

JOHN GRISHAM

THREE CLASSIC THRILLERS



THE FIRM



THE APPEAL



THE CHAMBER

John Grisham

The Firm

The Appeal

The Chamber



Dell

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* * *

JOHN GRISHAM

—

THE FIRM

* * *

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JOHN
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THE FIRM



A DELL BOOK
NEW YORK

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Copyright

The senior partner studied the résumé for the hundredth time and again found nothing he disliked about Mitchell Y. McDeere, at least not on paper. He had the brains, the ambition, the good looks. And he was hungry; with his background, he had to be. He was married, and that was mandatory. The firm had never hired an unmarried lawyer, and it frowned heavily on divorce, as well as womanizing and drinking. Drug testing was in the contract. He had a degree in accounting, passed the CPA exam the first time he took it and wanted to be a tax lawyer, which of course was a requirement with a tax firm. He was white, and the firm had never hired a black. They managed this by being secretive and clubbish and never soliciting job applications. Other firms solicited, and hired blacks. This firm recruited, and remained lily white. Plus, the firm was in Memphis, of all places, and the top blacks wanted New York or Washington or Chicago. McDeere was a male, and there were no women in the firm. That mistake had been made in the mid-seventies when they recruited the number one grad from Harvard, who happened to be a she and a wizard at taxation. She lasted four turbulent years and was killed in a car wreck.

He looked good, on paper. He was their top choice. In fact, for this year there were no other prospects. The list was very short. It was McDeere or no one.

The managing partner, Royce McKnight, studied a dossier labeled "Mitchell Y. McDeere—Harvard." An inch thick with small print and a few photographs, it had been prepared by some ex-CIA agents in a private intelligence outfit in Bethesda. They were clients of the firm and each year did the investigating for no fee. It was easy work,

they said, checking out unsuspecting law students. They learned, for instance, that he preferred to leave the Northeast, that he was holding three job offers, two in New York and one in Chicago, and that the highest offer was \$76,000 and the lowest was \$68,000. He was in demand. He had been given the opportunity to cheat on a securities exam during his second year. He declined, and made the highest grade in the class. Two months ago he had been offered cocaine at a law school party. He said no and left when everyone began snorting. He drank an occasional beer, but drinking was expensive and he had no money. He owed close to \$23,000 in student loans. He was hungry.

Royce McKnight flipped through the dossier and smiled. McDeere was their man.

Lamar Quin was thirty-two and not yet a partner. He had been brought along to look young and act young and project a youthful image for Bendini, Lambert & Locke, which in fact was a young firm, since most of the partners retired in their late forties or early fifties with money to burn. He would make partner in this firm. With a six-figure income guaranteed for the rest of his life, Lamar could enjoy the twelve-hundred-dollar tailored suits that hung so comfortably from his tall, athletic frame. He strolled nonchalantly across the thousand-dollar-a-day suite and poured another cup of decaf. He checked his watch. He glanced at the two partners sitting at the small conference table near the windows.

Precisely at two-thirty someone knocked on the door. Lamar looked at the partners, who slid the résumé and dossier into an open briefcase. All three reached for their jackets. Lamar buttoned his top button and opened the door.

"Mitchell McDeere?" he asked with a huge smile and a hand thrust forward.

"Yes." They shook hands violently.

"Nice to meet you, Mitchell. I'm Lamar Quin."

"My pleasure. Please call me Mitch." He stepped inside and quickly surveyed the spacious room.

"Sure, Mitch." Lamar grabbed his shoulder and led him across the suite, where the partners introduced themselves. They were

exceedingly warm and cordial. They offered him coffee, then water. They sat around a shiny mahogany conference table and exchanged pleasantries. McDeere unbuttoned his coat and crossed his legs. He was now a seasoned veteran in the search of employment, and he knew they wanted him. He relaxed. With three job offers from three of the most prestigious firms in the country, he did not need this interview, this firm. He could afford to be a little overconfident now. He was there out of curiosity. And he longed for warmer weather.

Oliver Lambert, the senior partner, leaned forward on his elbows and took control of the preliminary chitchat. He was glib and engaging with a mellow, almost professional baritone. At sixty-one, he was the grandfather of the firm and spent most of his time administering and balancing the enormous egos of some of the richest lawyers in the country. He was the counselor, the one the younger associates went to with their troubles. Mr. Lambert also handled the recruiting, and it was his mission to sign Mitchell Y. McDeere.

“Are you tired of interviewing?” asked Oliver Lambert.

“Not really. It’s part of it.”

Yes, yes, they all agreed. Seemed like yesterday they were interviewing and submitting résumés and scared to death they wouldn’t find a job and three years of sweat and torture would be down the drain. They knew what he was going through, all right.

“May I ask a question?” Mitch asked.

“Certainly.”

“Sure.”

“Anything.”

“Why are we interviewing in this hotel room? The other firms interview on campus through the placement office.”

“Good question.” They all nodded and looked at each other and agreed it was a good question.

“Perhaps I can answer that, Mitch,” said Royce McKnight, the managing partner. “You must understand our firm. We are different, and we take pride in that. We have forty-one lawyers, so we are small compared with other firms. We don’t hire too many people;

about one every other year. We offer the highest salary and fringes in the country, and I'm not exaggerating. So we are very selective. We selected you. The letter you received last month was sent after we screened over two thousand third-year law students at the best schools. Only one letter was sent. We don't advertise openings and we don't solicit applications. We keep a low profile, and we do things differently. That's our explanation."

"Fair enough. What kind of firm is it?"

"Tax. Some securities, real estate and banking, but eighty percent is tax work. That's why we wanted to meet you, Mitch. You have an incredibly strong tax background."

"Why'd you go to Western Kentucky?" asked Oliver Lambert.

"Simple. They offered me a full scholarship to play football. Had it not been for that, college would've been impossible."

"Tell us about your family."

"Why is that important?"

"It's very important to us, Mitch," Royce McKnight said warmly.

They all say that, thought McDeere. "Okay, my father was killed in the coal mines when I was seven years old. My mother remarried and lives in Florida. I had two brothers. Rusty was killed in Vietnam. I have a brother named Ray McDeere."

"Where is he?"

"I'm afraid that's none of your business." He stared at Royce McKnight and exposed a mammoth chip on his shoulder. The dossier said little about Ray.

"I'm sorry," the managing partner said softly.

"Mitch, our firm is in Memphis," Lamar said. "Does that bother you?"

"Not at all. I'm not fond of cold weather."

"Have you ever been to Memphis?"

"No."

"We'll have you down soon. You'll love it."

Mitch smiled and nodded and played along. Were these guys serious? How could he consider such a small firm in such a small town when Wall Street was waiting?

"How are you ranked in your class?" Mr. Lambert asked.

“Top five.” Not top five percent, but top five. That was enough of an answer for all of them. Top five out of three hundred. He could have said number three, a fraction away from number two, and within striking distance of number one. But he didn’t. They came from inferior schools—Chicago, Columbia and Vanderbilt, as he recalled from a cursory examination of Martindale-Hubbell’s Legal Directory. He knew they would not dwell on academics.

“Why did you select Harvard?”

“Actually, Harvard selected me. I applied at several schools and was accepted everywhere. Harvard offered more financial assistance. I thought it was the best school. Still do.”

“You’ve done quite well here, Mitch,” Mr. Lambert said, admiring the résumé. The dossier was in the briefcase, under the table.

“Thank you. I’ve worked hard.”

“You made extremely high grades in your tax and securities courses.”

“That’s where my interest lies.”

“We’ve reviewed your writing sample, and it’s quite impressive.”

“Thank you. I enjoy research.”

They nodded and acknowledged this obvious lie. It was part of the ritual. No law student or lawyer in his right mind enjoyed research, yet, without fail, every prospective associate professed a deep love for the library.

“Tell us about your wife,” Royce McKnight said, almost meekly. They braced for another reprimand. But it was a standard, nonsacred area explored by every firm.

“Her name is Abby. She has a degree in elementary education from Western Kentucky. We graduated one week and got married the next. For the past three years she’s taught at a private kindergarten near Boston College.”

“And is the marriage—”

“We’re very happy. We’ve known each other since high school.”

“What position did you play?” asked Lamar, in the direction of less sensitive matters.

“Quarterback. I was heavily recruited until I messed up a knee in my last high school game. Everyone disappeared except Western

Kentucky. I played off and on for four years, even started some as a junior, but the knee would never hold up.”

“How’d you make straight A’s and play football?”

“I put the books first.”

“I don’t imagine Western Kentucky is much of an academic school,” Lamar blurted with a stupid grin, and immediately wished he could take it back. Lambert and McKnight frowned and acknowledged the mistake.

“Sort of like Kansas State,” Mitch replied. They froze, all of them froze, and for a few seconds stared incredulously at each other. This guy McDeere knew Lamar Quin went to Kansas State. He had never met Lamar Quin and had no idea who would appear on behalf of the firm and conduct the interview. Yet, he knew. He had gone to Martindale-Hubbell’s and checked them out. He had read the biographical sketches of all of the forty-one lawyers in the firm, and in a split second he had recalled that Lamar Quin, just one of the forty-one, had gone to Kansas State. Damn, they were impressed.

“I guess that came out wrong,” Lamar apologized.

“No problem.” Mitch smiled warmly. It was forgotten.

Oliver Lambert cleared his throat and decided to get personal again. “Mitch, our firm frowns on drinking and chasing women. We’re not a bunch of Holy Rollers, but we put business ahead of everything. We keep low profiles and we work very hard. And we make plenty of money.”

“I can live with all that.”

“We reserve the right to test any member of the firm for drug use.”

“I don’t use drugs.”

“Good. What’s your religious affiliation?”

“Methodist.”

“Good. You’ll find a wide variety in our firm. Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians. It’s really none of our business, but we like to know. We want stable families. Happy lawyers are productive lawyers. That’s why we ask these questions.”

Mitch smiled and nodded. He’d heard this before.

The three looked at each other, then at Mitch. This meant they had reached the point in the interview where the interviewee was supposed to ask one or two intelligent questions. Mitch recrossed his legs. Money, that was the big question, particularly how it compared to his other offers. If it isn't enough, thought Mitch, then it was nice to meet you fellas. If the pay is attractive, *then* we can discuss families and marriages and football and churches. But, he knew, like all the other firms they had to shadowbox around the issue until things got awkward and it was apparent they had discussed everything in the world but money. So, hit them with a soft question first.

"What type of work will I do initially?"

They nodded and approved of the question. Lambert and McKnight looked at Lamar. This answer was his.

"We have something similar to a two-year apprenticeship, although we don't call it that. We'll send you all over the country to tax seminars. Your education is far from over. You'll spend two weeks next winter in Washington at the American Tax Institute. We take great pride in our technical expertise, and the training is continual, for all of us. If you want to pursue a master's in taxation, we'll pay for it. As far as practicing law, it won't be very exciting for the first two years. You'll do a lot of research and generally boring stuff. But you'll be paid handsomely."

"How much?"

Lamar looked at Royce McKnight, who eyed Mitch and said, "We'll discuss the compensation and other benefits when you come to Memphis."

"I want a ballpark figure or I may not come to Memphis." He smiled, arrogant but cordial. He spoke like a man with three job offers.

The partners smiled at each other, and Mr. Lambert spoke first. "Okay. A base salary of eighty thousand the first year, plus bonuses. Eighty-five the second year, plus bonuses. A low-interest mortgage so you can buy a home. Two country club memberships. And a new BMW. You pick the color, of course."

They focused on his lips, and waited for the wrinkles to form on his cheeks and the teeth to break through. He tried to conceal a smile, but it was impossible. He chuckled.

“That’s incredible,” he mumbled. Eighty thousand in Memphis equaled a hundred and twenty thousand in New York. Did the man say BMW! His Mazda hatchback had a million miles on it and for the moment had to be jump-started while he saved for a rebuilt starter.

“Plus a few more fringes we’ll be glad to discuss in Memphis.”

Suddenly he had a strong desire to visit Memphis. Wasn’t it by the river?

The smile vanished and he regained his composure. He looked sternly, importantly at Oliver Lambert and said, as if he’d forgotten about the money and the home and the BMW, “Tell me about your firm.”

“Forty-one lawyers. Last year we earned more per lawyer than any firm our size or larger. That includes every big firm in the country. We take only rich clients—corporations, banks and wealthy people who pay our healthy fees and never complain. We’ve developed a specialty in international taxation, and it’s both exciting and very profitable. We deal only with people who can pay.”

“How long does it take to make partner?”

“On the average, ten years, and it’s a hard ten years. It’s not unusual for our partners to earn half a million a year, and most retire before they’re fifty. You’ve got to pay your dues, put in eighty-hour weeks, but it’s worth it when you make partner.”

Lamar leaned forward. “You don’t have to be a partner to earn six figures. I’ve been with the firm seven years, and went over a hundred thousand four years ago.”

Mitch thought about this for a second and figured by the time he was thirty he could be well over a hundred thousand, maybe close to two hundred thousand. At the age of thirty!

They watched him carefully and knew exactly what he was calculating.

“What’s an international tax firm doing in Memphis?” he asked.

That brought smiles. Mr. Lambert removed his reading glasses and twirled them. “Now that’s a good question. Mr. Bendini founded the firm in 1944. He had been a tax lawyer in Philadelphia and had picked up some wealthy clients in the South. He got a wild hair and landed in Memphis. For twenty-five years he hired nothing but tax lawyers, and the firm prospered nicely down there. None of us are from Memphis, but we have grown to love it. It’s a very pleasant old Southern town. By the way, Mr. Bendini died in 1970.”

“How many partners in the firm?”

“Twenty, active. We try to keep a ratio of one partner for each associate. That’s high for the industry, but we like it. Again, we do things differently.”

“All of our partners are multimillionaires by the age of forty-five,” Royce McKnight said.

“All of them?”

“Yes, sir. We don’t guarantee it, but if you join our firm, put in ten hard years, make partner and put in ten more years, and you’re not a millionaire at the age of forty-five, you’ll be the first in twenty years.”

“That’s an impressive statistic.”

“It’s an impressive firm, Mitch,” Oliver Lambert said, “and we’re very proud of it. We’re a close-knit fraternity. We’re small and we take care of each other. We don’t have the cutthroat competition the big firms are famous for. We’re very careful whom we hire, and our goal is for each new associate to become a partner as soon as possible. Toward that end we invest an enormous amount of time and money in ourselves, especially our new people. It is a rare, extremely rare occasion when a lawyer leaves our firm. It is simply unheard of. We go the extra mile to keep careers on track. We want our people happy. We think it is the most profitable way to operate.”

“I have another impressive statistic,” Mr. McKnight added. “Last year, for firms our size or larger, the average turnover rate among associates was twenty-eight percent. At Bendini, Lambert & Locke, it was zero. Year before, zero. It’s been a long time since a lawyer left our firm.”

They watched him carefully to make sure all of this sank in. Each term and each condition of the employment was important, but the permanence, the finality of his acceptance overshadowed all other items on the checklist. They explained as best they could, for now. Further explanation would come later.

Of course, they knew much more than they could talk about. For instance, his mother lived in a cheap trailer park in Panama City Beach, remarried to a retired truck driver with a violent drinking problem. They knew she had received \$41,000 from the mine explosion, squandered most of it, then went crazy after her oldest son was killed in Vietnam. They knew he had been neglected, raised in poverty by his brother Ray (whom they could not find) and some sympathetic relatives. The poverty hurt, and they assumed, correctly, it had bred the intense desire to succeed. He had worked thirty hours a week at an all-night convenience store while playing football and making perfect grades. They knew he seldom slept. They knew he was hungry. He was their man.

“Would you like to come visit us?” asked Oliver Lambert.

“When?” asked Mitch, dreaming of a black 318i with a sunroof.

The ancient Mazda hatchback with three hubcaps and a badly cracked windshield hung in the gutter with its front wheels sideways, aiming at the curb, preventing a roll down the hill. Abby grabbed the door handle on the inside, yanked twice and opened the door. She inserted the key, pressed the clutch and turned the wheel. The Mazda began a slow roll. As it gained speed, she held her breath, released the clutch and bit her lip until the unmuffled rotary engine began whining.

With three job offers on the table, a new car was four months away. She could last. For three years they had endured poverty in a two-room student apartment on a campus covered with Porsches and little Mercedes convertibles. For the most part they had ignored the snubs from the classmates and coworkers in this bastion of East Coast snobbery. They were hillbillies from Kentucky, with few

friends. But they had endured and succeeded quite nicely all to themselves.

She preferred Chicago to New York, even for a lower salary, largely because it was farther from Boston and closer to Kentucky. But Mitch remained noncommittal, characteristically weighing it all carefully and keeping most of it to himself. She had not been invited to visit New York and Chicago with her husband. And she was tired of guessing. She wanted an answer.

She parked illegally on the hill nearest the apartment and walked two blocks. Their unit was one of thirty in a two-story red-brick rectangle. Abby stood outside her door and fumbled through the purse looking for keys. Suddenly, the door jerked open. He grabbed her, yanked her inside the tiny apartment, threw her on the sofa and attacked her neck with his lips. She yelled and giggled as arms and legs thrashed about. They kissed, one of those long, wet, ten-minute embraces with groping and fondling and moaning, the kind they had enjoyed as teenagers when kissing was fun and mysterious and the ultimate.

"My goodness," she said when they finished. "What's the occasion?"

"Do you smell anything?" Mitch asked.

She looked away and sniffed. "Well, yes. What is it?"

"Chicken chow mein and egg foo yung. From Wong Boys."

"Okay, what's the occasion?"

"Plus an expensive bottle of Chablis. It's even got a cork."

"What have you done, Mitch?"

"Follow me." On the small, painted kitchen table, among the legal pads and casebooks, sat a large bottle of wine and a sack of Chinese food. They shoved the law school paraphernalia aside and spread the food. Mitch opened the wine and filled two plastic wineglasses.

"I had a great interview today," he said. "Who?"

"Remember that firm in Memphis I received a letter from last month?"

"Yes. You weren't too impressed."

"That's the one. I'm very impressed. It's all tax work and the money looks good."

“How good?”

He ceremoniously dipped chow mein from the container onto both plates, then ripped open the tiny packages of soy sauce. She waited for an answer. He opened another container and began dividing the egg foo yung. He sipped his wine and smacked his lips.

“How much?” she repeated.

“More than Chicago. More than Wall Street.”

She took a long, deliberate drink of wine and eyed him suspiciously. Her brown eyes narrowed and glowed. The eyebrows lowered and the forehead wrinkled. She waited.

“How much?”

“Eighty thousand, first year, plus bonuses. Eighty-five, second year, plus bonuses.” He said this nonchalantly while studying the celery bits in the chow mein.

“Eighty thousand,” she repeated.

“Eighty thousand, babe. Eighty thousand bucks in Memphis, Tennessee, is about the same as a hundred and twenty thousand bucks in New York.”

“Who wants New York?” she asked.

“Plus a low-interest mortgage loan.”

That word—mortgage—had not been uttered in the apartment in a long time. In fact, she could not, at the moment, recall the last discussion about a home or anything related to one. For months now it had been accepted that they would *rent* some place until some distant, unimaginable point in the future when they achieved affluence and would then qualify for a large mortgage.

She sat her glass of wine on the table and said matter-of-factly, “I didn’t hear that.”

“A low-interest mortgage loan. The firm loans enough money to buy a house. It’s very important to these guys that their associates look prosperous, so they give us the money at a much lower rate.”

“You mean as in a *home*, with grass around it and shrubs?”

“Yep. Not some overpriced apartment in Manhattan, but a three-bedroom house in the suburbs with a driveway and a two-car garage where we can park the BMW.”

The reaction was delayed by a second or two, but she finally said, “BMW? Whose BMW?”

“Ours, babe. Our BMW. The firm leases a new one and gives us the keys. It’s sort of like a signing bonus for a first-round draft pick. It’s worth another five thousand a year. We pick the color, of course. I think black would be nice. What do you think?”

“No more clunkers. No more leftovers. No more hand-me-downs,” she said as she slowly shook her head.

He crunched on a mouthful of noodles and smiled at her. She was dreaming, he could tell, probably of furniture, and wallpaper, and perhaps a pool before too long. And babies, little dark-eyed children with light brown hair.

“And there are some other benefits to be discussed later.”

“I don’t understand, Mitch. Why are they so generous?”

“I asked that question. They’re very selective, and they take a lot of pride in paying top dollar. They go for the best and don’t mind shelling out the bucks. Their turnover rate is zero. Plus, I think it costs more to entice the top people to Memphis.”

“It would be closer to home,” she said without looking at him.

“I don’t have a home. It would be closer to your parents, and that worries me.”

She deflected this, as she did most of his comments about her family. “You’d be closer to Ray.”

He nodded, bit into an egg roll and imagined her parents’ first visit, that sweet moment when they pulled into the driveway in their well-used Cadillac and stared in shock at the new French colonial with two new cars in the garage. They would burn with envy and wonder how the poor kid with no family and no status could afford all this at twenty-five and fresh out of law school. They would force painful smiles and comment on how nice everything was, and before long Mr. Sutherland would break down and ask how much the house cost and Mitch would tell him to mind his own business, and it would drive the old man crazy. They’d leave after a short visit and return to Kentucky, where all their friends would hear how great the daughter and the son-in-law were doing down in Memphis. Abby would be sorry they couldn’t get along but wouldn’t

say much. From the start they had treated him like a leper. He was so unworthy they had boycotted the small wedding.

“Have you ever been to Memphis?” he asked.

“Once when I was a little girl. Some kind of convention for the church. All I remember is the river.”

“They want us to visit.”

“Us! You mean I’m invited?”

“Yes. They insist on you coming.”

“When?”

“Couple of weeks. They’ll fly us down Thursday afternoon for the weekend.”

“I like this firm already.”

The five-story building had been built a hundred years earlier by a cotton merchant and his sons after the Reconstruction, during the revival of cotton trading in Memphis. It sat in the middle of Cotton Row on Front Street near the river. Through its halls and doors and across its desks, millions of bales of cotton had been purchased from the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas and sold around the world. Deserted, neglected, then renovated time and again since the first war, it had been purchased for good in 1951 by an aggressive tax lawyer named Anthony Bendini. He renovated it yet again and began filling it with lawyers. He renamed it the Bendini Building.

He pampered the building, indulged it, coddled it, each year adding another layer of luxury to his landmark. He fortified it, sealing doors and windows and hiring armed guards to protect it and its occupants. He added elevators, electronic surveillance, security codes, closed-circuit television, a weight room, a steam room, locker rooms and a partners' dining room on the fifth floor with a captivating view of the river.

In twenty years he built the richest law firm in Memphis, and, indisputably, the quietest. Secrecy was his passion. Every associate hired by the firm was indoctrinated in the evils of the loose tongue. Everything was confidential. Salaries, perks, advancement and, most especially, clients. Divulging firm business, the young associates were warned, could delay the awarding of the holy grail—a partnership. Nothing left the fortress on Front Street. Wives were told not to ask, or were lied to. The associates were expected to

work hard, keep quiet and spend their healthy paychecks. They did, without exception.

With forty-one lawyers, the firm was the fourth largest in Memphis. Its members did not advertise or seek publicity. They were clannish and did not fraternize with other lawyers. Their wives played tennis and bridge and shopped among themselves. Bendini, Lambert & Locke was a big family, of sorts. A rather rich family.

At 10 a.m. on a Friday, the firm limo stopped on Front Street and Mr. Mitchell Y. McDeere emerged. He politely thanked the driver, and watched the vehicle as it drove away. His first limo ride. He stood on the sidewalk next to a streetlight and admired the quaint, picturesque, yet somehow imposing home of the quiet Bendini firm. It was a far cry from the gargantuan steel-and-glass erections inhabited by New York's finest or the enormous cylinder he had visited in Chicago. But he instantly knew he would like it. It was less pretentious. It was more like himself.

Lamar Quin walked through the front door and down the steps. He yelled at Mitch and waved him over. He had met them at the airport the night before and checked them into the Peabody—"the South's Grand Hotel."

"Good morning, Mitch! How was your night?" They shook hands like lost friends.

"Very nice. It's a great hotel."

"We knew you'd like it. Everybody likes the Peabody."

They stepped into the front foyer, where a small billboard greeted Mr. Mitchell Y. McDeere, the guest of the day. A well-dressed but unattractive receptionist smiled warmly and said her name was Sylvia and if he needed anything while he was in Memphis just let her know. He thanked her. Lamar led him to a long hallway where he began the guided tour. He explained the layout of the building and introduced Mitch to various secretaries and paralegals as they walked. In the main library on the second floor a crowd of lawyers circled the mammoth conference table and consumed pastries and coffee. They became silent when the guest entered.

Oliver Lambert greeted Mitch and introduced him to the gang. There were about twenty in all, most of the associates in the firm, and most barely older than the guest. The partners were too busy, Lamar had explained, and would meet him later at a private lunch. He stood at the end of the table as Mr. Lambert called for quiet.

“Gentlemen, this is Mitchell McDeere. You’ve all heard about him, and here he is. He is our number one choice this year, our number one draft pick, so to speak. He is being romanced by the big boys in New York and Chicago and who knows where else, so we have to sell him on our little firm here in Memphis.” They smiled and nodded their approval. The guest was embarrassed.

“He will finish at Harvard in two months and will graduate with honors. He’s an associate editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.” This made an impression, Mitch could tell. “He did his undergraduate work at Western Kentucky, where he graduated summa cum laude.” This was not quite as impressive. “He also played football for four years, starting as quarterback his junior year.” Now they were really impressed. A few appeared to be in awe, as if staring at Joe Namath.

The senior partner continued his monologue while Mitch stood awkwardly beside him. He droned on about how selective they had always been and how well Mitch would fit in. Mitch stuffed his hands in his pockets and quit listening. He studied the group. They were young, successful and affluent. The dress code appeared to be strict, but no different than New York or Chicago. Dark gray or navy wool suits, white or blue cotton button-downs, medium starch, and silk ties. Nothing bold or nonconforming. Maybe a couple of bow ties, but nothing more daring. Neatness was mandatory. No beards, mustaches or hair over the ears. There were a couple of wimps, but good looks dominated.

Mr. Lambert was winding down. “Lamar will give Mitch a tour of our offices, so you’ll have a chance to chat with him later. Let’s make him welcome. Tonight he and his lovely, and I do mean lovely, wife, Abby, will eat ribs at the Rendezvous, and of course tomorrow night is the firm dinner at my place. I’ll ask you to be on your best behavior.” He smiled and looked at the guest. “Mitch, if

you get tired of Lamar, let me know and we'll get someone more qualified."

He shook hands with each one of them again as they left, and tried to remember as many names as possible.

"Let's start the tour," Lamar said when the room cleared. "This, of course, is a library, and we have identical ones on each of the first four floors. We also use them for large meetings. The books vary from floor to floor, so you never know where your research will lead you. We have two full-time librarians, and we use microfilm and microfiche extensively. As a rule, we don't do any research outside the building. There are over a hundred thousand volumes, including every conceivable tax reporting service. That's more than some law schools. If you need a book we don't have, just tell a librarian."

They walked past the lengthy conference table and between dozens of rows of books. "A hundred thousand volumes," Mitch mumbled.

"Yeah, we spend almost half a million a year on upkeep, supplements and new books. The partners are always griping about it, but they wouldn't think of cutting back. It's one of the largest private law libraries in the country, and we're proud of it."

"It's pretty impressive."

"We try to make research as painless as possible. You know what a bore it is and how much time can be wasted looking for the right materials. You'll spend a lot of time here the first two years, so we try to make it pleasant."

Behind a cluttered workbench in a rear corner, one of the librarians introduced himself and gave a brief tour of the computer room, where a dozen terminals stood ready to assist with the latest computerized research. He offered to demonstrate the latest, truly incredible software, but Lamar said they might stop by later.

"He's a nice guy," Lamar said as they left the library. "We pay him forty thousand a year just to keep up with the books. It's amazing."

Truly amazing, thought Mitch.

The second floor was virtually identical to the first, third and fourth. The center of each floor was filled with secretaries, their

desks, file cabinets, copiers and the other necessary machines. On one side of the open area was the library, and on the other was a configuration of smaller conference rooms and offices.

"You won't see any pretty secretaries," Lamar said softly as they watched them work. "It seems to be an unwritten firm rule. Oliver Lambert goes out of his way to hire the oldest and homeliest ones he can find. Of course, some have been here for twenty years and have forgotten more law than we learned in law school."

"They seem kind of plump," Mitch observed, almost to himself.

"Yeah, it's part of the overall strategy to encourage us to keep our hands in our pockets. Philandering is strictly forbidden, and to my knowledge has never happened."

"And if it does?"

"Who knows. The secretary would be fired, of course. And I suppose the lawyer would be severely punished. It might cost a partnership. No one wants to find out, especially with this bunch of cows."

"They dress nice."

"Don't get me wrong. We hire only the best legal secretaries and we pay more than any other firm in town. You're looking at the best, not necessarily the prettiest. We require experience and maturity. Lambert won't hire anyone under thirty."

"One per lawyer?"

"Yes, until you're a partner. Then you'll get another, and by then you'll need one. Nathan Locke has three, all with twenty years' experience, and he keeps them jumping."

"Where's his office?"

"Fourth floor. It's off-limits."

Mitch started to ask, but didn't.

The corner offices were twenty-five by twenty-five, Lamar explained, and occupied by the most senior partners. Power offices, he called them, with great expectation. They were decorated to each individual's taste with no expense spared and vacated only at retirement or death, then fought over by the younger partners.

Lamar flipped a switch in one and they stepped inside, closing the door behind them. "Nice view, huh," he said as Mitch walked to the

windows and looked at the river moving ever so slowly beyond Riverside Drive.

“How do you get this office?” Mitch asked as he admired a barge inching under the bridge leading to Arkansas.

“Takes time, and when you get here you’ll be very wealthy, and very busy, and you won’t have time to enjoy the view.”

“Whose is it?”

“Victor Milligan. He’s head of tax, and a very nice man. Originally from New England, he’s been here for twenty-five years and calls Memphis home.” Lamar stuck his hands in his pockets and walked around the room. “The hardwood floors and ceilings came with the building, over a hundred years ago. Most of the building is carpeted, but in a few spots the wood was not damaged. You’ll have the option of rugs and carpet when you get here.”

“I like the wood. What about that rug?”

“Some kind of antique Persian. I don’t know its history. The desk was used by his great-grandfather, who was a judge of some sort in Rhode Island, or so he says. He’s full of crap, and you never know when he’s blowing smoke.”

“Where is he?”

“Vacation, I think. Did they tell you about vacations?”

“No.”

“You get two weeks a year for the first five years. Paid, of course. Then three weeks until you become a partner, then you take whatever you want. The firm has a chalet in Vail, a cabin on a lake in Manitoba and two condos on Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman Island. They’re free, but you need to book early. Partners get priority. After that it’s first come. The Caymans are extremely popular in the firm. It’s an international tax haven and a lot of our trips are written off. I think Milligan’s there now, probably scuba diving and calling it business.”

Through one of his tax courses, Mitch had heard of the Cayman Islands and knew they were somewhere in the Caribbean. He started to ask exactly where, but decided to check it himself.

“Only two weeks?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah. Is that a problem?”

“No, not really. The firms in New York are offering at least three.” He spoke like a discriminating critic of expensive vacations. He wasn’t. Except for the three-day weekend they referred to as a honeymoon, and an occasional drive through New England, he had never participated in a vacation and had never left the country.

“You can get an additional week, unpaid.”

Mitch nodded as though this was acceptable. They left Milligan’s office and continued the tour. The hallway ran in a long rectangle with the attorneys’ offices to the outside, all with windows, sunlight, views. Those with views of the river were more prestigious, Lamar explained, and usually occupied by partners. There were waiting lists.

The conference rooms, libraries and secretarial desks were on the inside of the hallway, away from the windows and distractions.

The associates’ offices were smaller—fifteen by fifteen—but richly decorated and much more imposing than any associates’ offices he had seen in New York or Chicago. The firm spent a small fortune on design consultants, Lamar said. Money, it seemed, grew on trees. The younger lawyers were friendly and talkative and seemed to welcome the interruption. Most gave brief testimonials to the greatness of the firm and of Memphis. The old town kind of grows on you, they kept telling him, but it takes time. They, too, had been recruited by the big boys in Washington and on Wall Street, and they had no regrets.

The partners were busier, but just as nice. He had been carefully selected, he was told again and again, and he would fit in. It was his kind of firm. They promised to talk more during lunch.

An hour earlier, Kay Quin had left the kids with the baby nurse and the maid and met Abby for brunch at the Peabody. She was a small-town girl, much like Abby. She had married Lamar after college and lived in Nashville for three years while he studied law at Vanderbilt. Lamar made so much money she quit work and had two babies in fourteen months. Now that she had retired and finished her childbearing, she spent most of her time with the garden club and

the heart fund and the country club and the PTA and the church. Despite the money and the affluence, she was modest and unpretentious, and apparently determined to stay that way regardless of her husband's success. Abby found a friend.

After croissants and eggs Benedict, they sat in the lobby of the hotel, drinking coffee and watching the ducks swim in circles around the fountain. Kay had suggested a quick tour of Memphis with a late lunch near her home. Maybe some shopping.

"Have they mentioned the low-interest loan?" she asked.

"Yes, at the first interview."

"They'll want you to buy a house when you move here. Most people can't afford a house when they leave law school, so the firm loans you the money at a lower rate and holds the mortgage."

"How low?"

"I don't know. It's been seven years since we moved here, and we've bought another house since then. It'll be a bargain, believe me. The firm will see to it that you own a home. It's sort of an unwritten rule."

"Why is it so important?"

"Several reasons. First of all, they want you down here. This firm is very selective, and they usually get who they want. But Memphis is not exactly in the spotlight, so they have to offer more. Also, the firm is very demanding, especially on the associates. There's pressure, overwork, eighty-hour weeks and time away from home. It won't be easy on either of you, and the firm knows it. The theory is that a strong marriage means a happy lawyer, and a happy lawyer is a productive lawyer, so the bottom line is profits. Always profits.

"And there's another reason. These guys—all guys, no women—take a lot of pride in their wealth, and everyone is expected to look and act affluent. It would be an insult to the firm if an associate was forced to live in an apartment. They want you in a house, and after five years, in a bigger house. If we have some time this afternoon, I'll show you some of the partners' homes. When you see them, you won't mind the eighty-hour weeks."

"I'm used to them now."

“That’s good, but law school doesn’t compare with this. Sometimes they’ll work a hundred hours a week during tax season.”

Abby smiled and shook her head as if this impressed her a great deal. “Do you work?”

“No. Most of us don’t work. The money is there, so we’re not forced to, and we get little help with the kids from our husbands. Of course, working is not forbidden.”

“Forbidden by whom?”

“The firm.”

“I would hope not.” Abby repeated the word “forbidden” to herself, but let it pass.

Kay sipped her coffee and watched the ducks. A small boy wandered away from his mother and stood near the fountain. “Do you plan to start a family?” Kay asked.

“Maybe in a couple of years.”

“Babies are encouraged.”

“By whom?”

“The firm.”

“Why should the firm care if we have children?”

“Again, stable families. A new baby is a big deal around the office. They send flowers and gifts to the hospital. You’re treated like a queen. Your husband gets a week off, but he’ll be too busy to take it. They put a thousand dollars in a trust fund for college. It’s a lot of fun.”

“Sounds like a big fraternity.”

“It’s more like a big family. Our social life revolves around the firm, and that’s important because none of us are from Memphis. We’re all transplants.”

“That’s nice, but I don’t want anyone telling me when to work and when to quit and when to have children.”

“Don’t worry. They’re very protective of each other, but the firm does not meddle.”

“I’m beginning to wonder.”

“Relax, Abby. The firm is like a family. They’re great people, and Memphis is a wonderful old town to live in and raise kids. The cost of living is much lower and life moves at a slower pace. You’re

probably considering the bigger towns. So did we, but I'll take Memphis any day over the big cities."

"Do I get the grand tour?"

"That's why I'm here. I thought we'd start downtown, then head out east and look at the nicer neighborhoods, maybe look at some houses and eat lunch at my favorite restaurant."

"Sounds like fun."

Kay paid for the coffee, as she had the brunch, and they left the Peabody in the Quin family's new Mercedes.

The dining room, as it was simply called, covered the west end of the fifth floor above Riverside Drive and high above the river in the distance. A row of eight-foot windows lined the wall and provided a fascinating view of the tugboats, paddle-wheelers, barges, docks and bridges.

The room was protected turf, a sanctuary for those lawyers talented and ambitious enough to be called partners in the quiet Bendini firm. They gathered each day for lunches prepared by Jessie Frances, a huge, temperamental old black woman, and served by her husband, Roosevelt, who wore white gloves and an odd-fitting, faded, wrinkled hand-me-down tux given to him by Mr. Bendini himself shortly before his death. They also gathered for coffee and doughnuts some mornings to discuss firm business and, occasionally, for a glass of wine in the late afternoon to celebrate a good month or an exceptionally large fee. It was for partners only, and maybe an occasional guest such as a blue-chip client or prospective recruit. The associates could dine there twice a year, only twice—and records were kept—and then only at the invitation of a partner.

Adjacent to the dining room was a small kitchen where Jessie Frances performed, and where she had cooked the first meal for Mr. Bendini and a few others twenty-six years earlier. For twenty-six years she had cooked Southern food and ignored requests to experiment and try dishes she had trouble pronouncing. "Don't eat it if you don't like it," was her standard reply. Judging from the

scraps Roosevelt collected from the tables, the food was eaten and enjoyed immensely. She posted the week's menu on Monday, asked that reservations be made by ten each day and held grudges for years if someone canceled or didn't show. She and Roosevelt worked four hours each day and were paid a thousand each month.

Mitch sat at a table with Lamar Quin, Oliver Lambert and Royce McKnight. The entrée was prime rib, served with fried okra and boiled squash.

"She laid off the grease today," Mr. Lambert observed.

"It's delicious," Mitch said.

"Is your system accustomed to grease?"

"Yes. They cook this way in Kentucky."

"I joined this firm in 1955," Mr. McKnight said, "and I come from New Jersey, right? Out of suspicion, I avoided most Southern dishes as much as possible. Everything is battered and fried in animal fat, right? Then Mr. Bendini decides to open up this little café. He hires Jessie Frances, and I've had heartburn for the past twenty years. Fried ripe tomatoes, fried green tomatoes, fried eggplant, fried okra, fried squash, fried anything and everything. One day Victor Milligan said too much. He's from Connecticut, right? And Jessie Frances had whipped up a batch of fried dill pickles. Can you imagine? Fried dill pickles! Milligan said something ugly to Roosevelt and he reported it to Jessie Frances. She walked out the back door and quit. Stayed gone for a week. Roosevelt wanted to work, but she kept him at home. Finally, Mr. Bendini smoothed things over and she agreed to return if there were no complaints. But she also cut back on the grease. I think we'll all live ten years longer."

"It's delicious," said Lamar as he buttered another roll.

"It's always delicious," added Mr. Lambert as Roosevelt walked by. "Her food is rich and fattening, but we seldom miss lunch."

Mitch ate cautiously, engaged in nervous chitchat and tried to appear completely at ease. It was difficult. Surrounded by eminently successful lawyers, all millionaires, in their exclusive, lavishly ornamented dining suite, he felt as if he was on hallowed ground. Lamar's presence was comforting, as was Roosevelt's.

When it was apparent Mitch had finished eating, Oliver Lambert wiped his mouth, rose slowly and tapped his tea glass with his spoon. "Gentlemen, could I have your attention."

The room became silent as the twenty or so partners turned to the head table. They laid their napkins down and stared at the guest. Somewhere on each of their desks was a copy of the dossier. Two months earlier they had voted unanimously to make him their number one pick. They knew he ran four miles a day, did not smoke, was allergic to sulfites, had no tonsils, had a blue Mazda, had a crazy mother and once threw three interceptions in one quarter. They knew he took nothing stronger than aspirin even when he was sick, and that he was hungry enough to work a hundred hours a week if they asked. They liked him. He was good-looking, athletic-looking, a man's man with a brilliant mind and a lean body.

"As you know, we have a very special guest today, Mitch McDeere. He will soon graduate with honors from Harvard—"

"Hear! Hear!" said a couple of Harvard alumni.

"Yes, thank you. He and his wife, Abby, are staying at the Peabody this weekend as our guests. Mitch will finish in the top five out of three hundred and has been heavily recruited. We want him here, and I know you will speak to him before he leaves. Tonight he will have dinner with Lamar and Kay Quin, and then tomorrow night is the dinner at my place. You are all expected to attend." Mitch smiled awkwardly at the partners as Mr. Lambert rambled on about the greatness of the firm. When he finished, they continued eating as Roosevelt served bread pudding and coffee.

Kay's favorite restaurant was a chic East Memphis hangout for the young affluent. A thousand ferns hung from everywhere and the jukebox played nothing but early sixties. The daiquiris were served in tall souvenir glasses.

"One is enough," Kay warned.

"I'm not much of a drinker."

They ordered the quiche of the day and sipped daiquiris.

“Does Mitch drink?”

“Very little. He’s an athlete and very particular about his body. An occasional beer or glass of wine, nothing stronger. How about Lamar?”

“About the same. He really discovered beer in law school, but he has trouble with his weight. The firm frowns on drinking.”

“That’s admirable, but why is it their business?”

“Because alcohol and lawyers go together like blood and vampires. Most lawyers drink like fish, and the profession is plagued with alcoholism. I think it starts in law school. At Vanderbilt, someone was always tapping a keg of beer. Probably the same at Harvard. The job has a lot of pressure, and that usually means a lot of booze. These guys aren’t a bunch of teetotalers, mind you, but they keep it under control. A healthy lawyer is a productive lawyer. Again, profits.”

“I guess that makes sense. Mitch says there’s no turnover.”

“It’s rather permanent. I can’t recall anyone leaving in the seven years we’ve been here. The money’s great and they’re careful about whom they hire. They don’t want anyone with family money.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“They won’t hire a lawyer with other sources of income. They want them young and hungry. It’s a question of loyalty. If all your money comes from one source, then you tend to be very loyal to that source. The firm demands extreme loyalty. Lamar says there’s never talk of leaving. They’re all happy, and either rich or getting that way. And if one wanted to leave, he couldn’t find as much money with another firm. They’ll offer Mitch whatever it takes to get you down here. They take great pride in paying more.”

“Why no female lawyers?”

“They tried it once. She was a real bitch and kept the place in an uproar. Most women lawyers walk around with chips on their shoulders looking for fights. They’re hard to deal with. Lamar says they’re afraid to hire one because they couldn’t fire her if she didn’t work out, with affirmative action and all.”

The quiche arrived and they declined another round of daiquiris. Hundreds of young professionals crowded under the clouds of ferns,

and the restaurant grew festive. Smokey Robinson sang softly from the jukebox.

"I've got a great idea," Kay said. "I know a realtor. Let's call her and go look at some houses."

"What kind of houses?"

"For you and Mitch. For the newest associate at Bendini, Lambert & Locke. She can show you several in your price range."

"I don't know our price range."

"I'd say a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand. The last associate bought in Oakgrove, and I'm sure he paid something like that."

Abby leaned forward and almost whispered, "How much would the monthly payments be?"

"I don't know. But you'll be able to afford it. Around a thousand a month, maybe a little more."

Abby stared at her and swallowed hard. The small apartments in Manhattan were renting for twice that. "Let's give her a call."

As expected, Royce McKnight's office was a power one with a great view. It was in one of the prized corners on the fourth floor, down the hall from Nathan Locke. Lamar excused himself, and the managing partner asked Mitch to have a seat at a small conference table next to the sofa. A secretary was sent for coffee.

McKnight asked him about his visit so far, and Mitch said he was quite impressed.

"Mitch, I want to nail down the specifics of our offer."

"Certainly."

"The base salary is eighty thousand for the first year. When you pass the bar exam you receive a five-thousand-dollar raise. Not a bonus, but a raise. The exam is given sometime in August and you'll spend most of your summer reviewing for it. We have our own bar study courses and you'll receive extensive tutoring from some of the partners. This is done primarily on firm time. As you know, most firms put you to work and expect you to study on your own time. Not us. No associate of this firm has ever flunked the bar exam, and

we're not worried about you breaking with tradition. Eighty thousand initially, up to eighty-five in six months. Once you've been here a year, you'll be raised to ninety thousand, plus you'll get a bonus each December based on the profits and performance during the prior twelve months. Last year the average bonus for associates was nine thousand. As you know, profit sharing with associates is extremely rare for law firms. Any questions about the salary?"

"What happens after the second year?"

"Your base salary is raised about ten percent a year until you become a partner. Neither the raises nor the bonuses are guaranteed. They are based on performance."

"Fair enough."

"As you know, it is very important to us that you buy a home. It adds stability and prestige and we're very concerned about these things, especially with our associates. The firm provides a low-interest mortgage loan, thirty years, fixed rate, nonassumable should you decide to sell in a few years. It's a one-shot deal, available only for your first home. After that you're on your own."

"What kind of rate?"

"As low as possible without running afoul with the IRS. Current market rate is around ten, ten and a half. We should be able to get you a rate of seven to eight percent. We represent some banks, and they assist us. With this salary, you'll have no trouble qualifying. In fact, the firm will sign on as a guarantor if necessary."

"That's very generous, Mr. McKnight."

"It's important to us. And we don't lose any money on the deal. Once you find a house, our real estate section handles everything. All you have to do is move in."

"What about the BMW?"

Mr. McKnight chuckled. "We started that about ten years ago and it's proved to be quite an inducement. It's very simple. You pick out a BMW, one of the smaller ones, we lease it for three years and give you the keys. We pay for tags, insurance, maintenance. At the end of three years you can buy it from the leasing company for the fair market value. It's also a one-shot deal."

"That's very tempting."

“We know.”

Mr. McKnight looked at his legal pad. “We provide complete medical and dental coverage for the entire family. Pregnancies, checkups, braces, everything. Paid entirely by the firm.”

Mitch nodded, but was not impressed. This was standard.

“We have a retirement plan second to none. For every dollar you invest, the firm matches it with two, provided, however, you invest at least ten percent of your base pay. Let’s say you start at eighty, and the first year you set aside eight thousand. The firm kicks in sixteen, so you’ve got twenty-four after the first year. A money pro in New York handles it and last year our retirement earned nineteen percent. Not bad. Invest for twenty years and you’re a millionaire at forty-five, just off retirement. One stipulation: If you bail out before twenty years, you lose everything but the money you put in, with no income earned on that money.”

“Sounds rather harsh.”

“No, actually it’s rather generous. Find me another firm or company matching two-to-one. There are none, to my knowledge. It’s our way of taking care of ourselves. Many of our partners retire at fifty, some at forty-five. We have no mandatory retirement, and some work into their sixties and seventies. To each his own. Our goal is simply to ensure a generous pension and make early retirement an option.”

“How many retired partners do you have?”

“Twenty or so. You’ll see them around here from time to time. They like to come in and have lunch and a few keep office space. Did Lamar cover vacations?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Book early, especially for Vail and the Caymans. You buy the air fare, but the condos are free. We do a lot of business in the Caymans and from time to time we’ll send you down for two or three days and write the whole thing off. Those trips are not counted as vacation, and you’ll get one every year or so. We work hard, Mitch, and we recognize the value of leisure.”

Mitch nodded his approval and dreamed of lying on a sun-drenched beach in the Caribbean, sipping on a piña colada and

watching string bikinis.

“Did Lamar mention the signing bonus?”

“No, but it sounds interesting.”

“If you join our firm we hand you a check for five thousand. We prefer that you spend the bulk of it on a new wardrobe. After seven years of jeans and flannel shirts, your inventory of suits is probably low, and we realize it. Appearance is very important to us. We expect our attorneys to dress sharp and conservative. There’s no dress code, but you’ll get the picture.”

Did he say five thousand dollars? For clothes? Mitch currently owned two suits, and he was wearing one of them. He kept a straight face and did not smile.

“Any questions?”

“Yes. The large firms are infamous for being sweatshops where the associates are flooded with tedious research and locked away in some library for the first three years. I want no part of that. I don’t mind doing my share of research and I realize I will be the low man on the pole. But I don’t want to research and write briefs for the entire firm. I’d like to work with real clients and their real problems.”

Mr. McKnight listened intently and waited with his rehearsed answer. “I understand, Mitch. You’re right, it is a real problem in the big firms. But not here. For the first three months you’ll do little but study for the bar exam. When that’s over, you begin practicing law. You’ll be assigned to a partner, and his clients will become your clients. You’ll do most of his research and, of course, your own, and occasionally you’ll be asked to assist someone else with the preparation of a brief or some research. We want you happy. We take pride in our zero turnover rate, and we go the extra mile to keep careers on track. If you can’t get along with your partner, we’ll find another one. If you discover you don’t like tax, we’ll let you try securities or banking. It’s your decision. The firm will soon invest a lot of money in Mitch McDeere, and we want him to be productive.”

Mitch sipped his coffee and searched for another question. Mr. McKnight glanced at his checklist.

“We pay all moving expenses to Memphis.”

“That won’t be much. Just a small rental truck.”

“Anything else, Mitch?”

“No, sir. I can’t think of anything.”

The checklist was folded and placed in the file. The partner rested both elbows on the table and leaned forward. “Mitch, we’re not pushing, but we need an answer as soon as possible. If you go elsewhere, we must then continue to interview. It’s a lengthy process, and we’d like our new man to start by July 1.”

“Ten days soon enough?”

“That’s fine. Say by March 30?”

“Sure, but I’ll contact you before then.” Mitch excused himself, and found Lamar waiting in the hall outside McKnight’s office. They agreed on seven for dinner.

There were no law offices on the fifth floor of the Bendini Building. The partners' dining room and kitchen occupied the west end, some unused and unpainted storage rooms sat locked and empty in the center, then a thick concrete wall sealed off the remaining third of the floor. A small metal door with a button beside it and a camera over it hung in the center of the wall and opened into a small room where an armed guard watched the door and monitored a wall of closed-circuit screens. A hallway zigzagged through a maze of cramped offices and workrooms where an assortment of characters went secretly about their business of watching and gathering information. The windows to the outside were sealed with paint and covered with blinds. The sunlight stood no chance of penetrating the fortress.

DeVasher, head of security, occupied the largest of the small, plain offices. The lone certificate on his bare walls recognized him for thirty years of dedicated service as a detective with the New Orleans Police Department. He was stocky with a slight belly, thick shoulders and chest and a huge, perfectly round head that smiled with great reluctance. His wrinkled shirt was mercifully unbuttoned at the collar, allowing his bulging neck to sag unrestricted. A thick polyester tie hung on the coatrack with a badly worn blazer.

Monday morning after the McDeere visit, Oliver Lambert stood before the small metal door and stared at the camera over it. He pushed the button twice, waited and was finally cleared through security. He walked quickly through the cramped hallway and entered the cluttered office. DeVasher blew smoke from a Dutch

Masters into a smokeless ashtray and shoved papers in all directions until wood was visible on his desk.

“Mornin’, Ollie. I guess you want to talk about McDeere.”

DeVasher was the only person in the Bendini Building who called him Ollie to his face.

“Yes, among other things.”

“Well, he had a good time, was impressed with the firm, liked Memphis okay and will probably sign on.”

“Where were your people?”

“We had the rooms on both sides at the hotel. His room was wired, of course, as was the limo and the phone and everything else. The usual, Ollie.”

“Let’s get specific.”

“Okay. Thursday night they checked in late and went to bed. Little discussion. Friday night he told her all about the firm, the offices, the people, said you were a real nice man. I thought you’d like that.”

“Get on with it.”

“Told her about the fancy dining room and his little lunch with the partners. Gave her the specifics on the offer and they were ecstatic. Much better than his other offers. She wants a home with a driveway and a sidewalk and trees and a backyard. He said she could have one.”

“Any problems with the firm?”

“Not really. He commented on the absence of blacks and women, but it didn’t seem to bother him.”

“What about his wife?”

“She had a ball. She likes the town, and she and Quin’s wife hit it off. They looked at houses Friday afternoon, and she saw a couple she liked.”

“You get any addresses?”

“Of course, Ollie. Saturday morning they called the limo and rode all over town. Very impressed with the limo. Our driver stayed away from the bad sections, and they looked at more houses. I think they decided on one. 1231 East Meadowbrook. It’s empty. Realtor by the

name of Betsy Bell walked them through it. Asking one-forty, but will take less. Need to move it.”

“That’s a nice part of town. How old is the house?”

“Ten, fifteen years. Three thousand square feet. Sort of a colonial-looking job. It’s nice enough for one of your boys, Ollie.”

“Are you sure that’s the one they want?”

“For now anyway. They discussed maybe coming back in a month or so to look at some more. You might want to fly them back as soon as they accept. That’s normal procedure, ain’t it?”

“Yes. We’ll handle that. What about the salary?”

“Most impressed. Highest one so far. They talked and talked about the money. Salary, retirement, mortgage, BMW, bonus, everything. They couldn’t believe it. Kids must really be broke.”

“They are. You think we got him, huh?”

“I’d bet on it. He said once that the firm may not be as prestigious as the ones on Wall Street, but the lawyers were just as qualified and a lot nicer. I think he’ll sign on, yeah.”

“Any suspicions?”

“Not really. Quin evidently told him to stay away from Locke’s office. He told his wife that no one ever went in there but some secretaries and a handful of partners. But he said Quin said Locke was eccentric and not that friendly. I don’t think he’s suspicious, though. She said the firm seemed concerned about some things that were none of its business.”

“Such as?”

“Personal matters. Children, working wives, etc. She seemed a bit irritated, but I think it was more of an observation. She told Mitch Saturday morning that she would be damned if any bunch of lawyers would tell her when to work and when to have babies. But I don’t think it’s a problem.”

“Does he realize how permanent this place is?”

“I think so. There was no mention of putting in a few years and moving on. I think he got the message. He wants to be a partner, like all of them. He’s broke and wants the money.”

“What about the dinner at my place?”

“They were nervous, but had a good time. Very impressed with your place. Really liked your wife.”

“Sex?”

“Every night. Sounded like a honeymoon in there.”

“What’d they do?”

“We couldn’t see, remember. Sounded normal. Nothing kinky. I thought of you and how much you like pictures, and I kept telling myself we should’ve rigged up some cameras for old Ollie.”

“Shut up, DeVasher.”

“Maybe next time.”

They were silent as DeVasher looked at a notepad. He stubbed his cigar in the ashtray and smiled to himself.

“All in all,” he said, “it’s a strong marriage. They seemed to be very intimate. Your driver said they held hands all weekend. Not a cross word for three days. That’s pretty good, ain’t it? But who am I? I’ve been married three times myself.”

“That’s understandable. What about children?”

“Couple of years. She wants to work some, then get pregnant.”

“What’s your opinion of this guy?”

“Very good, very decent young man. Also very ambitious. I think he’s driven and he won’t quit until he’s at the top. He’ll take some chances, bend some rules if necessary.”

Ollie smiled. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“Two phone calls. Both to her mother in Kentucky. Nothing remarkable.”

“What about his family?”

“Never mentioned.”

“No word on Ray?”

“We’re still looking, Ollie. Give us some time.”

DeVasher closed the McDeere file and opened another, much thicker one. Lambert rubbed his temples and stared at the floor. “What’s the latest?” he asked softly.

“It’s not good, Ollie. I’m convinced Hodge and Kozinski are working together now. Last week the FBI got a warrant and checked Kozinski’s house. Found our wiretaps. They told him his house was bugged, but of course they don’t know who did it. Kozinski tells

Hodge last Friday while they're hiding in the third-floor library. We got a bug nearby, and we pick up bits and pieces. Not much, but we know they talked about the wiretaps. They're convinced everything is bugged, and they suspect us. They're very careful where they talk."

"Why would the FBI bother with a search warrant?"

"Good question. Probably for our benefit. To make things look real legal and proper. They respect us."

"Which agent?"

"Tarrance. He's in charge, evidently."

"Is he good?"

"He's okay. Young, green, overzealous, but competent. He's no match for our men."

"How often has he talked to Kozinski?"

"There's no way to know. They figure we're listening, so everybody's real careful. We know of four meetings in the last month, but I suspect more."

"How much has he spilled?"

"Not much, I hope. They're still shadowboxing. The last conversation we got was a week ago and he didn't say much. He's bad scared. They're coaxing a lot, but not getting much. He hasn't yet made the decision to cooperate. They approached him, remember. At least we think they approached him. They shook him up pretty bad and he was ready to cut a deal. Now he's having second thoughts. But he's still in contact with them, and that's what worries me."

"Does his wife know?"

"I don't think so. She knows he's acting strange, and he tells her it's office pressure."

"What about Hodge?"

"Still ain't talked to the Fibbies, as far as we know. He and Kozinski talk a lot, or whisper, I should say. Hodge keeps saying he's scared to death of the FBI, that they don't play fair and they cheat and play dirty. He won't move without Kozinski."

"What if Kozinski is eliminated?"

“Hodge will be a new man. But I don’t think we’ve reached that point. Dammit, Ollie, he ain’t some hotshot thug who gets in the way. He’s a very nice young man, with kids and all that.”

“Your compassion is overwhelming. I guess you think I enjoy this. Hell, I practically raised these boys.”

“Well, get them back in line, then, before this thing goes too far. New York’s getting suspicious, Ollie. They’re asking a lot of questions.”

“Who?”

“Lazarov.”

“What have you told them, DeVasher?”

“Everything. That’s my job. They want you in New York day after tomorrow, for a full briefing.”

“What do they want?”

“Answers. And plans.”

“Plans for what?”

“Preliminary plans to eliminate Kozinski, Hodge and Tarrance, should it become necessary.”

“Tarrance! Are you crazy, DeVasher? We can’t eliminate a cop. They’ll send in the troops.”

“Lazarov is stupid, Ollie. You know that. He’s an idiot, but I don’t think we should tell him.”

“I think I will. I think I’ll go to New York and tell Lazarov he’s a complete fool.”

“You do that, Ollie. You do that.”

Oliver Lambert jumped from his seat and headed for the door.
“Watch McDeere for another month.”

“Sure, Ollie. You betcha. He’ll sign. Don’t worry.”

The Mazda was sold for two hundred dollars, and most of the money was immediately invested in a twelve-foot U-Haul rental truck. He would be reimbursed in Memphis. Half of the odd assortment of furniture was given or thrown away, and when loaded the truck held a refrigerator, a bed, a dresser and chest of drawers, a small color television, boxes of dishes, clothes and junk and an old sofa which was taken out of sentiment and would not last long in the new location.

Abby held Hearsay, the mutt, as Mitch worked his way through Boston and headed south, far south toward the promise of better things. For three days they drove the back roads, enjoyed the countryside, sang along with the radio, slept in cheap motels and talked of the house, the BMW, new furniture, children, affluence. They rolled down the windows and let the wind blow as the truck approached top speeds of almost forty-five miles per hour. At one point, somewhere in Pennsylvania, Abby mentioned that perhaps they could stop in Kentucky for a brief visit. Mitch said nothing, but chose a route through the Carolinas and Georgia, never venturing within two hundred miles of any point on the Kentucky border. Abby let it pass.

They arrived in Memphis on a Thursday morning, and, as promised, the black 318i sat under the carport as though it belonged there. He stared at the car. She stared at the house. The lawn was thick, green and neatly trimmed. The hedges had been manicured. The marigolds were in bloom.

The keys were found under a bucket in the utility room, as promised.

After the first test drive, they quickly unloaded the truck before the neighbors could inspect the sparse belongings. The U-Haul was returned to the nearest dealer. Another test drive.

An interior designer, the same one who would do his office, arrived after noon and brought with her samples of carpet, paint, floor coverings, curtains, drapes, wallpaper. Abby found the idea of a designer a bit hilarious after their apartment in Cambridge, but played along. Mitch was immediately bored, and excused himself for another test drive. He toured the tree-lined, quiet, shady streets of this handsome neighborhood of which he was now a member. He smiled as boys on bicycles stopped and whistled at his new car. He waved at the postman walking down the sidewalk sweating profusely. Here he was, Mitchell Y. McDeere, twenty-five years old and one week out of law school, and he had arrived.

At three, they followed the designer to an upscale furniture store where the manager politely informed them that Mr. Oliver Lambert had already made arrangements for their credit, if they so chose, and there was in fact no limit on what they could buy and finance. They bought a houseful. Mitch frowned from time to time, and twice vetoed items as too expensive, but Abby ruled the day. The designer complimented her time and again on her marvelous taste, and said she would see Mitch on Monday, to do his office. Marvelous, he said.

With a map of the city, they set out for the Quin residence. Abby had seen the house during the first visit, but did not remember how to find it. It was in a section of town called Chickasaw Gardens, and she remembered the wooded lots, huge houses and professionally landscaped front yards. They parked in the driveway behind the new Mercedes and the old Mercedes.

The maid nodded politely, but did not smile. She led them to the living room, and left them. The house was dark and quiet—no children, no voices, no one. They admired the furniture and waited. They mumbled quietly, then grew impatient. Yes, they agreed, they had in fact been invited to dinner on this night, Thursday, June 25,

at 6 p.m. Mitch checked his watch again and said something about it being rude. They waited.

From the hallway, Kay emerged and attempted to smile. Her eyes were puffy and glazed, with mascara leaking from the corners. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks, and she held a handkerchief over her mouth. She hugged Abby and sat next to her on the sofa. She bit the handkerchief and cried louder.

Mitch knelt before her. "Kay, what's happened?"

She bit harder and shook her head. Abby squeezed her knee, and Mitch patted the other one. They watched her fearfully, expecting the worst. Was it Lamar or one of the kids?

"There's been a tragedy," she said through the quiet sobbing.

"Who is it?" Mitch asked.

She wiped her eyes and breathed deeply. "Two members of the firm, Marty Kozinski and Joe Hodge, were killed today. We were very close to them."

Mitch sat on the coffee table. He remembered Marty Kozinski from the second visit in April. He had joined Lamar and Mitch for lunch at a deli on Front Street. He was next in line for a partnership, but had seemed less than enthused. Mitch could not place Joe Hodge.

"What happened?" he asked.

She had stopped crying, but the tears continued. She wiped her face again and looked at him. "We're not sure. They were on Grand Cayman, scuba diving. There was some kind of an explosion on a boat, and we think they drowned. Lamar said details were sketchy. There was a firm meeting a few hours ago, and they were all told about it. Lamar barely made it home."

"Where is he?"

"By the pool. He's waiting for you."

He sat in a white metal lawn chair next to a small table with a small umbrella, a few feet from the edge of the pool. Near a flower bed, a circular lawn sprinkler rattled and hissed and spewed forth water in a perfect arc which included the table, umbrella, chair and Lamar Quin. He was soaked. Water dripped from his nose, ears and

hair. The blue cotton shirt and wool pants were saturated. He wore no socks or shoes.

He sat motionless, never flinching with each additional dousing. He had lost touch. Some distant object on the side fence attracted and held his attention. An unopened bottle of Heineken sat in a puddle on the concrete beside his chair.

Mitch surveyed the back lawn, in part to make sure the neighbors could not see. They could not. An eight-foot cypress fence ensured complete privacy. He walked around the pool and stopped at the edge of the dry area. Lamar noticed him, nodded, attempted a weak smile and motioned to a wet chair. Mitch pulled it a few feet away and sat down, just as the next barrage of water landed.

His stare returned to the fence, or whatever it was in the distance. For an eternity they sat and listened to the thrashing sound of the sprinkler. Lamar would sometimes shake his head and attempt to mumble. Mitch smiled awkwardly, unsure of what, if anything, needed to be said.

“Lamar, I’m very sorry,” he finally offered.

He acknowledged this and looked at Mitch. “Me too.”

“I wish I could say something.”

His eyes left the fence, and he cocked his head sideways in Mitch’s direction. His dark hair was soaked and hung in his eyes. The eyes were red and pained. He stared, and waited until the next round of water passed over.

“I know. But there’s nothing to say. I’m sorry it had to happen now, today. We didn’t feel like cooking.”

“That should be the least of your concerns. I lost my appetite a moment ago.”

“Do you remember them?” he asked, blowing water from his lips.

“I remember Kozinski, but not Hodge.”

“Marty Kozinski was one of my best friends. From Chicago. He joined the firm three years ahead of me and was next in line for a partnership. A great lawyer, one we all admired and turned to. Probably the best negotiator in the firm. Very cool and dry under pressure.”

He wiped his eyebrows and stared at the ground. When he talked the water dripped from his nose and interfered with his enunciation. "Three kids. His twin girls are a month older than our son, and they've always played together." He closed his eyes, bit his lip and started crying.

Mitch wanted to leave. He tried not to look at his friend. "I'm very sorry, Lamar. Very sorry."

After a few minutes, the crying stopped, but the water continued. Mitch surveyed the spacious lawn in search of the outside faucet. Twice he summoned the courage to ask if he could turn off the sprinkler, and twice he decided he could last if Lamar could. Maybe it helped. He checked his watch. Darkness was an hour and a half away.

"What about the accident?" Mitch finally asked.

"We weren't told much. They were scuba diving and there was an explosion on the boat. The dive captain was also killed. A native of the islands. They're trying to get the bodies home now."

"Where were their wives?"

"At home, thankfully. It was a business trip."

"I can't picture Hodge."

"Joe was a tall blond-headed guy who didn't say much. The kind you meet but don't remember. He was a Harvard man like yourself."

"How old was he?"

"He and Marty were both thirty-four. He would've made partner after Marty. They were very close. I guess we're all close, especially now."

With all ten fingernails he combed his hair straight back. He stood and walked to dry ground. Water poured from his shirttail and the cuffs of his pants. He stopped near Mitch and looked blankly at the tree-tops next door. "How's the BMW?"

"It's great. A fine car. Thanks for delivering it."

"When did you arrive?"

"This morning. I've already put three hundred miles on it."

"Did the interior woman show up?"

"Yeah. She and Abby spent next year's salary."

“That’s nice. Nice house. We’re glad you’re here, Mitch. I’m just sorry about the circumstances. You’ll like it here.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I still don’t believe it. I’m numb, paralyzed. I shudder at the thought of seeing Marty’s wife and the kids. I’d rather be lashed with a bullwhip than go over there.”

The women appeared, walked across the wooden patio deck and down the steps to the pool. Kay found the faucet and the sprinkler was silenced.

They left Chickasaw Gardens and drove west with the traffic toward downtown, into the fading sun. They held hands, but said little. Mitch opened the sunroof and rolled down the windows. Abby picked through a box of old cassettes and found Springsteen. The stereo worked fine. “Hungry Heart” blew from the windows as the little shiny roadster made its way toward the river. The warm, sticky, humid Memphis summer air settled in with the dark. Softball fields came to life as teams of fat men with tight polyester pants and lime-green and fluorescent-yellow shirts laid chalk lines and prepared to do battle. Cars full of teenagers crowded into fast-food joints to drink beer and gossip and check out the opposite sex. Mitch began to smile. He tried to forget about Lamar, and Kozinski and Hodge. Why should he be sad? They were not his friends. He was sorry for their families, but he did not really know these people. And he, Mitchell Y. McDeere, a poor kid with no family, had much to be happy about. Beautiful wife, new house, new car, new job, new Harvard degree. A brilliant mind and a solid body that did not gain weight and needed little sleep. Eighty thousand a year, for now. In two years he could be in six figures, and all he had to do was work ninety hours a week. Piece of cake.

He pulled into a self-serve and pumped fifteen gallons. He paid inside and bought a six-pack of Michelob. Abby opened two, and they darted back into the traffic. He was smiling now.

“Let’s eat,” he said.

“We’re not exactly dressed,” she said.

He stared at her long, brown legs. She wore a white cotton skirt, above the knees, with a white cotton button-down. He had shorts, deck shoes and a faded black polo. "With legs like that, you could get us into any restaurant in New York."

"How about the Rendezvous? The dress seemed casual."

"Great idea."

They paid to park in a lot downtown and walked two blocks to a narrow alley. The smell of barbecue mixed with the summer air and hung like a fog close to the pavement. The aroma filtered gently through the nose, mouth and eyes and caused a rippling sensation deep in the stomach. Smoke poured into the alley from vents running underground into the massive ovens where the best pork ribs were barbecued in the best barbecue restaurant in a city known for world-class barbecue. The Rendezvous was downstairs, beneath the alley, beneath an ancient red-brick building that would have been demolished decades earlier had it not been for the famous tenant in the basement.

There was always a crowd and a waiting list, but Thursdays were slow, it seemed. They were led through the cavernous, sprawling, noisy restaurant and shown a small table with a red-checked tablecloth. There were stares along the way. Always stares. Men stopped eating, froze with ribs hanging from their teeth, as Abby McDeere glided by like a model on a runway. She had stopped traffic from a sidewalk in Boston. Whistles and catcalls were a way of life. And her husband was used to it. He took great pride in his beautiful wife.

An angry black man with a red apron stood before them. "Okay, sir," he demanded.

The menus were mats on the tables, and completely unnecessary. Ribs, ribs and ribs.

"Two whole orders, cheese plate, pitcher of beer," Mitch shot back at him. The waiter wrote nothing, but turned and screamed in the direction of the entrance: "Gimme two whole, cheese, pitcher!"

When he left, Mitch grabbed her leg under the table. She slapped his hand.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “When was the last time I told you that you are beautiful?”

“About two hours ago.”

“Two hours! How thoughtless of me!”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

He grabbed her leg again and rubbed the knee. She allowed it. She smiled seductively at him, dimples forming perfectly, teeth shining in the dim light, soft pale brown eyes glowing. Her dark brunet hair was straight and fell perfectly a few inches below her shoulders.

The beer arrived and the waiter filled two mugs without saying a word. Abby took a small drink and stopped smiling.

“Do you think Lamar’s okay?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I thought at first he was drunk. I felt like an idiot sitting there watching him get soaked.”

“Poor guy. Kay said the funerals will probably be Monday, if they can get the bodies back in time.”

“Let’s talk about something else. I don’t like funerals, any funeral, even when I’m there out of respect and don’t know the deceased. I’ve had some bad experiences with funerals.”

The ribs arrived. They were served on paper plates with aluminum foil to catch the grease. A small dish of slaw and one of baked beans sat around a foot-long slab of dry ribs sprinkled heavily with the secret sauce. They dug in with fingers.

“What would you like to talk about?” she asked.

“Getting pregnant.”

“I thought we were going to wait a few years.”

“We are. But I think we should practice diligently until then.”

“We’ve practiced in every roadside motel between here and Boston.”

“I know, but not in our new home.” Mitch ripped two ribs apart, slinging sauce into his eyebrows.

“We just moved in this morning.”

“I know. What’re we waiting for?”

“Mitch, you act as though you’ve been neglected.”

“I have, since this morning. I suggest we do it tonight, as soon as we get home, to sort of christen our new house.”

“We’ll see.”

“Is it a date? Look, did you see that guy over there? He’s about to break his neck trying to see some leg. I oughta go over and whip his ass.”

“Yes. It’s a date. Don’t worry about those guys. They’re staring at you. They think you’re cute.”

“Very funny.”

Mitch stripped his ribs clean and ate half of hers. When the beer was gone, he paid the check and they climbed into the alley. He drove carefully across town and found the name of a street he recognized from one of his many road trips of the day. After two wrong turns, he found Meadowbrook, and then the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Y. McDeere.

The mattress and box springs were stacked on the floor of the master bedroom, surrounded by boxes. Hearsay hid under a lamp on the floor and watched as they practiced.

Four days later, on what should have been his first day behind his new desk, Mitch and his lovely wife joined the remaining thirty-nine members of the firm, and their lovely wives, as they paid their last respects to Martin S. Kozinski. The cathedral was full. Oliver Lambert offered a eulogy so eloquent and touching not even Mitchell McDeere, who had buried a father and a brother, could resist chill bumps. Abby’s eyes watered at the sight of the widow and the children.

That afternoon, they met again in the Presbyterian church in East Memphis to say farewell to Joseph M. Hodge.

The small lobby outside Royce McKnight's office was empty when Mitch arrived precisely at eight-thirty, on schedule. He hummed and coughed and began to wait anxiously. From behind two file cabinets an ancient blue-haired secretary appeared and scowled in his general direction. When it was apparent he was not welcome, he introduced himself and explained he was to meet Mr. McKnight at this appointed hour. She smiled and introduced herself as Louise, Mr. McKnight's personal secretary, for thirty-one years now. Coffee? Yes, he said, black. She disappeared and returned with a cup and saucer. She notified her boss through the intercom and instructed Mitch to have a seat. She recognized him now. One of the other secretaries had pointed him out during the funerals yesterday.

She apologized for the somber atmosphere around the place. No one felt like working, she explained, and it would be days before things were normal. They were such nice young men. The phone rang and she explained that Mr. McKnight was in an important meeting and could not be disturbed. It rang again, she listened, and escorted him into the managing partner's office.

Oliver Lambert and Royce McKnight greeted Mitch and introduced him to two other partners, Victor Milligan and Avery Tolar. They sat around a small conference table. Louise was sent for more coffee. Milligan was head of tax, and Tolar, at forty-one, was one of the younger partners.

"Mitch, we apologize for such a depressing beginning," McKnight said. "We appreciate your presence at the funerals yesterday, and we're sorry your first day as a member of our firm was one of such sadness."

"I felt I belonged at the funerals," Mitch said.

"We're very proud of you, and we have great plans for you. We've just lost two of our finest lawyers, both of whom did nothing but tax, so we'll be asking more of you. All of us will have to work a little harder."

Louise arrived with a tray of coffee. Silver coffee server, fine china.

"We are quite saddened," said Oliver Lambert. "So please bear with us."

They all nodded and frowned at the table. Royce McKnight looked at some notes on a legal pad.

"Mitch, I think we've covered this before. At this firm, we assign each associate to a partner, who acts as a supervisor and mentor. These relationships are very important. We try to match you with a partner with whom you will be compatible and able to work closely, and we're usually right. We have made mistakes. Wrong chemistry, or whatever, but when that happens we simply reassign the associate. Avery Tolar will be your partner."

Mitch smiled awkwardly at his new partner.

"You will be under his direction, and the cases and files you work on will be his. Virtually all of it will be tax work."

"That's fine."

"Before I forget it, I'd like to have lunch today," Tolar said.

"Certainly," Mitch said.

"Take my limo," Mr. Lambert said.

"I had planned to," said Tolar.

"When do I get a limo?" Mitch asked.

They smiled, and seemed to appreciate the relief. "In about twenty years," said Mr. Lambert.

"I can wait."

"How's the BMW?" asked Victor Milligan.

"Great. It's ready for the five-thousand-mile service."

"Did you get moved in okay?"

"Yes, everything's fine. I appreciate the firm's assistance in everything. You've made us feel very welcome, and Abby and I are extremely grateful."

McKnight quit smiling and returned to the legal pad. "As I've told you, Mitch, the bar exam has priority. You've got six weeks to study for it and we assist in every way possible. We have our own review courses directed by our members. All areas of the exam will be covered and your progress will be closely watched by all of us, especially Avery. At least half of each day will be spent on bar review, and most of your spare time as well. No associate in this firm has ever failed the exam."

"I won't be the first."

"If you flunk it, we take away the BMW," Tolar said with a slight grin.

"Your secretary will be a lady named Nina Huff. She's been with the firm more than eight years. Sort of temperamental, not much to look at, but very capable. She knows a lot of law and has a tendency to give advice, especially to the newer attorneys. It'll be up to you to keep her in place. If you can't get along with her, we'll move her."

"Where's my office?"

"Second floor, down the hall from Avery. The interior woman will be here this afternoon to pick out the desk and furnishings. As much as possible, follow her advice."

Lamar was also on the second floor, and at the moment that thought was comforting. He thought of him sitting by the pool, soaking wet, crying and mumbling incoherently.

McKnight spoke. "Mitch, I'm afraid I neglected to cover something that should've been discussed during the first visit here."

He waited, and finally said, "Okay, what is it?"

The partners watched McKnight intently. "We've never allowed an associate to begin his career burdened with student loans. We prefer that you find other things to worry about, and other ways to spend your money. How much do you owe?"

Mitch sipped his coffee and thought rapidly. "Almost twenty-three thousand."

"Have the documents on Louise's desk first thing in the morning."

"You, uh, mean the firm satisfies the loans?"

"That's our policy. Unless you object."

"No objection. I don't quite know what to say."

“You don’t have to say anything. We’ve done it for every associate for the past fifteen years. Just get the paperwork to Louise.”

“That’s very generous, Mr. McKnight.”

“Yes, it is.”

Avery Tolar talked incessantly as the limo moved slowly through the noontime traffic. Mitch reminded him of himself, he said. A poor kid from a broken home, raised by foster families throughout southwest Texas, then put on the streets after high school. He worked the night shift in a shoe factory to finance junior college. An academic scholarship to UTEP opened the door. He graduated with honors, applied to eleven law schools and chose Stanford. He finished number two in his class and turned down offers from every big firm on the West Coast. He wanted to do tax work, nothing but tax work. Oliver Lambert had recruited him sixteen years ago, back when the firm had fewer than thirty lawyers.

He had a wife and two kids, but said little about the family. He talked about money. His passion, he called it. The first million was in the bank. The second was two years away. At four hundred thousand a year gross, it wouldn’t take long. His specialty was forming partnerships to purchase supertankers. He was the premier specialist in his field and worked at three hundred an hour, sixty, sometimes seventy hours a week.

Mitch would start at a hundred bucks an hour, at least five hours a day until he passed the bar and got his license. Then eight hours a day would be expected, at one-fifty an hour. Billing was the lifeblood of the firm. Everything revolved around it. Promotions, raises, bonuses, survival, success, everything revolved around how well one was billing. Especially the new guys. The quickest route to a reprimand was to neglect the daily billing records. Avery could not remember such a reprimand. It was simply unheard of for a member of the firm to ignore his billing.

The average for associates was one-seventy-five per hour. For partners, three hundred. Milligan got four hundred an hour from a couple of his clients, and Nathan Locke once got five hundred an hour for some tax work that involved swapping assets in several foreign countries. Five hundred bucks an hour! Avery relished the thought, and computed five hundred per hour by fifty hours per week at fifty weeks per year. One million two hundred fifty thousand a year! That's how you make money in this business. You get a bunch of lawyers working by the hour and you build a dynasty. The more lawyers you get, the more money the partners make.

Don't ignore the billing, he warned. That's the first rule of survival. If there were no files to bill on, immediately report to his office. He had plenty. On the tenth day of each month the partners review the prior month's billing during one of their exclusive luncheons. It's a big ceremony. Royce McKnight reads out each lawyer's name, then the total of his monthly billing. The competition among the partners is intense, but good-spirited. They're all getting rich, right? It's very motivational. As for the associates, nothing is said to the low man unless it's his second straight month. Oliver Lambert will say something in passing. No one has ever finished low for three straight months. Bonuses can be earned by associates for exorbitant billing. Partnerships are based on one's track record for generating fees. So don't ignore it, he warned again. It must always have priority—after the bar exam, of course.

The bar exam was a nuisance, an ordeal that must be endured, a rite of passage, and nothing any Harvard man should fear. Just concentrate on the review courses, he said, and try to remember everything he had just learned in law school.

The limo wheeled into a side street between two tall buildings and stopped in front of a small canopy that extended from the curb to a black metal door. Avery looked at his watch and said to the driver, "Be back at two."

Two hours for lunch, thought Mitch. That's over six hundred dollars in billable time. What a waste.

The Manhattan Club occupied the top floor of a ten-story office building which had last been fully occupied in the early fifties. Avery referred to the structure as a dump, but was quick to point out that the club was the most exclusive lunch and dinner refuge in the city. It offered excellent food in an all-white, rich-male, plush environment. Powerful lunches for powerful people. Bankers, lawyers, executives, entrepreneurs, a few politicians and a few aristocrats. A gold-plated elevator ran nonstop past the deserted offices and stopped on the elegant tenth floor. The maitre d' called Mr. Tolar by name and asked about his good friends Oliver Lambert and Nathan Locke. He expressed sympathies for the loss of Mr. Kozinski and Mr. Hodge. Avery thanked him and introduced the newest member of the firm. The favorite table was waiting in the corner. A courtly black man named Ellis delivered the menus.

"The firm does not allow drinking at lunch," Avery said as he opened his menu.

"I don't drink during lunch."

"That's good. What'll you have?"

"Tea, with ice."

"Iced tea, for him," Avery said to the waiter. "Bring me a Bombay martini on the rocks with three olives."

Mitch bit his tongue and grinned behind the menu.

"We have too many rules," Avery mumbled.

The first martini led to a second, but he quit after two. He ordered for both of them. Broiled fish of some sort. The special of the day. He watched his weight carefully, he said. He also worked out daily at a health club, his own health club. He invited Mitch to come sweat with him. Maybe after the bar exam. There were the usual questions about football in college and the standard denials of any greatness.

Mitch asked about the children. He said they lived with their mother.

The fish was raw and the baked potato was hard. Mitch picked at his plate, ate his salad slowly and listened as his partner talked about most of the other people present for lunch. The mayor was seated at a large table with some Japanese. One of the firm's

bankers was at the next table. There were some other big-shot lawyers and corporate types, all eating furiously and importantly, powerfully. The atmosphere was stuffy. According to Avery, every member of the club was a compelling figure, a potent force both in his field and in the city. Avery was at home.

They both declined dessert and ordered coffee. He would be expected to be in the office by nine each morning, Avery explained as he lit a Montesino. The secretaries would be there at eight-thirty. Nine to five, but no one worked eight hours a day. Personally, he was in the office by eight, and seldom left before six. He could bill twelve hours each day, every day, regardless of how many hours he actually worked. Twelve a day, five days a week, at three hundred an hour, for fifty weeks. Nine hundred thousand dollars! In billable time! That was his goal. Last year he had billed seven hundred thousand, but there had been some personal problems. The firm didn't care if Mitch came in at 6 a.m. or 9 a.m., as long as the work was done.

"What time are the doors unlocked?" Mitch asked.

Everyone has a key, he explained, so he could come and go as he pleased. Security was tight, but the guards were accustomed to workaholics. Some of the work habits were legendary. Victor Milligan, in his younger days, worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, until he made partner. Then he quit working on Sundays. He had a heart attack and gave up Saturdays. His doctor put him on ten-hour days, five days a week, and he hasn't been happy since. Marty Kozinski knew all the janitors by first name. He was a 9 a.m. man who wanted to have breakfast with the kids. He would come in at nine and leave at midnight. Nathan Locke claims he can't work well after the secretaries arrive, so he comes in at six. It would be a disgrace to start later. Here's a man sixty-one years old, worth ten million, and works from six in the morning until eight at night five days a week and then a half day on Saturday. If he retired, he'd die.

Nobody punched a clock, the partner explained. Come and go as you please. Just get the work done.

Mitch said he got the message. Sixteen hours a day would be nothing new.

Avery complimented him on the new suit. There was an unwritten dress code, and it was apparent Mitch had caught on. He had a tailor, an old Korean in South Memphis, he would recommend when Mitch could afford it. Fifteen hundred a suit. Mitch said he would wait a year or two.

An attorney from one of the bigger firms interrupted and spoke to Avery. He offered his sympathies and asked about the families. He and Joe Hodge had worked together on a case last year, and he couldn't believe it. Avery introduced him to Mitch. He was at the funeral, he said. They waited for him to leave, but he rambled on and on about how sorry he was. It was obvious he wanted details. Avery offered none, and he finally left.

By two, the power lunches were losing steam, and the crowd thinned. Avery signed the check, and the maitre d' led them to the door. The chauffeur stood patiently by the rear of the limo. Mitch crawled into the back and sank into the heavy leather seat. He watched the buildings and the traffic. He looked at the pedestrians scurrying along the hot sidewalks and wondered how many of them had seen the inside of a limo or the inside of the Manhattan Club. How many of them would be rich in ten years? He smiled, and felt good. Harvard was a million miles away. Harvard with no student loans. Kentucky was in another world. His past was forgotten. He had arrived.

The decorator was waiting in his office. Avery excused himself and asked Mitch to be in his office in an hour to begin work. She had books full of office furniture and samples of everything. He asked for suggestions, listened with as much interest as he could muster, then told her he trusted her judgment and she could pick out whatever she felt was appropriate. She liked the solid-cherry work desk, no drawers, burgundy leather wing chairs and a very expensive oriental rug. Mitch said it was marvelous.

She left and he sat behind the old desk, one that looked fine and would have suited him except that it was considered used and therefore not good enough for a new lawyer at Bendini, Lambert & Locke. The office was fifteen by fifteen, with two six-foot windows facing north and staring directly into the second floor of the old building next door. Not much of a view. With a strain, he could see a glimpse of the river to the northwest. The walls were Sheetrock and bare. She had picked out some artwork. He determined that the Ego Wall would face the desk, behind the wing chairs. The diplomas, etc., would have to be mounted and framed. The office was big, for an associate. Much larger than the cubbyholes where the rookies were placed in New York and Chicago. It would do for a couple of years. Then on to one with a better view. Then a corner office, one of those power ones.

Miss Nina Huff knocked on the door and introduced herself as the secretary. She was a heavysset woman of forty-five, and with one glance it was not difficult to understand why she was still single. With no family to support, it was evident she spent her money on clothes and makeup—all to no avail. Mitch wondered why she did not invest in a fitness counselor. She informed him forthrightly that she had been with the firm eight and a half years now and knew all there was to know about office procedure. If he had a question, just ask her. He thanked her for that. She had been in the typing pool and was grateful for the return to general secretarial duties. He nodded as though he understood completely. She asked if he knew how to operate the dictating equipment. Yes, he said. In fact, the year before he had worked for a three-hundred-man firm on Wall Street and that firm owned the very latest in office technology. But if he had a problem he would ask her, he promised.

“What’s your wife’s name?” she asked.

“Why is that important?” he asked.

“Because when she calls, I would like to know her name so that I can be real sweet and friendly to her on the phone.”

“Abby.”

“How do you like your coffee?”

“Black, but I’ll fix it myself.”

"I don't mind fixing your coffee for you. It's part of the job."

"I'll fix it myself."

"All the secretaries do it."

"If you ever touch my coffee, I'll see to it that you're sent to the mail room to lick stamps."

"We have an automated licker. Do they lick stamps on Wall Street?"

"It was a figure of speech."

"Well, I've memorized your wife's name and we've settled the issue of coffee, so I guess I'm ready to start."

"In the morning. Be here at eight-thirty."

"Yes, boss." She left and Mitch smiled to himself. She was a real smart-ass, but she would be fun.

Lamar was next. He was late for a meeting with Nathan Locke, but he wanted to stop by and check on his friend. He was pleased their offices were close. He apologized again for last Thursday's dinner. Yes, he and Kay and the kids would be there at seven to inspect the new house and the furniture.

Hunter Quin was five. His sister Holly was seven. They both ate the spaghetti with perfect manners from the brand-new dining table and dutifully ignored the grown-up talk circulating around them. Abby watched the two and dreamed of babies. Mitch thought they were cute, but was not inspired. He was busy recalling the events of the day.

The women ate quickly, then left to look at the furniture and talk about the remodeling. The children took Hearsay to the backyard.

"I'm a little surprised they put you with Tolar," Lamar said, wiping his mouth.

"Why is that?"

"I don't think he's ever supervised an associate."

"Any particular reason?"

"Not really. He's a great guy, but not much of a team player. Sort of a loner. Prefers to work by himself. He and his wife are having

some problems, and there's talk that they've separated. But he keeps it to himself."

Mitch pushed his plate away and sipped the iced tea. "Is he a good lawyer?"

"Yes, very good. They're all good if they make partner. A lot of his clients are rich people with millions to put in tax shelters. He sets up limited partnerships. Many of his shelters are risky, and he's known for his willingness to take chances and fight with the IRS later. Most of his clients are big-time risk takers. You'll do a lot of research looking for ways to bend the tax laws. It'll be fun."

"He spent half of lunch lecturing on billing."

"It's vital. There's always the pressure to bill more and more. All we have to sell is our time. Once you pass the bar your billing will be monitored weekly by Tolar and Royce McKnight. It's all computerized and they can tell down to the dime how productive you are. You'll be expected to bill thirty to forty hours a week for the first six months. Then fifty for a couple of years. Before they'll consider you for partner, you've got to hit sixty hours a week consistently over a period of years. No active partner bills less than sixty a week—most of it at the maximum rate."

"That's a lot of hours."

"Sounds that way, but it's deceptive. Most good lawyers can work eight or nine hours a day and bill twelve. It's called padding. It's not exactly fair to the client, but it's something everybody does. The great firms have been built by padding files. It's the name of the game."

"Sounds unethical."

"So is ambulance chasing by plaintiff's lawyers. It's unethical for a dope lawyer to take his fee in cash if he has a reason to believe the money is dirty. A lot of things are unethical. What about the doctor who sees a hundred Medicare patients a day? Or the one who performs unnecessary surgery? Some of the most unethical people I've met have been my own clients. It's easy to pad a file when your client is a multimillionaire who wants to screw the government and wants you to do it legally. We all do it."

"Do they teach it?"

“No. You just sort of learn it. You’ll start off working long, crazy hours, but you can’t do it forever. So you start taking shortcuts. Believe me, Mitch, after you’ve been with us a year you’ll know how to work ten hours and bill twice that much. It’s sort of a sixth sense lawyers acquire.”

“What else will I acquire?”

Lamar rattled his ice cubes and thought for a moment. “A certain amount of cynicism. This business works on you. When you were in law school you had some noble idea of what a lawyer should be. A champion of individual rights; a defender of the Constitution; a guardian of the oppressed; an advocate for your client’s principles. Then after you practice for six months you realize we’re nothing but hired guns. Mouthpieces for sale to the highest bidder, available to anybody, any crook, any sleazebag with enough money to pay our outrageous fees. Nothing shocks you. It’s supposed to be an honorable profession, but you’ll meet so many crooked lawyers you’ll want to quit and find an honest job. Yeah, Mitch, you’ll get cynical. And it’s sad, really.”

“You shouldn’t be telling me this at this stage of my career.”

“The money makes up for it. It’s amazing how much drudgery you can endure at two hundred thousand a year.”

“Drudgery? You make it sound terrible.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not that bad. My perspective on life changed radically last Thursday.”

“You want to look at the house? It’s marvelous.”

“Maybe some other time. Let’s just talk.”

At five a.m. the alarm clock exploded on the new bed table under the new lamp, and was immediately silenced. Mitch staggered through the dark house and found Hearsay waiting at the back door. He released him into the backyard and headed for the shower. Twenty minutes later he found his wife under the covers and kissed her goodbye. She did not respond.

With no traffic to fight, the office was ten minutes away. He had decided his day would start at five-thirty, unless someone could top that; then he would be there at five, or four-thirty, or whenever it took to be first. Sleep was a nuisance. He would be the first lawyer to arrive at the Bendini Building on this day, and every day until he became a partner. If it took the others ten years, he could do it in seven. He would become the youngest partner in the history of the firm, he had decided.

The vacant lot next to the Bendini Building had a ten-foot chain-link fence around it and a guard by the gate. There was a parking place inside with his name spray-painted between the yellow lines. He stopped by the gate and waited. The uniformed guard emerged from the darkness and approached the driver's door. Mitch pushed a button, lowered the window and produced a plastic card with his picture on it.

"You must be the new man," the guard said as he held the card.

"Yes. Mitch McDeere."

"I can read. I should've known by the car."

"What's your name?" Mitch asked.

"Dutch Hendrix. Worked for the Memphis Police Department for thirty-three years."

“Nice to meet you, Dutch.”

“Yeah. Same to you. You start early, don’t you?”

Mitch smiled and took the ID card. “No, I thought everyone would be here.”

Dutch managed a smile. “You’re the first. Mr. Locke will be along shortly.”

The gate opened and Dutch ordered him through. He found his name in white on the asphalt and parked the spotless BMW all by itself on the third row from the building. He grabbed his empty burgundy eel-skin attaché case from the rear seat and gently closed the door. Another guard waited by the rear entrance. Mitch introduced himself and watched as the door was unlocked. He checked his watch. Exactly five-thirty. He was relieved that this hour was early enough. The rest of the firm was still asleep.

He flipped on the light switch in his office and laid the attaché case on the temporary desk. He headed for the coffee room down the hall, turning on lights as he went. The coffeepot was one of those industrial sizes with multi-levels, multi-burners, multi-pots and no apparent instructions on how to operate any of it. He studied this machine for a moment as he emptied a pack of coffee into the filter. He poured water through one of the holes in the top and smiled when it began dripping in the right place.

In one corner of his office were three cardboard boxes full of books, files, legal pads and class notes he had accumulated in the previous three years. He sat the first one on his desk and began removing its contents. The materials were categorized and placed in neat little piles around the desk.

After two cups of coffee, he found the bar review materials in box number three. He walked to the window and opened the blinds. It was still dark. He did not notice the figure suddenly appear in the doorway.

“Good morning!”

Mitch spun from the window and gawked at the man. “You scared me,” he said, and breathed deeply.

“I’m sorry. I’m Nathan Locke. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I’m Mitch McDeere. The new man.” They shook hands.

“Yes, I know. I apologize for not meeting you earlier. I was busy during your earlier visits. I think I saw you at the funerals Monday.”

Mitch nodded and knew for certain he had never been within a hundred yards of Nathan Locke. He would have remembered. It was the eyes, the cold black eyes with layers of black wrinkles around them. Great eyes. Unforgettable eyes. His hair was white and thin on top with thickets around the ears, and the whiteness contrasted sharply with the rest of his face. When he spoke, the eyes narrowed and the black pupils glowed fiercely. Sinister eyes. Knowing eyes.

“Maybe so,” Mitch said, captivated by the most evil face he had ever encountered. “Maybe so.”

“I see you’re an early riser.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, good to have you.”

Nathan Locke withdrew from the doorway and disappeared. Mitch checked the hall, then closed the door. No wonder they keep him on the fourth floor away from everyone, he thought. Now he understood why he didn’t meet Nathan Locke before he signed on. He might have had second thoughts. Probably hid him from all the prospective recruits. He had, without a doubt, the most ominous, evil presence Mitch had ever felt. It was the eyes, he said to himself again, as he propped his feet on the desk and sipped coffee. The eyes.

As Mitch expected, Nina brought food when she reported at eight-thirty. She offered Mitch a doughnut, and he took two. She inquired as to whether she should bring enough food every morning, and Mitch said he thought it would be nice of her.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing at the stacks of files and notes on the desk.

“That’s our project for the day. We need to get this stuff organized.”

“No dictating?”

“Not yet. I meet with Avery in a few minutes. I need this mess filed away in some order.”

“How exciting,” she said as she headed for the coffee room.

Avery Tolar was waiting with a thick, expandable file, which he handed to Mitch. “This is the Capps file. Part of it. Our client’s name is Sonny Capps. He lives in Houston now, but grew up in Arkansas. Worth about thirty million and keeps his thumb on every penny of it. His father gave him an old barge line just before he died, and he turned it into the largest towing service on the Mississippi River. Now he has ships, or boats, as he calls them, all over the world. We do eighty percent of his legal work, everything but the litigation. He wants to set up another limited partnership to purchase another fleet of tankers, this one from the family of some dead Chink in Hong Kong. Capps is usually the general partner, and he’ll bring in as many as twenty-five limited partners to spread the risk and pool their resources. This deal is worth about sixty-five million. I’ve done several limited partnerships for him and they’re all different, all complicated. And he is extremely difficult to deal with. He’s a perfectionist and thinks he knows more than I do. You will not be talking to him. In fact, no one here talks to him but me. That file is a portion of the last partnership I did for him. It contains, among other things, a prospectus, an agreement to form a partnership, letters of intent, disclosure statements and the limited partnership agreement itself. Read every word of it. Then I want you to prepare a rough draft of the partnership agreement for this venture.”

The file suddenly grew heavier. Perhaps five-thirty was not early enough.

The partner continued. “We have about forty days, according to Capps, so we’re already behind. Marty Kozinski was helping with this one, and as soon as I review his file I’ll give it to you. Any questions?”

“What about the research?”

“Most of it is current, but you’ll need to update it. Capps earned over nine million last year and paid a pittance in taxes. He doesn’t believe in paying taxes, and holds me personally responsible for every dime that’s sent in. It’s all legal, of course, but my point is that this is high-pressure work. Millions of dollars in investment and tax

savings are at stake. The venture will be scrutinized by the governments of at least three countries. So be careful.”

Mitch flipped through the documents. “How many hours a day do I work on this?”

“As many as possible. I know the bar exam is important, but so is Sonny Capps. He paid us almost a half a million last year in legal fees.”

“I’ll get it done.”

“I know you will. As I told you, your rate is one hundred an hour. Nina will go over the time records with you today. Remember, don’t ignore the billing.”

“How could I forget?”

Oliver Lambert and Nathan Locke stood before the metal door on the fifth floor and stared at the camera above. Something clicked loudly and the door opened. A guard nodded. DeVasher waited in his office.

“Good morning, Ollie,” he said quietly while ignoring the other partner.

“What’s the latest?” Locke snapped in DeVasher’s direction without looking at him.

“From where?” DeVasher asked calmly.

“Chicago.”

“They’re very anxious up there, Nat. Regardless of what you believe, they don’t like to get their hands dirty. And, frankly, they just don’t understand why they have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re asking some tough questions, like why can’t we keep our people in line?”

“And what’re you telling them?”

“That everything’s okay. Wonderful. The great Bendini firm is solid. The leaks have been plugged. Business as usual. No problems.”

“How much damage did they do?” asked Oliver Lambert.

“We’re not sure. We’ll never be sure, but I don’t think they ever talked. They had decided to, no doubt about that, but I don’t think they did. We’ve got it from a pretty good source there were FBI agents en route to the island the day of the accident, so we think they planned to rendezvous to spill their guts.”

“How do you know this?” asked Locke.

“Come on, Nat. We’ve got our sources. Plus, we had people all over the island. We do good work, you know.”

“Evidently.”

“Was it messy?”

“No, no. Very professional.”

“How’d the native get in the way?”

“We had to make it look good, Ollie.”

“What about the authorities down there?”

“What authorities? It’s a tiny, peaceful island, Ollie. Last year they had one murder and four diving accidents. As far as they’re concerned, it’s just another accident. Three accidental drownings.”

“What about the FBI?” asked Locke.

“Don’t know.”

“I thought you had a source.”

“We do. But we can’t find him. We’ve heard nothing as of yesterday. Our people are still on the island and they’ve noticed nothing unusual.”

“How long will you stay there?”

“Couple of weeks.”

“What happens if the FBI shows up?” asked Locke.

“We watch them real close. We’ll see them when they get off the plane. We’ll follow them to their hotel rooms. We may even bug their phones. We’ll know what they eat for breakfast and what they talk about. We’ll assign three of our guys for every one of theirs, and when they go to the toilet we’ll know it. There ain’t nothing for them to find, Nat. I told you it was a clean job, very professional. No evidence. Relax.”

“This makes me sick, DeVasher,” Lambert said.

“You think I like it, Ollie? What do you want us to do? Sit back and let them talk? Come on, Ollie, we’re all human. I didn’t want to

do it, but Lazarov said do it. You wanna argue with Lazarov, go ahead. They'll find you floating somewhere. Those boys were up to no good. They should've kept quiet, driven their little fancy cars and played big-shot lawyers. No, they gotta get sanctimonious."

Nathan Locke lit a cigarette and blew a heavy cloud of smoke in the general direction of DeVasher. The three sat in silence for a moment as the smoke settled across his desk. He glared at Black Eyes but said nothing.

Oliver Lambert stood and stared at the blank wall next to the door. "Why did you want to see us?" he asked.

DeVasher took a deep breath. "Chicago wants to bug the home phones of all nonpartners."

"I told you," Lambert said to Locke.

"It wasn't my idea, but they insist on it. They're very nervous up there, and they wanna take some extra precautions. You can't blame them."

"Don't you think it's going a bit too far?" asked Lambert.

"Yeah, it's totally unnecessary. But Chicago doesn't think so."

"When?" asked Locke.

"Next week or so. It'll take a few days."

"All of them?"

"Yes. That's what they said."

"Even McDeere?"

"Yes. Even McDeere. I think Tarrance will try again, and he might start at the bottom this time."

"I met him this morning," said Locke. "He was here before me."

"Five thirty-two," answered DeVasher.

The law school memorabilia were removed to the floor and the Capps file spread across the desk. Nina brought a chicken salad sandwich back from lunch, and he ate it as he read and as she filed away the junk on the floor. Shortly after one, Wally Hudson, or J. Walter Hudson as the firm letterhead declared him, arrived to begin the study for the bar exam. Contracts were his specialty. He was a five-year member of the firm and the only Virginia man, which he

found odd because Virginia had the best law school in the country, in his opinion. He had spent the last two years developing a new review course for the contracts section of the exam. He was quite anxious to try it on someone, and McDeere happened to be the man. He handed Mitch a heavy three-ring notebook that was at least four inches thick and weighed as much as the Capps file.

The exam would last for four days and consist of three parts, Wally explained. The first day would be a four-hour multiple-choice exam on ethics. Gill Vaughn, one of the partners, was the resident expert on ethics and would supervise that portion of the review. The second day would be an eight-hour exam known simply as multi-state. It covered most areas of the law common to all states. It, too, was multiple-choice and the questions were very deceptive. Then the heavy action. Days three and four would be eight hours each and cover fifteen areas of substantive law. Contracts, Uniform Commercial Code, real estate, torts, domestic relations, wills, estates, taxation, workers' compensation, constitutional law, federal trial procedure, criminal procedure, corporations, partnerships, insurance and debtor-creditor relations. All answers would be in essay form, and the questions would emphasize Tennessee law. The firm had a review plan for each of the fifteen sections.

"You mean fifteen of these?" Mitch asked as he lifted the notebook.

Wally smiled. "Yes. We're very thorough. No one in this firm has ever flunked—"

"I know. I know. I won't be the first."

"You and I will meet at least once a week for the next six weeks to go through the materials. Each session will last about two hours, so you can plan accordingly. I would suggest each Wednesday at three."

"Morning or afternoon?"

"Afternoon."

"That's fine."

"As you know, contracts and the Uniform Commercial Code go hand in hand, so I've incorporated the UCC into those materials. We'll cover both, but it'll take more time. A typical bar exam is

loaded with commercial transactions. Those problems make great essay questions, so that notebook will be very important. I've included actual questions from old exams, along with the model answers. It's fascinating reading."

"I can't wait."

"Take the first eighty pages for next week. You'll find some essay questions you'll need to answer."

"You mean homework?"

"Absolutely. I'll grade it next week. It's very important to practice these questions each week."

"This could be worse than law school."

"It's much more important than law school. We take it very seriously. We have a committee to monitor your progress from now until you sit for the exam. We'll be watching very closely."

"Who's on the committee?"

"Myself, Avery Tolar, Royce McKnight, Randall Dunbar and Kendall Mahan. We'll meet each Friday to assess your progress."

Wally produced a smaller, letter-sized notebook and laid it on the desk. "This is your daily log. You are to record the hours spent studying for the exam and the subjects studied. I'll pick it up every Friday morning before the committee meets. Any questions?"

"I can't think of any," Mitch said as he laid the notebook on top of the Capps file.

"Good. See you next Wednesday at three."

Less than ten seconds after he left, Randall Dunbar walked in with a thick notebook remarkably similar to the one left behind by Wally. In fact, it was identical, but not quite as thick. Dunbar was head of real estate and had handled the purchase and sale of the McDeere home in May. He handed Mitch the notebook, labeled *Real Estate Law*, and explained how his specialty was the most critical part of the exam. Everything goes back to property, he said. He had carefully prepared the materials himself over the past ten years and confessed that he had often thought of publishing them as an authoritative work on property rights and land financing. He would need at least one hour a week, preferably on Tuesday afternoon. He

talked for an hour about how different the exam was thirty years ago when he took it.

Kendall Mahan added a new twist. He wanted to meet on Saturday mornings. Early, say seven-thirty.

“No problem,” Mitch said as he took the notebook and placed it next to the others. This one was for constitutional law, a favorite of Kendall’s, although he seldom got to use it, he said. It was the most important section of the exam, or at least it had been when he took it five years ago. He had published an article on First Amendment rights in the *Columbia Law Review* in his senior year there. A copy of it was in the notebook, in case Mitch wanted to read it. He promised to do so almost immediately.

The procession continued throughout the afternoon until half of the firm had stopped by with notebooks, assignments of homework and requests for weekly meetings. No fewer than six reminded him that no member of the firm had ever failed the bar exam.

When his secretary said goodbye at five, the small desk was covered with enough bar review materials to choke a ten-man firm. Unable to speak, he simply smiled at her and returned to Wally’s version of contract law. Food crossed his mind an hour later. Then, for the first time in twelve hours, he thought of Abby. He called her.

“I won’t be home for a while,” he said.

“But I’m cooking dinner.”

“Leave it on the stove,” he said, somewhat shortly. There was a pause. “When will you be home?” she asked with slow, precise words.

“In a few hours.”

“A few hours. You’ve already been there half the day.”

“That’s right, and I’ve got much more to do.”

“But it’s your first day.”

“You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be home later.”

The starting engine awakened Dutch Hendrix, and he jumped to his feet. The gate opened and he waited by it as the last car left the lot. It stopped next to him.

“Evenin’, Dutch,” Mitch said.

“You just now leaving?”

“Yeah, busy day.”

Dutch flashed his light at his wrist and checked the time. Eleven-thirty.

“Well, be careful,” Dutch said.

“Yeah. See you in a few hours.”

The BMW turned onto Front Street and raced away into the night. A few hours, thought Dutch. The rookies were indeed amazing. Eighteen, twenty hours a day, six days a week. Sometimes seven. They all planned to be the world’s greatest lawyer and make a million dollars overnight. Sometimes they worked around the clock, slept at their desks. He had seen it all. But they couldn’t last. The human body was not meant for such abuse. After about six months they lost steam. They would cut back to fifteen hours a day, six days a week. Then five and a half. Then twelve hours a day.

No one could work a hundred hours a week for more than six months.

One secretary dug through a file cabinet in search of something Avery needed immediately. The other secretary stood in front of his desk with a steno pad, occasionally writing down the instructions he gave when he stopped yelling into the receiver of his phone and listened to whoever was on the other end. Three red lights were blinking on the phone. When he spoke into the receiver the secretaries spoke sharply to each other. Mitch walked slowly into the office and stood by the door.

“Quiet!” Avery yelled to the secretaries.

The one in the file cabinet slammed the drawer and went to the next file cabinet, where she bent over and pulled the bottom drawer. Avery snapped his fingers at the other one and pointed at his desk calendar. He hung up without saying goodbye.

“What’s my schedule for today?” he asked while pulling a file from his credenza.

“Ten a.m. meeting with the IRS downtown. One p.m. meeting with Nathan Locke on the Spinoso file. Three-thirty, partners’ meeting. Tomorrow you’re in tax court all day, and you’re supposed to prepare all day today.”

“Great. Cancel everything. Check the flights to Houston Saturday afternoon and the return flights Monday, early Monday.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mitch! Where’s the Capps file?”

“On my desk.”

“How much have you done?”

“I’ve read through most of it.”

"We need to get in high gear. That was Sonny Capps on the phone. He wants to meet Saturday morning in Houston, and he wants a rough draft of the limited partnership agreement."

Mitch felt a nervous pain in his empty stomach. If he recalled correctly, the agreement was a hundred and forty-some pages long.

"Just a rough draft," Avery said as he pointed to a secretary.

"No problem," Mitch said with as much confidence as he could muster. "It may not be perfect, but I'll have a rough draft."

"I need it by noon Saturday, as perfect as possible. I'll get one of my secretaries to show Nina where the form agreements are in the memory bank. That will save some dictation and typing. I know this is unfair, but there's nothing fair about Sonny Capps. He's very demanding. He told me the deal must close in twenty days or it's dead. Everything is waiting on us."

"I'll get it done."

"Good. Let's meet at eight in the morning to see where we are."

Avery punched one of the blinking lights and began arguing into the receiver. Mitch walked to his office and looked for the Capps file under the fifteen notebooks. Nina stuck her head in the door.

"Oliver Lambert wants to see you."

"When?" Mitch asked.

"As soon as you can get there."

Mitch looked at his watch. Three hours at the office and he was ready to call it a day. "Can it wait?"

"I don't think so. Mr. Lambert doesn't usually wait for anybody."

"I see."

"You'd better go."

"What does he want?"

"His secretary didn't say."

He put on his coat, straightened his tie and raced upstairs to the fourth floor, where Mr. Lambert's secretary was waiting. She introduced herself and informed him she had been with the firm for thirty-one years. In fact, she was the second secretary hired by Mr. Anthony Bendini after he moved to Memphis. Ida Renfroe was her name, but everyone called her Mrs. Ida. She showed him into the big office and closed the door.

Oliver Lambert stood behind his desk and removed his reading glasses. He smiled warmly and laid his pipe in the brass holder. "Good morning, Mitch," he said softly, as if time meant nothing. "Let's sit over there." He waved to the sofa.

"Would you like coffee?" Mr. Lambert asked.

"No, thanks."

Mitch sank into the couch and the partner sat in a stiff wing chair, two feet away and three feet higher. Mitch unbuttoned his coat and tried to relax. He crossed his legs and glanced at his new pair of Cole-Haans. Two hundred bucks. That was an hour's work for an associate at this money-printing factory. He tried to relax. But he could feel the panic in Avery's voice and see the desperation in his eyes when he held the phone and listened to this Capps fellow on the other end. This, his second full day on the job, and his head was pounding and his stomach hurting.

Mr. Lambert smiled downward with his best sincere grandfatherly smile. It was time for a lecture of some sort. He wore a brilliant white shirt, button-down, all-cotton, pinpoint, with a small, dark silk bow tie which bestowed upon him a look of extreme intelligence and wisdom. As always, he was tanned beyond the usual midsummer Memphis scorched bronzeness. His teeth sparkled like diamonds. A sixty-year-old model.

"Just a couple of things, Mitch," he said. "I understand you've become quite busy."

"Yes, sir, quite."

"Panic is a way of life in a major law firm, and clients like Sonny Capps can cause ulcers. Our clients are our only assets, so we kill ourselves for them."

Mitch smiled and frowned at the same time.

"Two things, Mitch. First, my wife and I want you and Abby to have dinner with us Saturday. We dine out quite often, and we enjoy having our friends with us. I am somewhat of a chef myself, and I appreciate fine food and drink. We usually reserve a large table at one of our favorite restaurants in town, invite our friends and spend the evening with a nine-course meal and the rarest of wines. Will you and Abby be free on Saturday?"

“Of course.”

“Kendall Mahan, Wally Hudson, Lamar Quin and their wives will also be there.”

“We’d be delighted.”

“Good. My favorite place in Memphis is Justine’s. It’s an old French restaurant with exquisite cuisine and an impressive wine list. Say seven Saturday?”

“We’ll be there.”

“Second, there’s something we need to discuss. I’m sure you’re aware of it, but it’s worth mentioning. It’s very important to us. I know they taught you at Harvard that there exists a confidential relationship between yourself, as a lawyer, and your client. It’s a privileged relationship and you can never be forced to divulge anything a client tells you. It’s strictly confidential. It’s a violation of our ethics if we discuss our client’s business. Now, this applies to every lawyer, but at this firm we take this professional relationship very seriously. We don’t discuss a client’s business with anyone. Not other lawyers. Not spouses. Sometimes, not even each other. As a rule, we don’t talk at home, and our wives have learned not to ask. The less you say, the better off you are. Mr. Bendini was a great believer in secrecy, and he taught us well. You will never hear a member of this firm mention even so much as a client’s name outside this building. That’s how serious we are.”

Where’s he going with this? Mitch asked himself. Any second-year law student could give this speech. “I understand that, Mr. Lambert, and you don’t have to worry about me.”

“ ‘Loose tongues lose lawsuits.’ That was Mr. Bendini’s motto, and he applied it to everything. We simply do not discuss our client’s business with anyone, and that includes our wives. We’re very quiet, very secretive, and we like it that way. You’ll meet other lawyers around town and sooner or later they’ll ask something about our firm, or about a client. We don’t talk, understand?”

“Of course, Mr. Lambert.”

“Good. We’re very proud of you, Mitch. You’ll make a great lawyer. And a very rich lawyer. See you Saturday.”

Mrs. Ida had a message for Mitch. Mr. Tolar needed him at once. He thanked her and raced down the stairs, down the hallway, past his office, to the big one in the corner. There were now three secretaries digging and whispering to each other while the boss yelled into the telephone. Mitch found a safe spot in a chair by the door and watched the circus. The women pulled files and notebooks and mumbled in strange tongues among themselves. Occasionally Avery would snap his fingers and point here and there and they would jump like scared rabbits.

After a few minutes he slammed the phone down, again without saying goodbye. He glared at Mitch.

“Sonny Capps again. The Chinese want seventy-five million and he’s agreed to pay it. There will be forty-one limited partners instead of twenty-five. We have twenty days, or the deal is off.”

Two of the secretaries walked over to Mitch and handed him thick expandable files.

“Can you handle it?” Avery asked, almost with a sneer. The secretaries looked at him.

Mitch grabbed the files and headed for the door. “Of course I can handle it. Is that all?”

“It’s enough. I don’t want you to work on anything but that file between now and Saturday, understand?”

“Yes, boss.”

In his office he removed the bar review materials, all fifteen notebooks, and piled them in a corner. The Capps file was arranged neatly across the desk. He breathed deeply and began reading. There was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

Nina stuck her head through. “I hate to tell you this, but your new furniture is here.”

He rubbed his temples and mumbled incoherently.

“Perhaps you could work in the library for a couple of hours.”

“Perhaps.”

They repacked the Capps file and moved the fifteen notebooks into the hall, where two large black men waited with a row of bulky cardboard boxes and an oriental rug.

Nina followed him to the second-floor library.

"I'm supposed to meet with Lamar Quin at two to study for the bar exam. Call him and cancel. Tell him I'll explain later."

"You have a two o'clock meeting with Gill Vaughn," she said.

"Cancel that one too."

"He's a partner."

"Cancel it. I'll make it up later."

"It's not wise."

"Just do as I say."

"You're the boss."

"Thank you."

The paperhanger was a short muscle-bound woman advanced in years but conditioned to hard work and superbly trained. For almost forty years now, she explained to Abby, she had hung expensive paper in the finest homes in Memphis. She talked constantly, but wasted no motion. She cut precisely, like a surgeon, then applied glue like an artist. While it dried, she removed her tape measure from her leather work belt and analyzed the remaining corner of the dining room. She mumbled numbers which Abby could not decipher. She gauged the length and height in four different places, then committed it all to memory. She ascended the stepladder and instructed Abby to hand her a roll of paper. It fit perfectly. She pressed it firmly to the wall and commented for the hundredth time on how nice the paper was, how expensive, how long it would look good and last. She liked the color too. It blended wonderfully with the curtains and the rug. Abby had long since grown tired of saying thanks. She nodded and looked at her watch. It was time to start dinner.

When the wall was finished, Abby announced it was quitting time and asked her to return at nine the next morning. The lady said certainly, and began cleaning up her mess. She was being paid twelve dollars an hour, cash, and was agreeable to almost anything. Abby admired the room. They would finish it tomorrow, and the wallpapering would be complete except for two bathrooms and the

den. The painting was scheduled to begin next week. The glue from the paper and the wet lacquer from the mantel and the newness of the furniture combined for a wonderful fresh aroma. Just like a new house.

Abby said goodbye to the paperhanger and went to the bedroom where she undressed and lay across her bed. She called her husband, spoke briefly to Nina and was told he was in a meeting and would be a while. Nina said he would call. Abby stretched her long, sore legs and rubbed her shoulders. The ceiling fan spun slowly above her. Mitch would be home, eventually. He would work a hundred hours a week for a while, then cut back to eighty. She could wait.

She awoke an hour later and jumped from the bed. It was almost six. Veal piccata. Veal piccata. She stepped into a pair of khaki walking shorts and slipped on a white polo. She ran to the kitchen, which was finished except for some paint and a set of curtains due in next week. She found the recipe in a pasta cookbook and arranged the ingredients neatly on the countertop. There had been little red meat in law school, maybe an occasional hamburger steak. When she cooked, it had been chicken this or chicken that. There had been a lot of sandwiches and hot dogs.

But now, with all this sudden affluence, it was time to learn to cook. In the first week she prepared something new every night, and they ate whenever he got home. She planned the meals, studied the cookbooks, experimented with the sauces. For no apparent reason, Mitch liked Italian food, and with spaghetti and pork cappelini tried and perfected, it was time for veal piccata. She pounded the veal scallops with a mallet until they were thin enough, then laid them in flour seasoned with salt and pepper. She put a pan of water on the burner for the linguine. She poured a glass of Chablis and turned on the radio. She had called the office twice since lunch, and he had not found time to return the calls. She thought of calling again, but said no. It was his turn. Dinner would be fixed, and they would eat whenever he got home.

The scallops were sautéed in hot oil for three minutes until the veal was tender; then removed. She poured the oil from the pan and

added wine and lemon juice until it was boiling. She scraped and stirred the pan to thicken the sauce. She returned the veal to the pan, and added mushrooms and artichokes and butter. She covered the pan and let it simmer.

She fried bacon, sliced tomatoes, cooked linguine and poured another glass of wine. By seven, dinner was ready; bacon and tomato salad with tubettini, veal piccata, and garlic bread in the oven. He had not called. She took her wine to the patio and looked around the backyard. Hearsay ran from under the shrubs. Together they walked the length of the yard, surveying the Bermuda and stopping under the two large oaks. The remains of a long-abandoned tree house were scattered among the middle branches of the largest oak. Initials were carved on its trunk. A piece of rope hung from the other. She found a rubber ball, threw it and watched as the dog chased it. She listened for the phone through the kitchen window. It did not ring.

Hearsay froze, then growled at something next door. Mr. Rice emerged from a row of perfectly trimmed box hedges around his patio. Sweat dripped from his nose and his cotton undershirt was soaked. He removed his green gloves, and noticed Abby across the chain-link fence, under her tree. He smiled. He looked at her brown legs and smiled. He wiped his forehead with a sweaty forearm and headed for the fence.

“How are you?” he asked, breathing heavy. His thick gray hair dripped and clung to his scalp.

“Just fine, Mr. Rice. How are you?”

“Hot. Must be a hundred degrees.”

Abby slowly walked to the fence to chat. She had caught his stares for a week now, but did not mind. He was at least seventy and probably harmless. Let him look. Plus, he was a living, breathing, sweating human who could talk and maintain a conversation to some degree. The paperhanger had been her only source of dialogue since Mitch left before dawn.

“Your lawn looks great,” she said.

He wiped again and spat on the ground. “Great? You call this great? This belongs in a magazine. I’ve never seen a puttin’ green

look this good. I deserve garden of the month, but they won't give it to me. Where's your husband?"

"At the office. He's working late."

"It's almost eight. He must've left before sunup this morning. I take my walk at six-thirty, and he's already gone. What's with him?"

"He likes to work."

"If I had a wife like you, I'd stay at home. Couldn't make me leave."

Abby smiled at the compliment. "How is Mrs. Rice?"

He frowned, then yanked a weed out of the fence. "Not too good, I'm afraid. Not too good." He looked away and bit his lip. Mrs. Rice was almost dead with cancer. There were no children. She had a year, the doctors said. A year at the most. They had removed most of her stomach, and the tumors were now in the lungs. She weighed ninety pounds and seldom left the bed. During their first visit across the fence his eyes watered when he talked of her and of how he would be alone after fifty-one years.

"Naw, they won't give me garden of the month. Wrong part of town. It always goes to those rich folks who hire yard boys to do all the work while they sit by the pool and sip daiquiris. It does look good, doesn't it?"

"It's incredible. How many times a week do you mow?"

"Three or four. Depends on the rain. You want me to mow yours?"

"No. I want Mitch to mow it."

"He ain't got time, seems like. I'll watch it, and if it needs a little trim, I'll come over."

Abby turned and looked at the kitchen window. "Do you hear the phone?" she asked, walking away. Mr. Rice pointed to his hearing aid.

She said goodbye and ran to the house. The phone stopped when she lifted the receiver. It was eight-thirty, almost dark. She called the office, but no one answered. Maybe he was driving home.

An hour before midnight, the phone rang. Except for it and the light snoring, the second-floor office was without a sound. His feet were on the new desk, crossed at the ankles and numb from lack of circulation. The rest of the body slouched comfortably in the thick leather executive chair. He slumped to one side and intermittently exhaled the sounds of a deep sleep. The Capps file was strewn over the desk and one formidable-looking document was held firmly against his stomach. His shoes were on the floor, next to the desk, next to a pile of documents from the Capps file. An empty potato-chip bag was between the shoes.

After a dozen rings he moved, then jumped at the phone. It was his wife.

“Why haven’t you called?” she asked, coolly, yet with a slight touch of concern.

“I’m sorry. I fell asleep. What time is it?” He rubbed his eyes and focused on his watch.

“Eleven. I wish you would call.”

“I did call. No one answered.”

“When?”

“Between eight and nine. Where were you?”

She did not answer. She waited. “Are you coming home?”

“No. I need to work all night.”

“All night? You can’t work all night, Mitch.”

“Of course I can work all night. Happens all the time around here. It’s expected.”

“I expected you home, Mitch. And the least you could’ve done was call. Dinner is still on the stove.”

“I’m sorry. I’m up to my ears in deadlines and I lost track of time. I apologize.”

There was silence for a moment as she considered the apology. “Will this become a habit, Mitch?”

“It might.”

“I see. When do you think you might be home?”

“Are you scared?”

“No, I’m not scared. I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll come in around seven for a shower.”

“That’s nice. If I’m asleep, don’t wake me.”

She hung up. He looked at the receiver, then put it in place. On the fifth floor a security agent chuckled to himself. “ ‘Don’t wake me.’ That’s good,” he said as he pushed a button on the computerized recorder. He punched three buttons and spoke into a small mike. “Hey, Dutch, wake up down there.”

Dutch woke up and leaned to the intercom. “Yeah, what is it?”

“This is Marcus upstairs, I think our boy plans to stay all night.”

“What’s his problem?”

“Right now it’s his wife. He forgot to call her and she fixed a real nice supper.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. We’ve heard that before, ain’t we?”

“Yeah, every rookie does it the first week. Anyway, he told her he ain’t coming home till in the morning. So go back to sleep.”

Marcus pushed some more buttons and returned to his magazine.

Abby was waiting when the sun peeked between the oak trees. She sipped coffee and held the dog and listened to the quiet sounds of her neighborhood stirring to life. Sleep had been fitful. A hot shower had not eased the fatigue. She wore a white terry-cloth bathrobe, one of his, and nothing else. Her hair was wet and pulled straight back.

A car door slammed and the dog pointed inside the house. She heard him unlock the kitchen door, and moments later the sliding door to the patio opened. He laid his coat on a bench near the door and walked over to her.

“Good morning,” he said, then sat down across the wicker table.

She gave him a fake smile. “Good morning to you.”

“You’re up early,” he said in an effort at friendliness. It did not work. She smiled again and sipped her coffee.

He breathed deeply and gazed across the yard. “Still mad about last night, I see.”

“Not really. I don’t carry a grudge.”

"I said I was sorry, and I meant it. I tried to call once."

"You could've called again."

"Please don't divorce me, Abby. I swear it will never happen again. Just don't leave me."

She managed a genuine grin. "You look terrible," she said.

"What's under the robe?"

"Nothing."

"Let's see."

"Why don't you take a nap. You look haggard."

"Thanks. But I've got a nine o'clock meeting with Avery. And a ten o'clock meeting with Avery."

"Are they trying to kill you the first week?"

"Yes, but they can't do it. I'm too much of a man. Let's go take a shower."

"I've taken one."

"Naked?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it. Tell me every detail."

"If you'd come home at a decent hour you wouldn't feel deprived."

"I'm sure it'll happen again, dear. There will be plenty of all-nighters. You didn't complain in law school when I studied around the clock."

"It was different. I endured law school because I knew it would soon end. But now you're a lawyer and you will be for a long time. Is this part of it? Will you always work a thousand hours a week?"

"Abby, this is my first week."

"That's what worries me. It will only get worse."

"Sure it will. That's part of it, Abby. It's a cutthroat business where the weak are eaten and the strong get rich. It's a marathon. He who endures wins the gold."

"And dies at the finish line."

"I don't believe this. We moved here a week ago, and you're already worried about my health."

She sipped the coffee and rubbed the dog. She was beautiful. With tired eyes, no makeup, and wet hair, she was beautiful. He stood,

walked behind her and kissed her on the cheek. "I love you," he whispered.

She clutched his hand on her shoulder. "Go take a shower. I'll fix breakfast."

The table was arranged to perfection. Her grandmother's china was taken from the cabinet and used for the first time in the new home. Candles were lit in silver candlesticks. Grapefruit juice was poured in the crystal tea glasses. Linen napkins that matched the tablecloth were folded on the plates. When he finished his shower and changed into a new Burberry glen plaid, he walked to the dining room and whistled.

"What's the occasion?"

"It's a special breakfast, for a special husband."

He sat and admired the china. The food was warming in a covered silver dish. "What'd you cook?" he asked, smacking his lips. She pointed and he removed the lid. He stared at it.

"What's this?" he asked without looking at her.

"Veal piccata."

"Veal what?"

"Veal piccata."

He glanced at his watch. "I thought it was breakfast time."

"I cooked it for dinner last night, and I suggest you eat it."

"Veal piccata for breakfast?"

She grinned firmly and shook her head slightly. He looked again at the dish, and for a second or two analyzed the situation.

Finally, he said, "Smells good."

Saturday morning. He slept in and didn't get to the office until seven. He didn't shave, wore jeans, an old button-down, no socks and Bass loafers. Law school attire.

The Capps agreement had been printed and reprinted late Friday. He made some further revisions, and Nina ran it again at eight Friday night. He assumed she had little or no social life, so he didn't hesitate to ask her to work late. She said she didn't mind overtime, so he asked her to work Saturday morning.

She arrived at nine, wearing a pair of jeans that would fit a nose guard. He handed her the agreement, all two hundred and six pages, with his latest changes, and asked her to run it for the fourth time. He was to meet with Avery at ten.

The office changed on Saturday. All of the associates were there, as well as most of the partners and a few of the secretaries. There were no clients, thus no dress code. There was enough denim to launch a cattle drive. No ties. Some of the preppier ones wore their finest starched Duckheads with heavily starched button-downs and seemed to crackle when they walked.

But the pressure was there, at least for Mitchell Y. McDeere, the newest associate. He had canceled his bar review meetings on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and the fifteen notebooks sat on the shelf, gathering dust and reminding him that he would indeed become the first member to flunk the bar exam.

At ten the fourth revision was complete, and Nina ceremoniously laid it on Mitch's desk and left for the coffee room. It had grown to two hundred and nineteen pages. He had read every word four times and researched the tax code provisions until they were

memorized. He marched down the hall to his partner's office and laid it on the desk. A secretary was packing a mammoth briefcase while the boss talked on the phone.

"How many pages?" Avery asked when he hung up.

"Over two hundred."

"This is quite impressive. How rough is it?"

"Not very. That's the fourth revision since yesterday morning. It's almost perfect."

"We'll see. I'll read it on the plane, then Capps will read it with a magnifying glass. If he finds one mistake he'll raise hell for an hour and threaten not to pay. How many hours are in this?"

"Fifty-four and a half, since Wednesday."

"I know I've pushed, and I apologize. You've had a tough first week. But our clients sometimes push hard, and this won't be the last time we break our necks for someone who pays us two hundred dollars an hour. It's part of the business."

"I don't mind it. I'm behind on the bar review, but I can catch up."

"Is that little Hudson twerp giving you a hard time?"

"No."

"If he does, let me know. He's only a five-year man, and he enjoys playing professor. Thinks he's a real academic. I don't particularly like him."

"He's no problem."

Avery placed the agreement in the briefcase. "Where are the prospectus and other documents?"

"I've done a very rough draft of each. You said we had twenty days."

"We do, but let's get it done. Capps starts demanding things long before their deadlines. Are you working tomorrow?"

"I hadn't planned on it. In fact, my wife has sort of insisted we go to church."

Avery shook his head. "Wives can really get in the way, can't they?" He said this without expecting a reply.

Mitch did not respond.

"Let's have Capps finished by next Saturday."

“Fine. No problem,” Mitch said.

“Have we discussed Koker-Hanks?” Avery asked while rummaging through a file.

“No.”

“Here it is. Koker-Hanks is a big general contractor out of Kansas City. Keeps about a hundred million under contract, all over the country. An outfit out of Denver called Holloway Brothers has offered to buy Koker-Hanks. They want to swap some stock, some assets, some contracts, and throw in some cash. Pretty complicated deal. Familiarize yourself with the file, and we’ll discuss it Tuesday morning when I get back.”

“How much time do we have?”

“Thirty days.”

It was not quite as thick as the Capps file, but just as imposing. “Thirty days,” Mitch mumbled.

“The deal is worth eighty million, and we’ll rake off two hundred grand in fees. Not a bad deal. Every time you look at that file, charge it for an hour. Work on it whenever you can. In fact, if the name Koker-Hanks crosses your mind while you’re driving to work, stick it for an hour. The sky’s the limit on this one.”

Avery relished the thought of a client who would pay regardless of the charges. Mitch said goodbye and returned to his office.

About the time the cocktails were finished, while they studied the wine list and listened to Oliver Lambert’s comparison of the nuances, the subtleties, the distinctions of each of the French wines, about the time Mitch and Abby realized they would much rather be home eating a pizza and watching TV, two men with the correct key entered the shiny black BMW in the parking lot of Justine’s. They wore coats and ties and looked inconspicuous. They sped away innocently and drove across midtown to the new home of Mr. and Mrs. McDeere. They parked the BMW where it belonged, in the carport. The driver produced another key, and the two entered the house. Hearsay was locked in a closet in the washroom.

In the dark, a small leather attaché case was placed on the dining table. Thin disposable rubber gloves were pulled and stretched over the hands, and each took a small flashlight.

“Do the phones first,” one said.

They worked quickly, in the dark. The receiver from the kitchen phone was unplugged and laid on the table. The microphone was unscrewed and examined. A tiny drop-in transmitter, the size of a raisin, was glued in the cavity of the receiver and held firmly in place for ten seconds. When the glue became firm, the microphone was replaced and the receiver was plugged into the phone and hung on the kitchen wall. The voices, or signals, would be transmitted to a small receiver to be installed in the attic. A larger transmitter next to the receiver would send the signals across town to an antenna on top of the Bendini Building. Using the AC lines as a power source, the small bugs in the phones would transmit indefinitely.

“Get the one in the den.”

The attaché case was moved to a sofa. Above the recliner they drove a small nail into a ridge in the paneling, then removed it. A thin black cylinder, one twentieth of an inch by one inch, was carefully placed in the hole. It was cemented in place with a dab of black epoxy. The microphone was invisible. A wire, the thickness of a human hair, was gently fitted into the seam of the paneling and run to the ceiling. It would be connected to a receiver in the attic.

Identical mikes were hidden in the walls of each bedroom. The men found the retractable stairs in the main hallway and climbed into the attic. One removed the receiver and transmitter from the case while the other painstakingly pulled the tiny wires from the walls. When he gathered them, he wrapped them together and laid them under the insulation and ran them to a corner where his partner was placing the transmitter in an old cardboard box. An AC line was spliced and wired to the unit to provide power and transmission. A small antenna was raised to within an inch of the roof decking.

Their breathing became heavier in the sweltering heat of the dark attic. The small plastic casing of an old radio was fitted around the transmitter, and they scattered insulation and old clothing around it.

It was in a remote corner and not likely to be noticed for months, maybe years. And if it was noticed, it would appear to be only worthless junk. It could be picked up and thrown away without suspicion. They admired their handiwork for a second, then descended the stairs.

They meticulously covered their tracks and were finished in ten minutes.

Hearsay was released from the closet, and the men crept into the carport. They backed quickly out the driveway and sped into the night.

As the baked pompano was served, the BMW parked quietly next to the restaurant. The driver fished through his pockets and found the key to a maroon Jaguar, property of Mr. Kendall Mahan, attorney-at-law. The two technicians locked the BMW and slid into the Jag. The Mahans lived much closer than the McDeeres, and judging from the floor plans, the job would be quicker.

On the fifth floor of the Bendini Building, Marcus stared at a panel of blinking lights and waited for some signal from 1231 East Meadowbrook. The dinner party had broken up thirty minutes earlier, and it was time to listen. A tiny yellow light flashed weakly, and he draped a headset over his ears. He pushed a button to record. He waited. A green light beside the code McD6 began flashing. It was the bedroom wall. The signals grew clearer, voices, at first faint, then very clear. He increased the volume. And listened.

"Jill Mahan is a bitch," the female, Mrs. McDeere, was saying. "The more she drank, the bitchier she got."

"I think she's a blue blood of some sort," Mr. McDeere replied.

"Her husband is okay, but she's a real snot," Mrs. McDeere said.

"Are you drunk?" asked Mr. McDeere.

"Almost. I'm ready for passionate sex."

Marcus increased the volume and leaned toward the blinking lights.

"Take your clothes off," demanded Mrs. McDeere.

"We haven't done this in a while," said Mr. McDeere.

Marcus stood and hovered above the switches and lights.

“And whose fault is that?” she asked.

“I haven’t forgotten how. You’re beautiful.”

“Get in the bed,” she said.

Marcus turned the dial marked VOLUME until it would go no farther. He smiled at the lights and breathed heavily. He loved these associates, fresh from law school and full of energy. He smiled at the sounds of their lovemaking. He closed his eyes and watched them.

The Capps crisis passed in two weeks without disaster, thanks largely to a string of eighteen-hour days by the newest member of the firm, a member who had not yet passed the bar exam and who was too busy practicing law to worry about it. In July he billed an average of fifty-nine hours a week, a firm record for a nonlawyer. Avery proudly informed the partners at the monthly meeting that McDeere's work was remarkable for a rookie. The Capps deal was closed three days ahead of schedule, thanks to McDeere. The documents totaled four hundred pages, all perfect, all meticulously researched, drafted and redrafted by McDeere. Koker-Hanks would close within a month, thanks to McDeere, and the firm would earn close to a quarter of a mill. He was a machine.

Oliver Lambert expressed concern over his study habits. The bar exam was less than three weeks away, and it was obvious to all that McDeere was not ready. He had canceled half his review sessions in July and had logged less than twenty hours. Avery said not to worry, his boy would be ready.

Fifteen days before the exam, Mitch finally complained. He was about to flunk it, he explained to Avery over lunch at the Manhattan Club, and he needed time to study. Lots of time. He could cram it in for the next two weeks and pass by the hair of his ass. But he had to be left alone. No deadlines. No emergencies. No all-nighters. He pleaded. Avery listened carefully, and apologized. He promised to ignore him for the next two weeks. Mitch said thanks.

On the first Monday in August, a firm meeting was called in the main library on the first floor. It was the meeting room, the largest

of the four libraries, the showplace. Half the lawyers sat around the antique cherry conference table with twenty chairs under it. The rest stood next to the shelves of thick leather law books which had not been opened in decades. Every member was present, even Nathan Locke. He arrived late and stood next to the door by himself. He spoke to no one, and no one looked at him. Mitch stole a glance at Black Eyes when possible.

The mood was somber. No smiles. Beth Kozinski and Laura Hodge were escorted through the door by Oliver Lambert. They were seated at the front of the room facing a wall where two veiled portraits hung. They held hands and tried to smile. Mr. Lambert stood with his back to the wall and faced the small audience.

He spoke softly, his rich baritone exuding sympathy and compassion. He almost whispered at first, but the power of his voice made every sound and every syllable clear throughout the room. He looked at the two widows and told of the deep sadness the firm felt, how they would always be taken care of as long as there was a firm. He talked of Marty and Joe, of their first few years with the firm, of their importance to the firm, of the vast voids their deaths created. He spoke of their love for their families, their dedication to their homes.

The man was eloquent. He spoke in prose, with no forethought as to what the next sentence would be. The widows cried softly and wiped their eyes. And then some of the closer ones, Lamar Quin and Doug Turney, began to snifle.

When he had said enough, he unveiled the portrait of Martin Kozinski. It was an emotional moment. There were more tears. There would be a scholarship established at the Chicago Law School in his name. The firm would set up trusts for his children's education. The family would be taken care of. Beth bit her lip, but cried louder. The seasoned, hardened, tough-as-nails negotiators of the great Bendini firm swallowed rapidly and avoided looking at each other. Only Nathan Locke was unmoved. He glared at the wall with his penetrating lasers and ignored the ceremony.

Then the portrait of Joe Hodge, and a similar biography, similar scholarship and trust funds. Mitch had heard a rumor that Hodge

purchased a two-million-dollar life insurance policy four months before his death.

When the eulogies were complete, Nathan Locke disappeared through the door. The lawyers surrounded the widows and offered quiet words and embraces. Mitch did not know them and had nothing to say. He walked to the front wall and examined the paintings. Next to those of Kozinski and Hodge were three slightly smaller, but equally dignified portraits. The one of the woman caught his attention. The brass plate read: "Alice Knauss 1948–1977."

"She was a mistake," Avery said under his breath as he stepped next to his associate.

"What do you mean?" Mitch asked.

"Typical female lawyer. Came here from Harvard, number one in her class and carrying a chip because she was a female. Thought every man alive was a sexist and it was her mission in life to eliminate discrimination. Super-bitch. After six months we all hated her but couldn't get rid of her. She forced two partners into early retirement. Milligan still blames her for his heart attack. He was her partner."

"Was she a good lawyer?"

"Very good, but it was impossible to appreciate her talents. She was so contentious about everything."

"What happened to her?"

"Car wreck. Killed by a drunk driver. It was really tragic."

"Was she the first woman?"

"Yes, and the last, unless we get sued."

Mitch nodded to the next portrait. "Who was he?"

"Robert Lamm. He was a good friend of mine. Emory Law School in Atlanta. He was about three years ahead of me."

"What happened?"

"No one knows. He was an avid hunter. We hunted moose in Wyoming one winter. In 1972 he was deer hunting in Arkansas and turned up missing. They found him a month later in a ravine with a hole through his head. Autopsy said the bullet entered through the rear of his skull and blew away most of his face. They speculate the

shot was fired from a high-powered rifle at long range. It was probably an accident, but we'll never know. I could never imagine anyone wanting to kill Bobby Lamm."

The last portrait was of John Mickel, 1950–1984. "What happened to him?" Mitch whispered.

"Probably the most tragic of all. He was not a strong man, and the pressure got to him. He drank a lot, and started drugs. Then his wife left him and they had a bitter divorce. The firm was embarrassed. After he had been here ten years, he began to fear he would not become a partner. The drinking got worse. We spent a small fortune on treatment, shrinks, everything. But nothing worked. He became depressed, then suicidal. He wrote a seven-page suicide note and blew his brains out."

"That's terrible."

"Sure was."

"Where'd they find him?"

Avery cleared his throat and glanced around the room. "In your office."

"What!"

"Yeah, but they cleaned it up."

"You're kidding!"

"No, I'm serious. It was years ago, and the office has been used since then. It's okay."

Mitch was speechless.

"You're not superstitious, are you?" Avery asked with a nasty grin.

"Of course not."

"I guess I should've told you, but it's not something we talk about."

"Can I change offices?"

"Sure. Just flunk the bar exam and we'll give you one of those paralegal offices in the basement."

"If I flunk it, it'll be because of you."

"Yes, but you won't flunk it, will you?"

"If you can pass it, so can I."

From 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. the Bendini Building was empty and quiet. Nathan Locke arrived around six, but went straight to his office and locked the door. At seven, the associates began appearing and voices could be heard. By seven-thirty the firm had a quorum, and a handful of secretaries punched in. By eight the halls were full and it was chaos as usual. Concentration became difficult. Interruptions were routine. Phones beeped incessantly. By nine, all lawyers, paralegals, clerks and secretaries were either present or accounted for.

Mitch treasured the solitude of the early hours. He moved his clock up thirty minutes and began waking Dutch at five, instead of five-thirty. After making two pots of coffee, he roamed the dark halls flipping light switches and inspecting the building. Occasionally, on a clear morning, he would stand before the window in Lamar's office and watch the dawn break over the mighty Mississippi below. He would count the barges lined neatly before their tugboats plowing slowly up-river. He watched the trucks inch across the bridge in the distance. But he wasted little time. He dictated letters, briefs, summaries, memorandums and a hundred other documents for Nina to type and Avery to review. He crammed for the bar exam.

The morning after the ceremony for the dead lawyers, he found himself in the library on the first floor looking for a treatise when he again noticed the five portraits. He walked to the wall and stared at them, remembering the brief obituaries given by Avery. Five dead lawyers in twenty years. It was a dangerous place to work. On a legal pad he scribbled their names and the years they died. It was five-thirty.

Something moved in the hallway, and he jerked to his right. In the darkness he saw Black Eyes watching. He stepped forward to the door and glared at Mitch. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

Mitch faced him and attempted a smile. "Good morning to you. It happens I am studying for the bar exam."

Locke glanced at the portraits and then stared at Mitch. "I see. Why are you so interested in them?"

"Just curious. This firm has had its share of tragedy."

“They’re all dead. A real tragedy will occur if you don’t pass the bar exam.”

“I intend to pass it.”

“I’ve heard otherwise. Your study habits are causing concern among the partners.”

“Are the partners concerned about my excessive billing?”

“Don’t get smart. You were told the bar exam has priority over everything. An employee with no license is of no use to this firm.”

Mitch thought of a dozen smart retorts, but let it pass. Locke stepped backward and disappeared. In his office with the door closed, Mitch hid the names and dates in a drawer and opened a review book on constitutional law.

The Saturday after the bar exam Mitch avoided his office and his house and spent the morning digging in the flower beds and waiting. With the remodeling complete, the house was now presentable, and of course the first guests had to be her parents. Abby had cleaned and polished for a week, and it was now time. She promised they wouldn't stay long, no more than a few hours. He promised to be as nice as possible.

Mitch had washed and waxed both new cars and they looked as if they had just left the showroom. The lawn had been manicured by a kid down the street. Mr. Rice had applied fertilizer for a month and it looked like a puttin' green, as he liked to say.

At noon they arrived, and he reluctantly left the flower beds. He smiled and greeted them and excused himself to go clean up. He could tell they were uncomfortable, and he wanted it that way. He took a long shower as Abby showed them every piece of furniture and every inch of wallpaper. These things impressed the Sutherlands. Small things always did. They dwelt on the things others did or did not have. He was the president of a small county bank that had been on the verge of collapse for ten years. She was too good to work and had spent all of her adult life seeking social advancement in a town where there was none to be had. She had traced her ancestry to royalty in one of the old countries, and this had always impressed the coal miners in Danesboro, Kentucky. With so much blue blood in her veins, it had fallen her duty to do nothing but drink hot tea, play bridge, talk of her husband's money, condemn the less fortunate and work tirelessly in the Garden Club. He was a stuffed shirt who jumped when she barked and lived in

eternal fear of making her mad. As a team they had relentlessly pushed their daughter from birth to be the best, achieve the best, but most importantly, marry the best. Their daughter had rebelled and married a poor kid with no family except a crazy mother and a criminal brother.

"Nice place you've got here, Mitch," Mr. Sutherland said in an effort to break the ice. They sat for lunch and began passing dishes.

"Thanks." Nothing else, just thanks. He concentrated on the food. There would be no smiles from him at lunch. The less he said, the more uncomfortable they would be. He wanted them to feel awkward, guilty, wrong. He wanted them to sweat, to bleed. It had been their decision to boycott the wedding. It had been their stones cast, not his.

"Everything is so lovely," her mother gushed in his direction.

"Thanks."

"We're so proud of it, Mother," Abby said.

The conversation immediately went to the remodeling. The men ate in silence as the women chattered on and on about what the decorator did to this room and that one. At times, Abby was almost desperate to fill in the gaps with words about whatever came to mind. Mitch almost felt sorry for her, but he kept his eyes on the table. The butter knife could have cut the tension.

"So you've found a job?" Mrs. Sutherland asked.

"Yes. I start a week from Monday. I'll be teaching third-graders at St. Andrew's Episcopal School."

"Teaching doesn't pay much," her father blurted.

He's relentless, thought Mitch.

"I'm not concerned with money, Dad. I'm a teacher. To me, it's the most important profession in the world. If I wanted money, I would've gone to medical school."

"Third-graders," her mother said. "That's such a cute age. You'll be wanting children before long."

Mitch had already decided that if anything would attract these people to Memphis on a regular basis, it was grandchildren. And he had decided he could wait a long time. He had never been around children. There were no nieces or nephews, except for maybe a few

unknown ones Ray had scattered around the country. And he had developed no affinity for children.

“Maybe in a few years, Mother.” Maybe after they’re both dead, thought Mitch. “You want children, don’t you, Mitch?” asked the mother-in-law.

“Maybe in a few years.”

Mr. Sutherland pushed his plate away and lit a cigarette. The issue of smoking had been repeatedly discussed in the days before the visit. Mitch wanted it banned completely from his house, especially by these people. They had argued vehemently, and Abby won.

“How was the bar exam?” the father-in-law asked.

This could be interesting, Mitch thought. “Grueling.” Abby chewed her food nervously.

“Do you think you passed?”

“I hope so.”

“When will you know?”

“Four to six weeks.”

“How long did it last?”

“Four days.”

“He’s done nothing but study and work since we moved here. I haven’t seen much of him this summer,” Abby said.

Mitch smiled at his wife. The time away from home was already a sore subject, and it was amusing to hear her condone it.

“What happens if you don’t pass it?” her father asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Do they give you a raise when you pass?” Mitch decided to be nice, as he had promised. But it was difficult. “Yes, a nice raise and a nice bonus.”

“How many lawyers are in the firm?”

“Forty.”

“My goodness,” said Mrs. Sutherland. She lit up one of hers. “There’s not that many in Dane County.”

“Where’s your office?” he asked. “Downtown.”

“Can we see it?” she asked.

“Maybe some other time. It’s closed to visitors on Saturdays.” Mitch amused himself with his answer. Closed to visitors, as if it was a museum.

Abby sensed disaster and began talking about the church they had joined. It had four thousand members, a gymnasium and bowling alley. She sang in the choir and taught eight-year-olds in Sunday school. Mitch went when he was not working, but he’d been working most Sundays.

“I’m happy to see you’ve found a church home, Abby,” her father said piously. For years he had led the prayer each Sunday at the First Methodist Church in Danesboro, and the other six days he had tirelessly practiced greed and manipulation. He had also steadily but discreetly pursued whiskey and women.

An awkward silence followed as the conversation came to a halt. He lit another one. Keep smoking, old boy, Mitch thought. Keep smoking.

“Let’s have dessert on the patio,” Abby said. She began clearing the table.

They bragged about his gardening skills, and he accepted the credit. The same kid down the street had pruned the trees, pulled the weeds, trimmed the hedges and edged the patio. Mitch was proficient only in pulling weeds and scooping dog crap. He could also operate the lawn sprinkler, but usually let Mr. Rice do it.

Abby served strawberry shortcake and coffee. She looked helplessly at her husband, but he was noncommittal.

“This is a real nice place you’ve got here,” her father said for the third time as he surveyed the backyard. Mitch could see his mind working. He had taken the measure of the house and neighborhood, and the curiosity was becoming unbearable. How much did the place cost, dammit? That’s what he wanted to know. How much down? How much a month? Everything. He would keep pecking away until he could work in the questions somewhere.

“This is a lovely place,” her mother said for the tenth time.

“When was it built?” her father asked.

Mitch laid his plate on the table and cleared his throat. He could sense it coming. “It’s about fifteen years old,” he answered.

“How many square feet?”

“About three thousand,” Abby answered nervously. Mitch glared at her. His composure was vanishing.

“It’s a lovely neighborhood,” her mother added helpfully.

“New loan, or did you assume one?” her father asked, as if he were interviewing a loan applicant with weak collateral.

“It’s a new loan,” Mitch said, then waited. Abby waited and prayed.

He didn’t wait, couldn’t wait. “What’d you pay for it?”

Mitch breathed deeply and was about to say, “Too much.” Abby was quicker. “We didn’t pay too much, Daddy,” she said firmly with a frown. “We’re quite capable of handling our money.”

Mitch managed a smile while biting his tongue.

Mrs. Sutherland was on her feet. “Let’s go for a drive, shall we? I want to see the river and that new pyramid they’ve built beside it. Shall we? Come on, Harold.”

Harold wanted more information about the house, but his wife was now tugging on his arm. “Great idea,” Abby said.

They loaded into the shiny new BMW and went to see the river. Abby asked them not to smoke in the new car. Mitch drove in silence and tried to be nice.

Nina entered the office in a rush with a stack of paperwork and laid it before her boss. "I need signatures," she demanded, and handed him his pen.

"What is all this?" Mitch asked as he dutifully scribbled his name.

"Don't ask. Just trust me."

"I found a misspelled word in the Landmark Partners agreement."

"It's the computer."

"Okay. Get the computer fixed."

"How late are you working tonight?"

Mitch scanned the documents and signed off on each. "I don't know. Why?"

"You look tired. Why don't you go home early, say around ten or ten-thirty, and get some rest. Your eyes are beginning to look like Nathan Locke's."

"Very funny."

"Your wife called."

"I'll call her in a minute."

When he finished she restacked the letters and documents. "It's five o'clock. I'm leaving. Oliver Lambert is waiting on you in the first-floor library."

"Oliver Lambert! Waiting on me?"

"That's what I said. He called not more than five minutes ago. Said it was very important."

Mitch straightened his tie and ran down the hall, down the stairs, and walked casually into the library. Lambert, Avery and what appeared to be most of the partners sat around the conference table. All of the associates were present, standing behind the partners. The

seat at the head of the table was empty, and waiting. The room was quiet, almost solemn. There were no smiles. Lamar was close by and refused to look at him. Avery was sheepish, sort of embarrassed. Wally Hudson twirled the end of his bow tie and slowly shook his head.

“Sit down, Mitch,” Mr. Lambert said gravely. “We have something to discuss with you.” Doug Turney closed the door.

He sat and searched for any small sign of reassurance. None. The partners rolled their chairs in his direction, squeezing together in the process. The associates surrounded him and glared downward.

“What is it?” he asked meekly, looking helplessly at Avery. Small beads of sweat surfaced above his eyebrows. His heart pounded like a jackhammer. His breathing was labored.

Oliver Lambert leaned across the edge of the table and removed his reading glasses. He frowned sincerely, as if this would be painful. “We’ve just received a call from Nashville, Mitch, and we wanted to talk with you about it.”

The bar exam. The bar exam. The bar exam. History had been made. An associate of the great Bendini firm had finally flunked the bar exam. He glared at Avery, and wanted to scream, “It’s all your fault!” Avery pinched his eyebrows as if a migraine had hit and avoided eye contact. Lambert eyed the other partners suspiciously and returned to McDeere.

“We were afraid this would happen, Mitch.”

He wanted to speak, to explain that he deserved just one more chance, that the exam would be given again in six months and he would ace it, that he would not embarrass them again. A thick pain hit below the belt.

“Yes, sir,” he said humbly, in defeat.

Lambert moved in for the kill. “We aren’t supposed to know these things, but the folks in Nashville told us that you made the highest score on the bar exam. Congratulations, Counselor.”

The room exploded with laughter and cheers. They gathered around and shook his hand, patted his back and laughed at him. Avery rushed forward with a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Kendall Mahan slammed three bottles of champagne on the table

and began popping corks. A round was poured into plastic wineglasses. He finally breathed and broke into a smile. He slugged the champagne, and they poured him another glass.

Oliver Lambert placed his arm gently around Mitch's neck and spoke. "Mitch, we are very proud of you. This calls for a little bonus. I have here a firm check in the amount of two thousand dollars, which I am presenting to you as a small reward for this achievement."

There were whistles and catcalls.

"This is, of course, in addition to the substantial raise you have just earned."

More whistles and catcalls. Mitch took the check but did not look at it.

Mr. Lambert raised his hand and asked for quiet. "On behalf of the firm, I would like to present you with this." Lamar handed him a package wrapped in brown paper. Mr. Lambert peeled it off and threw it on the table.

"It's a plaque which we prepared in anticipation of this day. As you can see, it is a bronzed replica of a piece of firm stationery, complete with every name. As you can also see, the name of Mitchell Y. McDeere has been added to the letterhead."

Mitch stood and awkwardly received the award. The color had returned to his face, and the champagne was beginning to feel good. "Thank you," he said softly.

Three days later the Memphis paper published the names of the attorneys who passed the bar exam. Abby clipped the article for the scrapbook and sent copies to her parents and Ray.

Mitch had discovered a deli three blocks from the Bendini Building between Front Street and Riverside Drive, near the river. It was a dark hole in the wall with few customers and greasy chili dogs. He liked it because he could sneak away and proofread a document while he ate. Now that he was a full-blown associate, he could eat a hot dog for lunch and bill a hundred and fifty an hour.

A week after his name was in the paper, he sat by himself at a table in the rear of the deli and ate a chili dog with a fork. The place was empty. He read a prospectus an inch thick. The Greek who ran the place was asleep behind the cash register.

A stranger approached his table and stopped a few feet away. He unraveled a piece of Juicy Fruit, making as much noise as possible. When it was apparent he was not being seen, he walked to the table and sat down. Mitch looked across the red-checkered tablecloth and laid the document next to the iced tea.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

The stranger glanced at the counter, glanced at the empty tables and glanced behind him. “You’re McDeere, aren’t you?”

It was a rich brogue, undoubtedly Brooklyn. Mitch studied him carefully. He was about forty, with a short military haircut on the sides and a wisp of gray hair hanging almost to his eyebrows. The suit was a three-piece, navy in color, made of at least ninety percent polyester. The tie was cheap imitation silk. He wasn’t much of a dresser, but there was a certain neatness about him. And an air of cockiness.

“Yeah. Who are you?” Mitch asked.

He grabbed his pocket and whipped out a badge. “Tarrance, Wayne Tarrance, Special Agent, FBI.” He raised his eyebrows and waited for a response.

“Have a seat,” Mitch said.

“Don’t mind if I do.”

“Do you want to frisk me?”

“Not till later. I just wanted to meet you. Saw your name in the paper and heard you were the new man at Bendini, Lambert & Locke.”

“Why should that interest the FBI?”

“We watch that firm pretty close.”

Mitch lost interest in the chili dog and slid the plate to the center of the table. He added more sweetener to his tea in a large Styrofoam cup.

“Would you like something to drink?” Mitch asked.

“No, thanks.”

“Why do you watch the Bendini firm?”

Tarrance smiled and looked toward the Greek. “I can’t really say at this point. We got our reasons, but I didn’t come here to talk about that. I came here to meet you, and to warn you.”

“To warn me?”

“Yes, to warn you about the firm.”

“I’m listening.”

“Three things. Number one, don’t trust anyone. There’s not a single person in that firm you can confide in. Remember that. It will become important later on. Number two, every word you utter, whether at home, at the office or anywhere in the building, is likely to be recorded. They might even listen to you in your car.”

Mitch watched and listened intently. Tarrance was enjoying this.

“And number three?” Mitch asked.

“Number three, money don’t grow on trees.”

“Would you care to elaborate?”

“I can’t right now. I think you and I will become very close. I want you to trust me, and I know I’ll have to earn your trust. So I don’t want to move too fast. We can’t meet at your office, or my office, and we can’t talk on the phone. So from time to time I’ll come find you. In the meantime, just remember those three things, and be careful.”

Tarrance stood and reached for his wallet. “Here’s my card. My home number is on the back. Use it only from a pay phone.”

Mitch studied the card. “Why should I be calling you?”

“You won’t need to for a while. But keep the card.”

Mitch placed it in his shirt pocket.

“There’s one other thing,” Tarrance said. “We saw you at the funerals of Hodge and Kozinski. Sad, really sad. Their deaths were not accidental.”

He looked down at Mitch with both hands in his pockets and smiled.

“I don’t understand.”

Tarrance started for the door. “Gimme a call sometime, but be careful. Remember, they’re listening.”

A few minutes after four a horn honked and Dutch bolted to his feet. He cursed and walked in front of the headlights.

“Dammit, Mitch. It’s four o’clock. What’re you doing here?”

“Sorry, Dutch. Couldn’t sleep. Rough night.” The gate opened.

By seven-thirty he had dictated enough work to keep Nina busy for two days. She bitched less when her nose was glued to the monitor. His immediate goal was to become the first associate to justify a second secretary.

At eight o’clock he parked himself in Lamar’s office and waited. He proofed a contract and drank coffee, and told Lamar’s secretary to mind her own business. He arrived at eight-fifteen.

“We need to talk,” Mitch said as he closed the door. If he believed Tarrance, the office was bugged and the conversation would be recorded. He was not sure whom to believe.

“You sound serious,” Lamar said.

“Ever hear of a guy named Tarrance, Wayne Tarrance?”

“No.”

“FBI.”

Lamar closed his eyes. “FBI,” he mumbled.

“That’s right. He had a badge and everything.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“He found me at Lansky’s Deli on Union. He knew who I was, knew I’d just been admitted. Says he knows all about the firm. They watch us real close.”

“Have you told Avery?”

“No. No one but you. I’m not sure what to do.” Lamar picked up the phone. “We need to tell Avery. I think this has happened before.”

“What’s going on, Lamar?”

Lamar talked to Avery’s secretary and said it was an emergency. In a few seconds he was on the other end. “We’ve got a small problem, Avery. An FBI agent contacted Mitch yesterday. He’s in my office.”

Lamar listened, then said to Mitch, “He’s got me on hold. Said he was calling Lambert.”

“I take it this is pretty serious,” Mitch said.

“Yes, but don’t worry. There’s an explanation. It’s happened before.”

Lamar held the receiver closer and listened to the instructions. He hung up. “They want us in Lambert’s office in ten minutes.”

Avery, Royce McKnight, Oliver Lambert, Harold O’Kane and Nathan Locke were waiting. They stood nervously around the small conference table and tried to appear calm when Mitch entered the office.

“Have a seat,” Nathan Locke said with a short, plastic smile. “We want you to tell us everything.”

“What’s that?” Mitch pointed to a tape recorder in the center of the table.

“We don’t want to miss anything,” Locke said, and pointed to an empty chair. Mitch sat and stared across the table at Black Eyes. Avery sat between them. No one made a sound.

“Okay. I was eating lunch yesterday at Lansky’s Deli on Union. This guy walks up and sits across my table. He knows my name. Shows me a badge and says his name is Wayne Tarrance, Special Agent, FBI. I look at the badge, and it’s real. He tells me he wants to meet because we’ll get to know each other. They watch this firm real close and he warns me not to trust anyone. I ask him why, and he said he doesn’t have time to explain, but he will later. I don’t know what to say, so I just listen. He says he will contact me later. He gets up to leave and tells me they saw me at the funerals. Then he says the deaths of Kozinski and Hodge were not accidents. And he leaves. The entire conversation lasted less than five minutes.”

Black Eyes glared at Mitch and absorbed every word. “Have you ever seen this man before?”

“Never.”

“Whom did you tell?”

“Only Lamar. I told him first thing this morning.”

“Your wife?”

“No.”

“Did he leave you a phone number to call?”

“No.”

“I want to know every word that was said,” Locke demanded.

"I've told you what I remember. I can't recall it verbatim."

"Are you certain?"

"Let me think a minute." A few things he would keep to himself. He stared at Black Eyes, and knew that Locke suspected more.

"Let's see. He said he saw my name in the paper and knew I was the new man here. That's it. I've covered everything. It was a very brief conversation."

"Try to remember everything," Locke persisted. "I asked him if he wanted some of my tea. He declined."

The tape recorder was turned off, and the partners seemed to relax a little. Locke walked to the window. "Mitch, we've had trouble with the FBI, as well as the IRS. It's been going on for a number of years. Some of our clients are high rollers—wealthy individuals who make millions, spend millions and expect to pay little or no taxes. They pay us thousands of dollars to legally avoid taxes. We have a reputation for being very aggressive, and we don't mind taking chances if our clients instruct us to. We're talking about very sophisticated businessmen who understand risks. They pay dearly for our creativeness. Some of the shelters and write-offs we set up have been challenged by the IRS. We've slugged it out with them in tax litigation for the past twenty years. They don't like us, we don't like them. Some of our clients have not always possessed the highest degree of ethics, and they have been investigated and harassed by the FBI. For the past three years, we, too, have been harassed.

"Tarrance is a rookie looking for a big name. He's been here less than a year and has become a thorn. You are not to speak to him again. Your brief conversation yesterday was probably recorded. He is dangerous, extremely dangerous. He does not play fair, and you'll learn soon enough that most of the feds don't play fair."

"How many of these clients have been convicted?"

"Not a single one. And we've won our share of litigation with the IRS."

"What about Kozinski and Hodge?"

"Good question," answered Oliver Lambert. "We don't know what happened. It first appeared to be an accident, but now we're not

sure. There was a native of the islands on board with Marty and Joe. He was the captain and divemaster. The authorities down there now tell us they suspect he was a key link in a drug ring based in Jamaica and perhaps the explosion was aimed at him. He died, of course.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever know,” Royce McKnight added. “The police down there are not that sophisticated. We’ve chosen to protect the families, and as far as we’re concerned, it was an accident. Frankly, we’re not sure how to handle it.”

“Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone,” Locke instructed. “Stay away from Tarrance, and if he contacts you again, let us know immediately. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t even tell your wife,” Avery said.

Mitch nodded.

The grandfather’s warmth returned to Oliver Lambert’s face. He smiled and twirled his reading glasses. “Mitch, we know this is frightening, but we’ve grown accustomed to it. Let us handle it, and trust us. We are not afraid of Mr. Tarrance, the FBI, the IRS or anybody else because we’ve done nothing wrong. Anthony Bendini built this firm by hard work, talent and uncompromising ethics. It has been drilled into all of us. Some of our clients have not been saints, but no lawyer can dictate morals to his client. We don’t want you worrying about this. Stay away from this guy—he is very, very dangerous. If you feed him, he’ll get bolder and become a nuisance.”

Locke pointed a crooked finger at Mitch. “Further contact with Tarrance will jeopardize your future with this firm.”

“I understand,” Mitch said.

“He understands,” Avery said defensively. Locke glared at Tolar.

“That’s all we have, Mitch,” Mr. Lambert said. “Be cautious.”

Mitch and Lamar hit the door and found the nearest stairway.

“Get DeVasher,” Locke said to Lambert, who was on the phone. Within two minutes the two senior partners had been cleared and were sitting before DeVasher’s cluttered desk.

“Did you listen?” Locke asked.

“Of course I listened to it, Nat. We heard every word the boy said. You handled it real well. I think he’s scared and will run from Tarrance.”

“What about Lazarov?”

“I gotta tell him. He’s the boss. We can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

“What will they do?”

“Nothing serious. We’ll watch the boy around the clock and check all his phone calls. And wait. He’s not gonna move. It’s up to Tarrance. He’ll find him again, and the next time we’ll be there. Try to keep him in the building as much as possible. When he leaves, let us know, if you can. I don’t think it’s that bad, really.”

“Why would they pick McDeere?” asked Locke.

“New strategy, I guess. Kozinski and Hodge went to them, remember. Maybe they talked more than we thought. I don’t know. Maybe they figure McDeere is the most vulnerable because he’s fresh out of school and full of rookie idealism. And ethics—like our ethical friend Ollie here. That was good, Ollie, real good.”

“Shut up, DeVasher.”

DeVasher quit smiling and bit his bottom lip. He let it pass. He looked at Locke. “You know what the next step is, don’t you? If Tarrance keeps pushing, that idiot Lazarov will call me one day and tell me to remove him. Silence him. Put him in a barrel and drop him in the Gulf. And when that happens, all of you honorable esquires will take your early retirement and leave the country.”

“Lazarov wouldn’t order a hit on an agent.”

“Oh, it would be a foolish move, but then Lazarov is a fool. He’s very anxious about the situation down here. He calls a lot and asks all sorts of questions. I give him all sorts of answers. Sometimes he listens, sometimes he cusses. Sometimes he says he’s gotta talk to the board. But if he tells me to take out Tarrance, then we’ll take out Tarrance.”

“This makes me sick at my stomach,” Lambert said.

“You wanna get sick, Ollie. You let one of your little Gucci-loafered counselors get chummy with Tarrance and start talking,

you'll get a helluva lot worse than sick. Now, I suggest you boys keep McDeere so busy he won't have time to think about Tarrance."

"My God, DeVasher, he works twenty hours a day. He started like fire and he hasn't slowed down."

"Just watch him close. Tell Lamar Quin to get real tight with him so if he's got something on his mind, maybe he'll unload."

"Good idea," said Locke. He looked at Ollie. "Let's have a long talk with Quin. He's closest to McDeere, and maybe he can get closer."

"Look, boys," DeVasher said, "McDeere is scared right now. He won't make a move. If Tarrance contacts him again, he'll do what he did today. He'll run straight to Lamar Quin. He showed us who he confides in."

"Did he tell his wife last night?" asked Locke.

"We're checking the tapes now. It'll take about an hour. We've got so damned many bugs in this city it takes six computers to find anything."

Mitch stared through the window in Lamar's office and selected his words carefully. He said little. Suppose Tarrance was correct. Suppose everything was being recorded.

"Do you feel better?" Lamar asked.

"Yeah, I guess. It makes sense."

"It's happened before, just like Locke said."

"Who? Who was approached before?"

"I don't remember. Seems like it was three or four years ago."

"But you don't remember who it was?"

"No. Why is that important?"

"I'd just like to know. I don't understand why they would pick me, the new man, the one lawyer out of forty who knows the least about this firm and its clients. Why would they pick me?"

"I don't know, Mitch. Look, why don't you do as Locke suggested? Try to forget about it and run from this guy Tarrance. You don't have to talk to him unless he's got a warrant. Tell him to get lost if he shows up again. He's dangerous."

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Mitch forced a smile and headed for the door. “We’re still on for dinner tomorrow night?”

“Sure. Kay wants to grill steaks and eat by the pool. Make it late, say around seven-thirty.”

“See you then.”

The guard called his name, frisked him and led him to a large room where a row of small booths was occupied with visitors talking and whispering through thick metal screens.

“Number fourteen,” the guard said, and pointed. Mitch walked to his booth and sat down. A minute later Ray appeared and sat between his dividers on the other side of the screen. Were it not for a scar on Ray’s forehead and a few wrinkles around the eyes, they could pass for twins. Both were six-two, weighed about one-eighty, with light brown hair, small blue eyes, high cheekbones and large chins. They had always been told there was Indian blood in the family, but the dark skin had been lost through years in the coal mines.

Mitch had not been to Brushy Mountain in three years. Three years and three months. They’d exchanged letters twice a month, every month, for eight years now.

“How’s your French?” Mitch finally asked. Ray’s Army test scores had revealed an amazing aptitude for languages. He had served two years as a Vietnamese interpreter. He had mastered German in six months while stationed there. Spanish had taken four years, but he was forced to learn it from a dictionary in the prison library. French was his latest project.

“I’m fluent, I guess,” Ray answered. “It’s kinda hard to tell in here. I don’t get much practice. Evidently they don’t teach French in the projects, so most of these brothers here are unilingual. It’s undoubtedly the most beautiful language.”

“Is it easy?”

“Not as easy as German. Of course, it was easier to learn German since I was living there and everybody spoke it. Did you know that fifty percent of our language comes from German through Old English?”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“It’s true. English and German are first cousins.”

“What’s next?”

“Probably Italian. It’s a Romance language like French and Spanish and Portuguese. Maybe Russian. Maybe Greek. I’ve been reading about the Greek isles. I plan to go there soon.”

Mitch smiled. He was at least seven years away from parole.

“You think I’m kidding, don’t you?” Ray asked. “I’m checking out of here, Mitchell, and it won’t be long.”

“What are your plans?”

“I can’t talk. But I’m working on it.”

“Don’t do it, Ray.”

“I’ll need some help on the outside, and enough money to get me out of the country. A thousand should do it. You can handle that, can’t you? You won’t be implicated.”

“Aren’t they listening to us?”

“Sometimes.”

“Let’s talk about something else.”

“Sure. How’s Abby?”

“She’s fine.”

“Where is she?”

“Right now she’s in church. She wanted to come, but I told her she wouldn’t get to see you.”

“I’d like to see her. Your letters sound like y’all are doing real well. New house, cars, country club. I’m very proud of you. You’re the first McDeere in two generations to amount to a damned thing.”

“Our parents were good people, Ray. They had no opportunities and a lot of bad luck. They did the best they could.”

Ray smiled and looked away. “Yeah, I guess so. Have you talked to Mom?”

“It’s been a while.”

“Is she still in Florida?”

"I think so."

They paused and studied their fingers. They thought of their mother. Painful thoughts for the most part. There had been happier times, when they were small and their father was alive. She never recovered from his death, and after Rusty was killed the aunts and uncles put her in an institution.

Ray took his finger and followed the small metal rods in the screen. He watched his finger. "Let's talk about something else."

Mitch nodded in agreement. There was so much to talk about, but it was all in the past. They had nothing in common but the past, and it was best to leave it alone.

"You mentioned in a letter that one of your ex-cellmates is a private investigator in Memphis."

"Eddie Lomax. He was a Memphis cop for nine years, until he got sent up for rape."

"Rape?"

"Yeah. He had a tough time here. Rapists are not well regarded around this place. Cops are hated. They almost killed him until I stepped in. He's been out about three years now. He writes me all the time. Does mainly divorce investigations."

"Is he in the phone book?"

"969-3838. Why do you need him?"

"I've got a lawyer buddy whose wife is fooling around, but he can't catch her. Is this guy good?"

"Very good, so he says. He's made some money."

"Can I trust him?"

"Are you kidding. Tell him you're my brother and he'll kill for you. He's gonna help me get out of here, he just doesn't know it. You might mention it to him."

"I wish you'd stop that."

A guard walked behind Mitch. "Three minutes," he said.

"What can I send you?" Mitch asked. "I'd like a real favor, if you don't mind."

"Anything."

"Go to a bookstore and look for one of those cassette courses on how to speak Greek in twenty-four hours. That plus a Greek-to-

English dictionary would be nice.”

“I’ll send it next week.”

“How about Italian too?”

“No problem.”

“I’m undecided about whether to go to Sicily or the Greek isles. It’s really got me tore up. I asked the prison minister about it, and he was of no help. I’ve thought of going to the warden. What do you think?”

Mitch chuckled and shook his head. “Why don’t you go to Australia.”

“Great idea. Send me some tapes in Australian and a dictionary.”

They both smiled, then stopped. They watched each other carefully and waited for the guard to call time. Mitch looked at the scar on his forehead and thought of the countless bars and countless fights that led to the inevitable killing. Self-defense, Ray called it. For years he had wanted to cuss Ray for being so stupid, but the anger had passed. Now he wanted to embrace him and take him home and help him find a job.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” Ray said.

“Abby wants to write you.”

“I’d like that. I barely remember her as a small girl in Danesboro, hanging around her daddy’s bank on Main Street. Tell her to send me a picture. And I’d like a picture of your house. You’re the first McDeere in a hundred years to own real estate.”

“I gotta go.”

“Do me a favor. I think you need to find Mom, just to make sure she’s alive. Now that you’re out of school, it would be nice to reach out to her.”

“I’ve thought about that.”

“Think about it some more, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll see you in a month or so.”

DeVasher sucked on a Roi-Tan and blew a lungful of smoke into his air purifier. “We found Ray McDeere,” he announced proudly.

“Where?” asked Ollie.

“Brushy Mountain State Prison. Convicted of second-degree murder in Nashville eight years ago and sentenced to fifteen years with no parole. Real name is Raymond McDeere. Thirty-one years old. No family. Served three years in the Army. Dishonorable discharge. A real loser.”

“How’d you find him?”

“He was visited yesterday by his kid brother. We happened to be following. Twenty-four-hour surveillance, remember.”

“His conviction is public record. You should’ve found this earlier.”

“We would have, Ollie, if it was important. But it’s not important. We do our job.”

“Fifteen years, huh? Who’d he kill?”

“The usual. A buncha drunks in a bar fighting over a woman. No weapon, though. Police and autopsy reports say he hit the victim twice with his fists and cracked his skull.”

“Why the dishonorable discharge?”

“Gross insubordination. Plus, he assaulted an officer. I don’t know how he avoided a court-martial. Looks like a nasty character.”

“You’re right, it’s not important. What else do you know?”

“Not much. We’ve got the house wired, right? He has not mentioned Tarrance to his wife. In fact, we listen to this kid around the clock, and he ain’t mentioned Tarrance to anyone.”

Ollie smiled and nodded his approval. He was proud of McDeere. What a lawyer.

“What about sex?”

“All we can do is listen, Ollie. But we listen real close, and I don’t think they’ve had any in two weeks. Of course, he’s here sixteen hours a day going through the workaholic rookie counselor routine that you guys instill. It sounds like she’s getting tired of it. Could be the usual rookie’s wife syndrome. She calls her mother a lot—collect, so he won’t know. She told her mom that he’s changing and all that crap. She thinks he’ll kill himself working so hard. That’s what we’re hearing. So I don’t have any pictures, Ollie, and I’m sorry because I know how much you enjoy them. First chance we get, we’ll have you some pictures.”

Ollie glared at the wall but said nothing.

“Listen, Ollie, I think we need to send the kid with Avery to Grand Cayman on business. See if you can arrange it.”

“That’s no problem. May I ask why?”

“Not right now. You’ll know later.”

The building was in the low-rent section of downtown, a couple of blocks from the shadows of the modern steel-and-glass towers which were packed together as if land was scarce in Memphis. A sign on a door directed one’s attention upstairs, where Eddie Lomax, private investigator, maintained an office. Hours by appointment only. The door upstairs advertised investigations of all types—divorces, accidents, missing relatives, surveillance. The ad in the phone book mentioned the police expertise, but not the ending of that career. It listed eavesdropping, counter-measures, child custody, photographs, courtroom evidence, voice-stress analysis, location of assets, insurance claims and premarital background review. Bonded, insured, licensed and available twenty-four hours a day. Ethical, reliable, confidential, peace of mind.

Mitch was impressed with the abundance of confidence. The appointment was for 5 p.m., and he arrived a few minutes early. A shapely platinum blonde with a constricting leather skirt and matching black boots asked for his name and pointed to an orange vinyl chair next to a window. Eddie would be a minute. He inspected the chair, and noticing a fine layer of dust and several spots of what appeared to be grease, he declined and said his back was sore. Tammy shrugged and returned to her gum chewing and typing of some document; Mitch speculated whether it was a premarital report, or maybe a surveillance summary, or perhaps a countermeasure attack plan. The ashtray on her desk was filled with butts smeared with pink lipstick. While typing with her left hand, the right one instantly and precisely picked another cigarette from the pack and thrust it between her sticky lips. With remarkable coordination, she flicked something with her left hand and a flame shot to the tip of a very skinny and incredibly long liberated cigarette. When the flame disappeared, the lips instinctively

compacted and hardened around the tiny protrusion, and the entire body began to inhale. Letters became words, words became sentences, sentences became paragraphs as she tried desperately to fill her lungs. Finally, with an inch of the cigarette hanging as ashes, she swallowed, picked it from her lips with two brilliant red fingernails and exhaled mightily. The smoke billowed toward the stained plaster ceiling, where it upset an existing cloud and swirled around a hanging fluorescent light. She coughed, a hacking, irritating cough which reddened her face and gyrated her full breasts until they bounced dangerously close to the typewriter keys. She grabbed a nearby cup and lapped up something, then reinserted the filter-tip 1000 and pecked away.

After two minutes, Mitch began to fear carbon monoxide. He spotted a small hole in the window, in a pane that for some reason the spiders had not draped with cobwebs. He walked to within inches of the shredded, dust-laden curtains and tried to inhale in the direction of the opening. He felt sick. There was more hacking and wheezing behind him. He tried to open the window, but layers of cracked paint had long since welded it shut.

Just when he began to feel dizzy the typing and smoking stopped.

“You a lawyer?”

Mitch turned from the window and looked at the secretary. She was now sitting on the edge of her desk, legs crossed, with the black leather skirt well above her knees. She sipped a Diet Pepsi.

“Yes.”

“In a big firm?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. I could tell by your suit and your cute little preppie button-down with the silk paisley tie. I can always spot the big-firm lawyers, as opposed to the ham-and-egggers who hang around City Court.”

The smoke was clearing and Mitch was breathing easier. He admired her legs, which for the moment were positioned just so and demanded to be admired. She was now looking at his shoes.

“You like the suit, huh?” he said.

“It’s expensive, I can tell. So’s the tie. I’m not so sure about the shirt and shoes.”

Mitch studied the leather boots, the legs, the skirt and the tight sweater around the large breasts and tried to think of something cute to say. She enjoyed this gazing back and forth, and again sipped on her Diet Pepsi.

When she’d had enough, she nodded at Eddie’s door and said, “You can go in now. Eddie’s waiting.”

The detective was on the phone, trying to convince some poor old man that his son was in fact a homosexual. A very active homosexual. He pointed to a wooden chair, and Mitch sat down. He saw two windows, both wide open, and breathed easier.

Eddie looked disgusted and covered the receiver. “He’s crying,” he whispered to Mitch, who smiled obligingly, as if he was amused.

He wore blue lizard-skin boots with pointed toes, Levi’s, a well-starched peach button-down, which was unbuttoned well into the dark chest hair and exposed two heavy gold chains and one which appeared to be turquoise. He favored Tom Jones or Humperdinck or one of those bushy-headed, dark-eyed singers with thick sideburns and solid chins.

“I’ve got photographs,” he said, and yanked the receiver from his ear when the old man screamed. He pulled five glossy eight-by-tens from a file and slid them across the desk into Mitch’s lap. Yes, indeed, they were homosexuals, whoever they were. Eddie smiled at him proudly. The bodies were somewhere on a stage in what appeared to be a queer club. He laid them on the desk and looked at the window. They were of high quality, in color. Whoever took them had to have been in the club. Mitch thought of the rape conviction. A cop sent up for rape.

He slammed the phone down. “So you’re Mitchell McDeere! Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands across the desk. “My pleasure,” Mitch said. “I saw Ray Sunday.”

“I feel like I’ve known you for years. You look just like Ray. He told me you did. Told me all about you. I guess he told you about me. The police background. The conviction. The rape. Did he

explain to you it was statutory rape, and that the girl was seventeen years old, looked twenty-five, and that I got framed?"

"He mentioned it. Ray doesn't say much. You know that."

"He's a helluva guy. I owe him my life, literally. They almost killed me in prison when they found out I was a cop. He stepped in and even the blacks backed down. He can hurt people when he wants to."

"He's all the family I have."

"Yeah, I know. You bunk with a guy for years in an eight-by-twelve cell and you learn all about him. He's talked about you for hours. When I was paroled you were thinking about law school."

"I finished in June of this year and went to work for Bendini, Lambert & Locke."

"Never heard of them."

"It's a tax and corporate firm on Front Street."

"I do a lot of sleazy divorce work for lawyers. Surveillance, taking pictures, like those, and gathering filth for court." He spoke quickly, with short, clipped words and sentences. The cowboy boots were placed gingerly on the desk for display. "Plus, I've got some lawyers I run cases for. If I dig up a good car wreck or personal-injury suit, I'll shop around to see who'll give me the best cut. That's how I bought this building. That's where the money is—personal injury. These lawyers take forty percent of the recovery. Forty percent!" He shook his head in disgust as if he couldn't believe greedy lawyers actually lived and breathed in this city.

"You work by the hour?" Mitch asked.

"Thirty bucks, plus expenses. Last night I spent six hours in my van outside a Holiday Inn waiting for my client's husband to leave his room with his whore so I could take more pictures. Six hours. That's a hundred eighty bucks for sitting on my ass looking at dirty magazines and waiting. I also charged her for dinner."

Mitch listened intently, as if he wished he could do it.

Tammy stuck her head in the door and said she was leaving. A stale cloud followed her and Mitch looked at the windows. She slammed the door.

“She’s a great gal,” Eddie said. “She’s got trouble with her husband. He’s a truck driver who thinks he’s Elvis. Got the jet-black hair, ducktail, lamb-chop sideburns. Wears those thick gold sunglasses Elvis wore. When he’s not on the road he sits around the trailer listening to Elvis albums and watching those terrible movies. They moved here from Ohio just so this clown can be near the King’s grave. Guess what his name is.”

“I have no idea.”

“Elvis. Elvis Aaron Hemphill. Had his name legally changed after the King died. He does an impersonation routine in dark nightclubs around the city. I saw him one night. He wore a white skintight jumpsuit unbuttoned to his navel, which would’ve been okay except he’s got this gut that hangs out and looks like a bleached watermelon. It was pretty sad. His voice is hilarious, sounds like one of those old Indian chiefs chanting around the campfire.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Women. You would not believe the Elvis nuts who visit this city. They flock to watch this buffoon act like the King. They throw panties at him, big panties, panties made for heavy, wide lardasses, and he wipes his forehead and throws them back. They give him their room numbers, and we suspect he sneaks around and tries to play the big stud, just like Elvis. I haven’t caught him yet.”

Mitch could not think of any response to all this. He grinned like an idiot, like this was truly an incredible story. Lomax read him well.

“You got trouble with your wife?”

“No. Nothing like that. I need some information about four people. Three are dead, one is alive.”

“Sounds interesting. I’m listening.”

Mitch pulled the notes from a pocket. “I assume this is strictly confidential.”

“Of course it is. As confidential as you are with your client.”

Mitch nodded in agreement, but thought of Tammy and Elvis and wondered why Lomax told him that story.

“It must be confidential.”

“I said it would be. You can trust me.”

“Thirty bucks an hour?”

“Twenty for you. Ray sent you, remember?”

“I appreciate that.”

“Who are these people?”

“The three dead ones were once lawyers in our firm. Robert Lamm was killed in a hunting accident somewhere in Arkansas. Somewhere in the mountains. He was missing for about two weeks and they found him with a bullet in the head. There was an autopsy. That’s all I know. Alice Knauss died in 1977 in a car wreck here in Memphis. Supposedly a drunk driver hit her. John Mickel committed suicide in 1984. His body was found in his office. There was a gun and a note.”

“That’s all you know?”

“That’s it.”

“What’re you looking for?”

“I want to know as much as I can about how these people died. What were the circumstances surrounding each death? Who investigated each death? Any unanswered questions or suspicions.”

“What do you suspect?”

“At this point, nothing. I’m just curious.”

“You’re more than curious.”

“Okay, I’m more than curious. But for now, let’s leave it at that.”

“Fair enough. Who’s the fourth guy?”

“A man named Wayne Tarrance. He’s an FBI agent here in Memphis.”

“FBI!”

“Does that bother you?”

“Yes, it bothers me. I get forty an hour for cops.”

“No problem.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Check him out. How long has he been here? How long has he been an agent? What’s his reputation?”

“That’s easy enough.”

Mitch folded the paper and stuck it in his pocket. “How long will this take?”

“About a month.”

“That’s fine.”

“Say, what was the name of your firm?”

“Bendini, Lambert & Locke.”

“Those two guys who got killed last summer—”

“They were members.”

“Any suspicions?”

“No.”

“Just thought I’d ask.”

“Listen, Eddie. You must be very careful with this. Don’t call me at home or the office. I’ll call you in about a month. I suspect I’m being watched very closely.”

“By whom?”

“I wish I knew.”

Avery smiled at the computer printout. “For the month of October you billed an average of sixty-one hours per week.”

“I thought it was sixty-four,” Mitch said.

“Sixty-one is good enough. In fact, we’ve never had a first-year man average so high in one month. Is it legitimate?”

“No padding. In fact, I could’ve pushed it higher.”

“How many hours are you working a week?”

“Between eighty-five and ninety. I could bill seventy-five if I wanted to.”

“I wouldn’t suggest it, at least not now. It could cause a little jealousy around here. The younger associates are watching you very closely.”

“You want me to slow down?”

“Of course not. You and I are a month behind right now. I’m just worried about the long hours. A little worried, that’s all. Most associates start like wildfire—eighty- and ninety-hour weeks—but they burn out after a couple of months. Sixty-five to seventy is about average. But you seem to have unusual stamina.”

“I don’t require much sleep.”

“What does your wife think about it?”

“Why is that important?”

“Does she mind the long hours?”

Mitch glared at Avery, and for a second thought of the argument the previous night when he arrived home for dinner at three minutes before midnight. It was a controlled fight, but the worst one yet, and it promised to be followed by others. No ground was

surrendered. Abby said she felt closer to Mr. Rice next door than to her husband.

“She understands. I told her I would make partner in two years and retire before I was thirty.”

“Looks like you’re trying.”

“You’re not complaining, are you? Every hour I billed last month was on one of your files, and you didn’t seem too concerned about overworking me.”

Avery laid the printout on his credenza and frowned at Mitch. “I just don’t want you to burn out or neglect things at home.”

It seemed odd receiving marital advice from a man who had left his wife. He looked at Avery with as much contempt as he could generate. “You don’t need to worry about what happens at my house. As long as I produce around here you should be happy.”

Avery leaned across the desk. “Look, Mitch, I’m not very good at this sort of thing. This is coming from higher up. Lambert and McKnight are worried that maybe you’re pushing a bit too hard. I mean, five o’clock in the morning, every morning, even some Sundays. That’s pretty intense, Mitch.”

“What did they say?”

“Nothing much. Believe it or not, Mitch, those guys really care about you and your family. They want happy lawyers with happy wives. If everything is lovely, then the lawyers are productive. Lambert is especially paternalistic. He’s planning to retire in a couple of years, and he’s trying to relive his glory years through you and the other young guys. If he asks too many questions or gives a few lectures, take it in stride. He’s earned the right to be the grandfather around here.”

“Tell them I’m fine, Abby’s fine, we’re all happy and I’m very productive.”

“Fine, now that that’s out of the way, you and I leave for Grand Cayman a week from tomorrow. I’ve got to meet with some Caymanian bankers on behalf of Sonny Capps and three other clients. Mainly business, but we always manage to work in a little scuba diving and snorkeling. I told Royce McKnight you were

needed, and he approved the trip. He said you probably needed the R and R. Do you want to go?"

"Of course. I'm just a little surprised."

"It's business, so our wives won't be going. Lambert was a little concerned that it may cause a problem at home."

"I think Mr. Lambert worries too much about what happens at my home. Tell him I'm in control. No problems."

"So you're going?"

"Sure, I'm going. How long will we be there?"

"Couple of days. We'll stay in one of the firm's condos. Sonny Capps may stay in the other one. I'm trying to get the firm plane, but we may have to fly commercial."

"No problem with me."

Only two of the passengers on board the Cayman Airways 727 in Miami wore ties, and after the first round of complimentary rum punch Avery removed his and stuffed it in his coat pocket. The punch was served by beautiful brown Caymanian stewardesses with blue eyes and comely smiles. The women were great down there, Avery said more than once.

Mitch sat by the window and tried to conceal the excitement of his first trip out of the country. He had found a book on the Cayman Islands in a library. There were three islands, Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. The two smaller ones were sparsely populated and seldom visited. Grand Cayman had eighteen thousand people, twelve thousand registered corporations and three hundred banks. The population was twenty percent white, twenty percent black, and the other sixty percent wasn't sure and didn't care. Georgetown, the capital, in recent years had become an international tax haven with bankers as secretive as the Swiss. There were no income taxes, corporate taxes, capital-gains taxes, estate or gift taxes. Certain companies and investments were given guarantees against taxation for fifty years. The islands were a

dependent British territory with an unusually stable government. Revenue from import duties and tourism funded whatever government was necessary. There was no crime or unemployment.

Grand Cayman was twenty-three miles long and eight miles wide in places, but from the air it looked much smaller. It was a small rock surrounded by clear, sapphire water.

The landing almost occurred in a lagoon, but at the last second a small asphalt strip came forth and caught the plane. They disembarked and sang their way through customs. A black boy grabbed Mitch's bags and threw them with Avery's into the trunk of a 1972 Ford LTD. Mitch tipped him generously.

"Seven Mile Beach!" Avery commanded as he turned up the remnants of his last rum punch.

"Okay, mon," the driver drawled. He gunned the taxi and laid rubber in the direction of Georgetown. The radio blared reggae. The driver shook and gyrated and kept a steady beat with his fingers on the steering wheel. He was on the wrong side of the road, but so was everybody else. Mitch sank into the worn seat and crossed his legs. The car had no air-conditioning except for the open windows. The muggy tropical air rushed across his face and blew his hair. This was nice.

The island was flat, and the road into Georgetown was busy with small, dusty European cars, scooters and bicycles. The homes were small one-stories with tin roofs and neat, colorful paint jobs. The lawns were tiny with little grass, but the dirt was neatly swept. As they neared the town the houses became shops, two-and three-story white frame buildings where tourists stood under the canopies and took refuge from the sun. The driver made a sharp turn and suddenly they were in the midst of a downtown crowded with modern bank buildings.

Avery assumed the role of tour guide. "There are banks here from everywhere. Germany, France, Great Britain, Canada, Spain, Japan, Denmark. Even Saudi Arabia and Israel. Over three hundred, at last count. It's become quite a tax haven. The bankers here are extremely quiet. They make the Swiss look like blabbermouths."

The taxi slowed in heavy traffic, and the breeze stopped. "I see a lot of Canadian banks," Mitch said.

"That building right there is the Royal Bank of Montreal. We'll be there at ten in the morning. Most of our business will be with Canadian banks."

"Any particular reason?"

"They're very safe, and very quiet."

The crowded street turned and dead-ended into another one. Beyond the intersection the glittering blue of the Caribbean rose to the horizon. A cruise ship was anchored in the bay.

"That's Hogsty Bay," Avery said. "That's where the pirates docked their ships three hundred years ago. Blackbeard himself roamed these islands and buried his loot. They found some of it a few years ago in a cave east of here near Bodden Town."

Mitch nodded as if he believed this tale. The driver smiled in the rearview mirror.

Avery wiped the sweat from his forehead. "This place has always attracted pirates. Once it was Blackbeard, now it's modern-day pirates who form corporations and hide their money here. Right, mon?"

"Right, mon," the driver replied.

"That's Seven Mile Beach," Avery said. "One of the most beautiful and most famous in the world. Right, mon?"

"Right, mon."

"Sand as white as sugar. Warm, clear water. Warm, beautiful women. Right, mon?"

"Right, mon."

"Will they have the cookout tonight at the Palms?"

"Yes, mon. Six o'clock."

"That's next door to our condo. The Palms is a popular hotel with the hottest action on the beach."

Mitch smiled and watched the hotels pass. He recalled the interview at Harvard when Oliver Lambert preached about how the firm frowned on divorce and chasing women. And drinking. Perhaps Avery had missed those sermons. Perhaps he hadn't.

The condos were in the center of Seven Mile Beach, next door to another complex and the Palms. As expected, the units owned by the firm were spacious and richly decorated. Avery said they would sell for at least half a million each, but they weren't for sale. They were not for rent. They were sanctuaries for the weary lawyers of Bendini, Lambert & Locke. And a few very favored clients.

From the balcony off the second-floor bedroom, Mitch watched the small boats drift aimlessly over the sparkling sea. The sun was beginning its descent and the small waves reflected its rays in a million directions. The cruise ship moved slowly away from the island. Dozens of people walked the beach, kicking sand, splashing in the water, chasing sand crabs and drinking rum punch and Jamaican Red Stripe beer. The rhythmic beat of Caribbean music drifted from the Palms, where a large open-air thatched-roof bar attracted the beachcombers like a magnet. From a grass hut nearby they rented snorkeling gear, catamarans and volleyballs.

Avery walked to the balcony in a pair of brilliant orange-and-yellow flowered shorts. His body was lean and hard, with no flab. He owned part interest in a health club in Memphis and worked out every day. Evidently there were some tanning beds in the club. Mitch was impressed.

"How do you like my outfit?" Avery asked.

"Very nice. You'll fit right in."

"I've got another pair if you'd like."

"No, thanks. I'll stick to my Western Kentucky gym shorts."

Avery sipped on a drink and took in the scenery. "I've been here a dozen times, and I still get excited. I've thought about retiring down here."

"That would be nice. You could walk the beach and chase sand crabs."

"And play dominoes and drink Red Stripe. Have you ever had a Red Stripe?"

"Not that I recall."

"Let's go get one."

The open-air bar was called Rumheads. It was packed with thirsty tourists and a few locals who sat together around a wooden table

and played dominoes. Avery fought through the crowd and returned with two bottles. They found a seat next to the domino game.

"I think this is what I'll do when I retire. I'll come down here and play dominoes for a living. And drink Red Stripe."

"It's good beer."

"And when I get tired of dominoes, I'll throw some darts." He nodded to a corner where a group of drunk Englishmen were tossing darts at a board and cursing each other. "And when I get tired of darts, well, who knows what I'll do. Excuse me." He headed for a table on the patio where two string bikinis had just sat down. He introduced himself, and they asked him to have a seat. Mitch ordered another Red Stripe and went to the beach. In the distance he could see the bank buildings of Georgetown. He walked in that direction.

The food was placed on folding tables around the pool. Grilled grouper, barbecued shark, pompano, fried shrimp, turtle and oysters, lobster and red snapper. It was all from the sea, and all fresh. The guests crowded around the tables and served themselves while waiters scurried back and forth with gallons of rum punch. They ate on small tables in the courtyard overlooking Rumheads and the sea. A reggae band tuned up. The sun dipped behind a cloud, then over the horizon.

Mitch followed Avery through the buffet and, as expected, to a table where the two women were waiting. They were sisters, both in their late twenties, both divorced, both half drunk. The one named Carrie had fallen in heat with Avery, and the other one, Julia, immediately began making eyes at Mitch. He wondered what Avery had told them.

"I see you're married," Julia whispered as she moved next to him.

"Yes, happily."

She smiled as if to accept the challenge. Avery and his woman winked at each other. Mitch grabbed a glass of punch and gulped it down.

He picked at his food and could think of nothing but Abby. This would be hard to explain, if an explanation became necessary. Having dinner with two attractive women who were barely dressed. It would be impossible to explain. The conversation became awkward at the table, and Mitch added nothing. A waiter set a large pitcher on the table, and it quickly was emptied. Avery became obnoxious. He told the women Mitch had played for the New York Giants, had two Super Bowl rings. Made a million bucks a year before a knee injury ruined his career. Mitch shook his head and drank some more. Julia drooled at him and moved closer.

The band turned up the volume, and it was time to dance. Half the crowd moved to a wooden dance floor under two trees, between the pool and the beach. "Let's dance!" Avery yelled, and grabbed his woman. They ran through the tables and were soon lost in the crowd of jerking and lunging tourists.

He felt her move closer, then her hand was on his leg. "Do you wanna dance?" she asked.

"No."

"Good. Neither do I. What would you like to do?" She rubbed her breasts on his biceps and gave her best seductive smile, only inches away.

"I don't plan to do anything." He removed her hand.

"Aw, come on. Let's have some fun. Your wife will never know."

"Look, you're a very lovely lady, but you're wasting your time with me. It's still early. You've got plenty of time to pick up a real stud."

"You're cute."

The hand was back, and Mitch breathed deeply. "Why don't you get lost."

"I beg your pardon." The hand was gone. "I said, 'Get lost.' "

She backed away. "What's wrong with you?"

"I have an aversion to communicable diseases. Get lost."

"Why don't you get lost."

"That's a wonderful idea. I think I will get lost. Enjoyed dinner."

Mitch grabbed a glass of rum punch and made his way through the dancers to the bar. He ordered a Red Stripe and sat by himself in

a dark corner of the patio. The beach in front of him was deserted. The lights of a dozen boats moved slowly across the water. Behind him were the sounds of the Barefoot Boys and the laughter of the Caribbean night. Nice, he thought, but it would be nicer with Abby. Maybe they would vacation here next summer. They needed time together, away from home and the office. There was a distance between them—distance he could not define. Distance they could not discuss but both felt. Distance he was afraid of.

“What are you watching?” The voice startled him. She walked to the table and sat next to him. She was a native, dark skin with blue or hazel eyes. It was impossible to tell in the dark. But they were beautiful eyes, warm and uninhibited. Her dark curly hair was pulled back and hung almost to her waist. She was an exotic mixture of black, white and probably Latin. And probably more. She wore a white bikini top cut very low and barely covering her large breasts and a long, brightly colored skirt with a slit to the waist that exposed almost everything when she sat and crossed her legs. No shoes.

“Nothing, really,” Mitch said.

She was young, with a childish smile that revealed perfect teeth. “Where are you from?” she asked.

“The States.”

She smiled and chuckled. “Of course you are. Where in the States?” It was the soft, gentle, precise, confident English of the Caribbean.

“Memphis.”

“A lot of people come here from Memphis. A lot of divers.”

“Do you live here?” he asked.

“Yes. All my life. My mother is a native. My father is from England. He’s gone now, back to where he came from.”

“Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“Yes. Rum and soda.”

He stood at the bar and waited for the drinks. A dull, nervous something throbbed in his stomach. He could slide into the darkness, disappear into the crowd and find his way to the safety of the condo. He could lock the door and read a book on international

tax havens. Pretty boring. Plus, Avery was there by now with his hot little number. The girl was harmless, the rum and Red Stripe told him. They would have a couple of drinks and say good night.

He returned with the drinks and sat across from the girl, as far away as possible. They were alone on the patio.

“Are you a diver?” she asked.

“No. Believe it or not, I’m here on business. I’m a lawyer, and I have meetings with some bankers in the morning.”

“How long will you be here?”

“Couple of days.” He was polite, but short. The less he said, the safer he would be. She recrossed her legs and smiled innocently. He felt weak.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“I’m twenty, and my name is Eilene. I’m old enough.”

“I’m Mitch.” His stomach flipped and he felt lightheaded. He sipped rapidly on his beer. He glanced at his watch.

She watched with that same seductive smile. “You’re very handsome.”

This was unraveling in a hurry. Keep cool, he told himself, just keep cool.

“Thank you.”

“Are you an athlete?”

“Sort of. Why do you ask?”

“You look like an athlete. You’re very muscular and firm.” It was the way she emphasized “firm” that made his stomach flip again. He admired her body and tried to think of some compliment that would not be suggestive. Forget it.

“Where do you work?” he asked, aiming for less sensual areas.

“I’m a clerk in a jewelry store in town.”

“Where do you live?”

“In Georgetown. Where are you staying?”

“A condo next door.” He nodded in the direction, and she looked to her left. She wanted to see the condo, he could tell. She sipped on her drink.

“Why aren’t you at the party?” she asked.

“I’m not much on parties.”

“Do you like the beach?”

“It’s beautiful.”

“It’s prettier in the moonlight.” That smile, again.

He could say nothing to this.

“There’s a better bar about a mile down the beach,” she said.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

“I don’t know, I should get back. I’ve got some work to do before morning.”

She laughed and stood. “No one goes in this early in the Caymans. Come on. I owe you a drink.”

“No. I’d better not.”

She grabbed his hand, and he followed her off the patio onto the beach. They walked in silence until the Palms was out of sight and the music was growing dimmer. The moon was overhead and brighter now, and the beach was deserted. She unsnapped something and removed her skirt, leaving nothing but a string around her waist and a string running between her legs. She rolled up the skirt and placed it around his neck. She took his hand.

Something said run. Throw the beer bottle in the ocean. Throw the skirt in the sand. And run like hell. Run to the condo. Lock the door. Lock the windows. Run. Run. Run.

And something said to relax. It’s harmless fun. Have a few more drinks. If something happens, enjoy it. No one will ever know. Memphis is a thousand miles away. Avery won’t know. And what about Avery? What could he say? Everybody does it. It had happened once before when he was in college, before he was married but after he was engaged. He had blamed it on too much beer, and had survived with no major scars. Time took care of it. Abby would never know.

Run. Run. Run.

They walked for a mile and there was no bar in sight. The beach was darker. A cloud conveniently hid the moon. They had seen no one since Rumheads. She pulled his hand toward two plastic beach chairs next to the water. “Let’s rest,” she said. He finished his beer.

“You’re not saying much,” she said.

“What would you like for me to say?”

“Do you think I’m beautiful?”

“You are very beautiful. And you have a beautiful body.”

She sat on the edge of her chair and splashed her feet in the water. “Let’s go for a swim.”

“I, uh, I’m not really in the mood.”

“Come on, Mitch. I love the water.”

“Go ahead. I’ll watch.”

She knelt beside him in the sand and faced him, inches away. In slow motion, she reached behind her neck. She unhooked her bikini top, and it fell off, very slowly. Her breasts, much larger now, lay on his left forearm. She handed it to him. “Hold this for me.” It was soft and white and weighed less than a millionth of an ounce. He was paralyzed and the breathing, heavy and labored only seconds ago, had now ceased altogether.

She walked slowly into the water. The white string covered nothing from the rear. Her long, dark, beautiful hair hung to her waist. She waded knee deep, then turned to the beach.

“Come on, Mitch. The water feels great.”

She flashed a brilliant smile and he could see it. He rubbed the bikini top and knew this would be his last chance to run. But he was dizzy and weak. Running would require more strength than he could possibly muster. He wanted to just sit and maybe she would go away. Maybe she would drown. Maybe the tide would suddenly materialize and sweep her out to sea.

“Come on, Mitch.”

He removed his shirt and waded into the water. She watched him with a smile, and when he reached her, she took his hand and led him to deeper water. She locked her hands around his neck, and they kissed. He found the strings. They kissed again.

She stopped abruptly and, without speaking, started for the beach. He watched her. She sat on the sand, between the two chairs, and removed the rest of her bikini. He ducked under the water and held his breath for an eternity. When he surfaced, she was reclining, resting on her elbows in the sand. He surveyed the beach and, of course, saw no one. At that precise instant, the moon, ducked behind another cloud. There was not a boat or a catamaran or a

dinghy or a swimmer or a snorkeler or anything or anybody moving on the water.

"I can't do this," he muttered through clenched teeth.

"What did you say, Mitch?"

"I can't do this!" he yelled. "But I want you."

"I can't do it."

"Come on, Mitch. No one will ever know."

No one will ever know. No one will ever know. He walked slowly toward her. No one will ever know.

There was complete silence in the rear of the taxi as the lawyers rode into Georgetown. They were late. They had overslept and missed breakfast. Neither felt particularly well. Avery looked especially haggard. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was pale. He had not shaved.

The driver stopped in heavy traffic in front of the Royal Bank of Montreal. The heat and humidity were already stifling.

Randolph Osgood was the banker, a stuffy British type with a navy double-breasted suit, horn-rimmed glasses, a large shiny forehead and a pointed nose. He greeted Avery like an old friend and introduced himself to Mitch. They were led to a large office on the second floor with a view of Hogsty Bay. Two clerks were waiting.

"Exactly what do you need, Avery?" Osgood asked through his nose.

"Let's start off with some coffee. I need summaries of all the accounts of Sonny Capps, Al Coscia, Dolph Hemmba, Ratzlaff Partners and Greene Group."

"Yes, and how far back would you like to go?"

"Six months. Every account."

Osgood snapped his fingers at one of the clerks. She left and returned with a tray of coffee and pastries. The other clerk took notes.

"Of course, Avery, we'll need authorization and powers of attorney for each of these clients," Osgood said.

"They're on file," Avery said as he unpacked his briefcase.

"Yes, but they've expired. We'll need current ones. Every account."

"Very well." Avery slid a file across the table. "They're in there. Everything's current." He winked at Mitch.

A clerk took the file and spread the documents over the table. Each instrument was scrutinized by both clerks, then by Osgood himself. The lawyers drank coffee and waited.

Osgood smiled and said, "It all appears to be in order. We'll get the records. What else do you need?"

"I need to establish three corporations. Two for Sonny Capps and one for Greene Group. We'll follow the usual procedure. The bank will serve as registered agent, etc."

"I'll procure the necessary documents," Osgood said, and looked at a clerk. "What else?"

"That's all for now."

"Very well. We should have these records within thirty minutes. Will you be joining me for lunch?"

"I'm sorry, Randolph. I must decline. Mitch and I have a prior commitment. Maybe tomorrow."

Mitch knew nothing of a prior commitment, at least none he was involved in.

"Perhaps," replied Osgood. He left the room with the clerks.

Avery closed the door and removed his jacket. He walked to the window and sipped coffee. "Look, Mitch. I'm sorry about last night. Very sorry. I got drunk and quit thinking. I was wrong to push that woman on you."

"Apology accepted. Don't let it happen again."

"It won't. I promise."

"Was she good?"

"I think so. I don't remember too much. What did you do with her sister?"

"She told me to get lost. I hit the beach and took a walk."

Avery bit into a pastry and wiped his mouth. "You know I'm separated. We'll probably get a divorce in a year or so. I'm very discreet because the divorce could get nasty. There's an unwritten

rule in the firm—what we do away from Memphis stays away from Memphis. Understand?”

“Come on, Avery. You know I wouldn’t tell.”

“I know. I know.”

Mitch was glad to hear of the unwritten rule, although he awakened with the security that he had committed the perfect crime. He had thought of her in bed, the shower, the taxi, and now he had trouble concentrating on anything. He had caught himself looking at jewelry stores when they reached Georgetown.

“I’ve got a question,” Mitch said.

Avery nodded and ate the pastry.

“When I was recruited a few months ago by Oliver Lambert and McKnight and the gang, it was impressed upon me repeatedly that the firm frowned on divorce, women, booze, drugs, everything but hard work and money. That’s why I took the job. I’ve seen the hard work and money, but now I’m seeing other things. Where did you go wrong? Or do all the guys do it?”

“I don’t like your question.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. But I’d like an answer. I deserve an answer. I feel like I was misled.”

“So what are you going to do? Leave because I got drunk and laid up with a whore?”

“I haven’t thought about leaving.”

“Good. Don’t.”

“But I’m entitled to an answer.”

“Okay. Fair enough. I’m the biggest rogue in the firm, and they’ll come down hard when I mention the divorce. I chase women now and then, but no one knows it. Or at least they can’t catch me. I’m sure it’s done by other partners, but you’d never catch them. Not all of them, but a few. Most have very stable marriages and are forever faithful to their wives. I’ve always been the bad boy, but they’ve tolerated me because I’m so talented. They know I drink during lunch and sometimes in the office, and they know I violate some more of their sacred rules, but they made me a partner because they need me. And now that I’m a partner, they can’t do much about it. I’m not that bad of a guy, Mitch.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“I’m not perfect. Some of them are, believe me. They’re machines, robots. They live, eat and sleep for Bendini, Lambert & Locke. I like to have a little fun.”

“So you’re the exception—”

“Rather than the rule, yes. And I don’t apologize for it.”

“I didn’t ask you for an apology. Just a clarification.”

“Clear enough?”

“Yes. I’ve always admired your bluntness.”

“And I admire your discipline. It’s a strong man who can remain faithful to his wife with the temptations you had last night. I’m not that strong. Don’t want to be.”

Temptations. He had thought of inspecting the downtown jewelry shops during lunch.

“Look, Avery, I’m not a Holy Roller, and I’m not shocked. I’m not one to judge—I’ve been judged all my life. I was just confused about the rules, that’s all.”

“The rules never change. They’re cast in concrete. Carved in granite. Etched in stone. Violate too many and you’re out. Or violate as many as you want, but just don’t get caught.”

“Fair enough.”

Osgood and a group of clerks entered the room with computer printouts and stacks of documents. They made neat piles on the table and alphabetized it all.

“This should keep you busy for a day or so,” Osgood said with a forced smile. He snapped his fingers and the clerks disappeared. “I’ll be in my office if you need something.”

“Yes, thanks,” Avery said as he hovered over the first set of documents. Mitch removed his coat and loosened his tie.

“Exactly what are we doing here?” he asked.

“Two things. First, we’ll review the entries into all of these accounts. We’re looking primarily for interest earned, what rate, how much, etc. We’ll do a rough audit of each account to make sure the interest is going where it is supposed to go. For example, Dolph Hemmba sends his interest to nine different banks in the Bahamas. It’s stupid, but it makes him happy. It’s also impossible for anyone

to follow, except me. He has about twelve million in this bank, so it's worth keeping up with. He could do this himself, but he feels better if I do it. At two-fifty an hour, I don't mind. We'll check the interest this bank is paying on each account. The rate varies depending on a number of factors. It's discretionary with the bank, and this is a good way to keep them honest."

"I thought they were honest."

"They are, but they're bankers, remember."

"You're looking at close to thirty accounts here, and when we leave we'll know the exact balance, the interest earned and where the interest is going. Second, we have to incorporate three companies under Caymanian jurisdiction. It's fairly easy legal work and could be done in Memphis. But the clients think we must come here to do it. Remember, we're dealing with people who invest millions. A few thousand in legal fees doesn't bother them."

Mitch flipped through a printout in the Hemmba stack. "Who's this guy Hemmba? I haven't heard of him."

"I've got a lot of clients you haven't heard of. Hemmba is a big farmer in Arkansas, one of the state's largest landowners."

"Twelve million dollars?"

"That's just in this bank."

"That's a lot of cotton and soybeans."

"Let's just say he has other ventures."

"Such as?"

"I really can't say."

"Legal or illegal?"

"Let's just say he's hiding twenty million plus interest in various Caribbean banks from the IRS."

"Are we helping him?"

Avery spread the documents on one end of the table and began checking entries. Mitch watched and waited for an answer. The silence grew heavier and it was obvious there would not be one. He could press, but he had asked enough questions for one day. He rolled up his sleeves and went to work.

At noon he learned about Avery's prior commitment. His woman was waiting at the condo for a little rendezvous. He suggested they break for a couple of hours and mentioned a café downtown Mitch could try.

Instead of a café, Mitch found the Georgetown Library four blocks from the bank. On the second floor he was directed to the periodicals, where he found a shelf full of old editions of *The Daily Caymanian*. He dug back six months and pulled the one dated June 27. He laid it on a small table by a window overlooking the street. He glanced out the window, then looked closer. There was a man he had seen only moments earlier on the street by the bank. He was behind the wheel of a battered yellow Chevette parked in a narrow drive across from the library. He was a stocky, dark-haired, foreign-looking type with a gaudy green-and-orange shirt and cheap touristy sunglasses.

The same Chevette with the same driver had been parked in front of the gift shop next to the bank, and now, moments later, it was parked four blocks away. A native on a bicycle stopped next to him and took a cigarette. The man in the car pointed at the library. The native left his bicycle and walked quickly across the street.

Mitch folded the newspaper and stuck it in his coat. He walked past the rows of shelves, found a *National Geographic* and sat down at a table. He studied the magazine and listened carefully as the native climbed the stairs, noticed him, walked behind him, seemed to pause as if to catch a glimpse of what he was reading, then disappeared down the stairs. Mitch waited for a moment, then returned to the window. The native was taking another cigarette and talking to the man in the Chevette. He lit the cigarette and rode away.

Mitch spread the newspaper on the table and scanned the headline story of the two American lawyers and their dive guide who had been killed in a mysterious accident the day before. He made mental notes and returned the paper.

The Chevette was still watching. He walked in front of it, made the block and headed in the direction of the bank. The shopping district was squeezed tightly between the bank buildings and Hogsty

Bay. The streets were narrow and crowded with tourists on foot, tourists on scooters, tourists in rented compacts. He removed his coat and ducked into a T-shirt shop with a pub upstairs. He climbed the stairs, ordered a Coke, and sat on the balcony.

Within minutes the native with the bicycle was at the bar, drinking a Red Stripe and watching from behind a hand-printed menu.

Mitch sipped on the Coke and scanned the congestion below. No sign of the Chevette, but he knew it was close by. He saw another man stare at him from the street, then disappear. Then a woman. Was he paranoid? Then the Chevette turned the corner two blocks away and moved slowly beneath him.

He went to the T-shirt store and bought a pair of sunglasses. He walked for a block, then darted into an alley. He ran through the dark shade to the next street, then into a gift shop. He left through the back door, into an alley. He saw a large clothing store for tourists and entered through a side door. He watched the street closely and saw nothing. The racks were full of shorts and shirts of all colors—clothes the natives would not buy but the Americans loved. He stayed conservative—white shorts with a red knit pullover. He found a pair of straw sandals that sort of matched the hat he liked. The clerk giggled and showed him to a dressing room. He checked the street again. Nothing. The clothes fit, and he asked her if he could leave his suit and shoes in the back for a couple of hours. “No problem, mon,” she said. He paid in cash, slipped her a ten and asked her to call a cab. She said he was very handsome.

He watched the street nervously until the cab arrived. He darted across the sidewalk, into the back seat. “Abanks Dive Lodge,” he said.

“That’s a long way, mon.”

Mitch threw a twenty over the seat. “Get moving. Watch your mirror. If someone is following, let me know.”

He grabbed the money. “Okay, mon.”

Mitch sat low under his new hat in the back seat as his driver worked his way down Shedden Road, out of the shopping district,

around Hogsty Bay, and headed east, past Red Bay, out of the city of Georgetown and onto the road to Bodden Town.

“Who are you running from, mon?”

Mitch smiled and rolled down his window. “The Internal Revenue Service.” He thought that was cute, but the driver seemed confused. There were no taxes and no tax collectors in the islands, he remembered. The driver continued in silence.

According to the paper, the dive guide was Philip Abanks, son of Barry Abanks, the owner of the dive lodge. He was nineteen when he was killed. The three had drowned when an explosion of some sort hit their boat. A very mysterious explosion. The bodies had been found in eighty feet of water in full scuba gear. There were no witnesses to the explosion and no explanations as to why it occurred two miles offshore in an area not known for diving. The article said there were many unanswered questions.

Bodden Town was a small village twenty minutes from Georgetown. The dive lodge was south of town on an isolated stretch of beach.

“Did anyone follow us?” Mitch asked.

The driver shook his head.

“Good job. Here’s forty bucks.” Mitch looked at his watch. “It’s almost one. Can you be here at exactly two-thirty?”

“No problem, mon.”

The road ended at the edge of the beach and became a white-rock parking area shaded by dozens of royal palms. The front building of the lodge was a large, two-story home with a tin roof and an outer stairway leading to the center of the second floor. The Grand House, it was called. It was painted a light blue with neat white trim, and it was partially hidden by bay vines and spider lilies. The handwrought fretwork was painted pink. The solid wooden shutters were olive. It was the office and eating room of Abanks Dive Lodge. To its right the palm trees thinned and a small driveway curved around the Grand House and sloped downward to a large open area of white rock. On each side was a group of a dozen or so thatched-roof huts where divers roomed. A maze of wooden sidewalks ran

from the huts to the central point of the lodge, the open-air bar next to the water.

Mitch headed for the bar to the familiar sounds of reggae and laughter. It was similar to Rumheads, but without the crowd. After a few minutes, the bartender, Henry, delivered a Red Stripe to Mitch.

“Where’s Barry Abanks?” Mitch asked.

He nodded to the ocean and returned to the bar. Half a mile out, a boat cut slowly through the still water and made its way toward the lodge. Mitch ate a cheeseburger and watched the dominoes.

The boat docked at a pier between the bar and a larger hut with the words DIVE SHOP hand-painted over a window. The divers jumped from the boat with their equipment bags and, without exception, headed for the bar. A short, wiry man stood next to the boat and barked orders at the deckhands, who were unloading empty scuba tanks onto the pier. He wore a white baseball cap and not much else. A tiny black pouch covered his crotch and most of his rear end. From the looks of his brown leathery skin he hadn’t worn much in the past fifty years. He checked in at the dive shop, yelled at the dive captains and deckhands and made his way to the bar. He ignored the crowd and went to the freezer, where he picked up a Heineken, removed the top and took a long drink.

The bartender said something to Abanks and nodded toward Mitch. He opened another Heineken and walked to Mitch’s table.

He did not smile. “Are you looking for me?” It was almost a sneer.

“Are you Mr. Abanks?”

“That’s me. What do you want?”

“I’d like to talk to you for a few minutes.”

He gulped his beer and gazed at the ocean. “I’m too busy. I have a dive boat leaving in forty minutes.”

“My name is Mitch McDeere. I’m a lawyer from Memphis.”

Abanks glared at him with tiny brown eyes. Mitch had his attention. “So?”

“So, the two men who died with your son were friends of mine. It won’t take but a few minutes.”

Abanks sat on a stool and rested on his elbows. "That's not one of my favorite subjects."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"The police instructed me not to talk to anyone."

"It's confidential. I swear."

Abanks squinted and stared at the brilliant blue water. His face and arms bore the scars of a life at sea, a life spent sixty feet down guiding novices through and around coral reefs and wrecked ships.

"What do you want to know?" he asked softly.

"Can we talk somewhere else?"

"Sure. Let's take a walk." He yelled at Henry and spoke to a table of divers as he left. They walked on the beach.

"I'd like to talk about the accident," Mitch said.

"You can ask. I may not answer."

"What caused the explosion?"

"I don't know. Perhaps an air compressor. Perhaps some fuel. We are not certain. The boat was badly damaged and most of the clues went up in flames."

"Was it your boat?"

"Yes. One of my small ones. A thirty-footer. Your friends had chartered it for the morning."

"Where were the bodies found?"

"In eighty feet of water. There was nothing suspicious about the bodies, except that there were no burns or other injuries that would indicate they had been in the explosion. So I guess that makes the bodies very suspicious."

"The autopsies said they drowned."

"Yes, they drowned. But your friends were in full scuba gear, which was later examined by one of my divemasters. It worked perfectly. They were good divers."

"What about your son?"

"He was not in full gear. But he could swim like a fish."

"Where was the explosion?"

"They had been scheduled to dive along a series of reef formations at Roger's Wreck Point. Are you familiar with the island?"

“No.”

“It’s around the East Bay on Northeastern Point. Your friends had never dived there, and my son suggested they try it. We knew your friends well. They were experienced divers and took it seriously. They always wanted a boat by themselves and didn’t mind paying for it. And they always wanted Philip as their dive captain. We don’t know if they made any dives on the Point. The boat was found burning two miles at sea, far from any of our dive sites.”

“Could the boat have drifted?”

“Impossible. If there had been engine trouble, Philip would have used the radio. We have modern equipment, and our divemasters are always in touch with the dive shop. There’s no way the explosion could have occurred at the Point. No one saw it or heard it, and there’s always someone around. Secondly, a disabled boat could not drift two miles in that water. And, most importantly, the bodies were not on the boat, remember. Suppose the boat did drift, how do you explain the drifting of the bodies eighty feet below. They were found within twenty meters of the boat.”

“Who found them?”

“My men. We caught the bulletin over the radio, and I sent a crew. We knew it was our boat, and my men started diving. They found the bodies within minutes.”

“I know this is difficult to talk about.”

Abanks finished his beer and threw the bottle in a wooden garbage box. “Yes, it is. But time takes away the pain. Why are you so interested?”

“The families have a lot of questions.”

“I am sorry for them. I met their wives last year. They spent a week with us. Such nice people.”

“Is it possible they were simply exploring new territory when it happened?”

“Possible, yes. But not likely. Our boats report their movements from one dive site to the next. That’s standard procedure. No exceptions. I have fired a dive captain for not clearing a site before going to the next. My son was the best captain on the island. He grew up in these waters. He would never fail to report his

movements at sea. It's that simple. The police believe that is what happened, but they have to believe something. It's the only explanation they have."

"But how do they explain the condition of the bodies?"

"They can't. It's simply another diving accident as far as they're concerned."

"Was it an accident?"

"I think not."

The sandals had rubbed blisters by now, and Mitch removed them. They turned and started back to the lodge.

"If it wasn't an accident, what was it?"

Abanks walked and watched the ocean crawl along the beach. He smiled for the first time. "What are the other possibilities?"

"There's a rumor in Memphis that drugs could have been involved."

"Tell me about this rumor."

"We've heard that your son was active in a drug ring, that possibly he was using the boat that day to meet a supplier at sea, that there was a dispute and my friends got in the way."

Abanks smiled again and shook his head. "Not Philip. To my knowledge he never used drugs, and I know he didn't trade in them. He wasn't interested in money. Just women and diving."

"Not a chance?"

"No, not a chance. I've never heard this rumor, and I doubt if they know more in Memphis. This is a small island, and I would have heard it by now. It's completely false."

The conversation was over and they stopped near the bar. "I'll ask you a favor," Abanks said. "Do not mention any of this to the families. I cannot prove what I know to be true, so it's best if no one knows. Especially the families."

"I won't tell anyone. And I will ask you not to mention our conversation. Someone might follow me here and ask questions about my visit. Just say we talked about diving."

"As you wish."

"My wife and I will be here next spring for our vacation. I'll be sure to look you up."

St. Andrew's Episcopal School was located behind the church of the same name on a densely wooded and perfectly manicured five-acre estate in the middle of midtown Memphis. The white and yellow brick was occasionally visible where the ivy had for some reason turned and pursued another course. Symmetrical rows of clipped boxwoods lined the sidewalks and the small playground. It was a one-story L-shaped building sitting quietly in the shadows of a dozen ancient oaks. Cherished for its exclusivity, St. Andrew's was the most expensive private school in Memphis for grades kindergarten through six. Affluent parents signed the waiting list shortly after birth.

Mitch stopped the BMW in the parking lot between the church and the school. Abby's burgundy Peugeot was three spaces down, parked innocently. He was unexpected. The plane had landed an hour earlier, and he had stopped by the house to change into something lawyerly. He would see her, then back to his desk for a few hours at one hundred and fifty per.

He wanted to see her here, at the school, unannounced. A surprise attack. A countermove. He would say hello. He missed her. He couldn't wait to see her, so he stopped by the school. He would be brief, the first touch and feel and words after that incident on the beach. Could she tell just by looking at him? Maybe she could read his eyes. Would she notice a slight strain in his voice? Not if she was surprised. Not if she was flattered by this visit.

He squeezed the steering wheel and stared at her car. What an idiot! A stupid fool! Why didn't he run? Just throw her skirt in the sand and run like hell. But, of course, he didn't. He said what the

hell, no one will ever know. So now he was supposed to shrug it off and say what the hell, everybody does it.

On the plane he laid his plans. First, he would wait until late this night and tell her the truth. He would not lie, had no desire to live a lie. He would admit it and tell her exactly what happened. Maybe she would understand. Why, almost any man—hell, virtually every man would have taken the dive. His next move would depend on her reaction. If she was cool and showed a trace of compassion, he would tell her he was sorry, so very sorry, and that it would never happen again. If she fell all to pieces, he would beg, literally beg for forgiveness and swear on the Bible that it was a mistake and would never happen again. He would tell her how much he loved her and worshipped her, and please just give him one more chance. And if she started packing her bags, he would probably at that point realize he should not have told her.

Deny. Deny. Deny. His criminal-law professor at Harvard had been a radical named Moskowitz, who had made a name for himself defending terrorists and assassins and child fondlers. His theory of defense was simply: Deny! Deny! Deny! Never admit one fact or one piece of evidence that would indicate guilt.

He remembered Moskowitz as they landed in Miami, and began working on Plan B, which called for this surprise visit at the school and a late-night romantic dinner at her favorite place. And no mention of anything but hard work in the Caymans. He opened the car door, thought of her beautiful smiling, trusting face and felt nauseous. A thick, dull pain hammered deep in his stomach. He walked slowly in the late autumn breeze to the front door.

The hallway was empty and quiet. To his right was the office of the headmaster. He waited for a moment in the hall, waited to be seen, but no one was there. He walked quietly ahead until, at the third classroom, he heard the wonderful voice of his wife. She was plowing through multiplication tables when he stuck his head in the door and smiled. She froze, then giggled. She excused herself, told them to stay in their seats and read the next page. She closed the door.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked as he grabbed her and pinned her to the wall. She glanced nervously up and down the hall.

“I missed you,” he said with conviction. He bear-hugged her for a good minute. He kissed her neck and tasted the sweetness of her perfume. And then the girl returned. You piece of scum, why didn’t you run?

“When did you get in?” she asked, straightening her hair and glancing down the hall.

“About an hour ago. You look wonderful.”

Her eyes were wet. Those wonderfully honest eyes. “How was your trip?”

“Okay. I missed you. It’s no fun when you’re not around.”

Her smile widened and she looked away. “I missed you too.”

They held hands and walked toward the front door. “I’d like a date tonight,” he said.

“You’re not working?”

“No. I’m not working. I’m going out with my wife to her favorite restaurant. We’ll eat and drink expensive wine and stay out late, and then get naked when we get home.”

“You did miss me.” She kissed him again, on the lips, then looked down the hall. “But you better get out of here before someone sees you.”

They walked quickly to the front door without being seen.

He breathed deeply in the cool air and walked quickly to his car. He did it. He looked into those eyes, held her and kissed her like always. She suspected nothing. She was touched and even moved.

DeVasher paced anxiously behind his desk and sucked nervously on a Roi-Tan. He sat in his worn swivel chair and tried to concentrate on a memo, then he jumped to his feet and paced again. He checked his watch. He called his secretary. He called Oliver Lambert’s secretary. He paced some more.

Finally, seventeen minutes after he was supposed to arrive, Ollie was cleared through security and walked into DeVasher’s office.

DeVasher stood behind his desk and glared at Ollie. “You’re late!”

"I'm very busy," Ollie answered as he sat in a worn Naugahyde chair. "What's so important?"

DeVasher's face instantly changed into a sly, evil smile. He dramatically opened a desk drawer and proudly threw a large manila envelope across the desk into Ollie's lap. "Some of the best work we've ever done."

Lambert opened the envelope and gaped at the eight-by-ten black-and-white photographs. He stared at each one, holding them inches from his nose, memorizing each detail. DeVasher watched proudly.

Lambert reviewed them again and began breathing heavily. "These are incredible."

"Yep. We thought so."

"Who's the girl?" Ollie asked, still staring.

"A local prostitute. Looks pretty good, doesn't she? We've never used her before, but you can bet we'll use her again."

"I want to meet her, and soon."

"No problem. I kinda figured you would."

"This is incredible. How'd she do it?"

"It looked difficult at first. He told the first girl to get lost. Avery had the other one, but your man wanted no part of her friend. He left and went to that little bar on the beach. That's when our girl there showed up. She's a pro."

"Where were your people?"

"All over the place. Those were shot from behind a palm tree, about eighty feet away. Pretty good, aren't they?"

"Very good. Give the photographer a bonus. How long did they roll in the sand?"

"Long enough. They were very compatible."

"I think he really enjoyed himself."

"We were lucky. The beach was deserted and the timing was perfect."

Lambert raised a photograph toward the ceiling, in front of his eyes. "Did you make me a set?" he asked from behind it.

"Of course, Ollie. I know how much you enjoy these things."

"I thought McDeere would be tougher than that."

“He’s tough, but he’s human. He’s no dummy either. We’re not sure, but we think he knew we were watching him the next day during lunch. He seemed suspicious and began darting around the shopping district. Then he disappeared. He was an hour late for his meeting with Avery at the bank.”

“Where’d he go?”

“We don’t know. We were just watching out of curiosity, nothing serious. Hell, he might’ve been in a bar downtown for all we know. But he just disappeared.”

“Watch him carefully. He worries me.”

DeVasher waved another manila envelope. “Quit worrying, Ollie. We own him now! He would kill for us if he knew about these.”

“What about Tarrance?”

“Not a sign. McDeere ain’t mentioned it to anybody, at least not to anybody we’re listening to. Tarrance is hard to trail sometimes, but I think he’s staying away.”

“Keep your eyes open.”

“Don’t worry about my end, Ollie. You’re the lawyer, the counselor, the esquire, and you get your eight-by-tens. You run the firm. I run the surveillance.”

“How are things at the McDeere house?”

“Not too good. She was very cool to the trip.”

“What’d she do when he was gone?”

“Well, she ain’t one to sit around the house. Two nights she and Quin’s wife went out to eat at a couple of those yuppie joints. Then to the movies. She was out one night with a schoolteacher friend. She shopped a little.

“She also called her mother a lot, collect. Evidently there’s no love lost between our boy and her parents, and she wants to patch things up. She and her mom are tight and it really bothers her because they can’t be a big happy family. She wants to go home to Kentucky for Christmas, and she’s afraid he won’t go for it. There’s a lot of friction. A lot of undercurrents. She tells her mom he works too much, and her mom says it’s because he wants to show them up. I don’t like the sound of it, Ollie. Bad vibes.”

“Just keep listening. We’ve tried to slow him down, but he’s a machine.”

“Yeah, at a hundred and fifty an hour I know you want him to slack off. Why don’t you cut all your associates back to forty hours a week so they can spend more time with their families. You could cut your salary, sell a Jag or two, hock your old lady’s diamonds, maybe sell your mansion and buy a smaller house by the country club.”

“Shut up, DeVasher.”

Oliver Lambert stormed out of the office. DeVasher turned red with his high-pitched laughter, then, when his office was empty, he locked the photos in a file cabinet. “Mitchell McDeere,” he said to himself with an immense smile, “now you are ours.”

On a Friday, at noon, two weeks before Christmas, Abby said goodbye to her students and left St. Andrew's for the holidays. At one, she parked in a lot full of Volvos and BMWs and Saabs and more Peugeots and walked hurriedly through the cold rain into the crowded terrarium where the young affluent gathered to eat quiche and *fajitas* and black bean soup among the plants. This was Kay Quin's current hot spot of the year, and this was the second lunch they'd had in a month. Kay was late, as usual.

It was a friendship still in the initial stages of development. Cautious by nature, Abby had never been one to rush into chumminess with a stranger. The three years at Harvard had been friendless, and she had learned a great deal of independence. In six months in Memphis she had met a handful of prospects at church and one at school, but she moved cautiously.

At first Kay Quin had pushed hard. She was at once a tour guide, shopping consultant and even a decorator. But Abby had moved slowly, learning a little with each visit and watching her new friend carefully. They had eaten several times in the Quin home. They had seen each other at firm dinners and functions, but always in a crowd. And they had enjoyed each other's company over four long lunches at whatever happened to be the hottest gathering place at that moment for the young and beautiful Gold MasterCard holders in Memphis. Kay noticed cars and homes and clothes, but pretended to ignore it all. Kay wanted to be a friend, a close friend, a confidante, an intimate. Abby kept the distance, slowly allowing her in.

The reproduction of a 1950s jukebox sat below Abby's table on the first level near the bar, where a standing-room crowd sipped and waited for tables. After ten minutes and two Roy Orbisons, Kay emerged from the crowd at the front door and looked upward to the third level. Abby smiled and waved.

They hugged and pecked each other properly on the cheeks, without transferring lipstick.

"Sorry I'm late," Kay said.

"That's okay. I'm used to it."

"This place is packed," Kay said, looking around in amazement. It was always packed. "So you're out of school?"

"Yes. As of an hour ago. I'm free until January 6."

They admired each other's outfits and commented on how slim and in general how beautiful and young they were.

Christmas shopping at once became the topic, and they talked of stores and sales and children until the wine arrived. Abby ordered scampi in a skillet, but Kay stuck with the old fern-bar standby of broccoli quiche.

"What're your plans for Christmas?" Kay asked.

"None yet. I'd like to go to Kentucky to see my folks, but I'm afraid Mitch won't go. I've dropped a couple of hints, both of which were ignored."

"He still doesn't like your parents?"

"There's been no change. In fact, we don't discuss them. I don't know how to handle it."

"With great caution, I would imagine."

"Yeah, and great patience. My parents were wrong, but I still need them. It's painful when the only man I've ever loved can't tolerate my parents. I pray every day for a small miracle."

"Sounds like you need a rather large miracle. Is he working as hard as Lamar says?"

"I don't know how a person could work any harder. It's eighteen hours a day Monday through Friday, eight hours on Saturday, and since Sunday is a day of rest, he puts in only five or six hours. He reserves a little time for me on Sunday."

"Do I hear a touch of frustration?"

“A lot of frustration, Kay. I’ve been patient, but it’s getting worse. I’m beginning to feel like a widow. I’m tired of sleeping on the couch waiting for him to get home.”

“You’re there for food and sex, huh?”

“I wish. He’s too tired for sex. It’s not a priority anymore. And this is a man who could never get enough. I mean, we almost killed each other in law school. Now, once a week if I’m lucky. He comes home, eats if he has the energy and goes to bed. If I’m really lucky, he might talk to me for a few minutes before he passes out. I’m starved for adult conversation, Kay. I spend seven hours a day with eight-year-olds, and I crave words with more than three syllables. I try to explain this to him, and he’s snoring. Did you go through this with Lamar?”

“Sort of. He worked seventy hours a week for the first year. I think they all do. It’s kind of like initiation into the fraternity. A male ritual in which you have to prove your manliness. But most of them run out of gas after a year, and cut back to sixty or sixty-five hours. They still work hard, but not the kamikaze routine of the rookie year.”

“Does Lamar work every Saturday?”

“Most Saturdays, for a few hours. Never on Sunday. I’ve put my foot down. Of course, if there’s a big deadline or it’s tax season, then they all work around the clock. I think Mitch has them puzzled.”

“He’s not slowing down any. In fact, he’s possessed. Occasionally he won’t come home until dawn. Then it’s just a quick shower, and back to the office.”

“Lamar says he’s already a legend around the office.”

Abby sipped her wine and looked over the rail at the bar. “That’s great. I’m married to a legend.”

“Have you thought about children?”

“It requires sex, remember?”

“Come on, Abby, it can’t be that bad.”

“I’m not ready for children. I can’t handle being a single parent. I love my husband, but at this point in his life, he would probably have a terribly important meeting and leave me alone in the labor

room. Eight centimeters dilated. He thinks of nothing but that damned law firm.”

Kay reached across the table and gently took Abby’s hand. “It’ll be okay,” she said with a firm smile and a wise look. “The first year is the hardest. It gets better, I promise.”

Abby smiled. “I’m sorry.”

The waiter arrived with their food, and they ordered more wine. The scampi simmered in the butter-and-garlic sauce and produced a delicious aroma. The cold quiche was all alone on a bed of lettuce with a sickly tomato wedge.

Kay picked a glob of broccoli and chewed on it. “You know, Abby, the firm encourages children.”

“I don’t care. Right now I don’t like the firm. I’m competing with the firm, and I’m losing badly. So I could care less what they want. They will not plan my family for me. I don’t understand why they are so interested in things which are none of their business. That place is eerie, Kay. I can’t put my finger on it, but those people make my skin crawl.”

“They want happy lawyers with stable families.”

“And I want my husband back. They’re in the process of taking him away, so the family is not so stable. If they’d get off his back, perhaps we could be normal like everyone else and have a yard full of children. But not now.”

The wine arrived, and the scampi cooled. She ate it slowly and drank her wine. Kay searched for less sensitive areas.

“Lamar said Mitch went to the Caymans last month.”

“Yes. He and Avery were there for three days. Strictly business, or so he says. Have you been there?”

“Every year. It’s a beautiful place with gorgeous beaches and warm water. We go in June of each year, when school is out. The firm owns two huge condos right on the beach.”

“Mitch wants to vacation there in March, during my spring break.”

“You need to. Before we had kids, we did nothing but lie on the beach, drink rum and have sex. That’s one reason the firm furnishes

the condos and, if you're lucky, the airplane. They work hard, but they appreciate the need for leisure."

"Don't mention the firm to me, Kay. I don't want to hear about what they like or dislike, or what they do or don't do, or what they encourage or discourage."

"It'll get better, Abby. I promise. You must understand that your husband and my husband are both very good lawyers, but they could not earn this kind of money anywhere else. And you and I would be driving new Buicks instead of new Peugeots and Mercedes-Benzes."

Abby cut a shrimp in half and rolled it through the butter and garlic. She stabbed a portion with a fork, then pushed her plate away. The wineglass was empty. "I know, Kay, I know. But there is a hell of a lot more to life than a big yard and a Peugeot. No one around here seems to be aware of that. I swear, I think we were happier living in a two-room student apartment in Cambridge."

"You've only been here a few months. Mitch will slow down eventually, and you'll get into your routine. Before long there will be little McDeeres running around the backyard, and before you know it, Mitch will be a partner. Believe me, Abby, things will get much better. You're going through a period we've all been through, and we made it."

"Thanks, Kay, I certainly hope you're right."

The park was a small one, two or three acres on a bluff above the river. A row of cannons and two bronze statues memorialized those brave Confederates who had fought to save the river and the city. Under the monument to a general and his horse a wino tucked himself away. His cardboard box and ragged quilt provided little shelter from the bitter cold and the tiny pellets of frozen rain. Fifty yards below, the evening traffic rushed along Riverside Drive. It was dark.

Mitch walked to the row of cannons and stood gazing at the river and the bridges leading to Arkansas. He zipped his raincoat and

flipped the collar around his ears. He looked at his watch. He waited.

The Bendini Building was almost visible six blocks away. He had parked in a garage in midtown and taken a taxi back to the river. He was sure he had not been followed. He waited.

The icy wind blowing up from the river reddened his face and reminded him of the winters in Kentucky after his parents were gone. Cold, bitter winters. Lonely, desolate winters. He had worn someone else's coats, passed down from a cousin or a friend, and they had never been heavy enough. Secondhand clothes. He dismissed those thoughts.

The frozen rain turned to sleet and the tiny pieces of ice stuck in his hair and bounced on the sidewalk around him. He looked at his watch.

There were footsteps and a figure in a hurry walking toward the cannons. Whoever it was stopped, then approached slowly.

"Mitch?" It was Eddie Lomax, dressed in jeans and a full-length rabbit coat. With his thick mustache and white cowboy hat he looked like an ad for a cigarette. The Marlboro Man.

"Yeah, it's me."

Lomax walked closer, to the other side of the cannon. They stood like Confederate sentries watching the river.

"Have you been followed?" Mitch asked. "No, I don't think so. You?"

"No."

Mitch stared at the traffic on Riverside Drive, and beyond, to the river. Lomax thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "You talked to Ray, lately?" Lomax asked.

"No." The answer was short, as if to say, "I'm not standing here in the sleet to chitchat."

"What'd you find?" Mitch asked, without looking.

Lomax lit a cigarette, and now he *was* the Marlboro Man. "On the three lawyers, I found a little info. Alice Knauss was killed in a car wreck in 1977. Police report said she was hit by a drunk driver, but oddly enough, no such driver was ever found. The wreck happened around midnight on a Wednesday. She had worked late down at the

office and was driving home. She lived out east, in Sycamore View, and about a mile from her condo she gets hit head-on by a one-ton pickup. Happened on New London Road. She was driving a fancy little Fiat and it was blown to pieces. No witnesses. When the cops got there, the truck was empty. No sign of a driver. They ran the plates and found that the truck had been stolen in St. Louis three days earlier. No fingerprints or nothing.”

“They dusted for prints?”

“Yeah. I know the investigator who handled it. They were suspicious but had zero to go on. There was a broken bottle of whiskey on the floorboard, so they blamed it on a drunk driver and closed the file.”

“Autopsy?”

“No. It was pretty obvious how she died.”

“Sounds suspicious.”

“Very much so. All three of them are suspicious. Robert Lamm was the deer hunter in Arkansas. He and some friends had a deer camp in Izard County in the Ozarks. They went over two or three times a year during the season. After a morning in the woods, everyone returned to the cabin but Lamm. They searched for two weeks and found him in a ravine, partially covered with leaves. He had been shot once through the head, and that’s about all they know. They ruled out suicide, but there was simply no evidence to begin an investigation.”

“So he was murdered?”

“Apparently so. Autopsy showed an entry at the base of the skull and an exit wound that removed most of his face. Suicide would have been impossible.”

“It could have been an accident.”

“Possibly. He could have caught a bullet intended for a deer, but it’s unlikely. He was found a good distance from the camp, in an area seldom used by hunters. His friends said they neither heard nor saw other hunters the morning he disappeared. I talked to the sheriff, who is now the ex-sheriff, and he’s convinced it was murder. He claims there was evidence that the body had been covered intentionally.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah, on Lamm.”

“What about Mickel?”

“Pretty sad. He committed suicide in 1984 at the age of thirty-four. Shot himself in the right temple with a Smith & Wesson .357. He left a lengthy farewell letter in which he told his ex-wife he hoped she would forgive him and all that crap. Said goodbye to the kids and his mother. Real touching.”

“Was it in his handwriting?”

“Not exactly. It was typed, which was not unusual, because he typed a good bit. He had an IBM Selectric in his office, and the letter came from it. He had terrible handwriting.”

“So what’s suspicious?”

“The gun. He never bought a gun in his life. No one knows where it came from. No registration, no serial number, nothing. One of his friends in the firm allegedly said something to the effect that Mickel had told him he had bought a gun for protection. Evidently he was having some emotional problems.”

“What do you think?”

Lomax threw his cigarette butt in the frozen rain on the sidewalk. He cupped his hands over his mouth and blew in them. “I don’t know. I can’t believe a tax lawyer with no knowledge of guns could obtain one without registration or serial number. If a guy like that wanted a gun, he would simply go to a gun shop, fill out the papers and buy a nice, shiny new piece. This gun was at least ten years old and had been sanitized by professionals.”

“Did the cops investigate?”

“Not really. It was open and shut.”

“Did he sign the letter?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know who verified the signature. He and his wife had been divorced for a year, and she had moved back to Baltimore.”

Mitch buttoned the top button of his overcoat and shook the ice from his collar. The sleet was heavier, and the sidewalk was covered. Tiny icicles were beginning to form under the barrel of the

cannon. The traffic slowed on Riverside as wheels began to slide and spin.

“So what do you think of our little firm?” Mitch asked as he stared at the river in the distance.

“It’s a dangerous place to work. They’ve lost five lawyers in the past fifteen years. That’s not a very good safety record.”

“Five?”

“If you include Hodge and Kozinski. I’ve got a source telling me there are some unanswered questions.”

“I didn’t hire you to investigate those two.”

“And I’m not charging you for it. I got curious, that’s all.”

“How much do I owe you?”

“Six-twenty.”

“I’ll pay cash. No records, okay?”

“Suits me. I prefer cash.”

Mitch turned from the river and gazed at the tall buildings three blocks from the park. He was cold now, but in no hurry to leave. Lomax watched him from the corner of his eye.

“You’ve got problems, don’t you, pal?”

“Wouldn’t you say so?” Mitch answered.

“I wouldn’t work there. I mean, I don’t know all that you do, and I suspect you know a lot you’re not telling. But we’re standing here in the sleet because we don’t want to be seen. We can’t talk on the phone. We can’t meet in your office. Now you don’t want to meet in my office. You think you’re being followed all the time. You tell me to be careful and watch my rear because they, whoever they are, may be following me. You’ve got five lawyers in that firm who’ve died under very suspicious circumstances, and you act like you may be next. Yeah, I’d say you got problems. Big problems.”

“What about Tarrance?”

“One of their best agents; transferred in here about two years ago.”

“From where?”

“New York.”

The wino rolled from under the bronze horse and fell to the sidewalk. He grunted, staggered to his feet, retrieved his cardboard

box and quilt and left in the direction of downtown. Lomax jerked around and watched anxiously. "It's just a tramp," Mitch said. They both relaxed.

"Who are we hiding from?" Lomax asked.

"I wish I knew."

Lomax studied his face carefully. "I think you know."

Mitch said nothing.

"Look, Mitch, you're not paying me to get involved. I realize that. But my instincts tell me you're in trouble, and I think you need a friend, someone to trust. I can help, if you need me. I don't know who the bad guys are, but I'm convinced they're very dangerous."

"Thanks," Mitch said softly without looking, as if it was time for Lomax to leave and let him stand there in the sleet for a while.

"I would jump in that river for Ray McDeere, and I can certainly help his little brother."

Mitch nodded slightly, but said nothing. Lomax lit another cigarette and kicked the ice from his lizard-skins. "Just call me anytime. And be careful. They're out there, and they play for keeps."

At the intersection of Madison and Cooper in midtown, the old two-story buildings had been renovated into singles bars and watering holes and gift shops and a handful of good restaurants. The intersection was known as Overton Square, and it provided Memphis with its best nightlife. A playhouse and a bookstore added a touch of culture. Trees lined the narrow median on Madison. The weekends were rowdy with college students and sailors from the Navy base, but on weeknights the restaurants were full but quiet and uncrowded. Paulette's, a quaint French place in a white stucco building, was noted for its wine list and desserts and the gentle voice of the man at the Steinway. With sudden affluence came a collection of credit cards, and the McDeeres had used theirs in a quest for the best restaurants in town. Paulette's was the favorite, so far.

Mitch sat in the corner of the bar, drinking coffee and watching the front door. He was early, and had planned it that way. He had called her three hours earlier and asked if he could have a date for seven. She asked why, and he said he would explain later. Since the Caymans he had known someone was following, watching, listening. For the past month he had spoken carefully on the phone, had caught himself watching the rearview mirror, had even chosen his words around the house. Someone was watching and listening, he was sure.

Abby rushed in from the cold and glanced around the parlor for her husband. He met her in the front of the bar and pecked her on the cheek. She removed her coat, and they followed the maître d' to a small table in a row of small tables which were all full with people

within earshot. Mitch glanced around for another table, but there were none. He thanked him and sat across from his wife.

“What’s the occasion?” she asked suspiciously.

“Do I need a reason to have dinner with my wife?”

“Yes. It’s seven o’clock on Monday night, and you’re not at the office. This is indeed a special occasion.”

A waiter squeezed between their table and the next, and asked if they wanted a drink. Two white wines, please. Mitch glanced around the dining room again and caught a glimpse of a gentleman sitting alone five tables away. The face looked familiar. When Mitch looked again, the face slid behind a menu.

“What’s the matter, Mitch?”

He laid his hand on hers and frowned. “Abby, we gotta talk.”

Her hand flinched slightly and she stopped smiling. “About what?”

He lowered his voice. “About something very serious.”

She exhaled deeply and said, “Can we wait for the wine. I might need it.”

Mitch looked again at the face behind the menu. “We can’t talk here.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Look, Abby, you know where the rest rooms are? Down the hall over there, to your right?”

“Yes, I know.”

“There’s a rear entrance at the end of the hall. It goes out to the side street behind the restaurant. I want you to go to the rest room, then out the door. I’ll be waiting next to the street.”

She said nothing. Her eyebrows lowered and the eyes narrowed. Her head leaned slightly to the right.

“Trust me, Abby. I can explain later. I’ll meet you outside and we’ll find another place to eat. I can’t talk in here.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Please,” he said firmly, squeezing her hand. “Everything is fine. I’ll bring your coat.”

She stood with her purse and left the room. Mitch looked over his shoulder at the man with the familiar face, who suddenly stood and

welcomed an elderly lady to his table. He did not notice Abby's exit.

In the street behind Paulette's, Mitch draped the coat over Abby's shoulders and pointed eastward. "I can explain," he said more than once. A hundred feet down the street, they walked between two buildings and came to the front entrance of the Bombay Bicycle Club, a singles bar with good food and live blues. Mitch looked at the headwaiter, then surveyed the two dining rooms, then pointed to a table in the rear corner. "That one," he said.

Mitch sat with his back to the wall and his face toward the dining room and the front door. The corner was dark. Candles lit the table. They ordered more wine.

Abby sat motionless, staring at him, watching every move and waiting.

"Do you remember a guy named Rick Acklin from Western Kentucky?"

"No," she said without moving her lips.

"He played baseball, lived in the dorm. I think you may have met him once. A very nice guy, real clean-cut, good student. I think he was from Bowling Green. We weren't good friends, but we knew each other."

She shook her head and waited.

"Well, he finished a year before we did and went to law school at Wake Forest. Now he's with the FBI. And he's working here in Memphis." He watched her closely to see if "FBI" would have an impact. It did not. "And today I'm eating lunch at Obleo's hot-dog place on Main Street, when Rick walks up out of nowhere and says hello. Just like it was a real coincidence. We chat for a few minutes, and another agent, guy by the name of Tarrance, walks up and has a seat. It's the second time Tarrance has chased me down since I passed the bar."

"The second ...?"

"Yes. Since August."

"And these are ... FBI agents?"

"Yes, with badges and everything. Tarrance is a veteran agent from New York. Been here about two years. Acklin is a rookie they brought in three months ago."

“What do they want?”

The wine arrived and Mitch looked around the club. A band was tuning up on a small stage in a far corner. The bar was crowded with well-dressed professional types chitting and chatting relentlessly. The waiter pointed to the unopened menus. “Later,” Mitch said rudely.

“Abby, I don’t know what they want. The first visit was in August, right after my name was printed in the paper for passing the bar.” He sipped his wine and detailed play by play the first Tarrance visit at Lansky’s Deli on Union, the warnings about whom not to trust and where not to talk, the meeting with Locke and Lambert and the other partners. He explained their version of why the FBI was so interested in the firm and said that he discussed it with Lamar and believed every word Locke and Lambert had said.

Abby hung on every word, but waited to start asking.

“And now, today, while I’m minding my own business, eating a foot-long with onions, this guy I went to college with walks up and tells me that they, the FBI, know for a fact that my phones are bugged, my home is wired and somebody down at Bendini, Lambert & Locke knows when I sneeze and take a crap. Think of it, Abby, Rick Acklin was transferred here after I passed the bar exam. Nice coincidence, huh?”

“But what do they want?”

“They won’t say. They can’t tell me, yet. They want me to trust them, and all that routine. I don’t know, Abby. I have no idea what they’re after. But they’ve chosen me for some reason.”

“Did you tell Lamar about this visit?”

“No. I haven’t told anyone. Except you. And I don’t plan to tell anyone.”

She gulped the wine. “Our phones are tapped?”

“According to the FBI. But how do they know?”

“They’re not stupid, Mitch. If the FBI told me my phones were tapped, I’d believe them. You don’t?”

“I don’t know whom to believe. Locke and Lambert were so smooth and believable when they explained how the firm fights with the IRS and the FBI. I want to believe them, but so much of it

doesn't add up. Look at it this way—if the firm had a rich client who was shady and worthy of FBI scrutiny, why would the FBI pick me, the rookie, the one who knows the least, and begin following me? What do I know? I work on files someone else hands me. I have no clients of my own. I do as I'm told. Why not go after one of the partners?"

"Maybe they want you to squeal on the clients."

"No way. I'm a lawyer and sworn to secrecy about the affairs of clients. Everything I know about a client is strictly confidential. The feds know that. No one expects a lawyer to talk about his clients."

"Have you seen any illegal deals?"

He cracked his knuckles and gazed around the dining room. He smiled at her. The wine had settled and was taking effect. "I'm not supposed to answer that question, even from you, Abby. But the answer is no. I've worked on files for twenty of Avery's clients and a few other ones here and there, and I've seen nothing suspicious. Maybe a couple of risky tax shelters, but nothing illegal. I've got a few questions about the bank accounts I saw in the Caymans, but nothing serious." Caymans! His stomach dropped as he thought of the girl on the beach. He felt sick.

The waiter loitered nearby and stared at the menus. "More wine," Mitch said, pointing at the glasses.

Abby leaned forward, near the candles, and looked bewildered. "Okay, who tapped our phones?"

"Assuming they're tapped, I have no idea. At the first meeting in August, Tarrance implied it was someone from the firm. I mean, that's the way I took it. He said not to trust anyone at the firm, and that everything I said was subject to being heard and recorded. I assumed he meant they were doing it."

"And what did Mr. Locke say about that?"

"Nothing. I didn't tell him. I kept a few things to myself."

"Someone has tapped our phones and wired our house?"

"And maybe our cars. Rick Acklin made a big deal of it today. He kept telling me not to say anything I didn't want recorded."

"Mitch, this is incredible. Why would a law firm do that?"

He shook his head slowly and looked into the empty wineglass. "I have no idea, babe. No idea."

The waiter set two new wineglasses on the table and stood with his hands behind him. "Will you be ordering?" he asked.

"In a few minutes," Abby said.

"We'll call you when we're ready," Mitch added.

"Do you believe it, Mitch?"

"I think something's up. There's more to the story."

She slowly folded her hands on the table and stared at him with a look of utter fear. He told the story of Hodge and Kozinski, starting with Tarrance at the deli, then to the Caymans and being followed and the meeting with Abanks. He told her everything Abanks had said. Then Eddie Lomax and the deaths of Alice Knauss, Robert Lamm and John Mickel.

"I've lost my appetite," she said when he finished.

"So have I. But I feel better now that you know."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I hoped it would go away. I hoped Tarrance would leave me alone and find someone else to torment. But he's here to stay. That's why Rick Acklin was transferred to Memphis. To work on me. I have been selected by the FBI for a mission I know nothing about."

"I feel weak."

"We have to be careful, Abby. We must continue to live as if we suspect nothing."

"I don't believe this. I'm sitting here listening to you, but I don't believe what you're telling me. This is not real, Mitch. You expect me to live in a house that's wired and the phones are tapped and someone, somewhere is listening to everything we say."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Yeah. Let's hire this Lomax guy to inspect our house."

"I've thought of that. But what if he finds something? Think about it. What if we know for sure that the house is wired? What then? What if he breaks a device that's been planted? They, whoever in hell they are, will know that we know. It's too dangerous, for now anyway. Maybe later."

“This is crazy, Mitch. I guess we’re supposed to run out in the backyard to have a conversation.”

“Of course not. We could use the front yard.”

“At this moment, I don’t appreciate your sense of humor.”

“Sorry. Look, Abby, let’s be normal and patient for a while. Tarrance has convinced me he’s serious and he’s not going to forget about me. I can’t stop him. He finds me, remember. I think they follow me and wait in ambush. For the time being, it’s important that we carry on as usual.”

“Usual? Come to think of it, there’s not much conversation around our house these days. I sort of feel sorry for them if they’re waiting to hear meaningful dialogue. I talk to Hearsay a lot.”

The snow cleared long before Christmas, leaving the ground wet and making way for the traditional Southern holiday weather of gray skies and cold rain. Memphis had seen two white Christmases in the past ninety years, and the experts predicted no more in the century.

There was snow in Kentucky, but the roads were clear. Abby called her parents early Christmas morning after she packed. She was coming, she said, but she would be alone. They were disappointed, they said, and suggested that perhaps she should stay if it was causing trouble. She insisted. It was a ten-hour drive. Traffic would be light, and she would be there by dark.

Mitch said very little. He spread the morning paper on the floor next to the tree and pretended to concentrate as she loaded her car. The dog hid nearby under a chair, as if waiting for an explosion. Their gifts had been opened and arranged neatly on the couch. Clothes and perfume and albums, and for her, a full-length fox coat. For the first time in the young marriage, there was money to spend at Christmas.

She draped the coat over her arm and walked to the paper. "I'm leaving now," she said softly, but firmly.

He stood slowly and looked at her.

"I wish you would come with me," she said.

"Maybe next year." It was a lie, and they knew it. But it sounded good. It was promising.

"Please be careful."

"Take care of my dog."

"We'll be fine."

He took her shoulders and kissed her on the cheek. He looked at her and smiled. She was beautiful, much more so than when they married. At twenty-four, she looked her age, but the years were becoming very generous.

They walked to the carport, and he helped her into the car. They kissed again, and she backed down the driveway.

Merry Christmas, he said to himself. Merry Christmas, he said to the dog.

After an hour of watching the walls, he threw two changes of clothes in the BMW, placed Hearsay in the front seat and left town. He drove south on Interstate 55, out of Memphis, into Mississippi. The road was deserted, but he kept an eye on the rearview mirror. The dog whimpered precisely every sixty minutes, and Mitch would stop on the shoulder—if possible, just over a hill. He would find a cluster of trees where he could hide and watch the traffic while Hearsay did his business. He noticed nothing. After five stops, he was sure he was not being followed. They evidently took off Christmas Day.

In six hours he was in Mobile, and two hours later he crossed the bay at Pensacola and headed for the Emerald Coast of Florida. Highway 98 ran through the coastal towns of Navarre, Fort Walton Beach, Destin and Sandestin. It encountered clusters of condominiums and motels, miles of shopping centers, then strings of run-down amusement parks and low rent T-shirt shops, most of which had been locked and neglected since Labor Day. Then it went for miles with no congestion, no sprawl, just an awesome view of the snowy-white beaches and brilliant emerald waters of the Gulf. East of Sandestin, the highway narrowed and left the coast, and for an hour he drove alone on the two-lane with nothing to look at but the woods and an occasional self-serve gas station or quick-shop convenience store.

At dusk, he passed a high rise, and a sign said Panama City Beach was eight miles ahead. The highway found the coast again at a point where it forked and offered a choice between the bypass to the

north and the scenic route straight ahead on what was called the Miracle Strip. He chose the scenic route next to the beach—the strip that ran for fifteen miles by the water and was lined on both sides with condos, cheap motels, trailer parks, vacation cottages, fast-food joints and T-shirt shops. This was Panama City Beach.

Most of the ten zillion condos were empty, but there were a few cars parked about and he assumed that some families vacationed on the beach for Christmas. A hot-weather Christmas. At least they're together, he said to himself. The dog barked, and they stopped by a pier where men from Pennsylvania and Ohio and Canada fished and watched the dark waters.

They cruised the Miracle Strip by themselves. Hearsay stood on the door and took in the sights, barking at the occasional flashing neon of a cinder-block motel advertising its openness and cheap rates. Christmas on the Miracle Strip closed everything but a handful of diehard coffee shops and motels.

He stopped for gas at an all-night Texaco with a clerk who seemed uncommonly friendly.

“San Luis Street?” Mitch asked.

“Yes, yes,” the clerk said with an accent and pointed to the west. “Second traffic light to the right. First left. That's San Luis.”

The neighborhood was a disorganized suburb of antique mobile homes. Mobile, yes, but it was apparent they had not moved in decades. The trailers were packed tightly together like rows of dominoes. The short, narrow driveways seemed inches apart and were filled with old pickups and rusted lawn furniture. The streets were crowded with parked cars, junk cars, abandoned cars. Motorcycles and bicycles leaned on the trailer hitches and lawnmower handles protruded from beneath each home. A sign called the place a retirement village—“San Pedro Estates—A Half Mile from the Emerald Coast.” It was more like a slum on wheels, or a project with a trailer hitch.

He found San Luis Street and suddenly felt nervous. It was winding and narrow with smaller trailers in worse shape than the other “retirement homes.” He drove slowly, anxiously watching street numbers and observing the multitude of out-of-state license

plates. The street was empty except for the parked and abandoned cars.

The home at 486 San Luis was one of the oldest and smallest. It was scarcely bigger than a camper. The original paint job looked to be silver, but the paint was cracked and peeling, and a dark green layer of mold covered the top and inched downward to a point just above the windows. The screens were missing. One window above the trailer hitch was badly cracked and held together with gray electrical tape. A small covered porch surrounded the only entrance. The storm door was open, and through the screen Mitch could see a small color television and the silhouette of a man walking by.

This was not what he wanted. By choice, he had never met his mother's second husband, and now was not the time. He drove on, wishing he had not come.

He found on the Strip the familiar marquee of a Holiday Inn. It was empty, but open. He hid the BMW away from the highway, and registered under the name of Eddie Lomax of Danesboro, Kentucky. He paid cash for a single room with an ocean view.

The Panama City Beach phone book listed three Waffle Huts on the Strip. He lay across the motel bed and dialed the first number. No luck. He dialed the second number, and again asked for Eva Ainsworth. Just a minute, he was told. He hung up. It was 11 p.m. He had slept for two hours.

The taxi took twenty minutes to arrive at the Holiday Inn, and the driver began by explaining that he had been home enjoying leftover turkey with his wife and kids and kinfolks when the dispatcher called, and how it was Christmas and he hoped to be with his family all day and not worry about work for one day of the year. Mitch threw a twenty over the seat and asked him to be quiet.

"What's at the Waffle Hut, man?" the driver asked.

"Just drive."

"Waffles, right?" He laughed and mumbled to himself. He adjusted the radio volume and found his favorite soul station. He

glanced in the mirror, looked out the windows, whistled a bit, then said, "What brings you down here on Christmas?"

"Looking for someone."

"Who?"

"A woman."

"Ain't we all. Anyone in particular?"

"An old friend."

"She at the Waffle Hut?"

"I think so."

"You some kinda private eye or something?"

"No."

"Seems mighty suspicious to me."

"Why don't you just drive."

The Waffle Hut was a small, rectangular, boxlike building with a dozen tables and a long counter facing the grill, where everything was cooked in the open. Large plate-glass windows lined one side next to the tables so the customers could take in the Strip and the condos in the distance while they enjoyed their pecan waffles and bacon. The small parking lot was almost full, and Mitch directed the driver to an empty slot near the building.

"Ain't you getting out?" the driver asked.

"No. Keep the meter running."

"Man, this is strange."

"You'll get paid."

"You got that right."

Mitch leaned forward and rested his arms on the front seat. The meter clicked softly as he studied the customers inside. The driver shook his head, slumped in the seat, but watched out of curiosity.

In the corner next to the cigarette machine a table of fat tourists with long shirts, white legs and black socks drank coffee, and all talked at the same time while glancing at the menus. The leader, the one with an unbuttoned shirt, a heavy gold chain draped upon his chest hair, thick gray sideburns and a Phillies baseball cap, looked repeatedly toward the grill, in search of a waitress.

"You see her?" asked the driver.

Mitch said nothing, then leaned forward and frowned. She appeared from nowhere and stood at the table with her pen and order book. The leader said something funny, and the fat people laughed. She never smiled, just kept writing. She was frail and much thinner. Almost too thin. The black-and-white uniform fit snugly and squeezed her tiny waist. Her gray hair was pulled tightly and hidden under the Waffle Hut bonnet. She was fifty-one, and from the distance she looked her age. Nothing worse. She seemed sharp. When she finished scribbling she snatched the menus from their hands, said something polite, almost smiled, then disappeared. She moved quickly among the tables, pouring coffee, handing ketchup bottles and giving orders to the cook.

Mitch relaxed. The meter ticked slowly.

"Is that her?" asked the driver.

"Yes."

"What now?"

"I don't know."

"Well, we found her, didn't we?"

Mitch followed her movements and said nothing. She poured coffee for a man sitting alone. He said something, and she smiled. A wonderful, gracious smile. A smile he had seen a thousand times in the darkness staring at the ceiling. His mother's smile.

A light mist began to fall and the intermittent wipers cleaned the windshield every ten seconds. It was almost midnight, Christmas Day.

The driver tapped the wheel nervously and fidgeted. He sank lower in the seat, then changed stations. "How long we gonna sit here?"

"Not long."

"Man, this is weird."

"You'll be paid."

"Man, money ain't everything. It's Christmas. I got kids at home, kinfolks visiting, turkey and wine to finish off, and here I am sitting at the Waffle Hut so you can look at some old woman through the window."

"It's my mother."

“Your what!”

“You heard me.”

“Man, oh man. I get all kinds.”

“Just shut up, okay?”

“Okay. Ain’t you gonna talk to her? I mean it’s Christmas, and you found your momma. You gotta go see her, don’t you?”

“No. Not now.”

Mitch sat back in the seat and looked at the dark beach across the highway. “Let’s go.”

At daybreak, he dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, no socks or shoes, and took Hearsay for a walk on the beach. They walked east, toward the first glow of orange peeking above the horizon. The waves broke gently thirty yards out and rolled quietly onto shore. The sand was cool and wet. The sky was clear and full of seagulls talking incessantly among themselves. Hearsay ran boldly into the sea, then retreated furiously when the next wave of white foam approached. For a house dog, the endless stretch of sand and water demanded exploration. He ran a hundred yards ahead of Mitch.

After two miles they approached a pier, a large concrete structure running two hundred feet from the beach into the ocean. Hearsay, fearless now, darted onto it and ran to a bucket of bait next to two men standing motionless and staring down at the water. Mitch walked behind them, to the end of the pier, where a dozen fishermen talked occasionally to each other and waited for their lines to jump. The dog rubbed himself on Mitch’s leg and grew still. A brilliant return of the sun was in progress, and for miles the water glistened and turned from black to green.

Mitch leaned on the railing and shivered in the cool wind. His bare feet were frozen and gritty. For miles along the beach in both directions, the hotels and condos sat quietly and waited for the day. There was no one on the beach. Another pier jutted into the water miles away.

The fishermen spoke with the sharp, precise words of those from the North. Mitch listened long enough to learn the fish were not

biting. He studied the sea. Looking southeast, he thought of the Caymans, and Abanks. And the girl for a moment, then she was gone. He would return to the islands in March, for a vacation with his wife. Damn the girl. Surely he would not see her. He would dive with Abanks and cultivate a friendship. They would drink Heineken and Red Stripe at his bar and talk of Hodge and Kozinski. He would follow whoever was following him. Now that Abby was an accomplice, she would assist him.

The man waited in the dark beside the Lincoln Town Car. He nervously checked his watch and glanced at the dimly lit sidewalk that disappeared in front of the building. On the second floor a light was turned off. A minute later, the private eye walked from the building toward the car. The man walked up to him.

“Are you Eddie Lomax?” he asked anxiously.

Lomax slowed, then stopped. They were face-to-face. “Yeah. Who are you?”

The man kept his hands in his pockets. It was cold and damp, and he was shaking. “Al Kilbury. I need some help, Mr. Lomax. Real bad. I’ll pay you right now in cash, whatever you want. Just help me.”

“It’s late, pal.”

“Please. I’ve got the money. Name the price. You gotta help, Mr. Lomax.” He pulled a roll of cash from his left pants pocket and stood ready to count.

Lomax looked at the money, then glanced over his shoulder. “What’s the problem?”

“My wife. In an hour she’s supposed to meet a man at a motel in South Memphis. I’ve got the room number and all. I just need you to go with me and take pictures of them coming and going.”

“How do you know this?”

“Phone taps. She works with the man, and I’ve been suspicious. I’m a wealthy man, Mr. Lomax, and it’s imperative I win the

divorce. I'll pay you a thousand in cash now." He quickly peeled off ten bills and offered them.

Lomax took the money. "Okay. Let me get my camera."

"Please hurry. Everything's in cash, okay? No records."

"Suits me," said Lomax as he walked toward the building.

Twenty minutes later, the Lincoln rolled slowly through the crowded parking lot of a Days Inn. Kilbury pointed to a second-floor room on the back side of the motel, then to a parking space next to a brown Chevy van. Lomax backed carefully alongside the van and parked his Town Car. Kilbury again pointed to the room, again checked his watch and again told Lomax how much he appreciated his services. Lomax thought of the money. A thousand bucks for two hours' work. Not bad. He unpacked a camera, loaded the film and gauged the light. Kilbury watched nervously, his eyes darting from the camera to the room across the parking lot. He looked hurt. He talked of his wife and their wonderful years together, and why, oh why was she doing this?

Lomax listened and watched the rows of parked cars in front of him. He held his camera.

He did not notice the door of the brown van. It quietly and slowly slid open, just three feet behind him. A man in a black turtleneck wearing black gloves crouched low in the van and waited. When the parking lot was still, he jumped from the van, yanked open the left rear door of the Lincoln and fired three times into the back of Eddie's head. The shots, muffled with a silencer, could not be heard outside the car.

Eddie slumped against the wheel, already dead. Kilbury bolted from the Lincoln, ran to the van and sped away with the assassin.

After three days of unbillable time, of no production, of exile from their sanctuaries, of turkey and ham and cranberry sauce and new toys that came unassembled, the rested and rejuvenated lawyers of Bendini, Lambert & Locke returned to the fortress on Front Street with a vengeance. The parking lot was full by seventhirty. They sat fixed and comfortable behind their heavy desks, drank coffee by the gallon, meditated over mail and correspondence and documents and mumbled incoherently and furiously into their Dictaphones. They barked orders at secretaries and clerks and paralegals, and at each other. There were a few “How was your Christmas?” greetings in the halls and around the coffeepots, but small talk was cheap and unbillable. The sounds of typewriters, intercoms and secretaries all harmonized into one glorious hum as the mint recovered from the nuisance of Christmas. Oliver Lambert walked the halls, smiling with satisfaction and listening, just listening to the sounds of wealth being made by the hour.

At noon, Lamar walked into the office and leaned across the desk. Mitch was deep into an oil and gas deal in Indonesia.

“Lunch?” Lamar asked.

“No, thanks. I’m behind.”

“Aren’t we all. I thought we could run down to the Front Street Deli for a bowl of chili.”

“I’ll pass. Thanks.”

Lamar glanced over his shoulder at the door and leaned closer as if he had extraordinary news to share. “You know what today is, don’t you?”

Mitch glanced at his watch. “The twenty-eighth.”

“Right. And do you know what happens on the twenty-eighth of December of every year?”

“You have a bowel movement.”

“Yes. And what else?”

“Okay. I give up. What happens?”

“At this very moment, in the dining room on the fifth floor, all the partners are gathered for a lunch of roast duck and French wine.”

“Wine, for lunch?”

“Yes. It’s a very special occasion.”

“Okay?”

“After they eat for an hour, Roosevelt and Jessie Frances will leave and Lambert will lock the door. Then it’s all the partners, you see. Only the partners. And Lambert will hand out a financial summary for the year. It’s got all the partners listed, and beside each name is a number that represents their total billing for the year. Then on the next page is a summary of the net profits after expenses. Then, based on production, they divide the pie!”

Mitch hung on every word. “And?”

“And, last year the average piece of pie was three hundred and thirty thousand. And, of course, it’s expected to be even higher this year. Goes up every year.”

“Three hundred and thirty thousand,” Mitch repeated slowly.

“Yep. And that’s just the average. Locke will get close to a million. Victor Milligan will run a close second.”

“And what about us?”

“We get a piece too. A very small piece. Last year it was around nine thousand, on the average. Depends on how long you’ve been here and production.”

“Can we go watch?”

“They wouldn’t sell a ticket to the President. It’s supposed to be a secret meeting, but we all know about it. Word will begin drifting down late this afternoon.”

“When do they vote on who to make the next partner?”

“Normally, it would be done today. But, according to rumor, there may not be a new partner this year because of Marty and Joe. I

think Marty was next in line, then Joe. Now, they might wait a year or two.”

“So who’s next in line?”

Lamar stood straight and smiled proudly. “One year from today, my friend, I will become a partner in Bendini, Lambert & Locke. I’m next in line, so don’t get in my way this year.”

“I heard it was Massengill—a Harvard man, I might add.”

“Massengill doesn’t have a prayer. I intend to bill a hundred and forty hours a week for the next fifty-two weeks, and those birds will beg me to become a partner. I’ll go to the fourth floor, and Massengill will go to the basement with the paralegals.”

“I’m putting my money on Massengill.”

“He’s a wimp. I’ll run him into the ground. Let’s go eat a bowl of chili, and I’ll reveal my strategy.”

“Thanks, but I need to work.”

Lamar strutted from the office and passed Nina, who was carrying a stack of papers. She laid them on a cluttered corner of the desk. “I’m going to lunch. Need anything?”

“No. Thanks. Yes, a Diet Coke.”

The halls quietened during lunch as the secretaries escaped the building and walked toward downtown to a dozen small cafés and delicatessens nearby. With half the lawyers on the fifth floor counting their money, the gentle roar of commerce took an intermission.

Mitch found an apple on Nina’s desk and rubbed it clean. He opened a manual on IRS regulations, laid it on the copier behind her desk and touched the green PRINT button. A red warning lit up and flashed the message: INSERT FILE NUMBER. He backed away and looked at the copier. Yes, it was a new one. Next to the PRINT button was another that read BYPASS. He stuck his thumb on it. A shrill siren erupted from within the machine, and the entire panel of buttons turned bright red. He looked around helplessly, saw no one and frantically grabbed the instruction manual.

“What’s going on here?” someone demanded over the wailing of the copier.

"I don't know!" Mitch yelled, waving the manual.

Lela Pointer, a secretary too old to walk from the building for lunch, reached behind the machine and flipped a switch. The siren died.

"What the hell?" Mitch said, panting.

"Didn't they tell you?" she demanded, grabbing the manual and placing it back in its place. She drilled a hole in him with her tiny fierce eyes, as if she had caught him in her purse.

"Obviously not. What's the deal?"

"We have a new copying system," she lectured downward through her nose. "It was installed the day after Christmas. You must code in the file number before the machine will copy. Your secretary was supposed to tell you."

"You mean this thing will not copy unless I punch in a ten-digit number?"

"That's correct."

"What about copies in general, with no particular file?"

"Can't be done. Mr. Lambert says we lose too much money on unbilled copies. So, from now on, every copy is automatically billed to a file. You punch in the number first. The machine records the number of copies and sends it to the main terminal, where it goes on the client's billing account."

"What about personal copies?"

Lela shook her head in total frustration. "I can't believe your secretary didn't tell you all this."

"Well, she didn't, so why don't you help me out."

"You have a four-digit access number for yourself. At the end of each month you'll be billed for your personal copies."

Mitch stared at the machine and shook his head. "Why the damned alarm system?"

"Mr. Lambert says that after thirty days they will cut off the alarms. Right now, they're needed for people like you. He's very serious about this. Says we've been losing thousands on unbilled copies."

"Right. And I suppose every copier in the building has been replaced."

She smiled with satisfaction. "Yes, all seventeen."

"Thanks." Mitch returned to his office in search of a file number.

At three that afternoon, the celebration on the fifth floor came to a joyous conclusion, and the partners, now much wealthier and slightly drunker, filed out of the dining room and descended to their offices below. Avery, Oliver Lambert and Nathan Locke walked the short hallway to the security wall and pushed the button. DeVasher was waiting.

He waved at the chairs in his office and told them to sit down. Lambert passed around hand-wrapped Hondurans, and everyone lit up.

"Well, I see we're all in a festive mood," DeVasher said with a sneer. "How much was it? Three hundred and ninety thousand, average?"

"That's correct, DeVasher," Lambert said. "It was a very good year." He puffed slowly and blew smoke rings at the ceiling.

"Did we all have a wonderful Christmas?" DeVasher asked.

"What's on your mind?" Locke demanded.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Nat. Just a few things. I met with Lazarov two days ago in New Orleans. He does not celebrate the birth of Christ, you know. I brought him up to date on the situation down here, with emphasis on McDeere and the FBI. I assured him there had been no further contact since the initial meeting. He did not quite believe this and said he would check with his sources within the Bureau. I don't know what that means, but who am I to ask questions? He instructed me to trail McDeere twenty-four hours a day for the next six months. I told him we were already doing so, sort of. He does not want another Hodge-Kozinski situation. He's very distressed about that. McDeere is not to leave the city on firm business unless at least two of us go with him."

"He's going to Washington in two weeks," Avery said.

"What for?"

"American Tax Institute. It's a four-day seminar that we require of all new associates. It's been promised to him, and he'll be very

suspicious if it's canceled."

"We made his reservations in September," Ollie added.

"I'll see if I can clear it with Lazarov," DeVasher said. "Give me the dates, flights and hotel reservations. He won't like this."

"What happened Christmas?" Locke asked.

"Not much. His wife went to her home in Kentucky. She's still there. McDeere took the dog and drove to Panama City Beach, Florida. We think he went to see his mom, but we're not sure. Spent one night at a Holiday Inn on the beach. Just he and the dog. Pretty boring. Then he drove to Birmingham, stayed in another Holiday Inn, then early yesterday morning he drove to Brushy Mountain to visit his brother. Harmless trip."

"What's he said to his wife?" asked Avery.

"Nothing, as far as we can tell. It's hard to hear everything."

"Who else are you watching?" asked Avery.

"We're listening to all of them, sort of sporadically. We have no real suspects, other than McDeere, and that's just because of Tarrance. Right now all's quiet."

"He's got to go to Washington, DeVasher," Avery insisted.

"Okay, okay. I'll get it cleared with Lazarov. He'll make us send five men for surveillance. What an idiot."

Ernie's Airport Lounge was indeed near the airport. Mitch found it after three attempts and parked between two four-wheel-drive swampmobiles with real mud caked on the tires and headlights. The parking lot was full of such vehicles. He looked around and instinctively removed his tie. It was almost eleven. The lounge was deep and long and dark with colorful beer signs flashing in the painted windows.

He looked at the note again, just to be sure. "Dear Mr. McDeere: Please meet me at Ernie's Lounge on Winchester tonight—late. It's about Eddie Lomax. Very important. Tammy Hemphill, his secretary."

The note had been tacked on the door to the kitchen when he arrived home. He remembered her from the one visit to Eddie's

office, back in November. He remembered the tight leather skirt, huge breasts, bleached hair, red sticky lips and smoke billowing from her nose. And he remembered the story about her husband, Elvis.

The door opened without incident, and he slid inside. A row of pool tables covered the left half of the room. Through the darkness and black smoke, he could make out a small dance floor in the rear. To the right was a long saloon-type bar crowded with cowboys and cowgirls, all drinking Bud longnecks. No one seemed to notice him. He walked quickly to the end of the bar and slid onto the stool. "Bud long-neck," he told the bartender.

Tammy arrived before the beer. She was sitting and waiting on a crowded bench by the pool tables. She wore tight washed jeans, faded denim shirt and kinky red high heels. The hair had just received a fresh bleaching.

"Thanks for coming," she said into his face. "I've been waiting for four hours. I knew of no other way to find you."

Mitch nodded and smiled as if to say, "It's okay. You did the right thing."

"What's up?" he said.

She looked around. "We need to talk, but not here."

"Where do you suggest?"

"Could we maybe drive around?"

"Sure, but not in my car. It, uh, it may not be a good idea."

"I've got a car. It's old, but it'll do."

Mitch paid for the beer and followed her to the door. A cowpoke sitting near the door said, "Getta loada this. Guy shows up with a suit and picks her up in thirty seconds." Mitch smiled at him and hurried out the door. Dwarfed in a row of massive mud-eating machinery was a well-worn Volkswagen Rabbit. She unlocked it, and Mitch doubled over and squeezed into the cluttered seat. She pumped the accelerator five times and turned the key. Mitch held his breath until it started.

"Where would you like to go?" she asked.

Where we can't be seen, Mitch thought. "You're driving."

"You're married, aren't you?" she asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Yes, and my husband would not understand this situation right here. That’s why I chose that dump back there. We never go there.”

She said this as if she and her husband were discriminating critics of dark redneck dives.

“I don’t think my wife would understand either. She’s out of town, though.”

Tammy drove in the direction of the airport. “I’ve got an idea,” she said. She clutched the steering wheel tightly and spoke nervously.

“What’s on your mind?” Mitch asked.

“Well, you heard about Eddie.”

“Yes.”

“When did you last see him?”

“We met ten days or so before Christmas. It was sort of a secret meeting.”

“That’s what I thought. He kept no records of the work he was doing for you. Said you wanted it that way. He didn’t tell me much. But me and Eddie, well, we, uh, we were ... close.”

Mitch could think of no response.

“I mean, we were very close. Know what I mean?”

Mitch grunted and sipped the longneck.

“And he told me things I guess he wasn’t supposed to tell me. Said you had a real strange case, that some lawyers in your firm had died under suspicious circumstances. And that you always thought somebody was following and listening. That’s pretty weird for a law firm.”

So much for the confidentiality, thought Mitch. “That it is.”

She turned, made the exit to the airport and headed for the acres of parked cars.

“And after he finished his work for you, he told me once, just once, in bed, that he thought he was being followed. This was three days before Christmas. And I asked him who it was. He said he didn’t know, but mentioned your case and something about it was probably related to the same people who were following you. He didn’t say much.”

She parked in the short-term section near the terminal.

"Who else would follow him?" Mitch asked.

"No one. He was a good investigator who left no trail. I mean, he was an ex-cop and an ex-con. He was very street-smart. He got paid to follow people and collect dirt. No one followed him. Never."

"So who killed him?"

"Whoever was following him. The paper made like he got caught snooping on some rich guy and was wasted. It's not true."

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, she produced a filter-tip 1000 and shot a flame at the end. Mitch rolled down the window.

"Mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"No, just blow it that way," he said, pointing to her window.

"Anyway, I'm scared. Eddie was convinced the people following you are extremely dangerous and extremely smart. Very sophisticated, was what he said. And if they killed him, what about me? Maybe they think I know something. I haven't been to the office since the day he was killed. Don't plan to go back."

"I wouldn't if I were you."

"I'm not stupid. I worked for him for two years and learned a lot. There's a lot of nuts out there. We saw all kinds."

"How did they shoot him?"

"He's got a friend in Homicide. Guy told me confidentially that Eddie got hit three times in the back of the head, point-blank range, with a .22 pistol. And they don't have a clue. He told me it was a very clean, professional job."

Mitch finished the longneck and laid the bottle on the floorboard with a half dozen empty beer cans. A very clean, professional job.

"It doesn't make sense," she repeated. "I mean, how could anyone sneak up behind Eddie, somehow get in the back seat and shoot him three times in the back of the head? And he wasn't even supposed to be there."

"Maybe he fell asleep and they ambushed him."

"No. He took all kinds of speed when he worked late at night. Stayed wired."

"Are there any records at the office?"

"You mean about you?"

“Yeah, about me.”

“I doubt it. I never saw nothing in writing. He said you wanted it that way.”

“That’s right,” Mitch said with relief.

They watched a 727 lift off to the north. The parking lot vibrated.

“I’m really scared, Mitch. Can I call you Mitch?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“I think he got killed because of the work he did for you. That’s all it could be. And if they’d kill him because he knew something, they probably assume I know it too. What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t take any chances.”

“I might disappear for a while. My husband does a little nightclub work, and we can get mobile if we have to. I haven’t told him all this, but I guess I have to. What do you think?”

“Where would you go?”

“Little Rock, St. Louis, Nashville. He’s laid off, so we can move around, I guess.” Her words trailed off. She lit another one.

A very clean, professional job, Mitch repeated to himself. He glanced at her and noticed a small tear on her cheek. She was not ugly, but the years in lounges and nightclubs were taking their toll. Her features were strong, and minus the bleach and heavy makeup she would be somewhat attractive for her age. About forty, he guessed.

She took a mighty drag and sent a cloud of smoke surging from the Rabbit. “I guess we’re in the same boat, aren’t we? I mean, they’re after both of us. They’ve killed all those lawyers, now Eddie, and I guess we’re next.”

Don’t hold back, baby, just blurt it out. “Look, let’s do this. We need to keep in touch. You can’t call me on the phone, and we can’t be seen together. My wife knows everything, and I’ll tell her about this little meeting. Don’t worry about her. Once a week, write me a note and tell me where you are. What’s your mother’s name?”

“Doris.”

“Good. That’s your code name. Sign the name Doris on anything you send me.”

“Do they read your mail too?”

“Probably so, Doris, probably so.”

At five p.m., Mitch turned off the light in his office, grabbed both briefcases and stopped at Nina's desk. Her phone was glued to one shoulder while she typed on the IBM. She saw him and reached in a drawer for an envelope. "This is your confirmation at the Capital Hilton," she said into the receiver.

"The dictation is on my desk," he said. "See you Monday." He took the stairs to the fourth floor, to Avery's office in the corner, where a small riot was in progress. One secretary stuffed files into a massive briefcase. Another one spoke sharply to Avery, who was yelling on the phone to someone else. A paralegal shot orders to the first secretary.

Avery slammed the phone down. "Are you ready!" he demanded at Mitch.

"Waiting for you," Mitch replied.

"I can't find the Greenmark file," a secretary snarled at the paralegal.

"It was with the Rocconi file," said the paralegal.

"I don't need the Greenmark file!" Avery shouted. "How many times do I have to tell you? Are you deaf?"

The secretary glared at Avery. "No, I can hear very well. And I distinctly heard you say, 'Pack the Greenmark file.' "

"The limousine is waiting," said the other secretary.

"I don't need the damned Greenmark file!" Avery shouted.

"How about Rocconi?" asked the paralegal.

"Yes! Yes! For the tenth time. I need the Rocconi file!"

"The airplane is waiting too," said the other secretary.

One briefcase was slammed shut and locked. Avery dug through a pile of documents on his desk. "Where's the Fender file? Where are any of my files? Why can't I ever find a file?"

"Here's Fender," said the first secretary as she stuffed it into another briefcase.

Avery stared at a piece of notepaper. "All right. Do I have Fender, Rocconi, Cambridge Partners, Greene Group, Sonny Capps to Otaki, Burton Brothers, Galveston Freight and McQuade?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said the first secretary.

"That's all of them," said the paralegal.

"I don't believe it," Avery said as he grabbed his jacket. "Let's go." He strode through the door with the secretaries, paralegal and Mitch in pursuit. Mitch carried two briefcases, the paralegal had two, and a secretary had one. The other secretary scribbled notes as Avery barked the orders and demands he wanted carried out while he was away. The entourage crowded onto the small elevator for the ride to the first floor. Outside, the chauffeur sprang into action, opening doors and loading it all in the trunk.

Mitch and Avery fell into the back seat.

"Relax, Avery," Mitch said. "You're going to the Caymans for three days. Just relax."

"Right, right. I'm taking with me enough work for a month. I've got clients screaming for my hide, threatening suits for legal malpractice. I'm two months behind, and now you're leaving for four days of boredom at a tax seminar in Washington. Your timing is great, McDeere. Just great."

Avery opened a cabinet and mixed a drink. Mitch declined. The limo moved around Riverside Drive in the rush-hour traffic. After three swallows of gin, the partner breathed deeply.

"Continuing education. What a joke," Avery said.

"You did it when you were a rookie. And if I'm not mistaken, you spent a week not long ago at that international tax seminar in Honolulu. Or did you forget?"

"It was work. All work. Are you taking your files with you?"

"Of course, Avery. I'm expected to attend the tax seminar eight hours a day, learn the latest tax revisions Congress has bestowed

upon us and in my spare time bill five hours a day.”

“Six, if you can. We’re behind, Mitch.”

“We’re always behind, Avery. Fix another drink. You need to unwind.”

“I plan to unwind at Rumheads.”

Mitch thought of the bar with its Red Stripe, dominoes, darts and, yes, string bikinis. And the girl.

“Is this your first flight on the Lear?” Avery asked, more relaxed now.

“Yes. I’ve been here seven months, and I’m just now seeing the plane. If I had known this last March, I’d have gone to work with a Wall Street firm.”

“You’re not Wall Street material. You know what those guys do? They’ve got three hundred lawyers in a firm, right? And each year they hire thirty new associates, maybe more. Everybody wants a job because it’s Wall Street, right? And after about a month they get all thirty of them together in one big room and inform them they’re expected to work ninety hours a week for five years, and at the end of five years, half of them will be gone. The turnover is incredible. They try to kill the rookies, bill them out at a hundred, hundred-fifty an hour, make a bundle off them, then run them off. That’s Wall Street. And the little boys never get to see the firm plane. Or the firm limo. You are truly lucky, Mitch. You should thank God every day that we chose to accept you here at good old Bendini, Lambert & Locke.”

“Ninety hours sounds like fun. I could use the rest.”

“It’ll pay off. Did you hear what my bonus was last year?”

“No.”

“Four-eight-five. Not bad, huh? And that’s just the bonus.”

“I got six thousand,” Mitch said.

“Stick with me and you’ll be in the big leagues soon enough.”

“Yeah, but first I gotta get my continuing legal education.”

Ten minutes later the limo turned into a drive that led to a row of hangars. Memphis Aero, the sign said. A sleek silver Lear 55 taxied slowly toward the terminal. “That’s it,” Avery said.

The briefcases and luggage were loaded quickly onto the plane, and within minutes they were cleared for takeoff. Mitch fastened his seat belt and admired the leather-and-brass cabin. It was lavish and luxurious, and he had expected nothing less. Avery mixed another drink and buckled himself in.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, the Lear began its descent into Baltimore-Washington International Airport. After it taxied to a stop, Avery and Mitch descended to the tarmac and opened the baggage door. Avery pointed to a man in a uniform standing near a gate. "That's your chauffeur. The limo is in front. Just follow him. You're about forty minutes from the Capital Hilton."

"Another limo?" Mitch asked.

"Yeah. They wouldn't do this for you on Wall Street."

They shook hands, and Avery climbed back on the plane. The refueling took thirty minutes, and when the Lear took off and turned south, he was asleep again.

Three hours later, it landed in Georgetown, Grand Cayman. It taxied past the terminal to a very small hangar where it would spend the night. A security guard waited on Avery and his luggage and escorted him to the terminal and through customs. The pilot and copilot ran through the post flight ritual. They too were escorted through the terminal.

After midnight, the lights in the hangar were extinguished and the half dozen planes sat in the darkness. A side door opened, and three men, one of them Avery, entered and walked quickly to the Lear 55. Avery opened the baggage compartment, and the three hurriedly unloaded twenty-five heavy cardboard boxes. In the muggy tropical heat, the hangar was like an oven. They sweated profusely but said nothing until all boxes were out of the plane.

"There should be twenty-five. Count them," Avery said to a muscle-bound native with a tank top and a pistol on his hip. The other man held a clipboard and watched intently as if he was a receiving clerk in a warehouse. The native counted quickly, sweat dripping onto the boxes.

“Yes. Twenty-five.”

“How much?” asked the man with the clipboard. “Six and a half million.”

“All cash?”

“All cash. U.S. dollars. Hundreds and twenties. Let’s get it loaded.”

“Where’s it going?”

“Quebecbanq. They’re waiting for us.”

They each grabbed a box and walked through the dark to the side door, where a comrade was waiting with an Uzi. The boxes were loaded into a dilapidated van with CAYMAN PRODUCE stenciled badly on the side. The armed natives sat with guns drawn as the receiving clerk drove away from the hangar in the direction of downtown Georgetown.

Registration began at eight outside the Century Room on the mezzanine. Mitch arrived early, signed in, picked up the heavy notebook of materials with his name printed neatly on the cover and went inside. He took a seat near the center of the large room. Registration was limited to two hundred, the brochure said. A porter served coffee, and Mitch spread the *Washington Post* before him. The news was dominated by a dozen stories of the beloved Redskins, who were in the Super Bowl again.

The room filled slowly as tax lawyers from around the country gathered to hear the latest developments in tax laws that changed daily. A few minutes before nine, a clean-cut, boyish attorney sat to Mitch’s left and said nothing. Mitch glanced at him and returned to the paper. When the room was packed, the moderator welcomed everyone and introduced the first speaker. Congressman something or other from Oregon, chairman of a House Ways and Means subcommittee. As he took the podium for what was supposed to be a one-hour presentation, the attorney to Mitch’s left leaned over and offered his hand.

“Hi, Mitch,” he whispered. “I’m Grant Harbison, FBI.” He handed Mitch a card.

The congressman started with a joke that Mitch did not hear. He studied the card, holding it near his chest. There were five people seated within three feet of him. He didn't know anyone in the room, but it would be embarrassing if anyone knew he was holding an FBI card. After five minutes, Mitch shot a blank stare at Harbison.

Harbison whispered, "I need to see you for a few minutes."

"What if I'm busy?" Mitch asked.

The agent slid a plain white envelope from his seminar notebook and handed it to Mitch. He opened it near his chest. It was handwritten. Across the top, in small but imposing letters, the words read simply: "Office of the Director—FBI."

The note read:

Dear Mr. McDeere:

I would like to speak with you for a few moments during lunch.

Please follow the instructions of Agent Harbison. It won't take long.

We appreciate your cooperation.

Thanks.

F. DENTON VOYLES

Director

Mitch folded the letter in the envelope and slowly placed it in his notebook. We appreciate your cooperation. From the Director of the FBI. He realized the importance at this moment of maintaining his composure, of keeping a straight, calm face as if it was simply routine. But he rubbed his temples with both hands and stared at the floor in front of him. He closed his eyes and felt dizzy. The FBI. Sitting next to him! Waiting on him. The Director and hell knows who else. Tarrance would be close at hand.

Suddenly, the room exploded in laughter at the congressman's punch line. Harbison leaned quickly toward Mitch and whispered, "Meet me in the men's room around the corner in ten minutes." The agent left his notebooks on the table and exited amid the laughter.

Mitch flipped to the first section of the notebook and pretended to study the materials. The congressman was detailing his courageous

battle to protect tax shelters for the wealthy while at the same time easing the burden on the working class. Under his fearless guidance, the subcommittee had refused to report legislation limiting deductions for oil and gas exploration. He was a one-man army on the Hill.

Mitch waited fifteen minutes, then another five, then began coughing. He needed water, and with hand over mouth he slid between the chairs to the back of the room and out the rear door. Harbison was in the men's room washing his hands for the tenth time.

Mitch walked to the basin next to him and turned on the cold water. "What are you boys up to?" Mitch asked.

Harbison looked at Mitch in the mirror. "I'm just following orders. Director Voyles wants to personally meet you, and I was sent to get you."

"And what might he want?"

"I wouldn't want to steal his thunder, but I'm sure it's rather important."

Mitch cautiously glanced around the rest room. It was empty. "And what if I'm too busy to meet with him?"

Harbison turned off the water. and shook his hands into the basin. "The meeting is inevitable, Mitch. Let's not play games. When your little seminar breaks for lunch, you'll find a cab, number 8667, outside to the left of the main entrance. It will take you to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and we'll be there. You must be careful. Two of them followed you here from Memphis."

"Two of whom?"

"The boys from Memphis. Just do as we say and they'll never know."

The moderator thanked the second speaker, a tax professor from New York University, and dismissed them for lunch.

Mitch said nothing to the taxi driver. He sped away like a maniac, and they were soon lost in traffic. Fifteen minutes later, they parked near the Memorial.

“Don’t get out yet,” the driver said with authority. Mitch did not move. For ten minutes, he did not move or speak. Finally, a white Ford Escort pulled alongside the cab and honked. It then drove away.

The driver stared ahead and said, “Okay. Go to the Wall. They’ll find you after about five minutes.”

Mitch stepped to the sidewalk, and the cab left. He stuck his hands deep in the pockets of his wool overcoat and walked slowly to the Memorial. Bitter wind gusts from the north scattered leaves in all directions. He shivered and flipped the collar of his coat around his ears.

A solitary pilgrim sat rigidly in a wheelchair and stared at the Wall. He was covered with a heavy quilt. Under his oversized camouflage beret, a pair of aviator’s sunglasses covered his eyes. He sat near the end of the wall, near the names of those killed in 1972. Mitch followed the years down the sidewalk until he stopped near the wheelchair. He searched the names, suddenly oblivious of the man.

He breathed deeply and was aware of a numbness in his legs and stomach. He looked slowly downward, and then, near the bottom, there it was. Engraved neatly, matter-of-factly, just like all the others, was the name Rusty McDeere.

A basket of frozen and wilted flowers sat on its side next to the monument, inches under his name. Mitch gently laid them to one side and knelt before the Wall. He touched the engraved letters of Rusty’s name. Rusty McDeere. Age eighteen, forever. Seven weeks in Vietnam when he stepped on a land mine. Death was instantaneous, they said. They always said that, according to Ray. Mitch wiped a small tear and stood staring at the length of the Wall. He thought of the fifty-eight thousand families who had been told that death was instantaneous and no one suffered over there.

“Mitch, they’re waiting.”

He turned and looked at the man in the wheelchair, the only human in sight. The aviator’s glasses stared at the Wall and did not look up. Mitch glanced around in all directions.

“Relax, Mitch. We’ve got the place sealed off. They’re not watching.”

“And who are you?” Mitch asked.

“Just one of the gang. You need to trust us, Mitch. The Director has important words, words that could save your life.”

“Where is he?”

The man in the wheelchair turned his head and looked down the sidewalk. “Start walking that way. They’ll find you.”

Mitch stared for a moment longer at his brother’s name and walked behind the wheelchair. He walked past the statue of the three soldiers. He walked slowly, waiting, with hands deep in his pockets. Fifty yards past the monument, Wayne Tarrance stepped from behind a tree and walked beside him. “Keep walking,” he said.

“Why am I not surprised to see you here?” Mitch said.

“Just keep walking. We know of at least two goons from Memphis who were flown in ahead of you. They’re at the same hotel, next door to you. They did not follow you here. I think we lost them.”

“What the hell’s going on, Tarrance?”

“You’re about to find out. Keep walking. But relax, no one is watching you, except for about twenty of our agents.”

“Twenty?”

“Yeah. We’ve got this place sealed off. We want to make sure those bastards from Memphis don’t show up here. I don’t expect them.”

“Who are they?”

“The Director will explain.”

“Why is the Director involved?”

“You ask a lot of questions, Mitch.”

“And you don’t have enough answers.”

Tarrance pointed to the right. They left the sidewalk and headed for a heavy concrete bench near a footbridge leading to a small forest. The water on the pond below was frozen white.

“Have a seat,” Tarrance instructed. They sat down. Two men walked across the footbridge. Mitch immediately recognized the shorter one as Voyles. F. Denton Voyles, Director of the FBI under

three Presidents. A tough-talking, heavy-handed crime buster with a reputation for ruthlessness.

Mitch stood out of respect when they stopped at the bench. Voyles stuck out a cold hand and stared at Mitch with the same large, round face that was famous around the world. They shook hands and exchanged names. Voyles pointed to the bench. Tarrance and the other agent walked to the footbridge and studied the horizon. Mitch glanced across the pond and saw two men, undoubtedly agents with their identical black trench coats and close haircuts, standing against a tree a hundred yards away.

Voyles sat close to Mitch, their legs touching. A brown fedora rested to one side of his large, bald head. He was at least seventy, but the dark green eyes danced with intensity and missed nothing. Both men sat still on the cold bench with their hands stuck deep in their overcoats.

“I appreciate you coming,” Voyles started.

“I didn’t feel as though I had a choice. You folks have been relentless.”

“Yes. It’s very important to us.”

Mitch breathed deeply. “Do you have any idea how confused and scared I am. I’m totally bewildered. I would like an explanation, sir.”

“Mr. McDeere, can I call you Mitch?”

“Sure. Why not.”

“Fine. Mitch, I am a man of very few words. And what I’m about to tell you will certainly shock you. You will be horrified. You may not believe me. But I assure you it’s all true, and with your help we can save your life.”

Mitch braced himself and waited.

“Mitch, no lawyer has ever left your law firm alive. Three have tried, and they were killed. Two were about to leave, and they died last summer. Once a lawyer joins Bendini, Lambert & Locke, he never leaves, unless he retires and keeps his mouth shut. And by the time they retire, they are a part of the conspiracy and cannot talk. The firm has an extensive surveillance operation on the fifth floor. Your house and car are bugged. Your phones are tapped. Your desk

and office are wired. Virtually every word you utter is heard and recorded on the fifth floor. They follow you, and sometimes your wife. They are here in Washington as we speak. You see, Mitch, the firm is more than a firm. It is a division of a very large business, a very profitable business. A very illegal business. The firm is not owned by the partners."

Mitch turned and watched him closely. The Director looked at the frozen pond as he spoke.

"You see, Mitch, the law firm of Bendini, Lambert & Locke is owned by the Morolto crime family in Chicago. The Mafia. The Mob. They call the shots from up there. And that's why we're here." He touched Mitch firmly on the knee and stared at him from six inches away. "It's Mafia, Mitch, and illegal as hell."

"I don't believe it," he said, frozen with fear. His voice was weak and shrill.

The Director smiled. "Yes you do, Mitch. Yes you do. You've been suspicious for some time now. That's why you talked to Abanks in the Caymans. That's why you hired that sleazy investigator and got him killed by those boys on the fifth floor. You know the firm stinks, Mitch."

Mitch leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He stared at the ground between his shoes. "I don't believe it," he mumbled weakly.

"As far as we can tell, about twenty-five percent of their clients, or I should say your clients, are legitimate. There are some very good lawyers in that firm, and they do tax and securities work for rich clients. It's a very good front. Most of the files you've worked on so far have been legit. That's how they operate. They bring in a new rookie, throw money at him, buy the BMW, the house, all that jazz, wine and dine and go to the Caymans, and they work his ass off with what is really legitimate legal stuff. Real clients. Real lawyer stuff. That goes on for a few years, and the rookie doesn't suspect a thing, right? It's a great firm, great bunch of guys. Plenty of money. Hey, everything's wonderful. Then after five or six years, when the money is really good, when they own your mortgage, when you have a wife and kids and everything is so secure, they

drop the bomb and tell the truth. There's no way out. It's the Mafia, Mitch. Those guys don't play games. They'll kill one of your children or your wife, they don't care. You're making more money than you could possibly make anywhere else. You're blackmailed because you've got a family that doesn't mean a damned thing to the Mob, so what do you do, Mitch? You stay. You can't leave. If you stay you make a million and retire young with your family intact. If you want to leave, you'll wind up with your picture on the wall in the first-floor library. They're very persuasive."

Mitch rubbed his temples and began shivering.

"Look, Mitch, I know you must have a thousand questions. Okay. So I'll just keep talking and tell you what I know. The five dead lawyers all wanted out after they learned the truth. We never talked to the first three, because, frankly, we knew nothing about the firm until seven years ago. They've done an excellent job of staying quiet and leaving no trail. The first three just wanted out, probably, so they got out. In coffins. Hodge and Kozinski were different. They approached us, and over the course of a year we had several meetings. They dropped the bomb on Kozinski after he'd been there for seven years. He told Hodge. They whispered between themselves for a year. Kozinski was about to make partner and wanted out before that happened. So he and Hodge made the fatal decision to get out. They never suspected the first three were killed, or at least they never mentioned it to us. We sent Wayne Tarrance to Memphis to bring them in. Tarrance is an organized-crime specialist from New York. He and the two were getting real close when that thing happened in the Caymans. These guys in Memphis are very good, Mitch. Don't ever forget that. They've got the money and they hire the best. So after Hodge and Kozinski were killed, I made the decision to get the firm. If we can bust that firm, we can indict every significant member of the Morolto family. There could be over five hundred indictments. Tax evasion, laundering, racketeering, just whatever you want. It could destroy the Morolto family, and that would be the single most devastating blow to organized crime in the past thirty years. And, Mitch, it's all in the files at the quiet little Bendini firm in Memphis."

“Why Memphis?”

“Ah, good question. Who would suspect a small firm in Memphis, Tennessee? There’s no mob activity down there. It’s a quiet, lovely, peaceful city by the river. It could’ve been Durham or Topeka or Wichita Falls. But they chose Memphis. It’s big enough, though, to hide a forty-man firm. Perfect choice.”

“You mean every partner ...” His words trailed off.

“Yes, every partner knows and plays by the rules. We suspect that most of the associates know, but it’s hard to tell. There’s so much we don’t know, Mitch. I can’t explain how the firm operates and who’s in on it. But we strongly suspect a lot of criminal activity down there.”

“Such as?”

“Tax fraud. They do all the tax work for the Morolto bunch. They file nice, neat, proper-looking tax returns each year and report a fraction of the income. They launder money like crazy. They set up legitimate businesses with dirty money. That bank in St. Louis, big client, what is it?”

“Commercial Guaranty.”

“Right, that’s it. Mafia-owned. Firm does all its legal work. Morolto takes in an estimated three hundred million a year from gambling, dope, numbers, everything. All cash, right? Most of it goes to those banks in the Caymans. How does it move from Chicago to the islands? Any idea? The plane, we suspect. That gold-plated Lear you flew up here on runs about once a week to Georgetown.”

Mitch sat straight and watched Tarrance, who was out of hearing range and standing now on the footbridge. “So why don’t you get your indictments and bust it all up?”

“We can’t. We will, I assure you. I’ve assigned five agents to the project in Memphis and three here in Washington. I’ll get them, Mitch, I promise you. But we must have someone from the inside. They are very smart. They have plenty of money. They’re extremely careful, and they don’t make mistakes. I am convinced that we must have help from you or another member of the firm. We need copies

of files, copies of bank records, copies of a million documents that can only come from within. It's impossible otherwise."

"And I have been chosen."

"And you have been chosen. If you decline, then you can go on your way and make plenty of money and in general be a successful lawyer. But we will keep trying. We'll wait for the next new associate and try to pick him off. And if that doesn't work, we'll move in on one of the older associates. One with courage and morals and guts to do what's right. We'll find our man one day, Mitch, and when that happens we'll indict you along with all the rest and ship your rich and successful ass off to prison. It will happen, son, believe me."

At that moment, at that place and time, Mitch believed him. "Mr. Voyles, I'm cold. Could we walk around?"

"Sure, Mitch."

They walked slowly to the sidewalk and headed in the direction of the Vietnam Memorial. Mitch glanced over his shoulder: Tarrance and the other agent were following at a distance. Another agent in dark brown sat suspiciously on a park bench up the sidewalk.

"Who was Anthony Bendini?" Mitch asked.

"He married a Morolto in 1930. The old man's son-in-law. They had an operation in Philadelphia back then, and he was stationed there. Then, in the forties, for some reason, he was sent to Memphis to set up shop. He was a very good lawyer, though, from what we know."

A thousand questions flooded his brain and fought to be asked. He tried to appear calm, under control, skeptical.

"What about Oliver Lambert?"

"A prince of a guy. The perfect senior partner, who just happened to know all about Hodge and Kozinski and the plans to eliminate them. The next time you see Mr. Lambert around the office, try to remember that he is a cold-blooded murderer. Of course, he has no choice. If he didn't cooperate, they'd find him floating somewhere. They're all like that, Mitch. They started off just like you. Young, bright, ambitious, then suddenly one day they were in over their heads with no place to go. So they play along, work hard, do a

helluva job putting up a good front and looking like a real respectable little law firm. Each year or so they recruit a bright young law student from a poor background, no family money, with a wife who wants babies, and they throw money at him and sign him up.”

Mitch thought of the money, the excessive salary from a small firm in Memphis, and the car and low-interest mortgage. He was headed for Wall Street and had been sidetracked by the money. Only the money.

“What about Nathan Locke?”

The Director smiled. “Locke is another story. He grew up a poor kid in Chicago and was running errands for old man Morolto by the time he was ten. He’s been a hood all his life. Scratched his way through law school, and the old man sent him South to work with Anthony Bendini in the white-collar-crime division of the family. He was always a favorite of the old man.”

“When did Morolto die?”

“Eleven years ago at the age of eighty-eight. He has two slimy sons, Mickey the Mouth and Joey the Priest. Mickey lives in Las Vegas and has a limited role in the family business. Joey is the boss.”

The sidewalk reached an intersection with another one. In the distance to the left, the Washington Monument reached upward in the bitter wind. To the right, the walkway led to the Wall. A handful of people were now staring at it, searching for the names of sons and husbands and friends. Mitch headed for the Wall. They walked slowly.

Mitch spoke softly. “I don’t understand how the firm can do so much illegal work and keep it quiet. That place is full of secretaries and clerks and paralegals.”

“Good point, and one I cannot fully answer. We think it operates as two firms. One is legitimate, with the new associates, most of the secretaries and support people. Then, the senior associates and partners do the dirty work. Hodge and Kozinski were about to give us plenty of information, but they never made it. Hodge told Tarrance once that there was a group of paralegals in the basement

he knew little about. They worked directly for Locke and Milligan and McKnight and a few other partners, and no one was really sure what they did. Secretaries know everything, and we think that some of them are probably in on it. If so, I'm sure they're well paid and too scared to talk. Think about it, Mitch. If you work there making great money with great benefits, and you know that if you ask too many questions or start talking you wind up in the river, what do you do? You keep your mouth shut and take the money."

They stopped at the beginning of the Wall, at a point where the black granite began at ground level and started its run of 246 feet until it angled into the second row of identical panels. Sixty feet away, an elderly couple stared at the wall and cried softly. They huddled together, for warmth and strength. The mother bent down and laid a framed black-and-white photo at the base of the Wall. The father laid a shoe-box full of high school memorabilia next to the photo. Football programs, class pictures, love letters, key rings and a gold chain. They cried louder.

Mitch turned his back to the Wall and looked at the Washington Monument. The Director watched his eyes.

"So what am I supposed to do?" Mitch asked.

"First of all, keep your mouth shut. If you start asking questions, your life could be in danger. Your wife's also. Don't have any kids in the near future. They're easy targets. It's best to play dumb, as if everything is wonderful and you still plan to be the world's greatest lawyer. Second, you must make a decision. Not now, but soon. You must decide if you will cooperate or not. If you choose to help us, we will of course make it worth your while. If you choose not to, then we will continue to watch the firm until we decide to approach another associate. As I said, one of these days we'll find someone with guts and nail those bastards. And the Morolto crime family as we know it will cease to exist. We'll protect you, Mitch, and you'll never have to work again in your life."

"What life? I'll live in fear forever, if I live. I've heard stories of witnesses the FBI has supposedly hidden. Ten years later, the car explodes as they back out the driveway to go to work. The body is

scattered over three blocks. The Mob never forgets, Director. You know that.”

“They never forget, Mitch. But I promise you, you and your wife will be protected.”

The Director looked at his watch. “You’d better get back or they’ll be suspicious. Tarrance will be in touch. Trust him, Mitch. He’s trying to save your life. He has full authority to act on my behalf. If he tells you something, it’s coming from me. He can negotiate.”

“Negotiate what?”

“Terms, Mitch. What we give you in return for what you give us. We want the Morolto family, and you can deliver. You name your price, and this government, working through the FBI, will deliver. Within reason, of course. And that’s coming from me, Mitch.” They walked slowly along the Wall and stopped by the agent in the wheelchair. Voyles stuck out his hand. “Look, there’s a taxi waiting where you came in, number 1073. Same driver. You’d better leave now. We will not meet again, but Tarrance will contact you in a couple of weeks. Please think about what I said. Don’t convince yourself the firm is invincible and can operate forever, because I will not allow it. We will make a move in the near future, I promise that. I just hope you’re on our side.”

“I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do.”

“Tarrance has the game plan. A lot will depend upon you and what you learn once you’re committed.”

“Committed?”

“That’s the word, Mitch. Once you commit, there’s no turning back. They can be more ruthless than any organization on earth.”

“Why did you pick me?”

“We had to pick someone. No, that’s not true. We picked you because you have the guts to walk away from it. You have no family except a wife. No ties, no roots. You’ve been hurt by every person you ever cared for, except Abby. You raised yourself, and in doing so became self-reliant and independent. You don’t need the firm. You can leave it. You’re hardened and calloused beyond your years. And you’re smart enough to pull it off, Mitch. You won’t get caught.

That's why we picked you. Good day, Mitch. Thanks for coming. You'd better get back."

Voyles turned and walked quickly away. Tarrance waited at the end of the Wall, and gave Mitch a quick salute, as if to say, "So long—for now."

After making the obligatory stop in Atlanta, the Delta DC-9 landed in a cold rain at Memphis International. It parked at Gate 19, and the tightly packed crowd of business travelers quickly disembarked. Mitch carried only his briefcase and an *Esquire*. He saw Abby waiting near the pay phones and moved quickly through the pack. He threw the briefcase and magazine against the wall and bear-hugged her. The four days in Washington seemed like a month. They kissed again and again, and whispered softly.

“How about a date?” he asked.

“I’ve got dinner on the table and wine in the cooler,” she said. They held hands and walked through the mob pushing down the concourse in the general direction of the luggage pickup.

He spoke quietly. “Well, we need to talk, and we can’t do it at home.”

She gripped his hand tighter. “Oh?”

“Yes. In fact, we need to have a long talk.”

“What happened?”

“It’ll take a while.”

“Why am I suddenly nervous?”

“Just keep cool. Keep smiling. They’re watching.”

She smiled and glanced to her right. “Who’s watching?”

“I’ll explain in just a moment.”

Mitch suddenly pulled her to his left. They cut through the wave of human traffic and darted into a dark, crowded lounge full of businessmen drinking and watching the television above the bar and waiting for their flights. A small, round table covered with empty beer mugs had just been vacated, and they sat with their backs to

the wall and a view of the bar and the concourse. They sat close together, within three feet of another table. Mitch stared at the door and analyzed every face that walked in. "How long are we going to be here?" she asked.

"Why?"

She slid out of the full-length fox and folded it on the chair across the table. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"Just keep smiling for a moment. Pretend you really missed me. Here, give me a kiss." He pecked her on the lips, and they smiled into each other's eyes. He kissed her cheek and returned to the door. A waiter rushed to the table and cleaned it off. They ordered wine.

She smiled at him. "How was your trip?"

"Boring. We were in class eight hours a day, for four days. After the first day, I hardly left the hotel. They crammed six months' worth of tax revisions into thirty-two hours."

"Did you get to sightsee?"

He smiled and looked dreamily at her. "I missed you, Abby. More than I've ever missed anyone in my life. I love you. I think you're gorgeous, absolutely stunning. I do not enjoy traveling alone and waking up in a strange hotel bed without you. And I have something horrible to tell you."

She stopped smiling. He slowly looked around the room. They were three deep at the bar and yelling at the Knicks-Lakers game. The lounge was suddenly louder.

"I'll tell you about it," he said. "But there's a very good chance someone is in here right now watching us. They cannot hear, but they can observe. Just smile occasionally, although it will be hard."

The wine arrived, and Mitch began his story. He left nothing out. She spoke only once. He told her about Anthony Bendini and old man Morolto, and then Nathan Locke growing up in Chicago and Oliver Lambert and the boys on the fifth floor.

Abby nervously sipped her wine and tried valiantly to appear as the normal loving wife who missed her husband and was now enjoying immensely his recollection of the tax seminar. She watched the people at the bar, sipped a little and occasionally grinned at Mitch as he told of the money laundering and the murdered

lawyers. Her body ached with fear. Her breath was wildly irregular. But she listened, and pretended.

The waiter brought more wine as the crowd thinned. An hour after he started, Mitch finished in a low whisper.

“And Voyles said Tarrance would contact me in a couple of weeks to see if I will cooperate. He said goodbye and walked away.”

“And this was Tuesday?” she asked.

“Yes. The first day.”

“What did you do the rest of the week?”

“I slept little, ate little, walked around with a dull headache most of the time.”

“I think I feel one coming.”

“I’m sorry, Abby. I wanted to fly home immediately and tell you. I’ve been in shock for three days.”

“I’m in shock now. I’m not believing this, Mitch. This is like a bad dream, only much worse.”

“And this is only the beginning. The FBI is dead serious. Why else would the Director himself meet with me, an insignificant rookie lawyer from Memphis, in fifteen-degree weather on a concrete park bench? He’s assigned five agents in Memphis and three in Washington, and he said they’ll spend whatever it takes to get the firm. So if I keep my mouth shut, ignore them and go about my business of being a good and faithful member of Bendini, Lambert & Locke, one day they’ll show up with arrest warrants and haul everybody away. And if I choose to cooperate, you and I will leave Memphis in the dead of the night after I hand the firm to the feds, and we’ll go off and live in Boise, Idaho, as Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur Gates. We’ll have plenty of money, but we’ll have to work to avoid suspicion. After my plastic surgery, I’ll get a job driving a forklift in a warehouse, and you can work parttime at a day care. We’ll have two, maybe three kids and pray every night that people we’ve never met keep their mouths shut and forget about us. We’ll live every hour of every day in morbid fear of being discovered.”

“That’s perfect, Mitch, just perfect.” She was trying hard not to cry.

He smiled and glanced around the room. "We have a third option. We can walk out that door, buy two tickets to San Diego, sneak across the border and eat tortillas for the rest of our lives."

"Let's go."

"But they'd probably follow us. With my luck, Oliver Lambert will be waiting in Tijuana with a squad of goons. It won't work. Just a thought."

"What about Lamar?"

"I don't know. He's been here six or seven years, so he probably knows. Avery's a partner, so he's very much a part of the conspiracy."

"And Kay?"

"Who knows. It's very likely none of the wives know. I've thought about it for four days, Abby, and it's a marvelous front. The firm looks exactly like it's supposed to look. They could fool anyone. I mean, how would you and I or any other prospective recruit even think of such an operation. It's perfect. Except, now the feds know about it."

"And now the feds expect you to do their dirty work. Why did they pick you, Mitch? There are forty lawyers in the firm."

"Because I knew nothing about it. I was a sitting duck. The FBI is not sure when the partners spring the surprise on the associates, so they couldn't take a chance with anyone else. I happened to be the new guy, so they set the trap as soon as I passed the bar exam."

Abby chewed her lip and held back tears. She looked blankly at the door across the dark room. "And they listen to everything we say," she said.

"No. Just every phone call and conversation around the house and in the cars. We're free to meet here or in most restaurants, and there's always the patio. But I suggest we move farther away from the sliding door. To be safe, we need to sneak behind the storage shed and whisper softly."

"Are you trying to be funny? I hope not. This is no time for jokes. I'm so scared, angry, confused, mad as hell and not sure where to turn. I'm afraid to speak in my own house. I watch every word I

utter on the phone, even if it's a wrong number. Every time the phone rings, I jump and stare at it. And now this."

"You need another drink."

"I need ten drinks."

Mitch grabbed her wrist and squeezed firmly. "Wait a minute. I see a familiar face. Don't look around."

She held her breath. "Where?"

"On the other side of the bar. Smile and look at me."

Sitting on a barstool and staring intently at the TV was a well-tanned blond man with a loud blue-and-white alpine sweater. Fresh from the slopes. But Mitch had seen the tan and the blond bangs and the blond mustache somewhere in Washington. Mitch watched him carefully. The blue light from the tube illuminated his face. Mitch hid in the dark. The man lifted a bottle of beer, hesitated, then, there!, shot a glance into the corner where the McDeeres huddled closely together.

"Are you sure?" Abby asked through clenched teeth.

"Yes. He was in Washington, but I can't place him. In fact, I saw him twice."

"Is he one of them?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Let's get out of here."

Mitch laid a twenty on the table and they left the airport.

Driving her Peugeot, he raced through the short-term parking lot, paid the attendant and sped away toward midtown. After five minutes of silence, she leaned across and whispered in his ear, "Can we talk?"

He shook his head. "Well, how's the weather been while I was away?"

Abby rolled her eyes and looked through the passenger window. "Cold," she said. "Chance of light snow tonight."

"It was below freezing the entire week in Washington."

Abby looked flabbergasted at this revelation. "Any snow?" she asked with raised eyebrows and wide eyes as if enthralled with the

conversation.

“No. Just raw cold.”

“What a coincidence! Cold here and cold there.”

Mitch chuckled to himself. They rode silently on the interstate loop. “So who’s gonna win the Super Bowl?” he asked.

“Oilers.”

“Think so, huh? I’m for the Redskins. That’s all they talked about in Washington.”

“My, my. Must be a real fun city.”

More silence. Abby placed the back of her hand over her mouth and concentrated on the taillights ahead. At this moment of bewilderment, she would take her chances in Tijuana. Her husband, number three in his class (at Harvard), the one with Wall Street firms rolling out the red carpet, the one who could have gone anywhere, to any firm, had signed up with the ... Mafia! With five dead lawyers notched on their belts, they most surely wouldn’t hesitate with number six. Her husband! Then the many conversations with Kay Quin swirled around her brain. The firm encourages babies. The firm permits wives to work, but not forever. The firm hires no one with family money. The firm demands loyalty to the firm. The firm has the lowest turnover rate in the country. Small wonder.

Mitch watched her carefully. Twenty minutes after they left the airport, the Peugeot parked in the carport next to the BMW. They held hands and walked to the end of the driveway.

“This is crazy, Mitch.”

“Yes, but it’s real. It will not go away.”

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know, babe. But we gotta do it quick, and we can’t make mistakes.”

“I’m scared.”

“I’m terrified.”

Tarrance did not wait long. One week after he waved goodbye to Mitch at the Wall, he spotted him walking hurriedly in the cold in

the direction of the Federal Building on North Main, eight blocks from the Bendini Building. He followed him for two blocks, then slid into a small coffee shop with a row of windows facing the street, or the mall, as it was called. Cars were prohibited on Main Street in Memphis. The asphalt had been covered with tile when the boulevard had ceased being a street and had been transformed into the Mid-America Mall. An occasional useless and desolate tree rose from the tile and stretched its barren limbs between the buildings. Winos and urban nomads drifted aimlessly from one side of the mall to the other, begging for money and food.

Tarrance sat at a front window and watched in the distance as Mitch disappeared into the Federal Building. He ordered coffee and a chocolate doughnut. He checked his watch. It was 10 a.m. According to the docket, McDeere had a brief hearing in Tax Court at this moment. It should be very brief, the clerk of the court had informed Tarrance. He waited.

Nothing is ever brief in court. An hour later, Tarrance moved his face closer to the window and studied the scattered bodies walking quickly in the distance. He drained his coffee cup for the third time, laid two dollars on the table and stood hidden in the door. As Mitch approached on the other side of the mall, Tarrance moved swiftly toward him.

Mitch saw him and slowed for a second.

"Hello, Mitch. Mind if I walk with you?"

"Yes, I mind, Tarrance. It's dangerous, don't you think?"

They walked briskly and did not look at each other. "Look at that store over there," Tarrance said, pointing to their right. "I need a pair of shoes." They ducked into Don Pang's House of Shoes. Tarrance walked to the rear of the narrow store and stopped between two rows of fake Reeboks at \$4.99 for two pairs. Mitch followed him and picked up a pair of size tens. Don Pang or some other Korean eyed them suspiciously but said nothing. They watched the front door through the racks.

"The Director called me yesterday," Tarrance said without moving his lips. "He asked about you. Said it was time you made a decision."

“Tell him I’m still thinking.”

“Have you told the boys at the office?”

“No. I’m still thinking.”

“That’s good. I don’t think you should tell them.” He handed Mitch a business card. “Keep this. There are two numbers on the back. Use either one from a pay phone. You’ll get a recorder, so just leave a message and tell me exactly when and where to meet you.”

Mitch put the card in his pocket.

Suddenly, Tarrance ducked lower. “What is it!” Mitch demanded.

“I think we’ve been caught. I just saw a goon walk past the store and look in. Listen to me, Mitch, and listen carefully. Walk with me out of the store right now, and the instant we get out the door, yell at me to get lost and shove me away. I’ll act like I want to fight, and you run in the direction of your office.”

“You’re gonna get me killed, Tarrance.”

“Just do as I say. As soon as you get to the office, report this incident to the partners. Tell them I cornered you and you got away as soon as possible.”

Outside, Mitch shoved harder than necessary and yelled, “Get the hell away from me! And leave me alone!” He ran two blocks to Union Avenue, then walked to the Bendini Building. He stopped in the men’s room on the first floor to catch his breath. He stared at himself in the mirror and breathed deeply ten times.

Avery was on the phone, with two lights holding and blinking. A secretary sat on the sofa, ready with a steno pad for the onslaught of commands. Mitch looked at her and said, “Would you step outside, please. I need to speak with Avery in private.” She stood and Mitch escorted her to the door. He closed it.

Avery watched him closely and hung up. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Mitch stood by the sofa. “The FBI just grabbed me as I was returning from Tax Court.”

“Damn! Who was it?”

“Same agent. Guy by the name of Tarrance.”

Avery picked up the phone and kept talking. “Where did it happen?”

“On the mall. North of Union. I was just walking alone, minding my own business.”

“Is this the first contact since that other thing?”

“Yes. I didn’t recognize the guy at first.”

Avery spoke into the receiver. “This is Avery Tolar. I need to speak to Oliver Lambert immediately.... I don’t care if he’s on the phone. Interrupt him, and now.”

“What’s going on, Avery?” Mitch asked.

“Hello, Oliver. Avery here. Sorry for the interruption. Mitch McDeere is here in my office. A few minutes ago he was walking back from the Federal Building when an FBI agent approached him on the mall.... What? Yes, he just walked in my office and told me about it.... All right, we’ll be there in five minutes.” He hung up. “Relax, Mitch. We’ve been through this before.”

“I know, Avery, but this does not make sense. Why would they bother with me? I’m the newest man in the firm.”

“It’s harassment, Mitch. Pure and simple. Nothing but harassment. Sit down.”

Mitch walked to the window and looked at the river in the distance. Avery was a cool liar. It was now time for the “they’re just picking on us” routine. Relax, Mitch. Relax? With eight FBI agents assigned to the firm and the Director, Mr. Denton Voyles himself, monitoring the case daily? Relax? He’d just been caught whispering to an FBI agent inside a dollar shoe store. And now he was forced to act like he was an ignorant pawn being preyed upon by the evil forces of the federal government. Harassment? Then why was the goon following him on a routine walk to the courthouse? Answer that, Avery.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” Avery asked as he put his arm around him and gazed out the window.

“Not really. Locke explained it all last time. I just wish they would leave me alone.”

“It’s a serious matter, Mitch. Don’t take it lightly. Let’s walk over and see Lambert.”

Mitch followed Avery around the corner and down the hall. A stranger in a black suit opened the door for them, then closed it.

Lambert, Nathan Locke and Royce McKnight stood near the small conference table. Again, a tape recorder sat on the table. Mitch sat across from it. Black Eyes sat at the head of the table and glared at Mitch.

He spoke with a menacing frown. There were no smiles in the room. "Mitch, has Tarrance or anyone else from the FBI contacted you since the first meeting last August?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

Mitch slapped the table. "Dammit! I said no! Why don't you put me under oath?"

Locke was startled. They were all startled. A heavy, tense silence followed for thirty seconds. Mitch glared at Black Eyes, who retreated ever so slightly with a casual movement of his head.

Lambert, ever the diplomat, the mediator, intervened. "Look, Mitch, we know this is frightening."

"Damn right it is. I don't like it at all. I'm minding my own business, working my ass off ninety hours a week, trying to be nothing but a good lawyer and member of this firm, and for some unknown reason I keep getting these little visits from the FBI. Now, sir, I would like some answers."

Locke pressed the red button on the recorder. "We'll talk about that in a minute. First, you tell us everything that happened."

"It's very simple, Mr. Locke. I walked to the Federal Building at ten for an appearance before Judge Kofer on the Malcolm Delaney case. I was there about an hour, and I finished my business. I left the Federal Building, and I was walking in the direction of our office—in a hurry, I might add. It's about twenty degrees out there. A block or two north of Union, this guy Tarrance came out of nowhere, grabbed my arm and pushed me into a small store. I started to knock the hell out of him, but, after all, he is an FBI agent. And I didn't want to make a scene. Inside, he tells me he wants to talk for a minute. I pulled away from him, and ran to the door. He followed me, tried to grab me, and I shoved him away. Then I ran here, went straight to Avery's office, and here we are. That's all that was said. Play by play, everything."

“What did he want to talk about?”

“I didn’t give him a chance, Mr. Locke. I have no plans to talk to any FBI agent unless he has a subpoena.”

“Are you sure it’s the same agent?”

“I think so. I didn’t recognize him at first. I haven’t seen him since last August. Once inside the store, he pulled his badge and gave me his name again. At that point, I ran.”

Locke pressed another button and sat back in the chair. Lambert sat behind him and smiled ever so warmly. “Listen, Mitch, we explained this last time. These guys are getting bolder and bolder. Just last month they approached Jack Aldrich while he was eating lunch in a little grill on Second Street. We’re not sure what they’re up to, but Tarrance is out of his mind. It’s nothing but harassment.”

Mitch watched his lips but heard little. As Lambert spoke, he thought of Kozinski and Hodge and their pretty widows and children at the funerals.

Black Eyes cleared his throat. “It’s a serious matter, Mitch. But we have nothing to hide. They could better spend their time investigating our clients if they suspect wrongdoing. We’re lawyers. We may represent people who flirt with the law, but we have done nothing wrong. This is very baffling to us.”

Mitch smiled and opened his hands. “What do you want me to do?” he asked sincerely.

“There’s nothing you can do, Mitch,” said Lambert. “Just stay away from this guy, and run if you see him. If he so much as looks at you, report it immediately.”

“That’s what he did,” Avery said defensively.

Mitch looked as pitiful as possible.

“You can go, Mitch,” Lambert said. “And keep us posted.”

He left the office by himself.

DeVasher paced behind his desk and ignored the partners. “He’s lying, I tell you. He’s lying. The sonofabitch is lying. I know he’s lying.”

“What did your man see?” asked Locke.

“My man saw something different. Slightly different. But very different. He says McDeere and Tarrance walked sort of nonchalantly into the shoe store. No physical intimidation by Tarrance. None at all. Tarrance walks up, they talk, and both sort of duck into the store. My man says they disappear into the back of the store, and they’re back there for three, maybe four minutes. Then another one of our guys walks by the store, looks in and sees nothing. Evidently, they saw our man, because within seconds they come flying out of the store with McDeere shoving and yelling. Something ain’t right, I tell you.”

“Did Tarrance grab his arm and force him into the store?” Nathan Locke asked slowly, precisely.

“Hell no. And that’s the problem. McDeere went voluntarily, and when he said the guy grabbed his arm, he’s lying. My man says he thinks they would’ve stayed in there for a while if they hadn’t seen us.”

“But you’re not sure of that,” Nathan Locke said.

“I wasn’t sure, dammit. They didn’t invite me into the store.”

DeVasher kept pacing while the lawyers stared at the floor. He unwrapped a Roi-Tan and crammed it into his fat mouth.

Finally, Oliver Lambert spoke. “Look, DeVasher, it’s very possible McDeere is telling the truth and your man got the wrong signals. It’s very possible. I think McDeere is entitled to the benefit of the doubt.”

DeVasher grunted and ignored this.

“Do you know of any contact since last August?” asked Royce McKnight.

“We don’t know of any, but that doesn’t mean they ain’t talked, does it now? We didn’t know about those other two until it was almost too late. It’s impossible to watch every move they make. Impossible.”

He walked back and forth by his credenza, obviously deep in thought. “I gotta talk to him,” he finally said.

“Who?”

“McDeere. It’s time he and I had a little talk.”

“About what?” Lambert asked nervously.

“You let me handle it, okay? Just stay out of my way.”

“I think it’s a bit premature,” Locke said.

“And I don’t give a damn what you think. If you clowns were in charge of security, you’d all be in prison.”

Mitch sat in his office with the door closed and stared at the walls. A migraine was forming at the base of his skull, and he felt sick. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” he said softly.

Avery peeked inside, then walked to the desk. “How about lunch?”

“No, thanks. I’m not hungry.”

The partner slid his hands into his trouser pockets and smiled warmly. “Look, Mitch, I know you’re worried. Let’s take a break. I’ve got to run downtown for a meeting. Why don’t you meet me at the Manhattan Club at one. We’ll have a long lunch and talk things over. I’ve reserved the limo for you. It’ll be waiting outside at a quarter till.”

Mitch managed a weak smile, as if he was touched by this. “Sure, Avery. Why not.”

“Good. I’ll see you at one.”

At a quarter till, Mitch opened the front door and walked to the limo. The driver opened the door, and Mitch fell in. Company was waiting.

A thick, bald-headed man with a huge, bulging, hanging neck sat smugly in the corner of the rear seat. He stuck out a hand. “Name’s DeVasher, Mitch. Nice to meet you.”

“Am I in the right limo?” Mitch asked.

“Sure. Sure. Relax.” The driver pulled away from the curb.

“What can I do for you?” Mitch asked.

“You can listen for a while. We need to have a little talk.” The driver turned on Riverside Drive and headed for the Hernando De Soto Bridge.

“Where are we going?” Mitch asked.

“For a little ride. Just relax, son.”

So I'm number six, thought Mitch. This is it. No, wait a minute. They were much more creative than this with their killing.

"Mitch, can I call you Mitch?"

"Sure."

"Fine. Mitch, I'm in charge of security for the firm, and—"

"Why does the firm need security?"

"Just listen to me, son, and I'll explain. The firm has an extensive security program, thanks to old man Bendini. He was a nut about security and secrecy. My job is to protect the firm, and quite frankly, we're very concerned about this FBI business."

"So am I."

"Yes. We believe the FBI is determined to infiltrate our firm in hopes of collecting information on certain clients."

"Which clients?"

"Some high rollers with questionable tax shelters."

Mitch nodded and looked at the river below. They were now in Arkansas, with the Memphis skyline fading behind them. DeVasher recessed the conversation. He sat like a frog with his hands folded across the gut. Mitch waited, until it became apparent that lapses in conversation and awkward silence did not bother DeVasher. Several miles across the river, the driver left the interstate and found a rough county road that circled and ran back to the east. Then he turned onto a gravel road that went for a mile through low-lying bean fields next to the river. Memphis was suddenly visible again, across the water.

"Where are we going?" Mitch asked, with some alarm.

"Relax. I want to show you something."

A gravesite, thought Mitch. The limo stopped on a cliff that fell ten feet to a sandbar next to the bank. The skyline stood impressively on the other side. The top of the Bendini Building was visible.

"Let's take a walk," DeVasher said.

"Where to?" Mitch asked.

"Come on. It's okay." DeVasher opened his door and walked to the rear bumper. Slowly, Mitch followed him.

“As I was saying, Mitch, we are very troubled by this contact with the FBI. If you talk to them, they will get bolder, then who knows what the fools will try. It’s imperative that you not speak to them, ever again. Understand?”

“Yes. I’ve understood since the first visit in August.”

Suddenly, DeVasher was in his face, nose to nose. He smiled wickedly. “I have something that will keep you honest.” He reached in his sport coat and pulled out a manila envelope.

“Take a look at these,” he said with a sneer, and walked away.

Mitch leaned on the limo and nervously opened the envelope. There were four photographs, black and white, eight by ten, very clear. On the beach. The girl.

“Oh my god! Who took these?” Mitch yelled at him.

“What difference does it make? It’s you, ain’t it?”

There was no doubt about who it was. He ripped the photographs into small pieces and threw them in DeVasher’s direction.

“We got plenty at the office,” DeVasher said calmly. “Bunch of them. We don’t want to use them, but one more little conversation with Mr. Tarrance or any other Fibbie and we’ll mail them to your wife. How would you like that, Mitch? Imagine your pretty little wife going to the mailbox to get her *Redbook* and catalogues and she sees this strange envelope addressed to her. Try to think of that, Mitch. The next time you and Tarrance decide to shop for plastic shoes, think about us, Mitch. Because we’ll be watching.”

“Who knows about these?” Mitch asked.

“Me and the photographer, and now you. Nobody in the firm knows, and I don’t plan to tell them. But if you screw up again, I suspect they’ll be passing them around at lunch. I play hardball, Mitch.”

He sat on the trunk and rubbed his temples. DeVasher walked up next to him. “Listen, son. You’re a very bright young man, and you’re on your way to big bucks. Don’t screw it up. Just work hard, play the game, buy new cars, build bigger homes, the works. Just like all the other guys. Don’t try to be no hero. I don’t want to use the pictures.”

“Okay, okay.”

For seventeen days and seventeen nights, the troubled lives of Mitch and Abby McDeere proceeded quietly without interference from Wayne Tarrance or any of his confederates. The routines returned. Mitch worked eighteen hours a day, every day of the week, and never left the office for any reason except to drive home. Lunch was at the desk. Avery sent other associates to run errands or file motions or appear in court. Mitch seldom left his office, the fifteen-by-fifteen sanctuary where he was certain Tarrance could not get him. If possible, he stayed out of the halls and men's rooms and coffee room. They were watching, he was sure. He was not sure who they were, but there was no doubt that a bunch of folks were vitally interested in his movements. So he stayed at his desk, with the door shut most of the time, working diligently, billing like crazy and trying to forget that the building had a fifth floor and on the fifth floor was a nasty little bastard named DeVasher who had a collection of photographs that could ruin him.

With each uneventful day, Mitch withdrew even more into his asylum and became even more hopeful that perhaps the last episode in the Korean shoe store had scared Tarrance or maybe gotten him fired. Maybe Voyles would just simply forget the entire operation, and Mitch could continue along his happy way of getting rich and making partner and buying everything in sight. But he knew better.

To Abby, the house was a prison, though she could come and go at will. She worked longer hours at school, spent more time walking the malls and made at least one trip each day to the grocery store. She watched everyone, especially men in dark suits who looked at her. She wore black sunglasses so they could not see her eyes. She

wore them when it was raining. Late at night, after supper alone while she waited for him, she stared at the walls and resisted the temptation to investigate. The phones could be examined with a magnifying glass. The wires and mikes could not be invisible, she told herself. More than once she thought of finding a book on such devices so she could identify them. But Mitch said no. They were in the house, he assured her, and any attempt to find them could be disastrous.

So she moved silently around her own house, feeling violated and knowing it could not last much longer. They both knew the importance of appearing normal, of sounding normal. They tried to engage in normal talk about how the day went, about the office and her students, about the weather, about this and that. But the conversations were flat, often forced and strained. When Mitch was in law school the lovemaking had been frequent and rowdy; now it was practically nonexistent. Someone was listening.

Midnight walks around the block became a habit. After a quick sandwich each night, they would deliver the rehearsed lines about needing exercise and head for the street. They held hands and walked in the cold, talking about the firm and the FBI, and which way to turn; always the same conclusion: There was no way out. None. Seventeen days and seventeen nights.

The eighteenth day brought a new twist. Mitch was exhausted by 9 p.m. and decided to go home. He had worked nonstop for fifteen and a half hours. At two hundred per. As usual, he walked the halls of the second floor, then took the stairs to the third floor. He casually checked each office to see who was still working. No one on the third floor. He followed the stairs to the fourth floor and walked the wide rectangular hallway as if in search of something. All lights except one were off. Royce McKnight was working late. Mitch eased by his office without being seen. Avery's door was closed, and Mitch grabbed the doorknob. It was locked. He walked to the library down the hall, looking for a book he did not need. After two weeks of the casual late-night inspections, he had found no closed-circuit cameras above the halls or offices. They just listen, he decided. They do not see.

He said goodbye to Dutch Hendrix at the front gate and drove home. Abby was not expecting him at such an early hour. He quietly unlocked the door from the carport and eased into the kitchen. He flipped on a light switch. She was in the bedroom. Between the kitchen and the den was a small foyer with a rolltop desk where Abby left each day's mail. He laid his briefcase softly on the desk, then saw it. A large brown envelope addressed with a black felt marker to Abby McDeere. No return address. Scrawled in heavy black letters were the words PHOTOGRAPHS—DO NOT BEND. His heart stopped first, then his breathing. He grabbed the envelope. It had been opened.

A heavy layer of sweat broke across his forehead. His mouth was dry and he could not swallow. His heart returned with the fury of a jackhammer. The breathing was heavy and painful. He was nauseous. Slowly, he backed away from the desk, holding the envelope. She's in the bed, he thought. Hurt, sick, devastated and mad as hell. He wiped his forehead and tried to collect himself. Face it like a man, he said.

She was in the bed, reading a book with the television on. The dog was in the backyard. Mitch opened the bedroom door, and Abby bolted upright in horror. She almost screamed at the intruder, until she recognized him.

"You scared me, Mitch!"

Her eyes glowed with fear, then fun. They had not been crying. They looked fine, normal. No pain. No anger. He could not speak.

"Why are you home?" she demanded, sitting up in bed, smiling now.

Smiling? "I live here," he said weakly.

"Why didn't you call?"

"Do I have to call before I can come home?" His breathing was now almost normal. She was fine!

"It would be nice. Come here and kiss me."

He leaned across the bed and kissed her. He handed her the envelope. "What's this?" he asked nonchalantly.

“You tell me. It’s addressed to me, but there was nothing inside. Not a thing.” She closed her book and laid it on the night table.

Not a thing! He smiled at her and kissed her again. “Are you expecting photographs from anyone?” he asked in complete ignorance.

“Not that I know of. Must be a mistake.”

He could almost hear DeVasher laughing at this very moment on the fifth floor. The fat bastard was standing up there somewhere in some dark room full of wires and machines with a headset stretched around his massive bowling ball of a head, laughing uncontrollably.

“That’s strange,” Mitch said. Abby pulled on a pair of jeans and pointed to the backyard. Mitch nodded. The signal was simple, just a quick point or a nod of the head in the direction of the patio.

Mitch laid the envelope on the rolltop desk and for a second touched the scrawled markings on it. Probably DeVasher’s handwriting. He could almost hear him laughing. He could see his fat face and nasty smile. The photographs had probably been passed around during lunch in the partners’ dining room. He could see Lambert and McKnight and even Avery gawking admiringly over coffee and dessert.

They’d better enjoy the pictures, dammit. They’d better enjoy the remaining few months of their bright and rich and happy legal careers.

Abby walked by and he grabbed her hand. “What’s for dinner?” he asked for the benefit of those listening.

“Why don’t we go out. We should celebrate since you’re home at a decent hour.”

They walked through the den. “Good idea,” said Mitch. They eased through the rear door, across the patio and into the darkness.

“What is it?” Mitch asked.

“You got a letter today from Doris. She said she’s in Nashville, but will return to Memphis on the twenty-seventh of February. She says she needs to see you. It’s important. It was a very short letter.”

“The twenty-seventh! That was yesterday.”

“I know. I presume she’s already in town. I wonder what she wants.”

“Yeah, and I wonder where she is.”

“She said her husband had an engagement here in town.”

“Good. She’ll find us,” Mitch said.

Nathan Locke closed his office door and pointed DeVasher in the direction of the small conference table near the window. The two men hated each other and made no attempt to be cordial. But business was business, and they took orders from the same man.

“Lazarov wanted me to talk to you, alone,” DeVasher said. “I’ve spent the past two days with him in Vegas, and he’s very anxious. They’re all anxious, Locke, and he trusts you more than anyone else around here. He likes you more than he likes me.”

“That’s understandable,” Locke said with no smile. The ripples of black around his eyes narrowed and focused intently on DeVasher.

“Anyway, there are a few things he wants us to discuss.”

“I’m listening.”

“McDeere’s lying. You know how Lazarov’s always bragged about having a mole inside the FBI. Well, I’ve never believed him, and still don’t, for the most part. But according to Lazarov, his little source is telling him that there was some kind of secret meeting involving McDeere and some FBI heavyweights when your boy was in Washington back in January. We were there, and our men saw nothing, but it’s impossible to track anyone twenty-four hours a day without getting caught. It’s possible he could’ve slipped away for a little while without our knowledge.”

“Do you believe it?”

“It’s not important whether I believe it. Lazarov believes it, and that’s all that matters. At any rate, he told me to make preliminary plans to, uh, take care of him.”

“Damn, DeVasher! We can’t keep eliminating people.”

“Just preliminary plans, nothing serious. I told Lazarov I thought it was much too early and that it would be a mistake. But they are very worried, Locke.”

“This can’t continue, DeVasher. I mean, damn! We have reputations to consider. We have a higher casualty rate than oil rigs.

People will start talking. We're gonna reach a point where no law student in his right mind would take a job here."

"I don't think you need to worry about that. Lazarov has put a freeze on hiring. He told me to tell you that. He also wants to know how many associates are still in the dark."

"Five, I think. Let's see, Lynch, Sorrell, Buntin, Myers and McDeere."

"Forget McDeere. Lazarov is convinced he knows much more than we think. Are you certain the other four know nothing?"

Locke thought for a moment and mumbled under his breath. "Well, we haven't told them. You guys are listening and watching. What do you hear?"

"Nothing, from those four. They sound ignorant and act as if they suspect nothing. Can you fire them?"

"Fire them! They're lawyers, DeVasher. You don't fire lawyers. They're loyal members of the firm."

"The firm is changing, Locke. Lazarov wants to fire the ones who don't know and stop hiring new ones. It's obvious the Fibbies have changed their strategy, and it's time for us to change as well. Lazarov wants to circle the wagons and plug the leaks. We can't sit back and wait for them to pick off our boys."

"Fire them," Locke repeated in disbelief. "This firm has never fired a lawyer."

"Very touching, Locke. We've disposed of five, but never fired one. That's real good. You've got a month to do it, so start thinking of a reason. I suggest you fire all four at one time. Tell them you lost a big account and you're cutting back."

"We have clients, not accounts."

"Okay, fine. Your biggest client is telling you to fire Lynch, Sorrell, Buntin and Myers. Now start making plans."

"How do we fire those four without firing McDeere?"

"You'll think of something, Nat. You got a month. Get rid of them and don't hire any new boys. Lazarov wants a tight little unit where everyone can be trusted. He's scared, Nat. Scared and mad. I don't have to tell you what could happen if one of your boys spilled his guts."

“No, you don’t have to tell me. What does he plan to do with McDeere?”

“Right now, nothing but the same. We’re listening twenty-four hours a day, and the kid has never mentioned a word to his wife or anyone else. Not a word! He’s been corralled twice by Tarrance, and he reported both incidents to you. I still think the second meeting was somewhat suspicious, so we’re being very careful. Lazarov, on the other hand, insists there was a meeting in Washington. He’s trying to confirm. He said his sources knew little, but they were digging. If in fact McDeere met with the Fibbies up there and failed to report it, then I’m sure Lazarov will instruct me to move quickly. That’s why he wants preliminary plans to take McDeere out.”

“How do you plan to do it?”

“It’s too early. I haven’t given it much thought.”

“You know he and his wife are going to the Caymans in two weeks for a vacation. They’ll stay in one of our condos, the usual.”

“We wouldn’t do it there again. Too suspicious. Lazarov instructed me to get her pregnant.”

“McDeere’s wife?”

“Yep. He wants them to have a baby, a little leverage. She’s on the pill, so we gotta break in, take her little box, match up the pills and replace them with placebos.”

At this, the great black eyes saddened just a touch and looked through the window. “What the hell’s going on, DeVasher?” he asked softly.

“This place is about to change, Nat. It appears as though the feds are extremely interested, and they keep pecking away. One day, who knows, one of your boys may take the bait, and you’ll all leave town in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t believe that, DeVasher. A lawyer here would be a fool to risk his life and his family for a few promises from the feds. I just don’t believe it will happen. These boys are too smart and they’re making too much money.”

“I hope you’re right.”

The leasing agent leaned against the rear of the elevator and admired the black leather miniskirt from behind. He followed it down almost to the knees, where it ended and the seams in the black silk stockings began and snaked downward to black heels. Kinky heels, with little red bows across the toes. He slowly worked his way back up the seams, past the leather, pausing to admire the roundness of her rear, then upward to the red cashmere sweater, which from his vantage point revealed little but from the other side was quite impressive, as he had noticed in the lobby. The hair landed just below the shoulder blades and contrasted nicely with the red. He knew it was bleached, but add the bleach to the leather mini and the seams and the kinky heels and the tight sweater hugging those things around the front, add all that together and he knew this was a woman he could have. He would like to have her in the building. She just wanted a small office. The rent was negotiable.

The elevator stopped. The door opened, and he followed her into the narrow hall. "This way"—he pointed, flipping on a light switch. In the corner, he moved in front of her and stuck a key in a badly aged wooden door.

"It's just two rooms," he said, flipping on another switch. "About two hundred square feet."

She walked straight to the window. "The view is okay," Tammy said, staring into the distance.

"Yes, a nice view. The carpet is new. Painted last fall. Rest room's down the hall. It's a nice place. The entire building's been renovated

within the past eight years.” He stared at the black seams as he spoke.

“It’s not bad,” Tammy said, not in response to anything he had mentioned. She continued to stare out the window. “What’s the name of this place?”

“The Cotton Exchange Building. One of the oldest in Memphis. It’s really a prestigious address.”

“How prestigious is the rent?”

He cleared his throat and held a file before him. He did not look at the file. He was gaping at the heels now. “Well, it’s such a small office. What did you say you needed it for?”

“Secretarial work. Free-lance secretarial.” She moved to the other window, ignoring him. He followed every move.

“I see. How long will you need it?”

“Six months, with an option for a year.”

“Okay, for six months we can lease it for three-fifty a month.”

She did not flinch or look from the window. She slid her right foot out of the shoe and rubbed the left calf with it. The seam continued, he observed, under the heel and along the bottom of the foot. The toe-nails were ... red! She cocked her rear to the left and leaned on the windowsill. His file was shaking.

“I’ll pay two-fifty a month,” she said with authority.

He cleared his throat. There was no sense being greedy. The tiny rooms were dead space, useless to anyone else, and had not been occupied in years. The building could use a free-lance secretary. Hell, he might even need a free-lance secretary.

“Three hundred, but no less. This building is in demand. Ninety percent occupied right now. Three hundred a month, and that’s too low. We’re barely covering costs at that.”

She turned suddenly, and there they were. Staring at him. The cashmere was stretched tightly around them. “The ad said there were furnished offices available,” she said.

“We can furnish this one,” he said, eager to cooperate. “What do you need?”

She looked around the office. “I would like a secretarial desk with credenza in here. Several file cabinets. A couple of chairs for clients.

Nothing fancy. The other room does not have to be furnished. I'll put a copier in there."

"No problem," he said with a smile.

"And I'll pay three hundred a month, furnished."

"Good," he said as he opened a file and withdrew a blank lease. He laid it on a folding table and began writing.

"Your name?"

"Doris Greenwood." Her mother was Doris Greenwood, and she had been Tammy Inez Greenwood before she ran up on Buster Hemphill, who later became (legally) Elvis Aaron Hemphill, and life had pretty much been downhill since. Her mother lived in Effingham, Illinois.

"Okay, Doris," he said with an effort at suaveness, as if they were now on a first-name basis and growing closer by the moment. "Home address?"

"Why do you need that?" she asked with irritation.

"Well, uh, we just need that information."

"It's none of your business."

"Okay, okay. No problem." He dramatically scratched out that portion of the lease. He hovered above it. "Let's see. We'll run it from today, March 2, for six months until September 2. Is that okay?"

She nodded and lit a cigarette.

He read the next paragraph. "Okay, we require a three-hundred-dollar deposit and the first month's rent in advance."

From a pocket in the tight black leather skirt, she produced a roll of cash. She counted six one-hundred-dollar bills and laid them on the table. "Receipt, please," she demanded.

"Certainly." He continued writing.

"What floor are we on?" she asked, returning to the windows.

"Ninth. There's a ten percent late charge past the fifteenth of the month. We have the right to enter at any reasonable time to inspect. Premises cannot be used for any illegal purpose. You pay all utilities and insurance on contents. You get one parking space in the lot across the street, and here are two keys. Any questions?"

"Yeah. What if I work odd hours? I mean, real late at night."

“No big deal. You can come and go as you please. After dark the security guard at the Front Street door will let you pass.”

Tammy stuck the cigarette between her sticky lips and walked to the table. She glanced at the lease, hesitated, then signed the name of Doris Greenwood.

They locked up, and he followed her carefully down the hall to the elevator.

By noon the next day, the odd assortment of furniture had been delivered and Doris Greenwood of Greenwood Services arranged the rented typewriter and the rented phone next to each other on the secretarial desk. Sitting and facing the typewriter, she could look slightly to her left out the window and watch the traffic on Front Street. She filled the desk drawers with typing paper, notepads, pencils, odds and ends. She placed magazines on the filing cabinets and the small table between the two chairs where her clients would sit.

There was a knock at the door. “Who is it?” she asked.

“It’s your copier,” a voice answered.

She unlocked the door and opened it. A short, hyperactive little man named Gordy rushed in, looked around the room and said rudely, “Okay, where do you want it?”

“In there,” Tammy said, pointing to the eight-by-ten empty room with no door on the hinges. Two young men in blue uniforms pushed and pulled the cart holding the copier.

Gordy laid the paperwork on her desk. “It’s a mighty big copier for this place. We’re talking ninety copies a minute with a collator and automatic feed. It’s a big machine.”

“Where do I sign?” she asked, ignoring the small talk.

He pointed with the pen. “Six months, at two-forty a month. That includes service and maintenance and five hundred sheets of paper for the first two months. You want legal or letter-sized?”

“Legal.”

“First payment due on the tenth, and same thereafter for five months. Operator’s manual is on the rack. Call me if you have any questions.”

The two servicemen gawked at the tight stone-washed jeans and the red heels and slowly left the office. Gordy ripped off the yellow copy and handed it to her. "Thanks for the business," he said.

She locked the door behind them. She walked to the window next to her desk and looked north, along Front. Two blocks up on the opposite side, floors four and five of the Bendini Building were visible.

He kept to himself with his nose buried deep in the books and the piles of paperwork. He was too busy for any of them, except Lamar. He was very much aware that his withdrawal was not going unnoticed. So he worked harder. Perhaps they would not be suspicious if he billed twenty hours a day. Perhaps money could insulate him.

Nina left a box of cold pizza when she checked out after lunch. He ate it while he cleared his desk. He called Abby. Said he was going to see Ray and that he would return to Memphis late Sunday. He eased through the side door and into the parking lot.

For three and a half hours, he raced along Interstate 40 with his eyes on the rearview mirror. Nothing. He never saw them. They probably just call ahead, he thought, and wait for him somewhere up there. In Nashville, he made a sudden exit into downtown. Using a map he had scribbled, he darted in and out of traffic, making U-turns wherever possible and in general driving like a nut. To the south of town, he turned quickly into a large apartment complex and cruised between the buildings. It was nice enough. The parking lots were clean and the faces were white. All of them. He parked next to the office and locked the BMW. The pay phone by the covered pool worked. He called a cab and gave an address two blocks away. He ran between the buildings, down a side street, and arrived precisely with the cab. "Greyhound bus station," he said to the driver. "And in a hurry. I've got ten minutes."

"Relax, pal. It's only six blocks away."

Mitch ducked low in the rear seat and watched the traffic. The driver moved with a slow confidence and seven minutes later

stopped in front of the station. Mitch threw two fives over the seat and darted into the terminal. He bought a one-way ticket on the four-thirty bus to Atlanta. It was four thirty-one, according to the clock on the wall. The clerk pointed through the swinging doors. "Bus No. 454," she said. "Leaving in a moment."

The driver slammed the baggage door, took his ticket and followed Mitch onto the bus. The first three rows were filled with elderly blacks. A dozen more passengers were scattered toward the rear. Mitch walked slowly down the aisle, gazing at each face and seeing no one. He took a window seat on the fourth row from the rear. He slipped on a pair of sunglasses and glanced behind him. No one. Dammit! Was it the wrong bus? He stared out the dark windows as the bus moved quickly into traffic. They would stop in Knoxville. Maybe his contact would be there.

When they were on the interstate and the driver reached his cruising speed, a man in blue jeans and madras shirt suddenly appeared and slid into the seat next to Mitch. It was Tarrance. Mitch breathed easier.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"In the rest room. Did you lose them?" Tarrance spoke in a low voice while surveying the backs of the heads of the passengers. No one was listening. No one could hear.

"I never see them, Tarrance. So I cannot say if I lost them. But I think they would have to be supermen to keep my trail this time."

"Did you see our man in the terminal?"

"Yes. By the pay phone with the red Falcons cap. Black dude."

"That's him. He would've signaled if they were following."

"He gave me the go-ahead."

Tarrance wore silver reflective sunglasses under a green Michigan State baseball cap. Mitch could smell the fresh Juicy Fruit.

"Sort of out of uniform, aren't you?" Mitch said with no smile. "Did Voyles give you permission to dress like that?"

"I forgot to ask him. I'll mention it in the morning."

"Sunday morning?" Mitch asked.

"Of course. He'll wanna know all about our little bus ride. I briefed him for an hour before I left town."

“Well, first things first. What about my car?”

“We’ll pick it up in a few minutes and babysit it for you. It’ll be in Knoxville when you need it. Don’t worry.”

“You don’t think they’ll find us?”

“No way. No one followed you out of Memphis, and we detected nothing in Nashville. You’re clean as a whistle.”

“Pardon my concern. But after that fiasco in the shoe store, I know you boys are not above stupidity.”

“It was a mistake, all right. We—”

“A big mistake. One that could get me on the hit list.”

“You covered it well. It won’t happen again.”

“Promise me, Tarrance. Promise me no one will ever again approach me in public.”

Tarrance looked down the aisle and nodded.

“No, Tarrance. I need to hear it from your mouth. Promise me.”

“Okay, okay. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“Thanks. Now maybe I can eat at a restaurant without fear of being grabbed.”

“You’ve made your point.”

An old black man with a cane inched toward them, smiled and walked past. The rest-room door slammed. The Greyhound rode the left lane and blew past the lawful drivers.

Tarrance flipped through a magazine. Mitch gazed into the countryside. The man with the cane finished his business and wobbled to his seat on the front row.

“So what brings you here?” Tarrance asked, flipping pages.

“I don’t like airplanes. I always take the bus.”

“I see. Where would you like to start?”

“Voyles said you had a game plan.”

“I do. I just need a quarterback.”

“Good ones are very expensive.”

“We’ve got the money.”

“It’ll cost a helluva lot more than you think. The way I figure it, I’ll be throwing away a forty-year legal career at, say, an average of half a million a year.”

“That’s twenty million bucks.”

“I know. But we can negotiate.”

“That’s good to hear. You’re assuming that you’ll work, or practice, as you say, for forty years. That’s a very precarious assumption. Just for fun, let’s assume that within five years we bust up the firm and indict you along with all of your buddies. And that we obtain convictions, and you go off to prison for a few years. They won’t keep you long because you’re a white-collar type, and of course you’ve heard how nice the federal pens are. But at any rate, you’ll lose your license, your house, your little BMW. Probably your wife. When you get out, you can open up a private investigation service like your old friend Lomax. It’s easy work, unless you sniff the wrong underwear.”

“Like I said. It’s negotiable.”

“All right. Let’s negotiate. How much do you want?”

“For what?”

Tarrance closed the magazine, placed it under his seat and opened a thick paperback. He pretended to read. Mitch spoke from the corner of his mouth with his eyes on the median.

“That’s a very good question,” Tarrance said softly, just above the distant grind of the diesel engine. “What do we want from you? Good question. First, you have to give up your career as a lawyer. You’ll have to divulge secrets and records that belong to your clients. That, of course, is enough to get you disbarred, but that won’t seem important. You and I must agree that you will hand us the firm on a silver platter. Once we agree, if we agree, the rest will fall in place. Second, and most important, you will give us enough documentation to indict every member of the firm and most of the top Morolto people. The records are in the little building there on Front Street.”

“How do you know this?”

Tarrance smiled. “Because we spend billions of dollars fighting organized crime. Because we’ve tracked the Moroltos for twenty years. Because we have sources within the family. Because Hodge and Kozinski were talking when they were murdered. Don’t sell us short, Mitch.”

“And you think I can get the information out?”

“Yes, Counselor. You can build a case from the inside that will collapse the firm and break up one of the largest crime families in the country. You gotta lay out the firm for us. Whose office is where? Names of all secretaries, clerks, paralegals. Who works on what files? Who’s got which clients? The chain of command. Who’s on the fifth floor? What’s up there? Where are the records kept? Is there a central storage area? How much is computerized? How much is on microfilm? And, most important, you gotta bring the stuff out and hand it to us. Once we have probable cause, we can go in with a small army and get everything. But that’s an awfully big step. We gotta have a very tight and solid case before we go crashing in with search warrants.”

“Is that all you want?”

“No. You’ll have to testify against all of your buddies at their trials. Could take years.”

Mitch breathed deeply and closed his eyes. The bus slowed behind a caravan of mobile homes split in two. Dusk was approaching, and, one at a time, the cars in the westbound lane brightened with headlights. Testifying at trial! This, he had not thought of. With millions to spend for the best criminal lawyers, the trials could drag on forever.

Tarrance actually began reading the paperback, a Louis L’Amour. He adjusted the reading light above them, as if he was indeed a real passenger on a real journey. After thirty miles of no talk, no negotiation, Mitch removed his sunglasses and looked at Tarrance.

“What happens to me?”

“You’ll have a lot of money, for what that’s worth. If you have any sense of morality, you can face yourself each day. You can live anywhere in the country, with a new identity, of course. We’ll find you a job, fix your nose, do anything you want, really.”

Mitch tried to keep his eyes on the road, but it was impossible. He glared at Tarrance. “Morality? Don’t ever mention that word to me again, Tarrance. I’m an innocent victim, and you know it.”

Tarrance grunted with a smart-ass grin.

They rode in silence for a few miles.

“What about my wife?”

“Yeah, you can keep her.”

“Very funny.”

“Sorry. She’ll get everything she wants. How much does she know?”

“Everything.” He thought of the girl on the beach. “Well, almost everything.”

“We’ll get her a fat government job with the Social Security Administration anywhere you want. It won’t be that bad, Mitch.”

“It’ll be wonderful. Until an unknown point in the future when one of your people opens his or her mouth and lets something slip to the wrong person, and you’ll read about me or my wife in the paper. The Mob never forgets, Tarrance. They’re worse than elephants. And they keep secrets better than your side. You guys have lost people, so don’t deny it.”

“I won’t deny it. And I’ll admit to you that they can be ingenious when they decide to kill.”

“Thanks. So where do I go?”

“It’s up to you. Right now we have about two thousand witnesses living all over the country under new names with new homes and new jobs. The odds are overwhelmingly in your favor.”

“So I play the odds?”

“Yes. You either take the money and run, or you play big-shot lawyer and bet that we never infiltrate.”

“That’s a hell of a choice, Tarrance.”

“It is. I’m glad it’s yours.”

The female companion of the ancient black man with the cane rose feebly from her seat and began shuffling toward them. She grabbed each aisle seat as she progressed. Tarrance leaned toward Mitch as she passed. He would not dare speak with this stranger in the vicinity. She was at least ninety, half crippled, probably illiterate, and could care less if Tarrance received his next breath of air. But Tarrance was instantly mute.

Fifteen minutes later, the rest-room door opened and released the sounds of the toilet gurgling downward into the pit of the Greyhound. She shuffled to the front and took her seat.

“Who is Jack Aldrich?” Mitch asked. He suspected a cover-up with this one, and he carefully watched the reaction from the corner of his eye. Tarrance looked up from the book and stared at the seat in front of him.

“Name’s familiar. I can’t place him.”

Mitch returned his gaze to the window. Tarrance knew. He had flinched, and his eyes had narrowed too quickly before he answered. Mitch watched the westbound traffic.

“So who is he?” Tarrance finally asked.

“You don’t know him?”

“If I knew him, I wouldn’t ask who he was.”

“He’s a member of our firm. You should’ve known that, Tarrance.”

“The city’s full of lawyers. I guess you know them all.”

“I know the ones at Bendini, Lambert & Locke, the quiet little firm you guys have been studying for seven years. Aldrich is a six-year man who allegedly was approached by the FBI a couple of months ago. True or false?”

“Absolutely false. Who told you this?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just a rumor around the office.”

“It’s a lie. We’ve talked to no one but you since August. You have my word. And we have no plans to talk to anyone else, unless, of course, you decline and we must find another prospect.”

“You’ve never talked to Aldrich?”

“That’s what I said.”

Mitch nodded and picked up a magazine. They rode in silence for thirty minutes. Tarrance gave up on his novel, and finally said, “Look, Mitch, we’ll be in Knoxville in an hour or so. We need to strike a deal, if we’re going to. Director Voyles will have a thousand questions in the morning.”

“How much money?”

“Half a million bucks.”

Any lawyer worth his salt knew the first offer had to be rejected. Always. He had seen Avery’s mouth drop open in shock and his head shake wildly in absolute disgust and disbelief with first offers, regardless of how reasonable. There would be counteroffers, and

counter-counteroffers, and further negotiations, but always, the first offer was rejected.

So by shaking his head and smiling at the window as if this was what he expected, Mitch said no to half a million.

“Did I say something funny?” Tarrance, the non-lawyer, the nonnegotiator, asked.

“That’s ridiculous, Tarrance. You can’t expect me to walk away from a gold mine for half a million bucks. After taxes, I net three hundred thousand at best.”

“And if we close the gold mine and send all you Gucci-footed hotshots to jail?”

“If. If. If. If you knew so much, why haven’t you done something? Voyles said you boys have been watching and waiting for seven years. That’s real good, Tarrance. Do you always move so fast?”

“Do you wanna take that chance, McDeere? Let’s say it takes us another five years, okay? After five years we bust the joint and send your ass to jail. At that point it won’t make any difference how long it took us, will it? The result will be the same, Mitch.”

“I’m sorry. I thought we were negotiating, not threatening.”

“I’ve made you an offer.”

“Your offer is too low. You expect me to make a case that will hand you hundreds of indictments against a group of the sleaziest criminals in America, a case that could easily cost me my life. And you offer a pittance. Three million, at least.”

Tarrance did not flinch or frown. He received the counteroffer with a good, straight poker face, and Mitch, the negotiator, knew it was not out of the ballpark.

“That’s a lot of money,” Tarrance said, almost to himself. “I don’t think we’ve ever paid that much.”

“But you can, can’t you?”

“I doubt it. I’ll have to talk to the Director.”

“The Director! I thought you had complete authority on this case. Are we gonna run back and forth to the Director until we have a deal?”

“What else do you want?”

“I’ve got a few things in mind, but we won’t discuss them until the money gets right.”

The old man with the cane apparently had weak kidneys. He stood again and began the awkward wobble to the rear of the bus. Tarrance again started his book. Mitch flipped through an old copy of *Field & Stream*.

The Greyhound left the interstate in Knoxville two minutes before eight. Tarrance leaned closer and whispered, “Take the front door out of the terminal. You’ll see a young man wearing an orange University of Tennessee sweat suit standing beside a white Bronco. He’ll recognize you and call you Jeffrey. Shake hands like lost friends and get in the Bronco. He’ll take you to your car.”

“Where is it?” Mitch whispered.

“Behind a dorm on campus.”

“Have they checked it for bugs?”

“I think so. Ask the man in the Bronco. If they were tracking you when you left Memphis, they might be suspicious by now. You should drive to Cookeville. It’s about a hundred miles this side of Nashville. There’s a Holiday Inn there. Spend the night and go see your brother tomorrow. We’ll be watching also, and if things look fishy, I’ll find you Monday morning.”

“When’s the next bus ride?”

“Your wife’s birthday is Tuesday. Make reservations for eight at Grisanti’s, that Italian place on Airways. At precisely nine, go to the cigarette machine in the bar, insert six quarters and buy a pack of anything. In the tray where the cigarettes are released, you will find a cassette tape. Buy yourself one of those small tape players that joggers wear with earphones and listen to the tape in your car, not at home, and sure as hell not at the office. Use the earphones. Let your wife listen to it. I’ll be on the cassette, and I’ll give you our top dollar. I’ll also explain a few things. After you’ve listened to it a few times, dispose of it.”

“This is rather elaborate, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but we don’t need to speak to each other for a couple of weeks. They’re watching and listening, Mitch. And they’re very good. Don’t forget that.”

“Don’t worry.”

“What was your football jersey number in high school?”

“Fourteen.”

“And college?”

“Fourteen.”

“Okay. Your code number is 1-4-1-4. Thursday night, from a touch-tone pay phone, call 757-6000. You’ll get a voice that will lead you through a little routine involving your code number. Once you’re cleared, you will hear my recorded voice, and I will ask you a series of questions. We’ll go from there.”

“Why can’t I just practice law?”

The bus pulled into the terminal and stopped. “I’m going on to Atlanta,” Tarrance said. “I will not see you for a couple of weeks. If there’s an emergency, call one of the two numbers I gave you before.”

Mitch stood in the aisle and looked down at the agent. “Three million, Tarrance. Not a penny less. If you guys can spend billions fighting organized crime, surely you can find three million for me. And, Tarrance, I have a third option. I can disappear in the middle of the night, vanish into the air. If that happens, you and the Moroltos can fight each other till hell freezes over, and I’ll be playing dominoes in the Caribbean.”

“Sure, Mitch. You might play a game or two, but they’d find you within a week. And we wouldn’t be there to protect you. So long, buddy.”

Mitch jumped from the bus and darted through the terminal.

At eight-thirty a.m. on Tuesday, Nina formed neat piles out of the rubble and debris on his desk. She enjoyed this early-morning ritual of straightening the desk and planning his day. The appointment book lay unobstructed on a corner of his desk. She read from it. "You have a very busy day today, Mr. McDeere."

Mitch flipped through a file and tried to ignore her. "Every day is busy."

"You have a meeting at ten o'clock in Mr. Mahan's office on the Delta Shipping appeal."

"I can't wait," Mitch mumbled.

"You have a meeting at eleven-thirty in Mr. Tolar's office on the Greenbriar dissolution, and his secretary informed me it would last at least two hours."

"Why two hours?"

"I'm not paid to ask those questions, Mr. McDeere. If I do I might get fired. At three-thirty, Victor Milligan wants to meet with you."

"About what?"

"Again, Mr. McDeere, I'm not supposed to ask questions. And you're due in Frank Mulholland's office downtown in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, I know. Where is it?"

"The Cotton Exchange Building. Four or five blocks up Front at Union. You've walked by it a hundred times."

"Fine. What else?"

"Shall I bring you something back from lunch?"

"No, I'll grab a sandwich downtown."

"Wonderful. Do you have everything for Mulholland?"

He pointed to the heavy black briefcase and said nothing. She left, and seconds later Mitch walked down the hall, down the stairs and out the front door. He paused for a second under a streetlight, then turned and walked quickly toward downtown. The black briefcase was in his right hand, the burgundy eel-skin attaché was in his left. The signal.

In front of a green building with boarded windows, he stopped next to a fire hydrant. He waited a second, then crossed Front Street. Another signal.

On the ninth floor of the Cotton Exchange Building, Tammy Greenwood of Greenwood Services backed away from the window and put on her coat. She locked the door behind her and pushed the elevator button. She waited. She was about to encounter a man who could easily get her killed.

Mitch entered the lobby and went straight to the elevators. He noticed no one in particular. A half dozen businessmen were in the process of talking as they came and went. A woman was whispering into a pay phone. A security guard loitered near the Union Avenue entrance. He pushed the elevator button and waited, alone. As the door opened, a young clean-cut Merrill Lynch type in a black suit and sparkling wing tips stepped into the elevator. Mitch had hoped for a solitary ride upward.

Mulholland's office was on the seventh floor. Mitch pushed the seven button and ignored the kid in the black suit. As the elevator moved, both men dutifully stared at the blinking numbers above the door. Mitch eased to the rear of the small elevator and set the heavy briefcase on the floor, next to his right foot. The door opened on the fourth floor, and Tammy walked nervously in. The kid glanced at her. Her attire was remarkably conservative. A simple, short knit dress with no plunging necklines. No kinky shoes. Her hair was tinted to a soft shade of red. He glanced again and pushed the CLOSE DOOR button.

Tammy brought aboard a large black briefcase, identical to Mitch's. She ignored his eyes, stood next to him, quietly setting it next to his. On the seventh floor, Mitch grabbed her briefcase and

left the elevator. On the eighth floor, the cute young man in the black suit made his departure, and on the ninth floor Tammy picked up the heavy black briefcase full of files from Bendini, Lambert & Locke and took it to her office. She locked and bolted the door, quickly removed her coat and went to the small room where the copier was waiting and running. There were seven files, each at least an inch thick. She laid them neatly on the folding table next to the copier and took the one marked "Koker-Hanks to East Texas Pipe." She unhooked the aluminum clasp, removed the contents from the file and carefully placed the stack of documents and letters and notes into the automatic feed. She pushed the PRINT button and watched as the machine made two perfect copies of everything.

Thirty minutes later, the seven files were returned to the briefcase. The new files, fourteen of them, were locked away in a fireproof file cabinet hidden in a small closet, which was also locked. Tammy placed the briefcase near the door, and waited.

Frank Mulholland was a partner in a ten-man firm that specialized in banking and securities. His client was an old man who had founded and built a chain of do-it-yourself hardware stores and at one point had been worth eighteen million before his son and a renegade board of directors took control and forced him into retirement. The old man sued. The company countersued. Everybody sued everybody, and the suits and countersuits had been hopelessly deadlocked for eighteen months. Now that the lawyers were fat and happy, it was time to talk settlement. Bendini, Lambert & Locke handled the tax advice for the son and the new board, and two months earlier Avery had introduced Mitch to the hostilities. The plan was to offer the old man a five-million-dollar package of common stock, convertible warrants and a few bonds.

Mulholland was not impressed with the plan. His client was not greedy, he explained repeatedly, and he knew he would never regain control of the company. His company, remember. But five million was not enough. Any jury of any degree of intelligence

would be sympathetic to the old man, and a fool could see the lawsuit was worth at least, well ... at least twenty million!

After an hour of sliding proposals and offers and counteroffers across Mulholland's desk, Mitch had increased the package to eight million and the old man's lawyer said he might consider fifteen. Mitch politely repacked his attaché case and Mulholland politely escorted him to the door. They promised to meet again in a week. They shook hands like best friends.

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor, and Tammy walked casually inside. It was empty, except for Mitch. When the door closed, he said, "Any problems?"

"Nope. Two copies are locked away."

"How long did it take?"

"Thirty minutes."

It stopped on the fourth floor, and she picked up the empty briefcase. "Noon tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. The door opened and she disappeared onto the fourth floor. He rode alone to the lobby, which was empty except for the same security guard. Mitchell McDeere, Attorney and Counselor at Law, hurried from the building with a heavy briefcase in each hand and walked importantly back to his office.

The celebration of Abby's twenty-fifth birthday was rather subdued. Through the dim candlelight in a dark corner of Grisanti's, they whispered and tried to smile at each other. It was difficult. Somewhere at that moment in the restaurant an invisible FBI agent was holding a cassette tape that he would insert into a cigarette machine in the lounge at precisely nine o'clock, and Mitch was supposed to be there seconds later to retrieve it without being seen or caught by the bad guys, whoever they were and whatever they looked like. And the tape would reveal just how much cold hard cash the McDeeres would receive in return for evidence and a subsequent life on the run.

They picked at their food, tried to smile and carry on an extended conversation, but mainly they fidgeted and glanced at their watches.

The dinner was brief. By eight forty-five they were finished with the plates. Mitch left in the direction of the rest room, and he stared into the dark lounge as he walked by. The cigarette machine was in the corner, exactly where it should be.

They ordered coffee, and at exactly nine Mitch returned to the lounge, to the machine, where he nervously inserted six quarters and pulled the lever under Marlboro Lights, in memory of Eddie Lomax. He quickly reached into the tray, took the cigarettes and, fishing around in the darkness, found the cassette tape. The pay telephone next to the machine rang, and he jumped. He turned and surveyed the lounge. It was empty except for two men at the bar watching the television behind and above the bartender. Drunk laughter exploded from a dark corner far away.

Abby watched every step and move until he sat across from her. She raised her eyebrows. "And?"

"I got it. Your basic black Sony cassette tape." Mitch sipped coffee and smiled innocently while quickly surveying the crowded dining room. No one was watching. No one cared.

He handed the check and the American Express card to the waiter. "We're in a hurry," he said rudely. The waiter returned within seconds. Mitch scribbled his name.

The BMW was indeed wired. Heavily wired. Tarrance's gang had very quietly and very thoroughly examined it with magnifying glasses while waiting for the Greyhound four days earlier. Expertly wired, with terribly expensive equipment capable of hearing and recording the slightest snuffle or cough. But the bugs could only listen and record; they could not track. Mitch thought that was awfully nice of them, just to listen but not follow the movements of the BMW.

It left the parking lot of Grisanti's with no conversation between its occupants. Abby carefully opened a portable tape recorder and placed the cassette inside. She handed Mitch the earphones, which he stuck onto his head. She pushed the PLAY button. She watched him as he listened and drove aimlessly toward the interstate.

The voice belonged to Tarrance: "Hello, Mitch. Today is Tuesday, March 9, sometime after nine p.m. Happy Birthday to your lovely wife. This tape will run about ten minutes, and I instruct you to listen to it carefully, once or twice, then dispose of it. I had a face-to-face meeting with Director Voyles last Sunday and briefed him on everything. By the way, I enjoyed the bus ride. Director Voyles is very pleased with the way things are going, but he thinks we've talked long enough. He wants to cut a deal, and rather quickly. He explained to me in no uncertain terms that we have never paid three million dollars and we're not about to pay it to you. He cussed a lot, but to make a long story short, Director Voyles said we could pay a million cash, no more. He said the money would be deposited in a Swiss bank and no one, not even the IRS, would ever know about it. A million dollars, tax-free. That's our best deal, and Voyles said you can go to hell if you said no. We're gonna bust that little firm, Mitch, with or without you."

Mitch smiled grimly and stared at the traffic racing past them on the I-240 loop. Abby watched for a sign, a signal, a grunt or groan, anything to indicate good news or bad. She said nothing.

The voice continued: "We'll take care of you, Mitch. You'll have access to FBI protection anytime you think you need it. We'll check on you periodically, if you want. And if you want to move on to another city after a few years, we'll take care of it. You can move every five years if you want, and we'll pick up the tab and find jobs for you. Good jobs with the VA or Social Security or Postal Service. Voyles said we'd even find you a high-paying job with a private government contractor. You name it, Mitch, and it's yours. Of course, we'll provide new identities for you and your wife, and you can change every year if you desire. No problem. Or if you got a better idea, we'll listen. You wanna live in Europe or Australia, just say so. You'll get special treatment. I know we're promising a lot, Mitch, but we're dead serious and we'll put it in writing. We'll pay a million in cash, tax-free, and set you up wherever you choose. So that's the deal. And in return, you must hand us the firm, and the Moroltos. We'll talk about that later. For now, your time is up. Voyles is breathing down my neck, and things must happen quickly.

Call me at that number Thursday night at nine from the pay phone next to the men's rest room in Houston's on Poplar. So long, Mitch."

He sliced a finger across his throat, and Abby pushed the STOP button, then REWIND. He handed her the earphones, and she began to listen intently.

It was an innocent walk in the park, two lovebirds holding hands and strolling casually through the cool, clear moonlight. They stopped by a cannon and gazed at the majestic river inching ever so slowly toward New Orleans. The same cannon where the late Eddie Lomax once stood in a sleet storm and delivered one of his last investigative reports.

Abby held the cassette in her hand and watched the river below. She had listened to it twice and refused to leave it in the car, where who knows who might snatch it. After weeks of practicing silence, and then speaking only outdoors, words were becoming difficult.

"You know, Abby," Mitch finally said as he tapped the wooden wheel of the cannon, "I've always wanted to work with the post office. I had an uncle once who was a rural mail carrier. That would be neat."

It was a gamble, this attempt at humor. But it worked. She hesitated for three seconds, then laughed slightly, and he could tell she indeed thought it was funny. "Yeah, and I could mop floors in a VA hospital."

"You wouldn't have to mop floors. You could change bedpans, something meaningful, something inconspicuous. We'd live in a neat little white frame house on Maple Street in Omaha. I'd be Harvey and you'd be Thelma, and we'd need a short, unassuming last name."

"Poe," Abby added.

"That's great. Harvey and Thelma Poe. The Poe family. We'd have a million dollars in the bank but couldn't spend a dime because everyone on Maple Street would know it and then we'd become different, which is the last thing we want."

"I'd get a nose job."

“But your nose is perfect.”

“Abby’s nose is perfect, but what about Thelma’s? We’d have to get it fixed, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I suppose.” He was immediately tired of the humor and became quiet. Abby stepped in front of him, and he draped his arms over her shoulders. They watched a tug quietly push a hundred barges under the bridge. An occasional cloud dimmed the moonlight, and the cool winds from the west rose intermittently, then dissipated.

“Do you believe Tarrance?” Abby asked.

“In what way?”

“Let’s suppose you do nothing. Do you believe one day they’ll eventually infiltrate the firm?”

“I’m afraid not to believe.”

“So we take the money and run?”

“It’s easier for me to take the money and run, Abby. I have nothing to leave behind. For you, it’s different. You’ll never see your family again.”

“Where would we go?”

“I do not know. But I wouldn’t want to stay in this country. The feds cannot be trusted entirely. I’ll feel safer in another country, but I won’t tell Tarrance.”

“What’s the next step?”

“We cut a deal, then quickly go about the job of gathering enough information to sink the ship. I have no idea what they want, but I can find it for them. When Tarrance has enough, we disappear. We take our money, get our nose jobs and disappear.”

“How much money?”

“More than a million. They’re playing games with the money. It’s all negotiable.”

“How much will we get?”

“Two million cash, tax-free. Not a dime less.”

“Will they pay it?”

“Yes, but that’s not the question. The question is, will we take it and run?”

She was cold, and he draped his coat over her shoulders. He held her tightly. "It's a rotten deal, Mitch," she said, "but at least we'll be together."

"The name's Harvey, not Mitch."

"Do you think we'll be safe, Harvey?"

"We're not safe here."

"I don't like it here. I'm lonely and scared."

"I'm tired of being a lawyer."

"Let's take the money and haul ass."

"You've got a deal, Thelma."

She handed the cassette tape to him. He glanced at it, then threw it far below, beyond Riverside Drive, in the direction of the river. They held hands and strolled quickly through the park toward the BMW parked on Front Street.

For only the second time in his career, Mitch was allowed to visit the palatial dining room on the fifth floor. Avery's invitation came with the explanation that the partners were all quite impressed with the seventy-one hours per week he averaged in billing for the month of February, and thus they wished to offer the small reward of lunch. It was an invitation no associate could turn down, regardless of schedules and meetings and clients and deadlines and all the other terribly important and urgently critical aspects of careers at Bendini, Lambert & Locke. Never in history had an associate said no to an invitation to the dining room. Each received two invitations per year. Records were kept.

Mitch had two days to prepare for it. His first impulse was to decline, and when Avery first mentioned it a dozen lame excuses crossed his mind. Eating and smiling and chatting and fraternizing with criminals, regardless of how rich and polished, was less attractive than sharing a bowl of soup with a homeless down at the bus station. But to say no would be a grievous breach of tradition. And as things were going, his movements were already suspicious enough.

So he sat with his back to the window and forced smiles and small talk in the direction of Avery and Royce McKnight and, of course, Oliver Lambert. He knew he would eat at the same table with those three. Knew it for two days. He knew they would watch him carefully but nonchalantly, trying to detect any loss of enthusiasm, or cynicism, or hopelessness. Anything, really. He knew they would hang on his every word, regardless of what he said. He knew they would lavish praise and promises upon his weary shoulders.

Oliver Lambert had never been more charming. Seventy-one hours a week for a February for an associate was a firm record, he said as Roosevelt served prime rib. All the partners were amazed, and delighted, he explained softly while glancing around the room. Mitch forced a smile and sliced his serving. The other partners, amazed or indifferent, were talking idly and concentrating on the food. Mitch counted eighteen active partners and seven retirees, those with the khakis and sweaters and relaxed looks about them.

“You have remarkable stamina, Mitch,” Royce McKnight said with a mouthful. He nodded politely. Yes, yes, I practice my stamina all the time, he thought to himself. As much as possible, he kept his mind off Joe Hodge and Marty Kozinski and the other three dead lawyers memorialized on the wall downstairs. But it was impossible to keep his mind off the pictures of the girl in the sand, and he wondered if they all knew. Had they all seen the pictures? Passed them around during one of these little lunches when it was just the partners and no guests? DeVasher had promised to keep them to himself, but what’s a promise from a thug? Of course they’d seen them. Voyles said every partner and most of the associates were in on the conspiracy.

For a man with no appetite, he managed the food nicely. He even buttered and devoured an extra roll, just to appear normal. Nothing wrong with his appetite.

“So you and Abby are going to the Caymans next week?” Oliver Lambert said.

“Yes. It’s her spring break, and we booked one of the condos two months ago. Looking forward to it.”

“It’s a terrible time to go,” Avery said in disgust. “We’re a month behind right now.”

“We’re always a month behind, Avery. So what’s another week? I guess you want me to take my files with me?”

“Not a bad idea. I always do.”

“Don’t do it, Mitch,” Oliver Lambert said in mock protest. “This place will be standing when you return. You and Abby deserve a week to yourselves.”

“You’ll love it down there,” Royce McKnight said, as if Mitch had never been and that thing on the beach didn’t happen and no one knew anything about any photographs.

“When do you leave?” Lambert asked.

“Sunday morning. Early.”

“Are you taking the Lear?”

“No. Delta nonstop.”

Lambert and McKnight exchanged quick looks that Mitch was not supposed to see. There were other looks from the other tables, occasional quick glances filled with curiosity that Mitch had caught since he entered the room. He was there to be noticed.

“Do you scuba-dive?” asked Lambert, still thinking about the Lear versus the Delta nonstop.

“No, but we plan to do some snorkeling.”

“There’s a guy on Rum Point, on the north end, name of Adrian Bench, who’s got a great dive lodge and will certify you in one week. It’s a hard week, lot of instruction, but it’s worth it.”

In other words, stay away from Abanks, Mitch thought. “What’s the name of the lodge?” he asked.

“Rum Point Divers. Great place.”

Mitch frowned intelligently as if making a mental note of this helpful advice. Suddenly, Oliver Lambert was hit with sadness. “Be careful, Mitch. It brings back memories of Marty and Joe.”

Avery and McKnight stared at their plates in a split-second memorial to the dead boys. Mitch swallowed hard and almost sneered at Oliver Lambert. But he kept a straight face, even managed to look sad with the rest of them. Marty and Joe and their young widows and fatherless children. Marty and Joe, two young wealthy lawyers expertly killed and removed before they could talk. Marty and Joe, two promising sharks eaten by their own. Voyles had told Mitch to think of Marty and Joe whenever he saw Oliver Lambert.

And now, for a mere million bucks, he was expected to do what Marty and Joe were about to do, without getting caught. Perhaps a year from now the next new associate would be sitting here and watching the saddened partners talk about young Mitch McDeere

and his remarkable stamina and what a helluva lawyer he would have been but for the accident. How many would they kill?

He wanted two million. Plus a couple of other items.

After an hour of important talk and good food, the lunch began breaking up as partners excused themselves, spoke to Mitch and left the room. They were proud of him, they said. He was their brightest star of the future. The future of Bendini, Lambert & Locke. He smiled and thanked them.

About the time Roosevelt served the banana cream pie and coffee, Tammy Greenwood Hemphill of Greenwood Services parked her dirty brown Rabbit behind the shiny Peugeot in the St. Andrew's Episcopal School parking lot. She left the motor running. She took four steps, stuck a key into the trunk of the Peugeot and removed the heavy black briefcase. She slammed the trunk and sped away in the Rabbit.

From a small window in the teachers' lounge, Abby sipped coffee and stared through the trees, across the playground and into the parking lot in the distance. She could barely see her car. She smiled and checked her watch. Twelve-thirty, as planned.

Tammy weaved her way carefully through the noon traffic in the direction of downtown. Driving was tedious when watching the rearview mirror. As usual, she saw nothing. She parked in her designated place across the street from the Cotton Exchange Building.

There were nine files in this load. She arranged them neatly on the folding table and began making copies. Sigalas Partners, Lettie Plunk Trust, Handy-Man Hardware and two files bound loosely with a thick rubber band and marked EVERY'S FILES. She ran two copies of every sheet of paper in the files and meticulously put them back together. In a ledger book, she entered the date, time and name of each file. There were now twenty-nine entries. He said there would eventually be about forty. She placed one copy of each file into the locked and hidden cabinet in the closet, then repacked the briefcase with the original files and one copy of each.

Pursuant to his instructions, a week earlier she had rented in her name a twelve-by-twelve storage room at the Summer Avenue Mini Storage. It was fourteen miles from downtown, and thirty minutes later she arrived and unlocked number 38C. In a small cardboard box she placed the other copies of the nine files and scribbled the date on the end of the flap. She placed it next to three other boxes on the floor.

At exactly 3 p.m., she wheeled into the parking lot, stopped behind the Peugeot, opened its trunk and left the briefcase where she'd found it.

Seconds later, Mitch stepped from the front door of the Bendini Building and stretched his arms. He breathed deeply and gazed up and down Front Street. A lovely spring day. Three blocks to the north and nine floors up, in the window, he noticed the blinds had been pulled all the way down. The signal. Good. Everything's fine. He smiled to himself, and returned to his office.

At three o'clock the next morning, Mitch eased out of bed and quietly pulled on a pair of faded jeans, flannel law school shirt, white insulated socks and a pair of old work boots. He wanted to look like a truck driver. Without a word, he kissed Abby, who was awake, and left the house. East Meadowbrook was deserted, as were all the streets between home and the interstate. Surely they would not follow him at this hour.

He drove Interstate 55 south for twenty-five miles to Senatobia, Mississippi. A busy, all-night truck stop called the 4-55 shone brightly a hundred yards from the four-lane. He darted through the trucks to the rear where a hundred semis were parked for the night. He stopped next to the Truck Wash bay and waited. A dozen eighteen-wheelers inched and weaved around the pumps.

A black guy wearing a Falcons football cap stepped from around the corner and stared at the BMW. Mitch recognized him as the agent in the bus terminal in Knoxville. He killed the engine and stepped from the car.

"McDeere?" the agent asked.

“Of course. Who else? Where’s Tarrance?”

“Inside in a booth by the window. He’s waiting.”

Mitch opened the door and handed the keys to the agent. “Where are you taking it?”

“Down the road a little piece. We’ll take care of it. You were clean coming out of Memphis. Relax.”

He climbed into the car, eased between two diesel pumps and headed for the interstate. Mitch watched his little BMW disappear as he entered the truck-stop café. It was three forty-five.

The noisy room was filled with heavy middle-aged men drinking coffee and eating store-bought pies. They picked their teeth with colored toothpicks and talked of bass fishing and politics back at the terminal. Many spoke with loud Northern twangs. Merle Haggard wailed from the jukebox.

The lawyer moved awkwardly toward the rear until he saw in an unlit corner a familiar face hidden beneath aviator’s sunshades and the same Michigan State baseball cap. Then the face smiled. Tarrance was holding a menu and watching the front door. Mitch slid into the booth.

“Hello, good buddy,” Tarrance said. “How’s the truckin’?”

“Wonderful. I think I prefer the bus, though.”

“Next time we’ll try a train or something. Just for variety. Laney get your car?”

“Laney?”

“The black dude. He’s an agent, you know.”

“We haven’t been properly introduced. Yes, he’s got my car. Where is he taking it?”

“Down the interstate. He’ll be back in an hour or so. We’ll try to have you on the road by five so you can be at the office by six. We’d hate to mess up your day.”

“It’s already shot to hell.”

A partially crippled waitress named Dot ambled by and demanded to know what they wanted. Just coffee. A surge of Roadway drivers swarmed in the front door and filled up the café. Merle could barely be heard.

“So how are the boys at the office?” Tarrance asked cheerfully.

“Everything’s fine. The meters are ticking as we speak and everyone’s getting richer. Thanks for asking.”

“No problem.”

“How’s my old pal Voyles doing?” Mitch asked.

“He’s quite anxious, really. He called me twice today and repeated for the tenth time his desire to have an answer from you. Said you’d had plenty of time and all that. I told him to relax. Told him about our little roadside rendezvous tonight and he got real excited. I’m supposed to call him in four hours, to be exact.”

“Tell him a million bucks won’t do it, Tarrance. You boys like to brag about spending billions fighting organized crime, so I say throw a little my way. What’s a couple of million cash to the federal government?”

“So it’s a couple of million now?”

“Damned right it’s a couple of million. And not a dime less. I want a million now and a million later. I’m in the process of copying all of my files, and I should be finished in a few days. Legitimate files, I think. If I gave them to anyone I’d be permanently disbarred. So when I give them to you, I want the first million. Let’s just call it good-faith money.”

“How do you want it paid?”

“Deposited in an account in a bank in Zurich. But we’ll discuss the details later.”

Dot slid two saucers onto the table and dropped two mismatched cups on them. She poured from a height of three feet and splashed coffee in all directions. “Free refills,” she grunted, and left.

“And the second million?” Tarrance asked, ignoring the coffee.

“When you and I and Voyles decide I’ve supplied you with enough documents to get the indictments, then I get half. After I testify for the last time, I get the other half. That’s incredibly fair, Tarrance.”

“It is. You’ve got a deal.”

Mitch breathed deeply, and felt weak. A deal. A contract. An agreement. One that could never be put in writing, but one that was terribly enforceable nonetheless. He sipped the coffee but didn’t

taste it. They had agreed on the money. He was on a roll. Keep pushing.

“And there’s one other thing, Tarrance.”

The head lowered and turned slightly to the right. “Yeah?”

Mitch leaned closer, resting on his forearms. “It won’t cost you a dime, and you boys can pull it off with no sweat. Okay?”

“I’m listening.”

“My brother Ray is at Brushy Mountain. Seven years until parole. I want him out.”

“That’s ridiculous, Mitch. We can do a lot of things, but we damned sure can’t parole state prisoners. Federal maybe, but not state. No way.”

“Listen to me, Tarrance, and listen good. If I hit the road with the Mafia on my tail, my brother goes with me. Sort of like a package deal. And I know if Director Voyles wants him out of prison, he’ll get out of prison. I know that. Now, you boys just figure out a way to make it happen.”

“But we have no authority to interfere with state prisoners.”

Mitch smiled and returned to his coffee. “James Earl Ray escaped from Brushy Mountain. And he had no help from the outside.”

“Oh, that’s great. We attack the prison like commandos and rescue your brother. Beautiful.”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Tarrance. It’s not negotiable.”

“All right, all right. I’ll see what I can do. Anything else? Any more surprises?”

“No, just questions about where we go and what we do. Where do we hide initially? Where do we hide during the trials? Where do we live for the rest of our lives? Just minor questions like that.”

“We can discuss it later.”

“What did Hodge and Kozinski tell you?”

“Not enough. We’ve got a notebook, a rather thick notebook, in which we’ve accumulated and indexed everything we know about the Moroltos and the firm. Most of it’s Morolto crap, their organization, key people, illegal activities and so on. You need to read it all before we start to work.”

“Which, of course, will be after I’ve received the first million.”

“Of course. When can we see your files?”

“In about a week. I’ve managed to copy four files that belong to someone else. I may get my hands on a few more of those.”

“Who’s doing the copying?”

“None of your business.”

Tarrance thought for a second and let it pass. “How many files?”

“Between forty and fifty. I have to sneak them out a few at a time. Some I’ve worked on for eight months, others only a week or so. As far as I can tell, they’re all legitimate clients.”

“How many of these clients have you personally met?”

“Two or three.”

“Don’t bet they’re all legitimate. Hodge told us about some dummy files, or sweat files as they are known to the partners, that have been around for years and every new associate cuts his teeth on them; heavy files that require hundreds of hours and make the rookies feel like real lawyers.”

“Sweat files?”

“That’s what Hodge said. It’s an easy game, Mitch. They lure you with the money. They smother you with work that looks legitimate and for the most part probably is legitimate. Then, after a few years, you’ve unwittingly become a part of the conspiracy. You’re nailed, and there’s no getting out. Even you, Mitch. You started work in July, eight months ago, and you’ve probably already touched a few of the dirty files. You didn’t know it, had no reason to suspect it. But they’ve already set you up.”

“Two million, Tarrance. Two million and my brother.”

Tarrance sipped the lukewarm coffee and ordered a piece of coconut pie as Dot came within earshot. He glanced at his watch and surveyed the crowd of truckers, all smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee and gossiping.

He adjusted the sunglasses. “So what do I tell Mr. Voyles?”

“Tell him we ain’t got a deal until he agrees to get Ray out of prison. No deal, Tarrance.”

“We can probably work something out.”

“I’m confident you can.”

“When do you leave for the Caymans?”

“Early Sunday. Why?”

“Just curious, that’s all.”

“Well, I’d like to know how many different groups will be following me down there. Is that asking too much? I’m sure we’ll attract a crowd, and frankly, we had hoped for a little privacy.”

“Firm condo?”

“Of course.”

“Forget privacy. It’s probably got more wires than a switchboard. Maybe even some cameras.”

“That’s comforting. We might stay a couple of nights at Abanks Dive Lodge. If you boys are in the neighborhood, stop by for a drink.”

“Very funny. If we’re there, it’ll be for a reason. And you won’t know it.”

Tarrance ate the pie in three bites. He left two bucks on the table and they walked to the dark rear of the truck stop. The dirty asphalt pavement vibrated under the steady hum of an acre of diesel engines. They waited in the dark.

“I’ll talk to Voyles in a few hours,” Tarrance said. “Why don’t you and your wife take a leisurely Saturday-afternoon drive tomorrow.”

“Anyplace in particular?”

“Yeah. There’s a town called Holly Springs thirty miles east of here. Old place, full of antebellum homes and Confederate history. Women love to drive around and look at the old mansions. Make your appearance around four o’clock and we’ll find you. Our buddy Laney will be driving a bright red Chevy Blazer with Tennessee plates. Follow him. We’ll find a place and talk.”

“Is it safe?”

“Trust us. If we see or smell something, we’ll break off. Drive around town for an hour, and if you don’t see Laney, grab a sandwich and go back home. You’ll know they were too close. We won’t take chances.”

“Thanks. A great bunch of guys.”

Laney eased around the corner in the BMW and jumped out. “Everything’s clear. No trace of anyone.”

“Good,” Tarrance said. “See you tomorrow, Mitch. Happy truckin’.” They shook hands.

“It’s not negotiable, Tarrance,” Mitch said again.

“You can call me Wayne. See you tomorrow.”

The black thunderheads and driving rain had long since cleared the tourists from Seven Mile Beach when the McDeeres, soaked and tired, arrived at the luxury condominium duplex. Mitch backed the rented jeep over the curb, across the small lawn and up to the front door. Unit B. His first visit had been to Unit A. They appeared to be identical, except for the paint and trim. The key fit, and they grabbed and threw luggage as the clouds burst and the rain grew thicker.

Once inside and dry, they unpacked in the master bedroom upstairs with a long balcony facing the wet beach. Cautious with their words, they inspected the town house and checked out each room and closet. The refrigerator was empty, but the bar was very well stocked. Mitch mixed two drinks, rum and Coke, in honor of the islands. They sat on the balcony with their feet in the rain and watched the ocean churn and spill toward the shore. Rumheads was quiet and barely visible in the distance. Two natives sat at the bar, drinking and watching the sea.

"That's Rumheads over there," Mitch said, pointing with his drink.

"Rumheads?"

"I told you about it. It's a hot spot where tourists drink and the locals play dominoes."

"I see." Abby was unimpressed. She yawned and sank lower into the plastic chair. She closed her eyes.

"Oh, this is great, Abby. Our first trip out of the country, our first real honeymoon, and you're asleep ten minutes after we hit land."

"I'm tired, Mitch. I packed all night while you were sleeping."

“You packed eight suitcases—six for you and two for me. You packed every garment we own. No wonder you were awake all night.”

“I don’t want to run out of clothes.”

“Run out? How many bikinis did you pack? Ten? Twelve?”

“Six.”

“Great. One a day. Why don’t you put one on?”

“What?”

“You heard me. Go put on that little blue one with high legs and a couple of strings around front, the one that weighs half a gram and cost sixty bucks and your buns hang out when you walk. I wanna see it.”

“Mitch, it’s raining. You’ve brought me here to this island during the monsoon season. Look at those clouds. Dark and thick and extremely stationary. I won’t need any bikinis this week.”

Mitch smiled and began rubbing her legs. “I rather like the rain. In fact, I hope it rains all week. It’ll keep us inside, in the bed, sipping rum and trying to hurt each other.”

“I’m shocked. You mean you actually want sex? We’ve already done it once this month.”

“Twice.”

“I thought you wanted to snorkel and scuba-dive all week.”

“Nope. There’s probably a shark out there waiting for me.”

The winds blew harder and the balcony was being drenched.

“Let’s go take off our clothes,” Mitch said.

After an hour, the storm began to move. The rain slackened, then turned to a soft drizzle, then it was gone. The sky lightened as the dark, low clouds left the tiny island and headed northeast, toward Cuba. Shortly before its scheduled departure over the horizon, the sun suddenly emerged for a brief encore. It emptied the beach cottages and town homes and condos and hotel rooms as the tourists strolled through the sand toward the water. Rumheads was suddenly packed with dart throwers and thirsty beachcombers. The domino

game picked up where it had left off. The reggae band next door at the Palms tuned up.

Mitch and Abby walked aimlessly along the edge of the water in the general direction of Georgetown, away from the spot where the girl had been. He thought of her occasionally, and of the photographs. He had decided she was a pro and had been paid by DeVasher to seduce and conquer him in front of the hidden cameras. He did not expect to see her this time.

As if on cue, the music stopped, the beach strollers froze and watched, the noise at Rumheads quietened as all eyes turned to watch the sun meet the water. Gray and white clouds, the trailing remnants of the storm, lay low on the horizon and sank with the sun. Slowly they turned shades of orange and yellow and red, pale shades at first, then, suddenly, brilliant tones. For a few brief moments, the sky was a canvas and the sun splashed its awesome array of colors with bold strokes. Then the bright orange ball touched the water and within seconds was gone. The clouds became black and dissipated. A Cayman sunset.

With great fear and caution, Abby slowly maneuvered the jeep through the early-morning traffic in the shopping district. She was from Kentucky. She had never driven on the left side of the road for any substantial period of time. Mitch gave directions and watched the rearview mirror. The narrow streets and sidewalks were already crowded with tourists window-shopping for duty-free china, crystal, perfume, cameras and jewelry.

Mitch pointed to a hidden side street, and the jeep darted between two groups of tourists. He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll meet you right here at five."

"Be careful," she said. "I'll go to the bank, then stay on the beach near the condo."

He slammed the door and disappeared between two small shops. The alley led to a wider street that led to Hogsty Bay. He ducked into a crowded T-shirt store filled with racks and rows of tourist shirts and straw hats and sunglasses. He selected a gaudy green-and-

orange flowered shirt and a Panama hat. Two minutes later he darted from the store into the back seat of a passing taxi. "Airport," he said. "And make it quick. Watch your tail. Someone may be following."

The driver made no response, just eased past the bank buildings and out of town. Ten minutes later he stopped in front of the terminal.

"Anybody follow us?" Mitch asked, pulling money from his pocket.

"No, mon. Four dollars and ten cents."

Mitch threw a five over the seat and walked quickly into the terminal. The Cayman Airways flight to Cayman Brac would leave at nine. At a gift shop Mitch bought a cup of coffee and hid between two rows of shelves filled with souvenirs. He watched the waiting area and saw no one. Of course, he had no idea what they looked like, but he saw no one sniffing around and searching for lost people. Perhaps they were following the jeep or combing the shopping district looking for him. Perhaps.

For seventy-five Cayman dollars he had reserved the last seat on the ten-passenger, three-engine Trislander. Abby had made the reservation by pay phone the night they arrived. At the last possible second, he jogged from the terminal onto the tarmac and climbed on board. The pilot slammed and locked the doors, and they taxied down the runway. No other planes were visible. A small hangar sat to the right.

The ten tourists admired the brilliant blue sea and said little during the twenty-minute flight. As they approached Cayman Brac, the pilot became the tour guide and made a wide circle around the small island. He paid special attention to the tall bluffs that fell into the sea on the east end. Without the bluffs, he said, the island would be as flat as Grand Cayman. He landed the plane softly on a narrow asphalt strip.

Next to the small white frame building with the word AIRPORT painted on all sides, a clean-cut Caucasian waited and watched the passengers quickly disembark. He was Rick Acklin, Special Agent,

and sweat dripped from his nose and glued his shirt to his back. He stepped slightly forward. "Mitch," he said almost to himself.

Mitch hesitated and then walked over.

"Car's out front," Acklin said.

"Where's Tarrance?" Mitch looked around.

"He's waiting."

"Does the car have air conditioning?"

"Afraid not. Sorry."

The car was minus air, power anything and signal lights. It was a 1974 LTD, and Acklin explained as they followed the dusty road that there simply was not much of a selection of rental cars on Cayman Brac. And the reason the U.S. government had rented the car was because he and Tarrance had been unable to find a taxi. They were lucky to find a room, on such late notice.

The small neat homes were closer together, and sea appeared. They parked in the sand parking lot of an establishment called Brac Divers. An aging pier jutted into the water and anchored a hundred boats of all sizes. To the west along the beach a dozen thatched-roof cabins sat two feet above the sand and housed divers who came from around the world. Next to the pier was an open-air bar, nameless, but complete with a domino game and a dartboard. Oak-and-brass fans hung from the ceiling through the rafters and rotated slowly and silently, cooling the domino players and the bartender.

Wayne Tarrance sat at a table by himself drinking a Coke and watching a dive crew load a thousand identical yellow tanks from the pier onto a boat. Even for a tourist, his dress was hysterical. Dark sunglasses with yellow frames, brown straw sandals, obviously brand-new, with black socks, a tight Hawaiian luau shirt with twenty loud colors and a pair of gold gym shorts that were very old and very short and covered little of the shiny, sickly-white legs under the table. He waved his Coke at the two empty chairs.

"Nice shirt, Tarrance," Mitch said in undisguised amusement.

"Thanks. You gotta real winner yourself."

"Nice tan too."

"Yeah, yeah. Gotta look the part, you know."

The waiter hovered nearby and waited for them to speak. Acklin ordered a Coke. Mitch said he wanted a Coke with a splash of rum in it. All three became engrossed with the dive boat and the divers loading their bulky gear.

“What happened in Holly Springs?” Mitch finally asked.

“Sorry, we couldn’t help it. They followed you out of Memphis and had two cars waiting in Holly Springs. We couldn’t get near you.”

“Did you and your wife discuss the trip before you left?” asked Acklin.

“I think so. We probably mentioned it around the house a couple of times.”

Acklin seemed satisfied. “They were certainly ready for you. A green Skylark followed you for about twenty miles, then got lost. We called it off then.”

Tarrance sipped his Coke and said, “Late Saturday night the Lear left Memphis and flew nonstop to Grand Cayman. We think two or three of the goons were on board. The plane left early Sunday morning and returned to Memphis.”

“So they’re here and they’re following us?”

“Of course. They probably had one or two people on the plane with you and Abby. Might have been men, women or both. Could’ve been a black dude or an oriental woman. Who knows? Remember, Mitch, they have plenty of money. There are two that we recognize. One was in Washington when you were there. A blond fellow, about forty, six-one, maybe six-two, with real short hair, almost a crew cut, and real strong, Nordic-looking features. He moves quickly. We saw him yesterday driving a red Escort he got from Coconut Car Rentals on the island.”

“I think I’ve seen him,” Mitch said.

“Where?” asked Acklin.

“In a bar in the Memphis airport the night I returned from Washington. I caught him watching me, and I thought at the time that I had seen him in Washington.”

“That’s him. He’s here.”

“Who’s the other one?”

“Tony Verkler, or Two-Ton Tony as we call him. He’s a con with an impressive record of convictions, most of it in Chicago. He’s worked for Morolto for years. Weighs about three hundred pounds and does a great job of watching people because no one would ever suspect him.”

“He was at Rumheads last night,” Acklin added.

“Last night? We were there last night.”

With great ceremony, the dive boat pushed from the pier and headed for open water. Beyond the pier, fishermen in their small catboats pulled their nets and sailors navigated their brightly colored catamarans away from land. After a gentle and dreamy start, the island was awake now. Half the boats tied to the pier had left or were in the process of leaving.

“So when did you boys get in town?” Mitch asked, sipping his drink, which was more rum than Coke.

“Sunday night,” Tarrance answered while watching the dive boat slowly disappear.

“Just out of curiosity, how many men do you have on the islands?”

“Four men, two women,” said Tarrance. Acklin became mute and deferred all conversation to his supervisor.

“And why exactly are you here?” Mitch asked.

“Oh, several reasons. Number one, we wanted to talk to you and nail down our little deal. Director Voyles is terribly anxious about reaching an agreement you can live with. Number two, we want to watch them to determine how many goons are here. We’ll spend the week trying to identify these people. The island is small, and it’s a good place to observe.”

“And number three, you wanted to work on your suntan?”

Acklin managed a slight giggle. Tarrance smiled and then frowned. “No, not exactly. We’re here for your protection.”

“My protection?”

“Yes. The last time I sat at this very table I was talking to Joe Hodge and Marty Kozinski. About nine months ago. The day before they were killed, to be exact.”

“And you think I’m about to be killed?”

“No. Not yet.”

Mitch motioned at the bartender for another drink. The domino game grew heated, and he watched the natives argue and drink beer.

“Look, boys, as we speak the goons, as you call them, are probably following my wife all over Grand Cayman. I’ll be sort of nervous until I get back. Now, what about the deal?”

Tarrance left the sea and the dive boat and stared at Mitch. “Two million’s fine, and—”

“Of course it’s fine, Tarrance. We agreed on it, did we not?”

“Relax, Mitch. We’ll pay a million when you turn over all of your files. At that point, there’s no turning back, as they say. You’re in up to your neck.”

“Tarrance, I understand that. It was my suggestion, remember?”

“But that’s the easy part. We really don’t want your files, because they’re clean files. Good files. Legitimate files. We want the bad files, Mitch, the ones with indictments written all over them. And these files will be much harder to come by. But when you do so, we’ll pay another half million. And the rest after the last trial.”

“And my brother?”

“We’ll try.”

“Not good enough, Tarrance. I want a commitment.”

“We can’t promise to deliver your brother. Hell, he’s got at least seven more years.”

“But he’s my brother, Tarrance. I don’t care if he’s a serial murderer sitting on death row waiting for his last meal. He’s my brother, and if you want me, you have to release him.”

“I said we’ll try, but we can’t commit. There’s no legal, formal, legitimate way to get him out, so we must try other means. What if he gets shot during the escape?”

“Just get him out, Tarrance.”

“We’ll try.”

“You’ll throw the power and resources of the FBI in assisting my brother in escaping from prison, right, Tarrance?”

“You have my word.”

Mitch sat back in his chair and took a long sip of his drink. Now the deal was final. He breathed easier and smiled in the direction of the magnificent Caribbean.

“So when do we get your files?” Tarrance asked.

“Thought you didn’t want them. They’re too clean, remember?”

“We want the files, Mitch, because when we get the files, then we’ve got you. You’ve proved yourself when you hand us your files, your license to practice law, so to speak.”

“Ten to fifteen days.”

“How many files?”

“Between forty and fifty. The small ones are an inch thick. The big ones wouldn’t fit on this table. I can’t use the copiers around the office, so we’ve had to make other arrangements.”

“Perhaps we could assist in the copying,” said Acklin.

“Perhaps not. Perhaps if I need your help, perhaps I’ll ask for it.”

“How do you propose to get them to us?” Tarrance asked. Acklin withdrew again.

“Very simple, Wayne. When I’ve copied them all, and once I get the million where I want it, then I’ll hand you a key to a certain little room in the Memphis area, and you can get them in your pickup.”

“I told you we’d deposit the money in a Swiss bank account,” Tarrance said.

“And now I don’t want it in a Swiss bank account, okay? I’ll dictate the terms of the transfer, and it’ll be done exactly as I say. It’s my neck on the line from now on, boys, so I call the shots. Most of them, anyway.”

Tarrance smiled and grunted and stared at the pier. “So you don’t trust the Swiss?”

“Let’s just say I have another bank in mind. I work for money launderers, remember, Wayne, so I’ve become an expert on hiding money in offshore accounts.”

“We’ll see.”

“When do I see this notebook on the Moroltos?”

“After we get your files and pay our first installment. We’ll brief you as much as we can, but for the most part you’re on your own.

You and I will need to meet a lot, and of course that'll be rather dangerous. May have to take a few bus rides."

"Okay, but the next time I get the aisle seat."

"Sure, sure. Anybody worth two million can surely pick his seat on a Greyhound."

"I'll never live to enjoy it, Wayne. You know I won't."

Three miles out of Georgetown, on the narrow and winding road to Bodden Town, Mitch saw him. The man was squatting behind an old Volkswagen Beetle with the hood up as if engine trouble had stopped him. The man was dressed like a native, without tourist clothes. He could easily pass for one of the Brits who worked for the government or the banks. He was well tanned. The man held a wrench of some sort and appeared to study it and watch the Mitsubishi jeep as it roared by on the left-hand side of the road. The man was the Nordic.

He was supposed to have gone unnoticed.

Mitch instinctively slowed to thirty miles per hour, to wait for him. Abby turned and watched the road. The narrow highway to Bodden Town clung to the shoreline for five miles, then forked, and the ocean disappeared. Within minutes the Nordic's green VW came racing around a slight bend. The McDeere jeep was much closer than the Nordic anticipated. Being seen, he abruptly slowed, then turned into the first white-rock driveway on the ocean side.

Mitch gunned the jeep and sped to Bodden Town. West of the small settlement he turned south and less than a mile later found the ocean.

It was 10 a.m. and the parking lot of Abanks Dive Lodge was half full. The two morning dive boats had left thirty minutes earlier. The McDeeres walked quickly to the bar, where Henry was already shuffling beer and cigarettes to the domino players.

Barry Abanks leaned on a post supporting the thatched roof of the bar and watched as his two dive boats disappeared around the corner of the island. Each would make two dives, at places like Bonnie's Arch, Devil's Grotto, Eden Rock and Roger's Wreck Point,

places he had dived and toured and guided through a thousand times. Some of the places he had discovered himself.

The McDeeres approached, and Mitch quietly introduced his wife to Mr. Abanks, who was not polite but not rude. They started for the small pier, where a deckhand was preparing a thirty-foot fishing boat. Abanks unloaded an indecipherable string of commands in the general direction of the young deckhand, who was either deaf or unafraid of his boss.

Mitch stood next to Abanks, the captain now, and pointed to the bar fifty yards away down the pier. "Do you know all those people at the bar?" he asked.

Abanks frowned at Mitch.

"They tried to follow me here. Just curious," Mitch said.

"The usual gang," Abanks said. "No strangers."

"Have you noticed any strangers around this morning?"

"Look, this place attracts strange people. I keep no ledger of the strange ones and the normal ones."

"Have you seen a fat American, red hair, at least three hundred pounds?"

Abanks shook his head. The deckhand eased the boat backward, away from the pier, then toward the horizon. Abby sat on a small padded bench and watched the dive lodge disappear. In a vinyl bag between her feet were two new sets of snorkeling fins and dive masks. It was ostensibly a snorkeling trip with maybe a little light fishing if they were biting. The great man himself had agreed to accompany them, but only after Mitch insisted and told him they needed to discuss personal matters. Private matters, regarding the death of his son.

From a screened balcony on the second floor of a Cayman Kai beach house, the Nordic watched the two snorkeled heads bob and disappear around the fishing boat. He handed the binoculars to Two-Ton Tony Verkler, who, quickly bored, handed them back. A striking blonde in a black one-piece with legs cut high, almost to the

rib cage, stood behind the Nordic and took the binoculars. Of particular interest was the deckhand.

Tony spoke. "I don't understand. If they were talking serious, why the boy? Why have another set of ears around?"

"Perhaps they're talking about snorkeling and fishing," said the Nordic.

"I don't know," said the blonde. "It's unusual for Abanks to spend time on a fishing boat. He likes the divers. There must be a good reason for him to waste a day with two novice snorkelers. Something's up."

"Who's the boy?" asked Tony.

"Just one of the gofers," she said. "He's got a dozen."

"Can you talk to him later?" asked the Nordic.

"Yeah," said Tony. "Show him some skin, snort some candy. He'll talk."

"I'll try," she said.

"What's his name?" asked the Nordic.

"Keith Rook."

Keith Rook maneuvered the boat alongside the pier at Rum Point. Mitch, Abby and Abanks climbed from the boat and headed for the beach. Keith was not invited to lunch. He stayed behind and lazily washed the deck.

The Shipwreck Bar sat inland a hundred yards under a heavy cover of rare shade trees. It was dark and damp with screened windows and squeaky ceiling fans. There was no reggae, dominoes, or dartboard. The noon crowd was quiet with each table engrossed in its own private talk.

The view from their table was out to sea, to the north. They ordered cheeseburgers and beer—*island food*.

"This bar is different," Mitch observed quietly.

"Very much so," said Abanks. "And with good reason. It's a hangout for drug dealers who own many of the nice homes and condos around here. They fly in on their private jets, deposit their

money in our many fine banks and spend a few days around here checking their real estate.”

“Nice neighborhood.”

“Very nice, really. They have millions and they keep to themselves.”

The waitress, a husky, well-mixed mulatto, dropped three bottles of Jamaican Red Stripe on the table without saying a word. Abanks leaned forward on his elbows with his head lowered, the customary manner of speaking in the Shipwreck Bar. “So you think you can walk away?” he said.

Mitch and Abby leaned forward in unison, and all three heads met low in the center of the table, just over the beer. “Not walk, but run. Run like hell, but I’ll get away. And I’ll need your help.”

He thought about this for a moment and raised his head. He shrugged. “But what am I to do?” He took the first sip of his Red Stripe.

Abby saw her first, and it would take a woman to spot another woman straining ever so elegantly to eavesdrop on their little conversation. Her back was to Abanks. She was a solid blonde partially hidden under cheap black rubber sunglasses that covered most of her face, and she had been watching the ocean and listening a bit too hard. When the three of them leaned over, she sat up straight and listened like hell. She was by herself at a table for two.

Abby dug her fingernails into her husband’s leg, and their table became quiet. The blonde in black listened, then turned to her table and her drink.

Wayne Tarrance had improved his wardrobe by Friday of Cayman Week. Gone were the straw sandals and tight shorts and teenybop sunglasses. Gone were the sickly-pale legs. Now they were bright pink, burned beyond recognition. After three days in the tropical outback known as Cayman Brac, he and Acklin, acting on behalf of the U.S. government, had pounced on a rather cheap room on Grand Cayman, miles from Seven Mile Beach and not within walking distance of any remote portion of the sea. Here they had established

a command post to monitor the comings and goings of the McDeeres and other interested people. Here, at the Coconut Motel, they had shared a small room with two single beds and cold showers. Wednesday morning, they had contacted the subject, McDeere, and requested a meeting as soon as possible. He said no. Said he was too busy. Said he and his wife were honeymooning and had no time for such a meeting. Maybe later, was all he said.

Then late Thursday, while Mitch and Abby were enjoying grilled grouper at the Lighthouse on the road to Bodden Town, Laney, Agent Laney, dressed in appropriate island garb and looking very much like an island Negro, stopped at their table and laid down the law. Tarrance insisted on a meeting.

Chickens had to be imported into the Cayman Islands, and not the best ones. Only medium-grade chickens, to be consumed not by native islanders but by Americans away from home without this most basic staple. Colonel Sanders had the damndest time teaching the island girls, though black or close to it, how to fry chicken. It was foreign to them.

And so it was that Special Agent Wayne Tarrance, of the Bronx, arranged a quick secret meeting at the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise on the island of Grand Cayman. The only such franchise. He thought the place would be deserted. He was wrong.

A hundred hungry tourists from Georgia, Alabama, Texas and Mississippi packed the place and devoured extra-crispy with cole slaw and creamed potatoes. It tasted better in Tupelo, but it would do.

Tarrance and Acklin sat in a booth in the crowded restaurant and nervously watched the front door. It was not too late to abort. There were just too many people. Finally, Mitch entered, by himself, and stood in the long line. He brought his little red box to their table and sat down. He did not say hello or anything. He began eating the three-piece dinner for which he paid \$4.89, Cayman dollars. Imported chicken.

“Where have you been?” Tarrance asked.

Mitch attacked a thigh. “On the island. It’s stupid to meet here, Tarrance. Too many people.”

“We know what we’re doing.”

“Yeah, like the Korean shoe store.”

“Cute. Why wouldn’t you see us Wednesday?”

“I was busy Wednesday. I didn’t want to see you Wednesday. Am I clean?”

“Of course you’re clean. Laney would’ve tackled you at the front door if you weren’t clean.”

“This place makes me nervous, Tarrance.”

“Why did you go to Abanks?”

Mitch wiped his mouth and held the partially devoured thigh. A rather small thigh. “He’s got a boat. I wanted to fish and snorkel, so we cut a deal. Where were you, Tarrance? In a submarine trailing us around the island?”

“What did Abanks say?”

“Oh, he knows lots of words. Hello. Give me a beer. Who’s following us? Buncha words.”

“They followed you, you know?”

“They! Which they? Your they or their they? I’m being followed so much I’m causing traffic jams.”

“The bad guys, Mitch. Those from Memphis and Chicago and New York. The ones who’ll kill you tomorrow if you get real cute.”

“I’m touched. So they followed me. Where’d I take them? Snorkeling? Fishing? Come on, Tarrance. They follow me, you follow them, you follow me, they follow you. If I slam on brakes I get twenty noses up my ass. Why are we meeting here, Tarrance? This place is packed.”

Tarrance glanced around in frustration.

Mitch closed his chicken box. “Look, Tarrance, I’m nervous and I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Relax. You were clean coming from the condo.”

“I’m always clean, Tarrance. I suppose Hodge and Kozinski were clean every time they moved. Clean at Abanks. Clean on the dive boat. Clean at the funerals. This was not a good idea, Tarrance. I’m leaving.”

“Okay. When does your plane leave?”

“Why? You guys plan to follow? Will you follow me or them? What if they follow you? What if we all get real confused and I follow everybody?”

“Come on, Mitch.”

“Nine-forty in the morning. I’ll try to save you a seat. You can have the window next to Two-Ton Tony.”

“When do we get your files?”

Mitch stood with his chicken box. “In a week or so. Give me ten days, and, Tarrance, no more meetings in public. They kill lawyers, remember, not stupid FBI agents.”

At eight Monday morning, Oliver Lambert and Nathan Locke were cleared through the concrete wall on the fifth floor and walked through the maze of small rooms and offices. DeVasher was waiting. He closed the door behind them and pointed to the chairs. His walk was not as quick. The night had been a long losing battle with the vodka. The eyes were red and the brain expanded with each breath.

"I talked with Lazarov yesterday in Las Vegas. I explained as best I could why you boys were so reluctant to fire your four lawyers, Lynch, Sorrell, Buntin and Myers. I gave him all your good reasons. He said he'd think about it, but in the meantime, make damned sure those four work on nothing but clean files. Take no chances and watch them closely."

"He's really a nice guy, isn't he?" Oliver Lambert said.

"Oh yes. A real charmer. He said Mr. Morolto has asked about the firm once a week for six weeks now. Said they're all anxious."

"What did you tell him?"

"Told him things are secure, for now. Leaks are plugged, for now. I don't think he believes me."

"What about McDeere?" asked Locke.

"He had a wonderful week with his wife. Have you ever seen her in a string bikini? She wore one all week. Outstanding! We got some pictures, just for fun."

"I didn't come here to look at pictures," Locke snapped.

"You don't say. They spent an entire day with our little pal Abanks, just the three of them and a deckhand. They played in the water, did some fishing. And they did a lot of talking. About what,

we don't know. Never could get close enough. But it makes me very suspicious, guys. Very suspicious."

"I don't see why," said Oliver Lambert. "What can they talk about besides fishing and diving, and, of course, Hodge and Kozinski? And so they talk about Hodge and Kozinski, what's the harm?"

"He never knew Hodge and Kozinski, Oliver," said Locke. "Why would he be so interested in their deaths?"

"Keep in mind," said DeVasher, "that Tarrance told him at their first meeting that the deaths were not accidental. So now he's Sherlock Holmes looking for clues."

"He won't find any, will he, DeVasher?"

"Hell no. It was a perfect job. Oh sure, there are a few unanswered questions, but the Caymanian police damned sure can't answer them. Neither can our boy McDeere."

"Then why are you worried?" asked Lambert.

"Because they're worried in Chicago, Ollie, and they pay me real good money to stay worried down here. And until the Fibbies leave us alone, everybody stays worried, okay?"

"What else did he do?"

"The usual Cayman vacation. Sex, sun, rum, a little shopping and sightseeing. We had three people on the island, and they lost him a couple of times, but nothing serious, I hope. Like I've always said, you can't trail a man twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, without getting caught. So we have to play it cool sometimes."

"You think McDeere's talking?" asked Locke.

"I know he lies, Nat. He lied about the incident in the Korean shoe store a month ago. You guys didn't want to believe it, but I'm convinced he went into that store voluntarily because he wanted to talk with Tarrance. One of our guys made a mistake, got too close, so the little meeting broke up. That ain't McDeere's version, but that's what happened. Yeah, Nat, I think he's talking. Maybe he meets with Tarrance and tells him to go to hell. Maybe they're smoking dope together. I don't know."

"But you have nothing concrete, DeVasher," Ollie said.

The brain expanded and pressed mightily against the skull. It hurt too much to get mad. "No, Ollie, nothing like Hodge and Kozinski, if

that's what you mean. We had those boys on tape and knew they were about to talk. McDeere's a little different."

"He's also a rookie," said Nat. "An eight-month lawyer who knows nothing. He's spent a thousand hours on sweat files, and the only clients he's handled have been legitimate. Avery's been extremely careful about the files McDeere's touched. We've talked about it."

"He has nothing to say, because he knows nothing," added Ollie. "Marty and Joe knew a helluva lot, but they'd been here for years. McDeere's a new recruit."

DeVasher gently massaged his temples. "So you've hired a real dumb-ass. Let's just suppose the FBI has a hunch who our biggest client is. Okay. Think along with me. And let's just suppose Hodge and Kozinski fed them enough to confirm the identity of this particular client. See where I'm going? And let's suppose the Fibbies have told McDeere all they know, along with a certain amount of embellishment. Suddenly, your ignorant rookie recruit is a very smart man. And a very dangerous one."

"How do you prove this?"

"We step up surveillance, for starters. Put his wife under twenty-four-hour watch. I've already called Lazarov and requested more men. Told him we needed some fresh faces. I'm going to Chicago tomorrow to brief Lazarov, and maybe Mr. Morolto. Lazarov thinks Morolto has a lead on a mole within the Bureau, some guy who's close to Voyles and will sell information. But it's expensive, supposedly. They wanna assess things and decide where to go."

"And you'll tell them McDeere's talking?" asked Locke.

"I'll tell them what I know and what I suspect. I'm afraid that if we sit back and wait for concrete, it might be too late. I'm sure Lazarov will wanna discuss plans to eliminate him."

"Preliminary plans?" Ollie asked, with a touch of hope.

"We've passed the preliminary stage, Ollie."

The Hourglass Tavern in New York City faces Forty-sixth Street, near its corner with Ninth Avenue. A small, dark hole-in-the-wall with twenty-two seats, it grew to fame with its expensive menu and fifty-nine-minute time limit on each meal. On the walls not far above the tables, hourglasses with white sand silently collect the seconds and minutes until the tavern's timekeeper—the waitress—finally makes her calculations and calls time. Frequented by the Broadway crowd, it is usually packed, with loyal fans waiting on the sidewalk.

Lou Lazarov liked the Hourglass because it was dark and private conversations were possible. Short conversations, under fifty-nine minutes. He liked it because it was not in Little Italy, and he was not Italian, and although he was owned by Sicilians, he did not have to eat their food. He liked it because he was born and spent the first forty years of his life in the theater district. Then corporate headquarters was moved to Chicago, and he was transferred. But business required his presence in New York at least twice a week, and when the business included meeting a member of equal stature from another family, Lazarov always suggested the Hourglass. Tubertini had equal stature, and a little extra. Reluctantly, he agreed on the Hourglass.

Lazarov arrived first and did not wait for a table. He knew from experience the crowd thinned around 4 p.m., especially on Thursdays. He ordered a glass of red wine. The waitress tipped the hourglass above his head, and the race was on. He sat at a front table, facing the street, his back to the other tables. He was a heavy man of fifty-eight, with a thick chest and ponderous belly. He leaned hard on the red-checkered tablecloth and watched the traffic on Forty-sixth.

Thankfully, Tubertini was prompt. Less than a fourth of the white sand was wasted on him. They shook hands politely, while Tubertini scornfully surveyed the tiny sliver of a restaurant. He flashed a plastic smile at Lazarov and glared at his seat in the window. His back would face the street, and this was extremely irritating. And dangerous. But his car was just outside with two of his men. He

decided to be polite. He deftly maneuvered around the tiny table and sat down.

Tubertini was polished. He was thirty-seven, the son-in-law of old man Palumbo himself. Family. Married his only daughter. He was beautifully thin and tanned with his short black hair oiled to perfection and slicked back. He ordered red wine.

“How’s my pal Joey Morolto?” he asked with a perfect brilliant smile.

“Fine. And Mr. Palumbo?”

“Very ill, and very ill-tempered. As usual.”

“Please give him my regards.”

“Certainly.”

The waitress approached and looked menacingly at the timepiece. “Just wine,” said Tubertini. “I won’t be eating.”

Lazarov looked at the menu and handed it to her. “Sautéed blackfish, with another glass of wine.”

Tubertini glanced at his men in the car. They appeared to be napping. “So, what’s wrong in Chicago?”

“Nothing’s wrong. We just need a little information, that’s all. We’ve heard, unconfirmed of course, that you have a very reliable man somewhere deep in the Bureau, somewhere close to Voyles.”

“And if we do?”

“We need some information from this man. We have a small unit in Memphis, and the Fibbies are trying like hell to infiltrate. We suspect one of our employees may be working with them, but we can’t seem to catch him.”

“And if you caught him?”

“We’d slice out his liver and feed it to the rats.”

“Serious, huh?”

“Extremely serious. Something tells me the feds have targeted our little unit down there, and we’ve grown quite nervous.”

“Let’s say his name is Alfred, and let’s say he’s very close to Voyles.”

“Okay. We need a very simple answer from Alfred. We need to know, yes or no, if our employee is working with the Fibbies.”

Tubertini watched Lazarov and sipped his wine. "Alfred specializes in simple answers. He prefers the yes and no variety. We've used him twice, only when it's critical, and both times it was a question of 'Are the feds coming here or there?' He's extremely cautious. I don't think he would provide too many details."

"Is he accurate?"

"Deadly accurate."

"Then he should be able to help us. If the answer is yes, we move accordingly. If no, the employee is off the hook and it's business as usual."

"Alfred's very expensive."

"I was afraid so. How much?"

"Well, he has sixteen years with the Bureau and is a career man. That's why he's so cautious. He has much to lose."

"How much?"

"Half a million."

"Damn!"

"Of course, we have to make a small profit on the transaction. After all, Alfred is ours."

"A small profit?"

"Quite small, really. Most of it goes to Alfred. He talks to Voyles daily, you know. His office is two doors down."

"All right. We'll pay."

Tubertini flashed a conquering smile and tasted his wine. "I think you lied, Mr. Lazarov. You said it was a small unit in Memphis. That's not true, is it?"

"No."

"What's the name of this unit?"

"The Bendini firm."

"Old man Morolto's daughter married a Bendini."

"That's it."

"What's the employee's name?"

"Mitchell McDeere."

"It might take two or three weeks. Meeting with Alfred is a major production."

"Yes. Just be quick about it."

It was highly unusual for wives to appear at the quiet little fortress on Front Street. They were certainly welcome, they were told, but seldom invited. So Abby McDeere arrived through the front door, into the reception area uninvited and unannounced. It was imperative that she see her husband, she insisted. The receptionist phoned Nina on the second floor, and within seconds she appeared in a rush and warmly greeted her boss's wife. Mitch was in a meeting, she explained. He's always in a damned meeting, Abby replied. Get him out! They rushed to his office, where Abby closed the door and waited.

Mitch was observing another one of Avery's chaotic departures. Secretaries bumped into each other and packed briefcases while Avery yelled into the phone. Mitch sat on the sofa with a legal pad and watched. His partner was scheduled for two days on Grand Cayman. April 15 loomed on the calendar like a date with a firing squad, and the banks down there had certain records that had become critical. It was all work, Avery insisted. He talked about the trip for five days, dreading it, cursing it, but finding it completely unavoidable. He would take the Lear, and it was now waiting, said a secretary.

Probably waiting with a load of cash, thought Mitch.

Avery slammed the phone down and grabbed his coat. Nina walked through the door and glared at Mitch. "Mr. McDeere, your wife is here. She says it's an emergency."

The chaos became silent. He looked blankly at Avery. The secretaries froze. "What is it?" he asked, standing.

"She's in your office," Nina said.

“Mitch, I’ve gotta go,” Avery said. “I’ll call you tomorrow. I hope things are okay.”

“Sure.” He followed Nina down the hall, saying nothing, to his office. Abby sat on his desk. He closed and locked the door. He watched her carefully.

“Mitch, I have to go home.”

“Why? What’s happened?”

“My father just called at school. They found a tumor in one of Mother’s lungs. They’re operating tomorrow.”

He breathed deeply. “I’m so sorry.” He did not touch her. She was not crying.

“I must go. I’ve taken a leave of absence at school.”

“For how long?” It was a nervous question.

She looked past him, to the Ego Wall. “I don’t know, Mitch. We need some time apart. I’m tired of a lot of things right now, and I need time. I think it will be good for both of us.”

“Let’s talk about it.”

“You’re too busy to talk, Mitch. I’ve been trying to talk for six months, but you can’t hear me.”

“How long will you be gone, Abby?”

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on Mother. No, it depends on a lot of things.”

“You’re scaring me, Abby.”

“I’ll be back, I promise. I don’t know when. Maybe a week. Maybe a month. I need to sort out some things.”

“A month?”

“I don’t know, Mitch. I just need some time. And I need to be with Mother.”

“I hope she’s okay. I mean that.”

“I know. I’m going home to pack a few things, and I’ll leave in an hour or so.”

“All right. Be careful.”

“I love you, Mitch.”

He nodded and watched as she opened the door. There was no embrace.

On the fifth floor, a technician rewound the tape and pushed the emergency button direct to DeVasher's office. He appeared instantly and slapped the headphones over his extra-large cranium. He listened for a moment. "Rewind," he demanded. He was quiet for another moment.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

The technician looked at a panel of digital numbers. "Two minutes fourteen seconds ago. In his office, second floor."

"Damn, damn. She's leaving him, ain't she? No talk of separation or divorce before this?"

"No. You would've known about it. They've argued about his workaholic routine, and he hates her parents. But nothing like this."

"Yeah, yeah. Check with Marcus and see if he's heard anything before. Check the tapes, in case we've missed something. Damn, damn, damn!"

Abby started for Kentucky, but did not make it. An hour west of Nashville, she left Interstate 40, and turned north on Highway 13. She had noticed nothing behind her. She drove eighty at times, then fifty. Nothing. At the small town of Clarksville, near the Kentucky line, she abruptly turned east on Highway 12. An hour later she entered Nashville through a county highway, and the red Peugeot was lost in city traffic.

She parked it in the long-term section at Nashville Airport and caught a shuttle to the terminal. In a rest room on the first floor she changed into khaki walking shorts, Bass loafers and a navy knit pullover. It was a cool outfit, a little out of season, but she was headed for warmer weather. She pulled her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail and forced it under her collar. She changed sunglasses and stuffed the dress, heels and panty hose into a canvas gym bag.

Almost five hours after she left Memphis, she walked to the Delta boarding gate and presented her ticket. She asked for a window seat.

No Delta flight in the free world can bypass Atlanta, but fortunately she was not forced to change planes. She waited by her window and watched darkness fall on the busy airport. She was nervous, but tried not to think about it. She drank a glass of wine and read a *Newsweek*.

Two hours later she landed in Miami and left the plane. She walked rapidly through the airport, catching stares but ignoring them. They're just the usual everyday stares of admiration and lust, she told herself. Nothing more.

At the one and only Cayman Airways boarding gate, she produced her round-trip ticket and the required birth certificate and driver's license. Wonderful people, these Caymanians, but they won't allow you in their country unless you've already purchased a ticket to get out. Please come and spend your money, then leave. Please.

She sat in a corner of the crowded room and tried to read. A young father with a pretty wife and two babies kept staring at her legs, but no one else noticed her. The flight to Grand Cayman would leave in thirty minutes.

After a rough start, Avery gained momentum and spent seven hours at the Royal Bank of Montreal, Georgetown, Grand Cayman branch. When he left at 5 p.m., the complimentary conference room was filled with computer printouts and account summaries. He would finish tomorrow. He needed McDeere, but circumstances had worked to seriously curtail his travel plans. Avery was now exhausted and thirsty. And things were hot on the beach.

At Rumheads, he picked up a beer at the bar and worked his well-tanned body through the crowd to the patio, where he looked for a table. As he strode confidently past the domino game, Tammy Greenwood Hemphill, of Greenwood Services, nervously but nonchalantly entered the crowd and sat on a stool at the bar. She watched him. Her tan was store-bought, machine-inflicted, with some areas browner than others. But on the whole, it was an enviable tan for late March. The hair was now colored, not bleached, to a soft sandy blond, and the makeup likewise had been

tempered. The bikini was state of the art, bright fluorescent orange that demanded attention. The large breasts hung wonderfully and stretched the strings and patches to their limit. The small patch across the rear was woefully incapable of covering anything. She was forty, but twenty sets of hungry eyes followed her to the bar, where she ordered a club soda and fired up a cigarette. She smoked it, and watched him.

He was a wolf. He looked good, and he knew it. He sipped his beer and slowly examined every female within fifty yards. He locked into one, a young blonde, and seemed ready to pounce when her man arrived and she sat in his lap. He sipped his beer and continued to survey.

Tammy ordered another club soda, with a twist of lime, and started for the patio. The wolf locked into the big breasts immediately and watched them bounce his way.

“Mind if I sit down?” she asked.

He half stood and reached for the chair. “Please do.” It was a great moment for him. Of all the hungry wolves lusting around the bar and patio at Rumheads, she picked him. He’d had younger babes, but at this moment at this place, she was the hottest.

“I’m Avery Tolar. From Memphis.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Libby. Libby Lox from Birmingham.” Now she was Libby. She had a sister named Libby, a mother named Doris, and her name was Tammy. And she hoped to hell she could keep it all straight. Although she wore no rings, she had a husband whose legal name was Elvis, and he was supposed to be in Oklahoma City impersonating the King, and probably screwing teenage girls with LOVE ME TENDER T-shirts.

“What brings you here?” Avery asked.

“Just fun. Got in this morning. Staying at the Palms. You?”

“I’m a tax lawyer, and believe it or not, I’m here on business. I’m forced to come down several times a year. Real torture.”

“Where are you staying?”

He pointed. “My firm owns those two condos over there. It’s a nice little write-off.”

“Very pretty.”

The wolf did not hesitate. “Would you like to see them?”

She giggled like a sophomore. “Maybe later.” He smiled at her. This would be easy. He loved the islands.

“What’re you drinking?” he asked.

“Gin and tonic. Twist of lime.”

He left for the bar, and returned with the drinks. He moved his chair closer to her. Now their legs were touching. The breasts were resting comfortably on the table. He looked down between them.

“Are you alone?” Obvious question, but he had to ask it.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. Do you have plans for dinner?”

“Not really.”

“Good. There’s this great cookout there at the Palms beginning at six. The best seafood on the island. Good music. Rum punch. The works. No dress code.”

“I’m game.”

They moved closer together, and his hand was suddenly between her knees. His elbow nestled next to her left breast, and he smiled. She smiled. This was not altogether unpleasant, she thought, but there was business at hand.

The Barefoot Boys began to tune up, and the festival began. Beachcombers from all directions flocked to the Palms. Natives in white jackets and white shorts lined up folding tables and laid heavy cotton cloths over them. The smell of boiled shrimp and grilled amberjack and barbecued shark filled the beach. The lovebirds, Avery and Libby, walked hand in hand into the courtyard of the Palms and lined up for the buffet.

For three hours they dined and danced, drank and danced, and fell madly in heat over each other. Once he became drunk, she returned to straight club soda. Business was at hand. By ten, he was sloppy and she led him away from the dance floor, to the condo next door. He attacked her at the front door, and they kissed and groped for five minutes. He managed the key, and they were inside.

“One more drink,” she said, ever the party girl. He went to the bar and fixed her a gin and tonic. He was drinking scotch and water.

They sat on the balcony outside the master bedroom and watched a half-moon decorate the gentle sea.

She had matched him drink for drink, he thought, and if she could handle another, then so could he. But nature was calling again, and he excused himself. The scotch and water sat on the wicker table between them, and she smiled at it. Much easier than she had prayed for. She took a small plastic packet from the orange strap between her legs and dumped one capsule of chloral hydrate into his drink. She sipped her gin and tonic.

“Drink it up, big boy,” she said when he returned. “I’m ready for bed.”

He grabbed his whiskey and gulped it down. The taste buds had been numb for hours. He took another swallow, then began to relax. Another swallow. His head wobbled from shoulder to shoulder, and finally his chin hit his chest. The breathing became heavy.

“Sleep well, lover boy,” she said to herself.

With a man of a hundred eighty pounds, one shot of chloral hydrate would induce a dead sleep for ten hours. She took his glass and gauged what was left. Not much. Eight hours, to be safe. She rolled him out of the chair and dragged him to the bed. Head first, then feet. Very gently, she pulled his yellow-and-blue surfer shorts down his legs and laid them on the floor. She stared for a long second, then tucked the sheets and blankets around him. She kissed him good night.

On the dresser she found two key rings, eleven keys. Downstairs in the hall between the kitchen and the great room with a view of the beach, she found the mysterious locked door Mitch had found in November. He had paced off every room, upstairs and down, and determined this room to be at least fifteen by fifteen. It was suspicious because the door was metal, and because it was locked, and because a small STORAGE sign was affixed to it. It was the only labeled room in the condo. A week earlier in Unit B, he and Abby had found no such room.

One key ring held a key to a Mercedes, two keys to the Bendini Building, a house key, two apartment keys and a desk key. The keys

on the other ring were unmarked and fairly generic. She tried it first, and the fourth key fit. She held her breath and opened the door. No electric shocks, no alarms, nothing. Mitch told her to open the door, wait five minutes and, if nothing happened, then turn on the light.

She waited ten minutes. Ten long and frightful minutes. Mitch had speculated that Unit A was used by the partners and trusted guests, and that Unit B was used by the associates and others who required constant surveillance. Thus, he hoped, Unit A would not be laden with wires and cameras and recorders and alarms. After ten minutes, she opened the door wide and turned on the light. She waited again, and heard nothing. The room was square, about fifteen by fifteen, with white walls, no carpet, and, as she counted, twelve fireproof legal-size file cabinets. Slowly, she walked over to one and pulled the top drawer. It was unlocked.

She turned off the light, closed the door and returned to the bedroom upstairs, where Avery was now comatose and snoring loudly. It was ten-thirty. She would work like crazy for eight hours and quit at six in the morning.

Near a desk in a corner, three large briefcases sat neatly in a row. She grabbed them, turned off the lights and left through the front door. The small parking lot was dark and empty with a gravel drive leading to the highway. A sidewalk ran next to the shrubbery in front of both units and stopped at a white board fence along the property line. A gate led to a slight grassy knoll, with the first building of the Palms just over it.

It was a short walk from the condos to the Palms, but the briefcases had grown much heavier when she reached Room 188. It was on the first floor, front side, with a view of the pool but not of the beach. She was panting and sweating when she knocked on the door.

Abby yanked it open. She took the briefcases and placed them on the bed. "Any problems?"

"Not yet. I think he's dead." Tammy wiped her face with a towel and opened a can of Coke.

"Where is he?" Abby was all business, no smiles.

"In his bed. I figure we've got eight hours. Until six."

"Did you get in the room?" Abby asked as she handed her a pair of shorts and a bulky cotton shirt.

"Yeah. There's a dozen big file cabinets, unlocked. A few cardboard boxes and other junk, but not much else."

"A dozen?"

"Yeah, tall ones. All legal size. We'll be lucky to finish by six."

It was a single motel room with a queen-size bed. The sofa, coffee table and bed were pushed to the wall, and a Canon Model 8580 copier with automatic feed and collator sat in the center with engines running. On lease from Island Office Supply, it came at the scalper's price of three hundred dollars for twenty-four hours, delivered. It was the newest and largest rental copier on the island, the salesman had explained, and he was not excited about parting with it for only a day. But Abby charmed him and began laying hundred-dollar bills on the counter. Two cases of copy paper, ten thousand sheets, sat next to the bed.

They opened the first briefcase and removed six thin files. "Same type of files," Tammy mumbled to herself. She unhitched the two-prong clasp on the inside of the file and removed the papers. "Mitch says they're very particular about their files," Tammy explained as she unstapled a ten-page document. "He says lawyers have a sixth sense and can almost smell if a secretary or a clerk has been in a file. So you'll have to be careful. Work slowly. Copy one document, and when you restaple it, try to line up with the old staple holes. It's tedious. Copy only one document at a time, regardless of the number of pages. Then put it back together slowly and in order. Then staple your copy so everything stays in order."

With the automatic feed, the ten-page document took eight seconds.

"Pretty fast," Tammy said.

The first briefcase was finished in twenty minutes. Tammy handed the two key rings to Abby and picked up two new, empty, all-canvas Samsonite handbags. She left for the condo.

Abby followed her out the door, then locked it. She walked to the front of the Palms, to Tammy's rented Nissan Stanza. Dodging at

oncoming traffic from the wrong side of the road, she drove along Seven Mile Beach and into Georgetown. Two blocks behind the stately Swiss Bank Building, on a narrow street lined with neat frame houses, she found the one owned by the only locksmith on the island of Grand Cayman. At least, he was the only one she'd been able to locate without assistance. He owned a green house with open windows and white trim around the shutters and the doors.

She parked in the street and walked through the sand to the tiny front porch, where the locksmith and his neighbors were drinking and listening to Radio Cayman. Solid-gold reggae. They quietened when she approached, and none of them stood. It was almost eleven. He had said that he would do the job in his shop out back, and that his fees were modest, and that he would like a fifth of Myers's Rum as a down payment before he started.

"Mr. Dantley, I'm sorry I'm late. I've brought you a little gift." She held out the fifth of rum.

Mr. Dantley emerged from the darkness and took the rum. He inspected the bottle. "Boys, a bottle of Myers's."

Abby could not understand the chatter, but it was obvious the gang on the porch was terribly excited about the bottle of Myers's. Dantley handed it to them and led Abby behind his house to a small outbuilding full of tools and small machines and a hundred gadgets. A single yellow lightbulb hung from the ceiling and attracted mosquitoes by the hundreds. She handed Dantley the eleven keys, and he carefully laid them on a bare section of a cluttered workbench. "This will be easy," he said without looking up.

Although he was drinking at eleven at night, Dantley appeared to be in control. Perhaps his system had built an immunity to rum. He worked through a pair of thick goggles, drilling and carving each replica. After twenty minutes, he was finished. He handed Abby the two original sets of keys and their copies.

"Thank you, Mr. Dantley. How much do I owe you?"

"They were quite easy," he drawled. "A dollar per key."

She paid him quickly and left.

Tammy filled the two small suitcases with the contents of the top drawer of the first file cabinet. Five drawers, twelve cabinets, sixty trips to the copier and back. In eight hours. It could be done. There were files, notebooks, computer printouts and more files. Mitch said to copy it all. He was not exactly sure what he was looking for, so copy it all.

She turned off the light and ran upstairs to check on lover boy. He had not moved. The snoring was in slow motion.

The Samsonites weighed thirty pounds apiece, and her arms ached when she reached Room 188. First trip out of sixty, she would not make it. Abby had not returned from Georgetown, so Tammy unloaded the suitcases neatly on the bed. She took one drink from her Coke and left with the empty bags. Back to the condo. Drawer two was identical. She fitted the files in order into the suitcases and strong-armed zippers. She was sweating and gasping for breath. Four packs a day, she thought. She vowed to cut back to two. Maybe even one pack. Up the stairs to check on him. He had not breathed since her last trip.

The copier was clicking and humming when she returned from trip two. Abby was finishing the second briefcase, about to start on the third.

“Did you get the keys?” Tammy asked.

“Yeah, no problem. What’s your man doing?”

“If the copier wasn’t running, you could hear him snoring.” Tammy unpacked into another neat stack on the bed. She wiped her face with a wet towel and left for the condo.

Abby finished the third briefcase and started on the stacks from the file cabinets. She quickly got the hang of the automatic feed, and after thirty minutes she moved with the efficient grace of a seasoned copy-room clerk. She fed copies and unstapled and restapled while the machine clicked rapidly and spat the reproductions through the collator.

Tammy arrived from trip three out of breath and with sweat dripping from her nose. “Third drawer,” she reported. “He’s still snoring.” She unzipped the suitcases and made another neat pile on the bed. She caught her breath, wiped her face and loaded the now

copied contents of drawer one into the bags. For the rest of the night, she would be loaded coming and going.

At midnight, the Barefoot Boys sang their last song, and the Palms settled down for the night. The quiet hum of the copier could not be heard outside Room 188. The door was kept locked, the shades pulled tightly, and all lights extinguished except for a lamp near the bed. No one noticed the tired lady, dripping with sweat, lugging the same two suitcases to and from the room.

After midnight they did not speak. They were tired, too busy and scared, and there was nothing to report except lover boy's movements in bed, if any. And there was none, until around 1 a.m., when he subconsciously rolled onto his side, where he stayed for about twenty minutes, then returned to his back. Tammy checked on him with each visit and asked herself each time what she would do if his eyes suddenly opened and he attacked. She had a small tube of Mace in her shorts pocket, just in case a confrontation occurred and escape became necessary. Mitch had been vague on the details of such an escape. Just don't lead him back to the motel room, he said. Hit him with the Mace, then run like crazy and scream, "Rape!"

But after twenty-five trips, she became convinced he was hours away from consciousness. And it was bad enough hiking like a pack mule to and from, but she also had to climb the stairs, fourteen of them, each trip to check on Casanova. So she went to check every other trip. Then one out of three.

By 2 a.m., halfway through the project, they had copied the contents from five of the file cabinets. They had made over four thousand copies, and the bed was covered with neat little stacks of materials. Their copies stood along the wall next to the sofa in seven even rows almost waist high.

They rested for fifteen minutes.

At five-thirty the first flicker of sunrise rose in the east, and they forgot about being tired. Abby quickened her movements around the copier and hoped it would not burn up. Tammy rubbed the

cramps in her calves and walked quickly back to the condo. It was either trip number fifty-one or fifty-two. She had lost count. It would be her last trip for a while. He was waiting.

She opened the door and went straight to the storage room, as usual. She set the packed Samsonites on the floor, as usual. She quietly walked up the stairs, into the bedroom, and froze. Avery was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing the balcony. He heard her and turned slowly to face her. His eyes were swollen and glazed. He scowled at her.

Instinctively, she unbuttoned the khaki shorts and they fell to the floor. "Hey, big boy," she said, trying to breathe normally and act like a party girl. She walked to the edge of the bed where he was sitting. "You're up kinda early. Let's get some more sleep."

His gaze returned to the window. He said nothing. She sat beside him and rubbed the inside of his thigh. She slid her hand up the inside of his leg, and he did not move.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

No response.

"Avery, talk to me, baby. Let's get some more sleep. It's still dark out there."

He fell sideways, onto his pillow. He grunted. No attempt at speech. Just a grunt. Then he closed his eyes. She lifted his legs onto the bed and covered him again.

She sat by him for ten minutes, and when the snoring returned to its former intensity, she slid into the shorts and ran to the Palms.

"He woke up, Abby!" she reported in panic. "He woke up, then passed out again."

Abby stopped and stared. Both women looked at the bed, which was covered with uncopied documents.

"Okay. Take a quick shower," Abby said coolly. "Then go get in bed with him and wait. Lock the door to the storage room, and call me when he wakes up and gets in the shower. I'll keep copying what's left, and we'll try to move it later, after he goes to work."

"That's awfully risky."

"It's all risky. Hurry."

Five minutes later, Tammy/Doris/Libby with the bright orange string bikini made another trip—without the suitcases—to the condo. She locked the front door and the storage door and went to the bedroom. She removed the orange top and crawled under the covers.

The snoring kept her awake for fifteen minutes. Then she dozed. She sat up in bed to prevent sleep. She was scared, sitting there in bed with a nude man who would kill her if he knew. Her tired body relaxed, and sleep became unavoidable. She dozed again.

Lover boy broke from his coma at three minutes past nine. He moaned loudly and rolled to the edge of the bed. His eyelids were stuck together. They opened slowly, and the bright sun came piercing through. He moaned again. The head weighed a hundred pounds and rocked awkwardly from right to left, shifting the brain violently each time. He breathed deeply, and the fresh oxygen went screaming through his temples. His right hand caught his attention. He tried to raise it, but the nerve impulses would not penetrate the brain. Slowly it went up, and he squinted at it. He tried to focus with the right eye first, then the left. The clock.

He looked at the digital clock for thirty seconds before he could decipher the red numbers. Nine-oh-five. Damn! He was expected at the bank at nine. He moaned. The woman!

She had felt him move and heard his sounds, and she lay still with her eyes shut. She prayed he would not touch her. She felt him staring.

For this career rogue and bad boy, there had been many hangovers. But none like this. He looked at her face and tried to remember how good she had been. He could always remember that, if nothing else. Regardless of the size of the hangover, he could always remember the women. He watched her for a moment, then gave it up.

“Damn!” he said as he stood and tried to walk. His feet were like lead boots and only reluctantly complied with his wishes. He braced himself against the sliding door to the balcony.

The bathroom was twenty feet away, and he decided to go for it. The desk and dresser served as braces. One painful, clumsy step after another, and he finally made it. He hovered above the toilet and relieved himself.

She rolled to face the balcony, and when he finished she felt him sit on her side of the bed. He gently touched her shoulder. "Libby, wake up." He shook her, and she bolted stiff.

"Wake up, dear," he said. A gentleman.

She gave him her best sleepy smile. The morning-after smile of fulfillment and commitment. The Scarlett O'Hara smile the morning after Rhett nailed her. "You were great, big boy," she cooed with her eyes closed.

In spite of the pain and nausea, in spite of the lead boots and bowling-ball head, he was proud of himself. The woman was impressed. Suddenly, he remembered that he was great last night.

"Look, Libby, we've overslept. I gotta go to work. I'm already late."

"Not in the mood, huh?" she giggled. She prayed he wasn't in the mood.

"Naw, not now. How about tonight?"

"I'll be here, big boy."

"Good. I gotta take a shower."

"Wake me up when you get out."

He stood and mumbled something, then locked the bathroom door. She slid across the bed to the phone and called Abby. After three rings, she answered.

"He's in the shower."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. He couldn't do it if he had to."

"What took so long?"

"He wouldn't wake up."

"Is he suspicious?"

"No. He remembers nothing. I think he's in pain."

"How long will you be there?"

"I'll kiss him goodbye when he gets out of the shower. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

“Okay. Hurry.” Abby hung up, and Tammy slid to her side of the bed. In the attic above the kitchen, a recorder clicked, reset itself and was ready for the next call.

By ten-thirty, they were ready for the final assault on the condo. The contraband was divided into three equal parts. Three daring raids in open daylight. Tammy slid the shiny new keys into her blouse pocket and took off with the suitcases. She walked quickly, her eyes darting in all directions behind the sunglasses. The parking lot in front of the condos was still empty. Traffic was light on the highway.

The new key fit, and she was inside. The key to the storage door also fit, and five minutes later she left the condo. The second and third trips were equally quick and uneventful. When she left the storage room for the last time, she studied it carefully. Everything was in order, just as she found it. She locked the condo and took the empty, well-worn Samsonites back to her room.

For an hour they lay beside each other on the bed and laughed at Avery and his hangover. It was over now, for the most part, and they had committed the perfect crime. And lover boy was a willing but ignorant participant. It had been easy, they decided.

The small mountain of evidence filled eleven and a half corrugated storage boxes. At two-thirty, a native with a straw hat and no shirt knocked on the door and announced he was from an outfit called Cayman Storage. Abby pointed at the boxes. With no place to go and no hurry to get there, he took the first box and ever so slowly carried it to his van. Like all the natives, he operated on Cayman time. No hurry, mon.

They followed him in the Stanza to a warehouse in Georgetown. Abby inspected the proposed storage room and paid cash for three months' rental.

Wayne Tarrance sat on the back row of the 11:40 p.m. Greyhound from Louisville to Indianapolis to Chicago. Although he sat by himself, the bus was crowded. It was Friday night. The bus left Kentucky thirty minutes earlier, and by now he was convinced something had gone wrong. Thirty minutes, and not a word or signal from anyone. Maybe it was the wrong bus. Maybe McDeere had changed his mind. Maybe a lot of things. The rear seat was inches above the diesel engine, and Wayne Tarrance, of the Bronx, now knew why Greyhound Frequent Milers fought for the seats just behind the driver. His Louis L'Amour vibrated until he had a headache. Thirty minutes. Nothing.

The toilet flushed across the aisle, and the door flew open. The odor filtered out, and Tarrance looked away, to the southbound traffic. From nowhere, she slid into the aisle seat and cleared her throat. Tarrance jerked to his right, and there she was. He'd seen her before, somewhere.

"Are you Mr. Tarrance?" She wore jeans, white cotton sneakers and a heavy green rag sweater. She hid behind dark glasses.

"Yeah. And you?"

She grabbed his hand and shook it firmly. "Abby McDeere."

"I was expecting your husband."

"I know. He decided not to come, and so here I am."

"Well, uh, I sort of wanted to talk to him."

"Yes, but he sent me. Just think of me as his agent."

Tarrance laid his paperback under the seat and watched the highway. "Where is he?"

“Why is that important, Mr. Tarrance? He sent me to talk business, and you’re here to talk business. So let’s talk.”

“Okay. Keep your voice down, and if anybody comes down the aisle, grab my hand and stop talking. Act like we’re married or something. Okay? Now, Mr. Voyles—do you know who he is?”

“I know everything, Mr. Tarrance.”

“Good. Mr. Voyles is about to stroke out because we haven’t got Mitch’s files yet. The good files. You understand why they’re important, don’t you?”

“Very much so.”

“So we want the files.”

“And we want a million dollars.”

“Yes, that’s the deal. But we get the files first.”

“No. That’s not the deal. The deal, Mr. Tarrance, is that we get the million dollars exactly where we want it, then we hand over the files.”

“You don’t trust us?”

“That’s correct. We don’t trust you, Voyles or anyone else. The money is to be deposited by wire transfer to a certain numbered account in a bank in Freeport, Bahamas. We will immediately be notified, and the money will then be wired by us to another bank. Once we have it where we want it, the files are yours.”

“Where are the files?”

“In a mini-storage in Memphis. There are fifty-one files in all, all boxed up real neat and proper like. You’ll be impressed. We do good work.”

“We? Have you seen the files?”

“Of course. Helped box them up. There are these surprises in box number eight.”

“Okay. What?”

“Mitch was able to copy three of Avery Tolar’s files, and they appear to be questionable. Two deal with a company called Dunn Lane, Ltd., which we know to be a Mafia-controlled corporation chartered in the Caymans. It was established with ten million laundered dollars in 1986. The files deal with two construction

projects financed by the corporation. You'll find it fascinating reading."

"How do you know it was chartered in the Caymans? And how do you know about the ten million? Surely that's not in the files."

"No, it's not. We have other records."

Tarrance thought about the other records for six miles. It was obvious he wouldn't see them until the McDeeres had the first million. He let it pass.

"I'm not sure we can wire the money as you wish without first getting the files." It was a rather weak bluff. She read it perfectly and smiled.

"Do we have to play games, Mr. Tarrance? Why don't you just give us the money and quit sparring."

A foreign student of some sort, probably an Arab, sauntered down the aisle and into the rest room. Tarrance froze and stared at the window. Abby patted his arm like a real girlfriend. The flushing sounded like a short waterfall.

"How soon can this happen?" Tarrance asked. She was not touching him anymore.

"The files are ready. How soon can you round up a million bucks?"

"Tomorrow."

Abby looked out the window and talked from the left corner of her mouth. "Today's Friday. Next Tuesday, at ten a.m. Eastern time, Bahamas time, you transfer by wire the million dollars from your account at the Chemical Bank in Manhattan to a numbered account at the Ontario Bank in Freeport. It's a clean, legitimate wire transfer—take about fifteen seconds."

Tarrance frowned and listened hard. "What if we don't have an account at the Chemical Bank in Manhattan?"

"You don't now, but you will Monday. I'm sure you've got someone in Washington who can handle a simple wire transfer."

"I'm sure we do."

"Good."

"But why the Chemical Bank?"

“Mitch’s orders, Mr. Tarrance. Trust him, he knows what he’s doing.”

“I see he’s done his homework.”

“He always does his homework. And there’s something you need to always remember. He’s much smarter than you are.”

Tarrance snorted and faked a light chuckle. They rode in silence for a mile or two, each thinking of the next question and answer.

“Okay,” Tarrance said, almost to himself. “And when do we get the files?”

“When the money’s safe in Freeport, we’ll be notified. Wednesday morning before ten-thirty, you’ll receive at your Memphis office a Federal Express package with a note and the key to the mini-storage.”

“So I can tell Mr. Voyles we’ll have the files by Wednesday afternoon?”

She shrugged and said nothing. Tarrance felt stupid for asking the question. Quickly, he thought of a good one.

“We’ll need the account number in Freeport.”

“It’s written down. I’ll give it to you when the bus stops.”

The particulars were now complete. He reached under the seat and retrieved his book. He flipped pages and pretended to read. “Just sit here a minute,” he said.

“Any questions?” she asked.

“Yeah. Can we talk about these other records you mentioned?”

“Sure.”

“Where are they?”

“Good question. The way the deal was explained to me, we would first get the next installment, a half million, I believe, in return for enough evidence to allow you to obtain the indictments. These other records are part of the next installment.”

Tarrance flipped a page. “You mean you’ve already obtained the, uh, dirty files?”

“We have most of what we need. Yes, we have a bunch of dirty files.”

“Where are they?”

She smiled softly and patted his arm. "I assure you they're not in the mini-storage with the clean files."

"But you have possession of them?"

"Sort of. Would you like to see a couple?"

He closed the book and breathed deeply. He looked at her. "Certainly."

"I thought so. Mitch says we'll give you ten inches of documents on Dunn Lane, Ltd.—copies of bank records, corporate charters, minutes, bylaws, officers, stockholders, wire-transfer records, letters from Nathan Locke to Joey Morolto, working papers, a hundred other juicy morsels that'll make you lose sleep. Wonderful stuff. Mitch says you can probably get thirty indictments just from the Dunn Lane records."

Tarrance hung on every word, and believed her. "When can I see it?" he asked quietly but so eagerly.

"When Ray is out of prison. It's part of the deal, remember?"

"Aw yes. Ray."

"Aw yes. He goes over the wall, Mr. Tarrance, or you can forget the Bendini firm. Mitch and I will take our paltry million and disappear into the night."

"I'm working on it."

"Better work hard." It was more than a threat, and he knew it. He opened the book again and stared at it.

Abby pulled a Bendini, Lambert & Locke business card from her pocket and dropped it on the book. On the back she had written the account number: 477DL-19584, Ontario Bank, Freeport.

"I'm going back to my seat near the front, away from the engine. Are we clear about next Tuesday?"

"No problems, mon. Are you getting off in Indianapolis?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"To my parents' home in Kentucky. Mitch and I are separated."

She was gone.

Tammy stood in one of a dozen long, hot lines at Miami customs. She wore shorts, sandals, halter top, sunglasses and a straw hat and looked just like the other thousand weary tourists returning from the sundrenched beaches of the Caribbean. In front of her were two ill-tempered newlyweds carrying bags of duty-free liquor and perfume and obviously in the middle of a serious disagreement. Behind her were two brand-new Hartman leather suitcases filled with enough documents and records to indict forty lawyers. Her employer, also a lawyer, had suggested she purchase luggage with little wheels on the bottom so they could be pulled through the Miami International Airport. She also had a small overnight bag with a few clothes and a toothbrush, to look legitimate.

About every ten minutes, the young couple moved forward six inches, and Tammy followed with her baggage. An hour after she entered the line, she made it to the checkpoint.

“No declarations!” the agent snapped in broken English.

“No!” she snapped back.

He nodded at the big leather bags. “What’s in there?”

“Papers.”

“Papers?”

“Papers.”

“What kind of papers?”

Toilet paper, she thought. I spend my vacations traveling the Caribbean collecting toilet paper. “Legal documents, crap like that. I’m a lawyer.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He unzipped the overnight bag and glanced in. “Okay. Next!”

She carefully pulled the bags, just so. They were inclined to tip over. A bellboy grabbed them and loaded all three pieces onto a two-wheeler. “Delta Flight 282, to Nashville. Gate 44, Concourse B,” she said as she handed him a five-dollar bill.

Tammy and all three bags arrived in Nashville at midnight Saturday. She loaded them into her Rabbit and left the airport. In the suburb of Brentwood, she parked in her designated parking place and, one at a time, pulled the Hartmans into a one-bedroom apartment.

Except for a rented foldaway sofa, there was no furniture. She unpacked the suitcases in the bedroom and began the tedious process of arranging the evidence. Mitch wanted a list of each document, each bank record, each corporation. He wanted it just so. He said one day he would pass through in a great hurry, and he wanted it all organized.

For two hours she took inventory. She sat on the floor and made careful notes. After three one-day trips to Grand Cayman, the room was beginning to fill. Monday she would leave again.

She felt like she'd slept three hours in the past two weeks. But it was urgent, he said. A matter of life and death.

Tarry Ross, alias Alfred, sat in the darkest corner of the lounge of the Washington Phoenix Park Hotel. The meeting would be terribly brief. He drank coffee and waited on his guest.

He waited and vowed to wait only five more minutes. The cup shook when he tried to sip it. Coffee splashed on the table. He looked at the table and tried desperately not to look around. He waited.

His guest arrived from nowhere and sat with his back to the wall. His name was Vinnie Cozzo, a thug from New York. From the Palumbo family.

Vinnie noticed the shaking cup and the spilled coffee. "Relax, Alfred. This place is dark enough."

"What do you want?" Alfred hissed.

"I wanna drink."

"No time for drinks. I'm leaving."

"Settle down, Alfred. Relax, pal. There ain't three people in here."

"What do you want?" he hissed again.

"Just a little information."

"It'll cost you."

"It always does." A waiter ventured by, and Vinnie ordered Chivas and water.

"How's my pal Denton Voyles?" Vinnie asked.

"Kiss my ass, Cozzo. I'm leaving. I'm walking outta here."

“Okay, pal. Relax. I just need some info.”

“Make it quick.” Alfred scanned the lounge. His cup was empty, most of it on the table.

The Chivas arrived, and Vinnie took a good drink. “Gotta little situation down in Memphis. Some of the boys’re sorta worried about it. Ever hear of the Bendini firm?”

Instinctively, Alfred shook his head in the negative. Always say no, at first. Then, after careful digging, return with a nice little report and say yes. Yes, he’d heard of the Bendini firm and their prized client. Operation Laundromat. Voyles himself had named it and was so proud of his creativity.

Vinnie took another good drink. “Well, there’s a guy down there named McDeere, Mitchell McDeere, who works for this Bendini firm, and we suspect he’s also playing grab-ass with your people. Know what I mean? We think he’s selling info on Bendini to the feds. Just need to know if it’s true. That’s all.”

Alfred listened with a straight face, although it was not easy. He knew McDeere’s blood type and his favorite restaurant in Memphis. He knew that McDeere had talked to Tarrance half a dozen times now and that tomorrow, Tuesday, McDeere would become a millionaire. Piece of cake.

“I’ll see what I can do. Let’s talk money.”

Vinnie lit a Salem Light. “Well, Alfred, it’s a serious matter. I ain’t gonna lie. Two hundred thousand cash.”

Alfred dropped the cup. He pulled a handkerchief from his rear pocket and furiously rubbed his glasses. “Two hundred? Cash?”

“That’s what I said. What’d we pay you last time?”

“Seventy-five.”

“See what I mean? It’s pretty damned serious, Alfred. Can you do it?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Give me two weeks.”

A week before April 15, the workaholics at Bendini, Lambert & Locke reached maximum stress and ran at full throttle on nothing but adrenaline. And fear. Fear of missing a deduction or a write-off or some extra depreciation that would cost a rich client an extra million or so. Fear of picking up the phone and calling the client and informing him that the return was now finished and, sorry to say, an extra eight hundred thousand was due. Fear of not finishing by the fifteenth and being forced to file extensions and incurring penalties and interest. The parking lot was full by 6 a.m. The secretaries worked twelve hours a day. Tempers were short. Talk was scarce and hurried.

With no wife to go home to, Mitch worked around the clock. Sonny Capps had cursed and berated Avery because he owed \$450,000. On earned income of six million. Avery had cursed Mitch, and together they plowed through the Capps files again, digging and cursing. Mitch created two very questionable write-offs that lowered it to \$320,000. Capps said he was considering a new tax firm. One in Washington.

With six days to go, Capps demanded a meeting with Avery in Houston. The Lear was available, and Avery left at midnight. Mitch drove him to the airport, receiving instructions along the way.

Shortly after 1:30 a.m., he returned to the office. Three Mercedeses, a BMW and a Jaguar were scattered through the parking lot. The security guard opened the rear door, and Mitch rode the elevator to the fourth floor. As usual, Avery locked his office door. The partners' doors were always locked. At the end of the hall, a voice could be heard. Victor Milligan, head of tax, sat at

his desk and said ugly things to his computer. The other offices were dark and locked.

Mitch held his breath and stuck a key into Avery's door. The knob turned, and he was inside. He switched on all the lights and went to the small conference table where he and his partner had spent the day and most of the night. Files were stacked like bricks around the chairs. Papers thrown here and there. IRS Reg. books were piled on top of each other.

Mitch sat at the table and continued his research for Capps. According to the FBI notebook, Capps was a legitimate businessman who had used the firm for at least eight years. The Fibbies weren't interested in Sonny Capps.

After an hour, the talking stopped and Milligan closed and locked the door. He took the stairs without saying good night. Mitch quickly checked each office on the fourth floor, then the third. All empty. It was almost 3 a.m.

Next to the bookshelves on one wall of Avery's office, four solid-oak file cabinets sat undisturbed. Mitch had noticed them for months but had never seen them used. The active files were kept in three metal cabinets next to the window. Secretaries dug through these, usually while Avery yelled at them. He locked the door behind him and walked to the oak cabinets. Locked, of course. He had narrowed it down to two small keys, each less than an inch long. The first one fit the first cabinet, and he opened it.

From Tammy's inventory of the contraband in Nashville, he had memorized many of the names of the Cayman companies operating with dirty money that was now clean. He thumbed through the files in the top drawer, and the names jumped at him. Dunn Lane, Ltd., Eastpointe, Ltd., Virgin Bay, Ltd., Inland Contractors, Ltd., Gulf-South, Ltd. He found more familiar names in the second and third drawers. The files were filled with loan documents from Cayman banks, wire-transfer records, warranty deeds, leases, mortgage deeds and a thousand other papers. He was particularly interested in Dunn Lane and Gulf-South. Tammy had recorded a significant number of documents for these two companies.

He picked out a Gulf-South file full of wiretransfer records and loan documents from the Royal Bank of Montreal. He walked to a copier in the center of the fourth floor and turned it on. While it warmed, he casually glanced around. The place was dead. He looked along the ceilings. No cameras. He had checked it many times before. The ACCESS NUMBER light flashed, and he punched in the file number for Mrs. Lettie Plunk. Her tax return was sitting on his desk on the second floor, and it could spare a few copies. He laid the contents on the automatic feed, and three minutes later the file was copied. One hundred twenty-eight copies, charged to Lettie Plunk. Back to the file cabinet. Back to the copier with another stack of Gulf-South evidence. He punched in the access number for the file of Greenmark Partners, a real estate development company in Bartlett, Tennessee. Legitimate folks. The tax return was sitting on his desk and could spare a few copies. Ninety-one, to be exact.

Mitch had eighteen tax returns sitting in his office waiting to be signed and filed. With six days to go, he had finished his deadline work. All eighteen received automatic billings for copies of Gulf-South and Dunn Lane evidence. He had scribbled their access numbers on a sheet of notepaper, and it sat on the table next to the copier. After using the eighteen numbers, he accessed with three numbers borrowed from Lamar's files and three numbers borrowed from the Capps files.

A wire ran from the copier through a hole in the wall and down the inside of a closet, where it connected with wires from three other copiers on the fourth floor. The wire, larger now, ran down through the ceiling and along a baseboard to the billing room on the third floor, where a computer recorded and billed every copy made within the firm. An innocuous-looking little gray wire ran from the computer up a wall and through the ceiling to the fourth floor, and then up to the fifth, where another computer recorded the access code, the number of copies and the location of the machine making each copy.

At 5 p.m., April 15, Bendini, Lambert & Locke shut down. By six, the parking lot was empty, and the expensive automobiles reassembled two miles away behind a venerable seafood establishment called Anderton's. A small banquet room was reserved for the annual April 15 blowout. Every associate and active partner was present, along with eleven retired partners. The retirees were tanned and well rested; the actives were haggard and frayed. But they were all in a festive spirit, ready to get plastered. The stringent rules of clean living and moderation would be forgotten this night. Another firm rule prohibited any lawyer or secretary from working on April 16.

Platters of cold boiled shrimp and raw oysters sat on tables along the walls. A huge wooden barrel filled with ice and cold Moosehead greeted them. Ten cases stood behind the barrel. Roosevelt popped tops as quickly as possible. Late in the night, he would get drunk with the rest of them, and Oliver Lambert would call a taxi to haul him home to Jessie Frances. It was a ritual.

Roosevelt's cousin, Little Bobby Blue Baker, sat at a baby grand and sang sadly as the lawyers filed in. For now, he was the entertainment. Later, he would not be needed.

Mitch ignored the food and took an icy green bottle to a table near the piano. Lamar followed with two pounds of shrimp. They watched their colleagues shake off coats and ties and attack the Moosehead.

"Get 'em all finished?" Lamar asked, devouring the shrimp.

"Yeah. I finished mine yesterday. Avery and I worked on Sonny Capps's until five p.m. It's finished."

"How much?"

"Quarter of a mill."

"Ouch." Lamar turned up the bottle and drained half of it. "He's never paid that much, has he?"

"No, and he's furious. I don't understand the guy. He cleared six million from all sorts of ventures, and he's mad as hell because he had to pay five percent in taxes."

"How's Avery?"

"Somewhat worried. Capps made him fly to Houston last week, and it did not go well. He left on the Lear at midnight. Told me later

Capps was waiting at his office at four in the morning, furious over his tax mess. Blamed it all on Avery. Said he might change firms.”

“I think he says that all the time. You need a beer?”

Lamar left and returned with four Mooseheads. “How’s Abby’s mom?”

Mitch borrowed a shrimp and peeled it. “She’s okay, for now. They removed a lung.”

“And how’s Abby?” Lamar was watching his friend, and not eating.

Mitch started another beer. “She’s fine.”

“Look, Mitch, our kids go to St. Andrew’s. It’s no secret Abby took a leave of absence. She’s been gone for two weeks. We know it, and we’re concerned.”

“Things will work out. She wants to spend a little time away. It’s no big deal, really.”

“Come on, Mitch. It’s a big deal when your wife leaves home without saying when she’ll return. At least that’s what she told the headmaster at school.”

“That’s true. She doesn’t know when she’ll come back. Probably a month or so. She’s had a hard time coping with the hours at the office.”

The lawyers were all present and accounted for, so Roosevelt shut the door. The room became noisier. Bobby Blue took requests.

“Have you thought about slowing down?” Lamar asked.

“No, not really. Why should I?”

“Look, Mitch, I’m your friend, right? I’m worried about you. You can’t make a million bucks the first year.”

Oh yeah, he thought. I made a million bucks last week. In ten seconds the little account in Freeport jumped from ten thousand to a million ten thousand. And fifteen minutes later, the account was closed and the money was resting safely in a bank in Switzerland. Ah, the wonder of wire transfer. And because of the million bucks, this would be the first and only April 15 party of his short, but distinguished legal career. And his good friend who is so concerned about his marriage will most likely be in jail before long. Along with everyone else in the room, except for Roosevelt. Hell, Tarrance

might get so excited he'll indict Roosevelt and Jessie Frances just for the fun of it.

Then the trials. "I, Mitchell Y. McDeere, do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. So help me God." And he'd sit in the witness chair and point the finger at his good friend Lamar Quin. And Kay and the kids would be sitting in the front row for jury appeal. Crying softly.

He finished the second beer and started the third. "I know, Lamar, but I have no plans to slow down. Abby will adjust. Things'll be fine."

"If you say so. Kay wants you over tomorrow for a big steak. We'll cook on the grill and eat on the patio. How about it?"

"Yes, on one condition. No discussion about Abby. She went home to see her mother, and she'll be back. Okay?"

"Fine. Sure."

Avery sat across the table with a plate of shrimp. He began peeling them.

"We were just discussing Capps," Lamar said.

"That's not a pleasant subject," Avery replied. Mitch watched the shrimp intently until there was a little pile of about six freshly peeled. He grabbed them across the table and shoved the handful into his mouth.

Avery glared at him with tired, sad eyes. Red eyes. He struggled for something appropriate, then began eating the unpeeled shrimp. "I wish the heads were still on them," he said between bites. "Much better with the heads."

Mitch raked across two handfuls and began crunching. "I like the tails myself. Always been a tail man."

Lamar stopped eating and gawked at them. "You must be kidding."

"Nope," said Avery. "When I was a kid in El Paso, we used to go out with our nets and scoop up a bunch of fresh shrimp. We'd eat 'em on the spot, while they were still wiggling." Chomp, chomp. "The heads are the best part because of all the brain juices."

"Shrimp, in El Paso?"

"Yeah, Rio Grande's full of them."

Lamar left for another round of beer. The wear, tear, stress and fatigue mixed quickly with the alcohol and the room became rowdier. Bobby Blue was playing Steppenwolf. Even Nathan Locke was smiling and talking loudly. Just one of the boys. Roosevelt added five cases to the barrel of ice.

At ten, the singing started. Wally Hudson, minus the bow tie, stood on a chair by the piano and led the howling chorus through a riotous medley of Australian drinking songs. The restaurant was closed now, so who cared. Kendall Mahan was next. He had played rugby at Cornell and had an amazing repertoire of raunchy beer songs. Fifty untalented and drunk voices sang happily along with him.

Mitch excused himself and went to the rest room. A busboy unlocked the rear door, and he was in the parking lot. The singing was pleasant at this distance. He started for his car, but instead walked to a window. He stood in the dark, next to the corner of the building, and watched and listened. Kendall was now on the piano, leading his choir through an obscene refrain.

Joyous voices, of rich and happy people. He studied them one at a time, around the tables. Their faces were red. Their eyes were glowing. They were his friends—family men with wives and children—all caught up in this terrible conspiracy.

Last year Joe Hodge and Marty Kozinski were singing with the rest of them.

Last year he was a hotshot Harvard man with job offers in every pocket.

Now he was a millionaire, and would soon have a price on his head.

Funny what a year can do.

Sing on, brothers.

Mitch turned and walked away.

Around midnight, the taxis lined up on Madison, and the richest lawyers in town were carried and dragged into the back seats. Of course, Oliver Lambert was the soberest of the lot, and he directed

the evacuation. Fifteen taxis in all, with drunk lawyers lying everywhere.

At the same time, across town on Front Street, two identical navy-blue-and-yellow Ford vans with DUSTBUSTERS painted brightly on the sides pulled up to the gate. Dutch Hendrix opened it and waved them through. They backed up to the rear door, and eight women with matching shirts began unloading vacuum cleaners and buckets filled with spray bottles. They unloaded brooms and mops and rolls of paper towels. They chattered quietly among themselves as they went through the building. As directed from above, the technicians cleaned one floor at a time, beginning with the fourth. The guards walked the floors and watched them carefully.

The women ignored them and buzzed about their business of emptying garbage cans, polishing furniture, vacuuming and scrubbing bathrooms. The new girl was slower than the others. She noticed things. She pulled on desk drawers and file cabinets when the guards weren't looking. She paid attention.

It was her third night on the job, and she was learning her way around. She'd found the Tolar office on the fourth floor the first night, and smiled to herself.

She wore dirty jeans and ragged tennis shoes. The blue DUSTBUSTERS shirt was extra large, to hide the figure and make her appear plump, like the other technicians. The patch above the pocket read DORIS. Doris, the cleaning technician.

When the crew was half finished with the second floor, a guard told Doris and two others, Susie and Charlotte, to follow him. He inserted a key in the elevator panel, and it stopped in the basement. He unlocked a heavy metal door, and they walked into a large room divided into a dozen cubicles. Each small desk was cluttered, and dominated by a large computer. There were terminals everywhere. Black file cabinets lined the walls. No windows.

"The supplies are in there," the guard said, pointing to a closet. They pulled out a vacuum cleaner and spray bottles and went to work.

"Don't touch the desks," he said.

Mitch tied the laces of his Nike Air Cushion jogging shoes and sat on the sofa waiting by the phone. Hearsay, depressed after two weeks without the woman around, sat next to him and tried to doze. At exactly ten-thirty, it rang. It was Abby.

There were no mushy “sweethearts” and “babes” and “honeys.” The dialogue was cool and forced.

“How’s your mother?” he asked.

“Doing much better. She’s up and around, but very sore. Her spirits are good.”

“That’s good to hear. And your dad?”

“The same. Always busy. How’s my dog?”

“Lonesome and depressed. I think he’s cracking up.”

“I miss him. How’s work?”

“We survived April 15 without disaster. Everyone’s in a better mood. Half the partners left for vacation on the sixteenth, so the place is a lot quieter.”

“I guess you’ve cut back to sixteen hours a day?”

He hesitated, and let it sink in. No sense starting a fight. “When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know. Mom will need me for a couple more weeks. I’m afraid Dad’s not much help. They’ve got a maid and all, but Mom needs me now.” She paused, as if something heavy was coming. “I called St. Andrew’s today and told them I wouldn’t be back this semester.”

He took it in stride. “There are two months left in this semester. You’re not coming back for two months?”

“At least two months, Mitch. I just need some time, that’s all.”

“Time for what?”

“Let’s not start it again, okay? I’m not in the mood to argue.”

“Fine. Fine. Fine. What are you in the mood for?”

She ignored this, and there was a long pause. “How many miles are you jogging?”

“A couple. I’ve been walking to the track, then running about eight laps.”

“Be careful at the track. It’s awfully dark.”

“Thanks.”

Another long pause. “I need to go,” she said. “Mom’s ready for bed.”

“Will you call tomorrow night?”

“Yes. Same time.”

She hung up without a “goodbye” or “I love you” or anything. Just hung up.

Mitch pulled on his white athletic socks and tucked in his white long-sleeved T-shirt. He locked the kitchen door and trotted down the dark street. West Junior High School was six blocks to the east of East Meadowbrook. Behind the red-brick classrooms and gymnasium was the baseball field, and farther away at the end of a dark driveway was the football field. A cinder track circled the field, and was a favorite of local joggers.

But not at 11 p.m., especially with no moon. The track was deserted, and that was fine with Mitch. The spring air was light and cool, and he finished the first mile in eight minutes. He began walking a lap. As he passed the aluminum bleachers on the home side, he saw someone from the corner of his eye. He kept walking.

“Psssssst.”

Mitch stopped. “Yeah. Who is it?”

A hoarse, scratchy voice replied, “Joey Morolto.”

Mitch started for the bleachers. “Very funny, Tarrance. Am I clean?”

“Sure, you’re clean. Laney’s sitting up there in a school bus with a flashlight. He flashed green when you passed, and if you see something red flash, get back to the track and make like Carl Lewis.”

They walked to the top of the bleachers and into the unlocked press box. They sat on stools in the dark and watched the school. The buses were parked in perfect order along the driveway.

"Is this private enough for you?" Mitch asked.

"It'll do. Who's the girl?"

"I know you prefer to meet in daylight, preferably where a crowd has gathered, say like a fast-food joint or a Korean shoe store. But I like these places better."

"Great. Who's the girl?"

"Pretty clever, huh?"

"Good idea. Who is she?"

"An employee of mine."

"Where'd you find her?"

"What difference does it make? Why are you always asking questions that are irrelevant?"

"Irrelevant? I get a call today from some woman I've never met, tells me she needs to talk to me about a little matter at the Bendini Building, says we gotta change phones, instructs me to go to a certain pay phone outside a certain grocery store and be there at a certain time, and she'll call exactly at one-thirty. And I go there, and she calls at exactly one-thirty. Keep in mind, I've got three men within a hundred feet of the phone watching everybody that moves. And she tells me to be here at exactly ten forty-five tonight, to have the place sealed off, and that you'll come trotting by."

"Worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah, so far. But who is she? I mean, now you got someone else involved, and that really worries me, McDeere. Who is she and how much does she know?"

"Trust me, Tarrance. She's my employee and she knows everything. In fact, if you knew what she knows you'd be serving indictments right now instead of sitting here bitching about her."

Tarrance breathed deeply and thought about it. "Okay, so tell me what she knows."

"She knows that in the last three years the Morolto gang and its accomplices have taken over eight hundred million bucks in cash out of this country and deposited it in various banks in the

Caribbean. She knows which banks, which accounts, the dates, a bunch of stuff. She knows that the Moroltos control at least three hundred and fifty companies chartered in the Caymans, and that these companies regularly send clean money back into the country. She knows the dates and amounts of the wire transfers. She knows of at least forty U.S. corporations owned by Cayman corporations owned by the Moroltos. She knows a helluva lot, Tarrance. She's a very knowledgeable woman, don't you think?"

Tarrance could not speak. He stared fiercely into the darkness up the driveway.

Mitch found it enjoyable. "She knows how they take their dirty cash, trade it up to one-hundred-dollar bills and sneak it out of the country."

"How?"

"The firm Lear, of course. But they also mule it. They've got a small army of mules, usually their minimum-wage thugs and their girlfriends, but also students and other freelancers, and they'll give them ninety-eight hundred in cash and buy them a ticket to the Caymans or the Bahamas. No declarations are required for amounts under ten thousand, you understand. And the mules will fly down like regular tourists with pockets full of cash and take the money to their banks. Doesn't sound like much money, but you get three hundred people making twenty trips a year, and that's some serious cash walking out of the country. It's also called smurfing, you know."

Tarrance nodded slightly, as if he knew.

"A lot of folks wanna be smurfers when they can get free vacations and spending money. Then they've got their super mules. These are the trusted Morolto people who take a million bucks in cash, wrap it up real neat in newspaper so the airport machines won't see it, put it in big briefcases and walk it onto the planes like everybody else. They wear coats and ties and look like Wall Streeters. Or they wear sandals and straw hats and mule it in carry-on bags. You guys catch them occasionally, about one percent of the time, I believe, and when that happens the super mules go to jail. But they never talk, do they, Tarrance? And every now and then a

smurfer will start thinking about all this money in his briefcase and how easy it would be just to keep flying and enjoy all the money himself. And he'll disappear. But the Mob never forgets, and it may take a year or two, but they'll find him somewhere. The money'll be gone, of course, but then so will he. The Mob never forgets, does it, Tarrance? Just like they won't forget about me."

Tarrance listened until it was obvious he needed to say something. "You got your million bucks."

"Appreciate it. I'm almost ready for the next installment."

"Almost?"

"Yeah, me and the girl have a couple more jobs to pull. We're trying to get a few more records out of Front Street."

"How many documents do you have?"

"Over ten thousand."

The lower jaw collapsed and the mouth fell open. He stared at Mitch. "Damn! Where'd they come from?"

"Another one of your questions."

"Ten thousand documents," said Tarrance.

"At least ten thousand. Bank records, wiretransfer records, corporate charters, corporate loan documents, internal memos, correspondence between all sorts of people. A lot of good stuff, Tarrance."

"Your wife mentioned a company called Dunn Lane, Ltd. We've reviewed the files you've already given us. Pretty good material. What else do you know about it?"

"A lot. Chartered in 1986 with ten million, which was transferred into the corporation from a numbered account in Banco de México, the same ten million that arrived in Grand Cayman in cash on a certain Lear jet registered to a quiet little law firm in Memphis, except that it was originally fourteen million but after payoffs to Cayman customs and Cayman bankers it was reduced to ten million. When the company was chartered, the registered agent was a guy named Diego Sánchez, who happens to be a VP with Banco de México. The president was a delightful soul named Nathan Locke, the secretary was our old pal Royce McKnight and the treasurer of

this cozy little corporation was a guy named Al Rubinstein. I'm sure you know him. I don't."

"He's a Morolto operative."

"Surprise, surprise. Want more?"

"Keep talking."

"After the seed money of ten million was invested into this venture, another ninety million in cash was deposited over the next three years. Very profitable enterprise. The company began buying all sorts of things in the U.S.—cotton farms in Texas, apartment complexes in Dayton, jewelry stores in Beverly Hills, hotels in St. Petersburg and Tampa. Most of the transactions were by wire transfer from four or five different banks in the Caymans. It's a basic money-laundering operation."

"And you've got all this documented?"

"Stupid question, Wayne. If I didn't have the documents, how would I know about it? I only work on clean files, remember?"

"How much longer will it take you?"

"Couple of weeks. Me and my employee are still snooping around Front Street. And it doesn't look good. It'll be very difficult to get files out of there."

"Where'd the ten thousand documents come from?"

Mitch ignored the question. He jumped to his feet and started for the door. "Abby and I want to live in Albuquerque. It's a big town, sort of out of the way. Start working on it."

"Don't jump the gun. There's a lot of work to do."

"I said two weeks, Tarrance. I'll be ready to deliver in two weeks, and that means I'll have to disappear."

"Not so fast. I need to see a few of these documents."

"You have a short memory, Tarrance. My lovely wife promised a big stack of Dunn Lane documents just as soon as Ray goes over the wall."

Tarrance looked across the dark field. "I'll see what I can do."

Mitch walked to him and pointed a finger in his face. "Listen to me, Tarrance, and listen closely. I don't think we're getting through. Today is April 17. Two weeks from today is May 1, and on May 1 I will deliver to you, as promised, over ten thousand very

incriminating and highly admissible documents that will seriously cripple one of the largest organized crime families in the world. And, eventually, it will cost me my life. But I promised to do it. And you've promised to get my brother out of prison. You have a week, until April 24. If not, I'll disappear. And so will your case, and career."

"What's he gonna do when he gets out?"

"You and your stupid questions. He'll run like hell, that's what he'll do. He's got a brother with a million dollars who's an expert in money laundering and electronic banking. He'll be out of the country within twelve hours, and he'll go find the million bucks."

"The Bahamas."

"Bahamas. You're an idiot, Tarrance. That money spent less than ten minutes in the Bahamas. You can't trust those corrupt fools down there."

"Mr. Voyles doesn't like deadlines. He gets real upset."

"Tell Mr. Voyles to kiss my ass. Tell him to get the next half million, because I'm almost ready. Tell him to get my brother out or the deal's off. Tell him whatever you want, Tarrance, but Ray goes over the wall in a week or I'm gone."

Mitch slammed the door and started down the bleachers. Tarrance followed. "When do we talk again?" he yelled.

Mitch jumped the fence and was on the track. "My employee will call you. Just do as she says."

Nathan Locke's annual three-day post-April 15 vacation in Vail had been canceled. By DeVasher, on orders from Lazarov. Locke and Oliver Lambert sat in the office on the fifth floor and listened. DeVasher was reporting the bits and pieces and trying unsuccessfully to put the puzzle together.

"His wife leaves. Says she's gotta go home to her mother, who's got lung cancer. And that she's tired of a bunch of his crap. We've detected a little trouble here and there over the months. She bitched a little about his hours and all, but nothing this serious. So she goes home to Mommy. Says she don't know when she's coming back. Mommy's sick, right? Removed a lung, right? But we can't find a hospital that's heard of Maxine Sutherland. We've checked every hospital in Kentucky, Indiana and Tennessee. Seems odd, doesn't it, fellas?"

"Come on, DeVasher," Lambert said. "My wife had surgery four years ago, and we flew to the Mayo Clinic. I know of no law requiring one to have surgery within a hundred miles of home. That's absurd. And these are society people. Maybe she checked in under another name to keep it quiet. Happens all the time."

Locke nodded and agreed. "How much has he talked to her?"

"She calls about once a day. They've had some good talks, about this and that. The dog. Her mom. The office. She told him last night she ain't coming back for at least two months."

"Has she ever indicated which hospital?" asked Locke.

"Never. She's been real careful. Doesn't talk much about the surgery. Mommy is supposedly home now. If she ever left."

"What're you getting at, DeVasher?" asked Lambert.

“Shut up and I’ll finish. Just suppose it’s all a ruse to get her outta town. To get her away from us. From what’s coming down. Follow?”

“You’re assuming he’s working with them?” asked Locke.

“I get paid for making those assumptions, Nat. I’m assuming he knows the phones are bugged, and that’s why they’re so careful on the phone. I’m assuming he got her outta town to protect her.”

“Pretty shaky,” said Lambert. “Pretty shaky.”

DeVasher paced behind his desk. He glared at Ollie and let it pass. “About ten days ago, somebody makes a bunch of unusual copies on the fourth floor. Strange because it was three in the morning. According to our records, when the copies were made only two lawyers were here. McDeere and Scott Kimble. Neither of whom had any business on the fourth floor. Twenty-four access numbers were used. Three belong to Lamar Quin’s files. Three belong to Sonny Capps. The other eighteen belong to McDeere’s files. None belong to Kimble. Victor Milligan left his office around two-thirty, and McDeere was working in Avery’s office. He had taken him to the airport. Avery says he locked his office, but he could have forgotten. Either he forgot or McDeere’s got a key. I pressed Avery on this, and he feels almost certain he locked it. But it was midnight and he was dead tired and in a hurry. Could’ve forgotten, right? But he did not authorize McDeere to go back to his office and work. No big deal, really, because they had spent the entire day in there working on the Capps return. The copier was number eleven, which happens to be the closest one to Avery’s office. I think it’s safe to assume McDeere made the copies.”

“How many?”

“Two thousand and twelve.”

“Which files?”

“The eighteen were all tax clients. Now, I’m sure he’d explain it all by saying he had finished the returns and was merely copying everything. Sounds pretty legitimate, right? Except the secretaries always make the copies, and what the hell was he doing on the fourth floor at three a.m. running two thousand copies? And this was the morning of April 7. How many of your boys finish their April 15 work and run all the copies a week early?”

He stopped pacing and watched them. They were thinking. He had them. "And here's the kicker. Five days later his secretary entered the same eighteen access numbers on her copier on the second floor. She ran about three hundred copies, which, I ain't no lawyer, but I figure to be more in line. Don't you think?"

They both nodded, but said nothing. They were lawyers, trained to argue five sides of every issue. But they said nothing. DeVasher smiled wickedly and returned to his pacing. "Now, we caught him making two thousand copies that cannot be explained. So the big question is: What was he copying? If he was using wrong access numbers to run the machine, what the hell was he copying? I don't know. All of the offices were locked, except, of course, Avery's. So I asked Avery. He's got a row of metal cabinets where he keeps the real files. He keeps 'em locked, but he and McDeere and the secretaries have been rummaging through those files all day. Could've forgot to lock 'em when he ran to meet the plane. Big deal. Why would McDeere copy legitimate files? He wouldn't. Like everybody else on the fourth floor, Avery's got those four wooden cabinets with the secret stuff. No one touches them, right? Firm rules. Not even other partners. Locked up tighter than my files. So McDeere can't get in without a key. Avery showed me his keys. Told me he hadn't touched those cabinets in two days, before the seventh. Avery has gone through those files, and everything seems in order. He can't tell if they've been tampered with. But can you look at one of your files and tell if it's been copied? No, you can't. Neither can I. So I pulled the files this morning, and I'm sending them to Chicago. They're gonna check 'em for fingerprints. Take about a week."

"He couldn't copy those files," Lambert said.

"What else would he copy, Ollie? I mean, everything's locked on the fourth floor and the third floor. Everything, except Avery's office. And assuming he and Tarrance are whispering in each other's ears, what would he want from Avery's office. Nothing but the secret files."

"Now you're assuming he's got keys," Locke said.

"Yes. I'm assuming he's made a set of Avery's keys."

Ollie snorted and gave an exasperated laugh. "This is incredible. I don't believe it."

Black Eyes glared at DeVasher with a nasty smile. "How would he get a copy of the keys?"

"Good question, and one that I can't answer. Avery showed me his keys. Two rings, eleven keys. He keeps 'em with him at all times. Firm rule, right? Like a good little lawyer's supposed to do. When he's awake, the keys are in his pocket. When he's asleep away from home, the keys are under the mattress."

"Where's he traveled in the last month?" Black Eyes asked.

"Forget the trip to see Capps in Houston last week. Too recent. Before that, he went to Grand Cayman for two days on April 1."

"I remember," said Ollie, listening intently.

"Good for you, Ollie. I asked him what he did both nights, and he said nothing but work. Sat at a bar one night, but that's it. Swears he slept by himself both nights." DeVasher pushed a button on a portable tape recorder. "But he's lying. This call was made at nine-fifteen, April 2, from the phone in the master bedroom of Unit A." The tape began:

"He's in the shower." First female voice.

"Are you okay?" Second female voice.

"Yeah. Fine. He couldn't do it if he had to."

"What took so long?"

"He wouldn't wake up."

"Is he suspicious?"

"No. He remembers nothing. I think he's in pain."

"How long will you be there?"

"I'll kiss him goodbye when he gets out of the shower. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

"Okay. Hurry."

DeVasher punched another button and continued pacing. "I have no idea who they are, and I haven't confronted Avery. Yet. He worries me. His wife has filed for divorce, and he's lost control. Chases women all the time. This is a pretty serious breach of security, and I suspect Lazarov will go through the roof."

"She talked like it was a bad hangover," Locke said.

“Evidently.”

“You think she copied the keys?” Ollie asked.

DeVasher shrugged and sat in his worn leather chair. The cockiness vanished. “It’s possible, but I doubt it. I’ve thought about it for hours. Assuming it was some woman he picked up in a bar, and they got drunk, then it was probably late when they went to bed. How would she make copies of the keys in the middle of the night on that tiny island? I just don’t think so.”

“But she had an accomplice,” Locke insisted.

“Yeah, and I can’t figure that out. Maybe they were trying to steal his wallet and something went wrong. He carries a couple of thousand in cash, and if he got drunk, who knows what he told them. Maybe she planned to lift the money at the last second and haul ass. She didn’t do it. I don’t know.”

“No more assumptions?” Ollie asked.

“Not now. I love to make them, but it goes too far to assume these women took the keys, somehow managed to copy them in the middle of the night on the island, without his knowledge, and then the first one crawled back in the bed with him. And that somehow all of this is related to McDeere and his use of the copier on the fourth floor. It’s just too much.”

“I agree,” said Ollie.

“What about the storage room?” asked Black Eyes.

“I’ve thought about that, Nat. In fact, I’ve lost sleep thinking about it. If she was interested in the records in the storage room, there must be some connection with McDeere, or someone else poking around. And I can’t make that connection. Let’s say she found the room and the records, what could she do with them in the middle of the night with Avery asleep upstairs?”

“She could read them.”

“Yeah, there’s only a million. Keep in mind, now, she must have been drinking along with Avery, or he would’ve been suspicious. So she’s spent the night drinking and screwing. She waits until he goes to sleep, then suddenly she has this urge to go downstairs and read bank records. It don’t work, boys.”

“She could work for the FBI,” Ollie said proudly.

“No, she couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“It’s simple, Ollie. The FBI wouldn’t do it because the search would be illegal and the records would be inadmissible. And there’s a much better reason.”

“What?”

“If she was a Fibbie, she wouldn’t have used the phone. No professional would’ve made that call. I think she was a pickpocket.”

The pickpocket theory was explained to Lazarov, who poked a hundred holes but could devise nothing better. He ordered changes in all the locks on the third and fourth floors, and the basement, and both condos on Grand Cayman. He ordered a search for all the locksmiths on the island—there couldn’t be many, he said—to determine if any had reproduced keys the night of April 1 or the early morning of April 2. Bribe them, he told DeVasher. They’ll talk for a little money. He ordered a fingerprint examination of the files from Avery’s office. DeVasher proudly explained he had already started this. McDeere’s prints were on file with the state bar association.

He also ordered a sixty-day suspension of Avery Tolar. DeVasher suggested this might alert McDeere to something unusual. Fine, said Lazarov, tell Tolar to check into the hospital with chest pains. Two months off—doctor’s orders. Tell Tolar to clean up his act. Lock up his office. Assign McDeere to Victor Milligan.

“You said you had a good plan to eliminate McDeere,” DeVasher said.

Lazarov grinned and picked his nose. “Yeah. I think we’ll use the plane. We’ll send him down to the islands on a little business trip, and there will be this mysterious explosion.”

“Waste two pilots?” asked DeVasher.

“Yeah. It needs to look good.”

“Don’t do it anywhere around the Caymans. That’ll be too coincidental.”

“Okay, but it needs to happen over water. Less debris. We’ll use a big device, so they won’t find much.”

“That plane’s expensive.”

“Yeah. I’ll run it by Joey first.”

“You’re the boss. Let me know if we can help down there.”

“Sure. Start thinking about it.”

“What about your man in Washington?” DeVasher asked.

“I’m waiting. I called New York this morning, and they’re checking into it. We should know in a week.”

“That would make it easy.”

“Yeah. If the answer is yes, we need to eliminate him within twenty-four hours.”

“I’ll start planning.”

The office was quiet for a Saturday morning. A handful of partners and a dozen associates loitered about in khakis and polos. There were no secretaries. Mitch checked his mail and dictated correspondence. After two hours he left. It was time to visit Ray.

For five hours, he drove east on Interstate 40. Drove like an idiot. He drove forty-five, then eighty-five. He darted into every rest stop and weigh station. He made sudden exits from the left lane. He stopped at an underpass and waited and watched. He never saw them. Not once did he notice a suspicious car or truck or van. He even watched a few eighteen-wheelers. Nothing. They simply were not back there. He would have caught them.

His care package of books and cigarettes was cleared through the guard station, and he was pointed to stall number nine. Minutes later, Ray sat through the thick screen.

“Where have you been?” he said with a hint of irritation. “You’re the only person in the entire world who visits me, and this is only the second time in four months.”

“I know. It’s tax season, and I’ve been swamped. I’ll do better. I’ve written, though.”

“Yeah, once a week I get two paragraphs. ‘Hi, Ray. How’s the bunk? How’s the food? How are the walls? How’s the Greek or

Italian? I'm fine. Abby's great. Dog's sick. Gotta run. I'll come visit soon. Love, Mitch.' You write some rich letters, little brother. I really treasure them."

"Yours aren't much better."

"What have I got to say? The guards are selling dope. A friend got stabbed thirty-one times. I saw a kid get raped. Come on, Mitch, who wants to hear it?"

"I'll do better."

"How's Mom?"

"I don't know. I haven't been back since Christmas."

"I asked you to check on her, Mitch. I'm worried about her. If that goon is beating her, I want it stopped. If I could get out of here, I'd stop it myself."

"You will." It was a statement, not a question. Mitch placed a finger over his lips and nodded slowly. Ray leaned forward on his elbows and stared intently.

Mitch spoke softly. "*Español. Hable despacio.*" Spanish. Speak slowly.

Ray smiled slightly. "*¿Cuándo?*" When? "*La semana próxima.*" Next week. "*¿Qué día?*" What day?

Mitch thought for a second. "*Martes o miércoles.*" Tuesday or Wednesday.

"*¿A qué hora?*" What time?

Mitch smiled and shrugged, and looked around.

"How's Abby?" Ray asked.

"She's been in Kentucky for a couple of weeks. Her mother's sick." He stared at Ray and softly mouthed the words "Trust me."

"What's wrong with her?"

"They removed a lung. Cancer. She's smoked heavy all her life. You should quit."

"I will if I ever get out of here."

Mitch smiled and nodded slowly. "You've got at least seven more years."

"Yeah, and escape is impossible. They try it occasionally, but they're either shot or captured."

“James Earl Ray went over the wall, didn’t he?” Mitch nodded slowly as he asked the question. Ray smiled and watched his brother’s eyes.

“But they caught him. They bring in a bunch of mountain boys with bloodhounds, and it gets pretty nasty. I don’t think anyone’s ever survived the mountains after they got over the wall.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Mitch said.

“Good idea.”

Two guards stood by a window behind the row of visitors’ booths. They were enjoying a stack of dirty pictures someone took with a Polaroid and tried to sneak through the guard station. They giggled among themselves and ignored the visitors. On the prisoners’ side, a single guard with a stick walked benignly back and forth, half asleep.

“When can I expect little nieces and nephews?” Ray asked.

“Maybe in a few years. Abby wants one of each, and she would start now if I would. I’m not ready.”

The guard walked behind Ray, but did not look. They stared at each other, trying to read each other’s eyes.

“¿Adónde voy?” Ray asked quickly. Where am I going?

“Perdido Beach Hilton. We went to the Cayman Islands last month, Abby and I. Had a beautiful vacation.”

“Never heard of the place. Where is it?”

“In the Caribbean, below Cuba.”

“¿Que es mi nombre?” What is my name?

“Lee Stevens. Did some snorkeling. The water is warm and gorgeous. The firm owns two condos right on Seven Mile Beach. All I paid for was the airfare. It was great.”

“Get me a book. I’d like to read about it. ¿Pasaporte?”

Mitch nodded with a smile. The guard walked behind Ray and stopped. They talked of old times in Kentucky.

At dusk he parked the BMW on the dark side of a suburban mall in Nashville. He left the keys in the ignition and locked the door. He had a spare in his pocket. A busy crowd of Easter shoppers moved

en masse through the Sears doors. He joined them. Inside he ducked into the men's clothing department and studied socks and underwear while watching the door. Nobody suspicious. He left Sears and walked quickly through the crowd down the mall. A black cotton sweater in the window of a men's store caught his attention. He found one inside, tried it on and decided to wear it out of there, he liked it so much. As the clerk laid his change on the counter, he scanned the yellow pages for the number of a cab. Back into the mall, he rode the escalator to the first floor, where he found a pay phone. The cab would be there in ten minutes.

It was dark now, the cool early dark of spring in the South. He watched the mall entrance from inside a singles bar. He was certain he had not been followed through the mall. He walked casually to the cab. "Brentwood," he said to the driver, and disappeared into the back seat.

Brentwood was twenty minutes away. "Savannah Creek Apartments," he said. The cab searched through the sprawling complex and found number 480E. He threw a twenty over the seat and slammed the door. Behind an outside stairwell he found the door to 480E. It was locked.

"Who is it?" a nervous female voice asked from within. He heard the voice and felt weak.

"Barry Abanks," he said.

Abby pulled the door open and attacked. They kissed violently as he lifted her, walked inside and slammed the door with his foot. His hands were wild. In less than two seconds, he pulled her sweater over her head, unsnapped her bra and slid the rather loose-fitting skirt to her knees. They continued kissing. With one eye, he glanced apprehensively at the cheap, flimsy rented fold-a-bed that was waiting. Either that or the floor. He laid her gently on it and took off his clothes.

The bed was too short, and it squeaked. The mattress was two inches of foam rubber wrapped in a sheet. The metal braces underneath jutted upward and were dangerous.

But the McDeeres did not notice.

When it was good and dark, and the crowd of shoppers at the mall thinned for a moment, a shiny black Chevrolet Silverado pickup pulled behind the BMW and stopped. A small man with a neat haircut and sideburns jumped out, looked around and stuck a pointed screwdriver into the door lock of the BMW. Months later when he was sentenced, he would tell the judge that he had stolen over three hundred cars and pickups in eight states, and that he could break into a car and start the engine faster than the judge could with the keys. Said his average time was twenty-eight seconds. The judge was not impressed.

Occasionally, on a very lucky day, an idiot would leave the keys in the car, and the average time was reduced dramatically. A scout had found this car with the keys. He smiled and turned them. The Silverado raced away, followed by the BMW.

The Nordic jumped from the van and watched. It was too fast. He was too late. The pickup just pulled up, blocked his vision for an instant, then wham!, the BMW was gone. Stolen! Before his very eyes. He kicked the van. Now, how would he explain this?

He crawled back into the van and waited for McDeere.

After an hour on the couch, the pain of loneliness had been forgotten. They walked through the small apartment holding hands and kissing. In the bedroom, Mitch had his first viewing of what had become known among the three as the Bendini Papers. He had seen Tammy's notes and summaries, but not the actual documents. The room was like a chessboard with rows of neat stacks of papers. On two of the walls, Tammy had tacked sheets of white poster board, then covered them with the notes and lists and flowcharts.

One day soon he would spend hours in the room, studying the papers and preparing his case. But not tonight. In a few minutes, he would leave her and return to the mall.

She led him back to the couch.

The hall on the tenth floor, Madison Wing, of the Baptist Hospital was empty except for an orderly and a male nurse writing on his clipboard. Visiting hours had ended at nine, and it was ten-thirty. He eased down the hall, spoke to the orderly, was ignored by the nurse and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a strong voice said.

He pushed the heavy door open and stood by the bed.

“Hello, Mitch,” Avery said. “Can you believe this?”

“What happened?”

“I woke up at six this morning with stomach cramps, I thought. I took a shower and felt a sharp pain right here, on my shoulder. My breathing got heavy, and I started sweating. I thought no, not me. Hell, I’m forty-four, in great shape, work out all the time, eat pretty good, drink a little too much, maybe, but not me. I called my doctor, and he said to meet him here at the hospital. He thinks it was a slight heart attack. Nothing serious, he hopes, but they’re running tests for the next few days.”

“A heart attack.”

“That’s what he said.”

“I’m not surprised, Avery. It’s a wonder any lawyer in that firm lives past fifty.”

“Capps did it to me, Mitch. Sonny Capps. This is his heart attack. He called Friday and said he’d found a new tax firm in Washington. Wants all his records. That’s my biggest client. I billed him almost four hundred thousand last year, about what he paid in taxes. He’s not mad about the attorney’s fees, but he’s furious about the taxes. It doesn’t make sense, Mitch.”

“He’s not worth dying for.” Mitch looked for an IV, but did not see one. There were no tubes or wires. He sat in the only chair and laid his feet on the bed.

“Jean filed for divorce, you know.”

“I heard. That’s no surprise, is it?”

“Surprised she didn’t do it last year. I’ve offered her a small fortune as a settlement. I hope she takes it. I don’t need a nasty divorce.”

Who does? thought Mitch. “What did Lambert say?”

“It was kind of fun, really. In nineteen years I’ve never seen him lose his cool, but he lost it. He told me I was drinking too much, chasing women and who knows what else. Said I had embarrassed the firm. Suggested I see a psychiatrist.”

Avery spoke slowly, deliberately, and at times with a raspy, weak voice. It seemed phony. A sentence later he would forget about it and return to his normal voice. He lay perfectly still like a corpse, with the sheets tucked neatly around him. His color was good.

“I think you need a psychiatrist. Maybe two.”

“Thanks. I need a month in the sun. Doc said he would discharge me in three or four days, and that I couldn’t work for two months. Sixty days, Mitch. Said I cannot, under any circumstances, go near the office for sixty days.”

“What a blessing. I think I’ll have a slight heart attack.”

“At your pace, it’s guaranteed.”

“What are you, a doctor now?”

“No. Just scared. You get a scare like this, and you start thinking about things. Today is the first time in my life I’ve ever thought about dying. And if you don’t think about death, you don’t appreciate life.”

“This is getting pretty heavy.”

“Yeah, I know. How’s Abby?”

“Okay. I guess. I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“You’d better go see her and bring her home. And get her happy. Sixty hours a week is plenty, Mitch. You’ll ruin your marriage and kill yourself if you work more. She wants babies, then get them. I wish I had done things differently.”

“Damn, Avery. When’s the funeral? You’re forty-four, and you had a slight heart attack. You’re not exactly a vegetable.”

The male nurse glided in and glared at Mitch. “Visiting hours are over, sir. You need to leave.”

Mitch jumped to his feet. “Yeah, sure.” He slapped Avery’s feet and walked out. “See you in a couple of days.”

“Thanks for coming. Tell Abby I said hello.”

The elevator was empty. Mitch pushed the button to the sixteenth floor and seconds later got off. He ran two flights of stairs to the eighteenth, caught his breath and opened the door. Down the hall, away from the elevators, Rick Acklin watched and whispered into a dead telephone receiver. He nodded at Mitch, who walked toward him. Acklin pointed, and Mitch stepped into a small area used as a waiting room by worried relatives. It was dark and empty, with two rows of folding chairs and a television that did not work. A Coke machine provided the only light. Tarrance sat next to it and flipped through an old magazine. He wore a sweat suit, headband, navy socks and white canvas sneakers. Tarrance the jogger.

Mitch sat next to him, facing the hall.

“You’re clean. They followed you from the office to the parking lot, then left. Acklin’s in the hall. Laney’s around somewhere. Relax.”

“I like the headband.”

“Thanks.”

“I see you got the message.”

“Obviously. Real clever, McDeere. I’m sitting at my desk this afternoon, minding my own business, trying to work on something other than the Bendini case. I’ve got others, you know. And my secretary comes in and says there’s a woman on the phone who wants to talk about a man named Marty Kozinski. I jump from my chair, grab the phone, and of course it’s your girl. She says it’s urgent, as always. So I say okay, let’s talk. No, she don’t play it. She makes me drop everything I’m doing, run over to the Peabody, go to the lounge—what’s the name of it? Mallards—and have a seat. So I’m sitting there, thinking about how stupid this is because our phones are clean. Dammit, Mitch, I know our phones are clean. We

can talk on our phones! I'm drinking coffee and the bartender walks over and asks if my name is Kozinski. Kozinski who? I ask. Just for fun. Since we're having a ball, right? Marty Kozinski, he says with a puzzled look on his face. I say yeah, that's me. I felt stupid, Mitch. And he says I have a call. I walk over to the bar, and it's your girl. Tolar's had a heart attack or something. And you'll be here around eleven. Real clever."

"Worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah, and it would work just as easily if she would talk to me on my phone in my office."

"I like it better my way. It's safer. Besides, it gets you out of the office."

"Damned right, it does. Me and three others."

"Look, Tarrance, we'll do it my way, okay? It's my neck on the line, not yours."

"Yeah, yeah. What the hell are you driving?"

"A rented Celebrity. Nice, huh?"

"What happened to the little black lawyer's car?"

"It had an insect problem. Full of bugs. I parked it at a mall Saturday night in Nashville and left the keys in it. Someone borrowed it. I love to sing, but I have a terrible voice. Ever since I could drive I've done my singing in the car, alone. But with the bugs and all, I was too embarrassed to sing. I just got tired of it."

Tarrance could not resist a smile. "That's pretty good, McDeere. Pretty good."

"You should've seen Oliver Lambert this morning when I walked in and laid the police report on his desk. He stuttered and stammered and told me how sorry he was. I acted like I was real sad. Insurance will cover it, so old Oliver says they'll get me another one. Then he says they'll go get me a rental car for the meantime. I told him I already had one. Got it in Nashville Saturday night. He didn't like this, because he knew it was insect-free. He calls the BMW dealer himself, while I'm standing there, to check on a new one for me. He asked me what color I wanted. I said I was tired of black and wanted a burgundy one with tan interior. I drove to the BMW place yesterday and looked around. I didn't see a burgundy of

any model. He told the guy on the phone what I wanted, and then he tells him they don't have it. How about black, or navy, or gray, or red, or white? No, no, no, I want a burgundy one. They'll have to order it, he reports. Fine, I said. He hung up the phone and asked me if I was sure I couldn't use another color. Burgundy, I said. He wanted to argue, but realized it would seem foolish. So, for the first time in ten months, I can sing in my car."

"But a Celebrity. For a hotshot tax lawyer. That's got to hurt."

"I can deal with it."

Tarrance was still smiling, obviously impressed. "I wonder what the boys in the chop shop will do when they strip it down and find all those bugs."

"Probably sell it to a pawnshop as stereo equipment. How much was it worth?"

"Our boys said it was the best. Ten, fifteen thousand. I don't know. That's funny."

Two nurses walked by talking loudly. They turned a corner, and the hall was quiet. Acklin pretended to place another phone call.

"How's Tolar?" Tarrance asked.

"Superb. I hope my heart attack is as easy as his. He'll be here for a few days, then off for two months. Nothing serious."

"Can you get in his office?"

"Why should I? I've already copied everything in it."

Tarrance leaned closer and waited for more.

"No, I cannot get in his office. They've changed the locks on the third and fourth floors. And the basement."

"How do you know this?"

"The girl, Tarrance. In the last week, she's been in every office in the building, including the basement. She's checked every door, pulled on every drawer, looked in every closet. She's read mail, looked at files and rummaged through the garbage. There's not much garbage, really. The building has ten paper shredders in it. Four in the basement. Did you know that?"

Tarrance listened intently and did not move a muscle. "How did she—"

"Don't ask, Tarrance, because I won't tell you."

“She works there! She’s a secretary or something. She’s helping you from the inside.”

Mitch shook his head in frustration. “Brilliant, Tarrance. She called you twice today. Once at about two-fifteen and then about an hour later. Now, how would a secretary make two calls to the FBI an hour apart?”

“Maybe she didn’t work today. Maybe she called from home.”

“You’re wrong, Tarrance, and quit guessing. Don’t waste time worrying about her. She works for me, and together we’ll deliver the goods to you.”

“What’s in the basement?”

“One big room with twelve cubicles, twelve busy desks and a thousand file cabinets. Electronically wired file cabinets. I think it’s the operations center for their money-laundering activities. On the walls of the cubicles, she noticed names and phone numbers of dozens of banks in the Caribbean. There’s not much information lying around down there. They’re very careful. There’s a smaller room off to the side, heavily locked, and full of computers larger than refrigerators.”

“Sounds like the place.”

“It is, but forget it. There’s no way to get the stuff out without alerting them. Impossible. I know of only one way to bring the goods out.”

“Okay.”

“A search warrant.”

“Forget it. No probable cause.”

“Listen to me, Tarrance. This is how it’s gonna be, okay? I can’t give you all the documents you want. But I can give you all you need. I have in my possession over ten thousand documents, and although I have not reviewed all of them, I’ve seen enough to know that if you had them, you could show them to a judge and get a search warrant for Front Street. You can take the records I have now and obtain indictments for maybe half the firm. But the same documents will get your search warrant and, consequently, a truckload of indictments. There’s no other way to do it.”

Tarrance walked to the hall and looked around. Empty. He stretched his legs and walked to the Coke machine. He leaned on it and looked through the small window to the east. "Why only half the firm?"

"Initially, only half. Plus a number of retired partners. Scattered through my documents are various names of partners who've set up the bogus Cayman companies with Morolto money. Those indictments will be easy. Once you have all the records, your conspiracy theory will fall in place. and you can indict everyone."

"Where did you get the documents?"

"I got lucky. Very lucky. I sort of figured the firm had more sense than to keep the Cayman bank records in this country. I had a hunch the records might be in the Caymans. Fortunately, I was right. We copied the documents in the Caymans."

"We?"

"The girl. And a friend."

"Where are the records now?"

"You and your questions, Tarrance. They're in my possession. That's all you need to know."

"I want those documents from the basement."

"Listen to me, Tarrance. Pay attention. The documents in the basement are not coming out until you go in with a search warrant. It is impossible, do you hear?"

"Who are the guys in the basement?"

"Don't know. I've been there ten months and never seen them. I don't know where they park or how they get in and out. They're invisible. I figure the partners and the boys in the basement do the dirty work."

"What kind of equipment is down there?"

"Two copiers, four shredders, high-speed printers and all those computers. State of the art."

Tarrance walked to the window, obviously deep in thought. "That makes sense. Makes a lot of sense. I've always wondered how the firm, with all those secretaries and clerks and paralegals, could maintain such secrecy about Morolto."

“It’s easy. The secretaries and clerks and paralegals know nothing about it. They’re kept busy with the real clients. The partners and senior associates sit in their big offices and dream up exotic ways to launder money, and the basement crew does the grunt work. It’s a great setup.”

“So there are plenty of legitimate clients?”

“Hundreds. They’re talented lawyers with an amazing clientele. It’s a great cover.”

“And you’re telling me, McDeere, that you’ve got the documents now to support indictments and search warrants? You’ve got them—they’re in your possession?”

“That’s what I said.”

“In this country?”

“Yes, Tarrance, the documents are in this country. Very close to here, actually.”

Tarrance was fidgety now. He rocked from one foot to the other and cracked his knuckles. He was breathing quickly. “What else can you get out of Front Street?”

“Nothing. It’s too dangerous. They’ve changed the locks, and that sort of worries me. I mean, why would they change the locks on the third and fourth floors and not on the first and second? I made some copies on the fourth floor two weeks ago, and I don’t think it was a good idea. I’m getting bad vibes. No more records from Front Street.”

“What about the girl?”

“She no longer has access.”

Tarrance chewed his fingernails, rocking back and forth. Still staring at the window. “I want the records, McDeere, and I want them real soon. Like tomorrow.”

“When does Ray get his walking papers?”

“Today’s Monday. I think it’s set up for tomorrow night. You wouldn’t believe the cussing I’ve taken from Voyles. He’s had to pull every string in the book. You think I’m kidding? He called in both senators from Tennessee, and they personally flew to Nashville to visit the governor. Oh, I’ve been cussed, McDeere. All because of your brother.”

“He appreciates it.”

“What’s he gonna do when he gets out?”

“I’ll take care of that. You just get him out.”

“No guarantees. If he gets hurt, it ain’t our fault.”

Mitch stood and looked at his watch. “Gotta run. I’m sure someone’s out there waiting for me.”

“When do we meet again?”

“She’ll call. Just do as she says.”

“Oh, come on, Mitch! Not that routine again. She can talk to me on my phone. I swear! We keep our lines clean. Please, not that again.”

“What’s your mother’s name, Tarrance?”

“What? Doris.”

“Doris?”

“Yeah, Doris.”

“Small world. We can’t use Doris. Whom did you take to your senior prom?”

“Uh, I don’t think I went.”

“I’m not surprised. Who was your first date, if you had one?”

“Mary Alice Brenner. She was hot too. She wanted me.”

“I’m sure. My girl’s name is Mary Alice. The next time Mary Alice calls, you do exactly as she says, okay?”

“I can’t wait.”

“Do me a favor, Tarrance. I think Tolar’s faking, and I’ve got a weird feeling his fake heart attack is somehow related to me. Get your boys to snoop around here and check out his alleged heart attack.”

“Sure. We have little else to do.”

Tuesday morning the office buzzed with concern for Avery Tolar. He was doing fine. Running tests. No permanent damage. Overworked. Stressed out. Capps did it. Divorce did it. Leave of absence.

Nina brought a stack of letters to be signed. "Mr. Lambert would like to see you, if you're not too busy. He just called."

"Fine. I'm supposed to meet Frank Mulholland at ten. Do you know that?"

"Of course I know that. I'm the secretary. I know everything. Your office or his?"

Mitch looked at his appointment book and pretended to search. Mulholland's office. In the Cotton Exchange Building.

"His," he said with a frown.

"You met there last time, didn't you? Didn't they teach you about turf in law school? Never, I repeat, never meet two times in a row on the adversary's turf. It's unprofessional. It's uncool. Shows weakness."

"How can you ever forgive me?"

"Wait till I tell the other girls. They all think you're so cute and macho. When I tell them you're a wimp, they'll be shocked."

"They need to be shocked, with a cattle prod."

"How's Abby's mother?"

"Much better. I'm going up this weekend."

She picked up two files. "Lambert's waiting."

Oliver Lambert pointed at the stiff sofa and offered coffee. He sat perfectly erect in a wing chair and held his cup like a British aristocrat. "I'm worried about Avery," he said.

"I saw him last night," Mitch said. "Doctor's forcing a two-month retirement."

"Yes, that's why you're here. I want you to work with Victor Milligan for the next two months. He'll get most of Avery's files, so it's familiar territory."

"That's fine. Victor and I are good friends."

"You'll learn a lot from him. A genius at taxation. Reads two books a day."

Great, thought Mitch. He should average ten a day in prison. "Yes, he's a very smart man. He's helped me out of a jam or two."

"Good. I think you'll get along fine. Try and see him sometime this morning. Now, Avery had some unfinished business in the Caymans. He goes there a lot, as you know, to meet with certain bankers. In fact, he was scheduled to leave tomorrow for a couple of days. He told me this morning you're familiar with the clients and the accounts, so we need you to go."

The Lear, the loot, the condo, the storage room, the accounts. A thousand thoughts flashed in his mind. It did not add up. "The Caymans? Tomorrow?"

"Yes, it's quite urgent. Three of his clients are in dire need of summaries of their accounts and other legal work. I wanted Milligan to go, but he's due in Denver in the morning. Avery said you could handle it."

"Sure, I can handle it."

"Fine. The Lear will take you. You'll leave around noon and return by commercial flight late Friday. Any problems?"

Yes, many problems. Ray was leaving prison. Tarrance was demanding the contraband. A half million bucks had to be collected. And he was scheduled to disappear anytime.

"No problems."

He walked to his office and locked the door. He kicked off his shoes, lay on the floor and closed his eyes.

The elevator stopped on the seventh floor, and Mitch bolted up the stairs to the ninth. Tammy opened the door and locked it behind

him. He walked to the window.

"Were you watching?" he asked.

"Of course. The guard by your parking lot stood on the sidewalk and watched you walk here."

"Wonderful. Even Dutch follows me."

He turned and inspected her. "You look tired."

"Tired? I'm dead. In the past three weeks I've been a janitor, a secretary, a lawyer, a banker, a whore, a courier and a private investigator. I've flown to Grand Cayman nine times, bought nine sets of new luggage and hauled back a ton of stolen documents. I've driven to Nashville four times and flown ten. I've read so many bank records and legal crap I'm half blind. And when it's bedtime, I put on my little Dustbusters shirt and play maid for six hours. I've got so many names, I've written them on my hand so I won't get confused."

"I've got another for you."

"This doesn't surprise me. What?"

"Mary Alice. From now on, when you talk to Tarrance, you're Mary Alice."

"Let me write that down. I don't like him. He's very rude on the phone."

"I've got great news for you."

"I can't wait."

"You can quit Dustbusters."

"I think I'll lie down and cry. Why?"

"It's hopeless."

"I told you that a week ago. Houdini couldn't get files out of there, copy them and sneak them back in without getting caught."

"Did you talk to Abanks?" Mitch asked.

"Yes."

"Did he get the money?"

"Yes. It was wired Friday."

"Is he ready?"

"Said he was."

"Good. What about the forger?"

"I'm meeting with him this afternoon."

“Who is he?”

“An ex-con. He and Lomax were old pals. Eddie said he was the best documents man in the country.”

“He’d better be. How much?”

“Five thousand. Cash, of course. New IDs, passports, driver’s licenses and visas.”

“How long will it take him?”

“I don’t know. When do you need it?”

Mitch sat on the edge of the rented desk. He breathed deeply and tried to think. To calculate. “As soon as possible. I thought I had a week, but now I don’t know. Just get it as soon as possible. Can you drive to Nashville tonight?”

“Oh yes. I’d love to. I haven’t been there in two days.”

“I want a Sony camcorder with a tripod set up in the bedroom. Buy a case of tapes. And I want you to stay there, by the phone, for the next few days. Review the Bendini Papers again. Work on your summaries.”

“You mean I have to stay there?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’ve ruptured two disks sleeping on that couch.”

“You rented it.”

“What about the passports?”

“What’s the guy’s name?”

“Doc somebody. I’ve got his number.”

“Give it to me. Tell him I’ll call in a day or so. How much money do you have?”

“I’m glad you asked. I started with fifty thousand, right? I’ve spent ten thousand on airfare, hotels, luggage and rental cars. And I’m still spending. Now you want a video camera. And fake IDs. I’d hate to lose money on this deal.”

Mitch started for the door. “How about another fifty thousand?”

“I’ll take it.”

He winked at her and closed the door, wondering if he would ever see her again.

The cell was eight by eight, with a toilet in a corner and a set of bunk beds. The top bunk was uninhabited and had been for a year. Ray lay on the bottom bunk with wires running from his ears. He spoke to himself in a very foreign language. Turkish. At that moment on that floor, it was safe to bet he was the only soul listening to Berlitz jabber in Turkish. There was quiet talk up and down the hall, but most lights were out. Eleven o'clock, Tuesday night.

The guard walked silently to his cell. "McDeere," he said softly, secretly, through the bars. Ray sat on the edge of the bed, under the bunk above, and stared at him. He removed the wires.

"Warden wants to see you."

Sure, he thought, the warden's sitting at his desk at 11 p.m. waiting on me. "Where are we going?" It was an anxious question.

"Put your shoes on and come on."

Ray glanced around the cell and took a quick inventory of his worldly possessions. In eight years he had accumulated a black-and-white television, a large cassette player, two cardboard boxes full of tapes and several dozen books. He made three dollars a day working in the prison laundry, but after cigarettes there had been little to spend on tangibles. These were his only assets. Eight years.

The guard fitted a heavy key in the door and slid it open a few inches. He turned off the light. "Just follow me, and no cute stuff. I don't know who you are, mister, but you got some heavy-duty friends."

Other keys fit other doors, and they were outside under the basketball hoop. "Stay behind me," the guard said.

Ray's eyes darted around the dark compound. The wall loomed like a mountain in the distance, beyond the courtyard and walking area where he had paced a thousand miles and smoked a ton of cigarettes. It was sixteen feet tall in the daylight, but looked much larger at night. The guard towers were fifty yards apart and well lit. And heavily armed.

The guard was casual and unconcerned. Of course, he had a uniform and a gun. He moved confidently between two cinder-block buildings, telling Ray to follow and be cool. Ray tried to be cool.

They stopped at the corner of a building, and the guard gazed at the wall, eighty feet away. Floodlights made a routine sweep of the courtyard, and they backed into the darkness.

Why are we hiding? Ray asked himself. Are those guys up there with the guns on our side? He would like to know before he made any dramatic moves.

The guard pointed to the exact spot on the wall where James Earl Ray and his gang went over. A rather famous spot, studied and admired by most of the inmates at Brushy Mountain. Most of the white ones anyway. "In about five minutes, they'll throw a ladder up there. The wire has already been cut on top. You'll find a heavy rope on the other side."

"Mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Make it quick."

"What about all these lights?"

"They'll be diverted. You'll have total darkness."

"And those guns up there?"

"Don't worry. They'll look the other way."

"Dammit! Are you sure?"

"Look, man, I've seen some inside jobs before, but this takes the cake. Warden Lattemer himself planned this one. He's right up there." The guard pointed to the nearest tower.

"The warden?"

"Yep. Just so nothing'll go wrong."

"Who's throwing up the ladder?"

"Coupla guards."

Ray wiped his forehead with his sleeve and breathed deeply. His mouth was dry and his knees were weak.

The guard whispered, "There'll be a dude waiting for you. His name is Bud. White dude. He'll find you on the other side, and just do what he says."

The floodlights swept through again, then died. "Get ready," the guard said. Darkness settled in, followed by a dreadful silence. The wall was now black. From the nearest tower, a whistle blew two short signals. Ray knelt and watched.

From behind the next building, he could see the silhouettes running to the wall. They grabbed at something in the grass, then hoisted it.

“Run, dude,” the guard said. “Run!”

Ray sprinted with his head low. The homemade ladder was in place. The guards grabbed his arms and threw him to the first step. The ladder bounced as he scurried up the two-by-fours. The top of the wall was two feet wide. A generous opening had been cut in the coiled barbed wire. He slid through without touching it. The rope was right where it was supposed to be, and he eased down the outside of the wall. Eight feet from pay dirt, he turned loose and jumped. He squatted and looked around. Still dark. The floodlights were on hold.

The clearing stopped a hundred feet away, and the dense woods began. “Over here,” the voice said calmly. Ray started for it. Bud was waiting in the first cluster of black bushes.

“Hurry. Follow me.”

Ray followed him until the wall was out of sight. They stopped in a small clearing next to a dirt trail. He stuck out a hand. “I’m Bud Riley. Kinda fun, ain’t it?”

“Unbelievable. Ray McDeere.”

Bud was a stocky man with a black beard and a black beret. He wore combat boots, jeans and a camouflage jacket. No gun was in sight. He offered Ray a cigarette.

“Who are you with?” Ray asked.

“Nobody. I just do a little free-lance work for the warden. They usually call me when somebody goes over the wall. Course, this is a little different. Usually I bring my dogs. I thought we’d wait here for a minute until the sirens go off, so you can hear. Wouldn’t be right if you didn’t get to hear ’em. I mean, they’re sorta in your honor.”

“That’s okay. I’ve heard them before.”

“Yeah, but it’s different out here when they go off. It’s a beautiful sound.”

“Look, Bud, I—”

“Just listen, Ray. We got plenty of time. They won’t chase you, much.”

“Much?”

“Yeah, they gotta make a big scene, wake ever’-body up, just like a real escape. But they ain’t coming after you. I don’t know what kinda pull you got, but it’s something.”

The sirens began screaming, and Ray jumped. Lights flashed across the black sky, and the faint voices of the tower guards were audible.

“See what I mean?”

“Let’s go,” Ray said, and began walking.

“My truck’s just up the road a piece. I brought you some clothes. Warden gave me your sizes. Hope you like them.”

Bud was out of breath when they reached the truck. Ray quickly changed into the olive Duckheads and navy cotton work shirt. “Very nice, Bud,” he said.

“Just throw them prison clothes in the bushes.”

They drove the winding mountain trail for two miles, then turned onto blacktop. Bud listened to Conway Twitty and said nothing.

“Where are we going, Bud?” Ray finally asked.

“Well, the warden said he didn’t care and really didn’t want to know. Said it was up to you. I’d suggest we get to a big town where there’s a bus station. After that, you’re on your own.”

“How far will you drive me?”

“I got all night, Ray. You name the town.”

“I’d like to get some miles behind us before I start hanging around a bus station. How about Knoxville?”

“Knoxville it is. Where are you going from there?”

“I don’t know. I need to get out of the country.”

“With your friends, that should be no problem. Be careful, though. By tomorrow, your picture will be hanging in every sheriff’s office in ten states.”

Three cars with blue lights came blazing over the hill in front of them. Ray ducked onto the floorboard.

“Relax, Ray. They can’t see you.”

He watched them disappear through the rear window. “What about roadblocks?”

“Look, Ray. Ain’t gonna be no roadblocks, okay? Trust me.” Bud stuck a hand in a pocket and threw a wad of cash on the seat. “Five hundred bucks. Hand-delivered by the warden. You got some stout friends, buddy.”

Wednesday morning. Tarry Ross climbed the stairs to the fourth floor of the Phoenix Park Hotel. He paused on the landing outside the hall door and caught his breath. Sweat beaded across his eyebrows. He removed the dark sunglasses and wiped his face with the sleeve of his overcoat. Nausea hit below the belt, and he leaned on the stair rail. He dropped his empty briefcase on the concrete and sat on the bottom step. His hands shook like severe palsy, and he wanted to cry. He clutched his stomach and tried not to vomit.

The nausea passed, and he breathed again. Be brave, man, be brave. There's two hundred thousand waiting down the hall. If you got guts, you can go in there and get it. You can walk out with it, but you must have courage. He breathed deeper, and his hands settled down. Guts, man, guts.

The weak knees wobbled, but he made it to the door. Down the hall, past the rooms. Eighth door on the right. He held his breath, and knocked.

Seconds passed. He watched the dark hall through the dark glasses and could see nothing. "Yeah," a voice inside said, inches away.

"It's Alfred." Ridiculous name, he thought. Where'd it come from?

The door cracked, and a face appeared behind the little chain. The door closed, then opened wide. Alfred walked in.

"Good morning, Alfred," Vinnie Cozzo said warmly. "Would you like coffee?"

"I didn't come here for coffee," Alfred snapped. He placed the briefcase on the bed and stared at Cozzo.

“You’re always so nervous, Alfred. Why don’t you relax. There’s no way you can get caught.”

“Shut up, Cozzo. Where’s the money?”

Vinnie pointed to a leather handbag. He stopped smiling. “Talk to me, Alfred.”

The nausea hit again, but he kept his feet. He stared at them. His heart beat like pistons. “Okay, your man, McDeere, has been paid a million bucks already. Another million is on the way. He’s delivered one load of Bendini documents and claims to have ten thousand more.” A sharp pain hit his groin, and he sat on the edge of the bed. He removed his glasses.

“Keep talking,” Cozzo demanded.

“McDeere’s talked to our people many times in the last six months. He’ll testify at the trials, then hit the road as a protected witness. He and his wife.”

“Where are the other documents?”

“Dammit, I don’t know. He won’t tell. But they’re ready to be delivered. I want my money, Cozzo.”

Vinnie threw the handbag on the bed. Alfred opened it and the briefcase. He attacked the stacks of bills, his hands shaking violently.

“Two hundred thousand?” he asked desperately.

Vinnie smiled. “That was the deal, Alfred. I got another job for you in a couple of weeks.”

“No way, Cozzo. I can’t take any more of this.” He slammed the briefcase shut and ran to the door. He stopped and tried to calm himself. “What will you do with McDeere?” he asked, staring at the door.

“What do you think, Alfred?”

He bit his lip, clenched the briefcase and walked from the room. Vinnie smiled and locked the door. He pulled a card from his pocket and placed a call to the Chicago home of Mr. Lou Lazarov.

Tarry Ross walked in panic down the hall. He could see little from behind the glasses. Seven doors down, almost to the elevator, a huge hand reached from the darkness and pulled him into a room. The hand slapped him hard, and another fist landed in his stomach.

Another fist to the nose. He was on the floor, dazed and bleeding. The briefcase was emptied on the bed.

He was thrown into a chair, and the lights came on. Three FBI agents, his comrades, glared at him. Director Voyles walked up to him, shaking his head in disbelief. The agent with the huge, efficient hands stood nearby, within striking distance. Another agent was counting money.

Voyles leaned into his face. "You're a traitor, Ross. The lowest form of scum. I can't believe it."

Ross bit his lip and began sobbing.

"Who is it?" Voyles asked intently.

The crying was louder. No answer.

Voyles swung wildly and slapped Ross's left temple. He shrieked in pain. "Who is it, Ross? Talk to me."

"Vinnie Cozzo," he blurted between sobs.

"I know it's Cozzo! Dammit! I know that! But what did you tell him?"

Tears ran from his eyes and blood poured from his nose. His body shook and gyrated pitifully. No answer.

Voyles slapped him again, and again. "Tell me, you little sonofabitch. Tell me what Cozzo wants." He slapped him again.

Ross doubled over and dropped his head on his knees. The crying softened.

"Two hundred thousand dollars," an agent said.

Voyles dropped to one knee and almost whispered to Ross. "Is it McDeere, Ross? Please, oh please, tell me it's not McDeere. Tell me, Tarry, tell me it's not McDeere."

Tarry stuck his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor. The blood dripped neatly into one little puddle on the carpet. Gut check, Tarry. You don't get to keep your money. You're on the way to jail. You're a disgrace, Tarry. You're a slimy little scuzzball of a chicken, and it's over. What could possibly be gained by keeping secrets? Gut check, Tarry.

Voyles was pleading softly. Sinners, won't you come? "Please say it ain't McDeere, Tarry, please tell me it ain't."

Tarry sat straight and wiped his eyes with his fingers. He breathed deeply. Cleared his throat. He bit his lip, looked squarely at Voyles and nodded.

DeVasher had no time for the elevator. He ran down the stairs to the fourth floor, to the corner, a power one, and barged into Locke's office. Half the partners were there. Locke, Lambert, Milligan, McKnight, Dunbar, Denton, Lawson, Banahan, Kruger, Welch and Shottz. The other half had been summoned.

A quiet panic filled the room. DeVasher sat at the head of the conference table, and they gathered around.

"Okay, boys. It's not time to haul ass and head for Brazil. Not yet, anyway. We confirmed this morning that he has talked extensively to the Fibbies, that they have paid him a million cash, that they have promised another million, that he has certain documents that are believed to be fatal. This came straight from the FBI. Lazarov and a small army are flying into Memphis as we speak. It appears as though the damage has not been done. Yet. According to our source—a very high-ranking Fibbie—McDeere has over ten thousand documents in his possession, and he is ready to deliver. But he has only delivered a few so far. We think. Evidently, we have caught this thing in time. If we can prevent further damage, we should be okay. I say this, even though they have some documents. Obviously, they don't have much or they would've been here with search warrants."

DeVasher was onstage. He enjoyed this immensely. He spoke with a patronizing smile and looked at each of the worried faces. "Now, where is McDeere?"

Milligan spoke. "In his office. I just talked to him. He suspects nothing."

"Wonderful. He's scheduled to leave in three hours for Grand Cayman. Correct, Lambert?"

"That's correct. Around noon."

"Boys, the plane will never make it. The pilot will land in New Orleans for an errand, then he'll take off for the island. About thirty

minutes over the Gulf, the little blip will disappear from radar, forever. Debris will scatter over a thirty-square-mile area, and no bodies will ever be found. It's sad, but necessary."

"The Lear?" asked Denton.

"Yes, son, the Lear. We'll buy you another toy."

"We're assuming a lot, DeVasher," Locke said. "We're assuming the documents already in their possession are harmless. Four days ago you thought McDeere had copied some of Avery's secret files.

What gives?"

"They studied the files in Chicago. Yeah, they're full of incriminating evidence, but not enough to move with. They couldn't get the first conviction. You guys know the damning materials are on the island. And, of course, in the basement. No one can penetrate the basement. We checked the files in the condo. Everything looked in order."

Locke was not satisfied. "Then where did the ten thousand come from?"

"You're assuming he has ten thousand. I rather doubt it. Keep in mind, he's trying to collect another one million bucks before he takes off. He's probably lying to them and snooping around for more documents. If he had ten thousand, why wouldn't the Fibbies have them by now?"

"Then what's to fear?" asked Lambert.

"The fear is the unknown, Ollie. We don't know what he's got, except that he's got a million bucks. He's no dummy, and he just might stumble across something if left alone. We cannot allow that to happen. Lazarov, you see, said to blow his ass outta the air. Quote unquote."

"There's no way a rookie associate could find and copy that many incriminating records," Kruger said boldly, and looked around the group for approval. Several nodded at him with intense frowns.

"Why is Lazarov coming?" asked Dunbar, the real estate man. He said "Lazarov" as if Charles Manson was coming to dinner.

"That's a stupid question," DeVasher snapped, and looked around for the idiot. "First, we've got to take care of McDeere and hope the

damage is minimal. Then we'll take a long look at this unit and make whatever changes are necessary."

Locke stood and glared at Oliver Lambert. "Make sure McDeere's on that plane."

Tarrance, Acklin and Laney sat in stunned silence and listened to the speaker phone on the desk. It was Voyles in Washington, explaining exactly what had happened. He would leave for Memphis within the hour. He was almost desperate.

"You gotta bring him in, Tarrance. And quick. Cozzo doesn't know that we know about Tarry Ross, but Ross told him McDeere was on the verge of delivering the records. They could take him out at any time. You've got to get him. Now! Do you know where he is?"

"He's at the office," Tarrance said.

"Okay. Fine. Bring him in. I'll be there in two hours. I wanna talk to him. Goodbye."

Tarrance punched the phone, then dialed the number.

"Who are you calling?" Acklin asked.

"Bendini, Lambert & Locke. Attorneys-at-law."

"Are you crazy, Wayne?" Laney asked.

"Just listen."

The receptionist answered the phone. "Mitch McDeere, please," Tarrance said.

"One moment, please," she said. Then the secretary: "Mr. McDeere's office."

"I need to speak to Mitchell McDeere."

"I'm sorry, sir. He's in a meeting."

"Listen, young lady, this is Judge Henry Hugo, and he was supposed to be in my courtroom fifteen minutes ago. We're waiting for him. It's an emergency."

"Well, I see nothing on his calendar for this morning."

"Do you schedule his appointments?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"Then it's your fault. Now get him on the phone."

Nina ran across the hall and into his office. "Mitch, there's a Judge Hugo on the phone. Says you're supposed to be in court right now. You'd better talk to him."

Mitch jumped to his feet and grabbed the phone. He was pale. "Yes," he said.

"Mr. McDeere," Tarrance said. "Judge Hugo. You're late for my court. Get over here."

"Yes, Judge." He grabbed his coat and briefcase and frowned at Nina.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's not on your calendar."

Mitch raced down the hall, down the stairs, past the receptionist and out the front door. He ran north on Front Street to Union and darted through the lobby of the Cotton Exchange Building. On Union, he turned east and ran toward the Mid-America Mall.

The sight of a well-dressed young man with a briefcase running like a scared dog may be a common sight in some cities, but not in Memphis. People noticed.

He hid behind a fruit stand and caught his breath. He saw no one running behind him. He ate an apple. If it came to a footrace, he hoped Two-Ton Tony was chasing him.

He had never been particularly impressed with Wayne Tarrance. The Korean shoe store was a fiasco. The chicken place on Grand Cayman was equally dumb. His notebook on the Moroltos would bore a Cub Scout. But his idea about a Mayday code, a "don't ask questions, just run for your life" alert, was a brilliant idea. For a month, Mitch knew if Judge Hugo called, he had to hit the door on a dead run. Something bad had gone wrong, and the boys on the fifth floor were moving in. Where was Abby? he thought.

A few pedestrians walked in pairs along Union. He wanted a crowded sidewalk, but there was none. He stared at the corner of Front and Union and saw nothing suspicious. Two blocks east, he casually entered the lobby of the Peabody and looked for a phone. On the mezzanine overlooking the lobby, he found a neglected one in a short hallway near the men's room. He dialed the Memphis office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“Wayne Tarrance, please. It’s an emergency. This is Mitch McDeere.”

Tarrance was on the phone in seconds. “Mitch, where are you?”

“Okay, Tarrance, what’s going on?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m out of the building, Judge Hugo. I’m safe for now. What’s happened?”

“Mitch, you’ve gotta come in.”

“I don’t have to do a damned thing, Tarrance. And I won’t, until you talk to me.”

“Well, we’ve, uh, we’ve had a slight problem. There’s been a small leak. You need—”

“Leak, Tarrance? Did you say leak? There’s no such thing as a small leak. Talk to me, Tarrance, before I hang up this phone and disappear. You’re tracing this call, aren’t you, Tarrance? I’m hanging up.”

“No! Listen, Mitch. They know. They know we’ve been talking, and they know about the money and the files.”

There was a long pause. “A small leak, Tarrance. Sounds like the dam burst. Tell me about this leak, and quick.”

“God this hurts. Mitch, I want you to know how much this hurts. Voyles is devastated. One of our senior men sold the information. We caught him this morning at a hotel in Washington. They paid him two hundred thousand for the story on you. We’re in shock, Mitch.”

“Oh, I’m touched. I’m truly concerned over your shock and pain, Tarrance. I guess now you want me to run down there to your office so we can all sit around and console each other.”

“Voyles will be there by noon, Mitch. He’s flying in with his top people. He wants to meet with you. We’ll get you out of town.”

“Right. You want me to rush into your arms for protection. You’re an idiot, Tarrance. Voyles is an idiot. You’re all idiots. And I’m a fool for trusting you. Are you tracing this call, Tarrance?”

“No!”

“You’re lying. I’m hanging up, Tarrance. Sit tight and I’ll call you in thirty minutes from another phone.”

“No! Mitch, listen. You’re dead if you don’t come in.”

“Goodbye, Wayne. Sit by the phone.”

Mitch dropped the receiver and looked around. He walked to a marble column and peeked at the lobby below. The ducks were swimming around the fountain. The bar was deserted. A table was surrounded with rich old ladies sipping their tea and gossiping. A solitary guest was registering.

Suddenly, the Nordic stepped from behind a potted tree and stared at him. “Up there!” he yelled across the lobby to an accomplice. They watched him intently and glanced at the stairway under him. The bartender looked up at Mitch, then at the Nordic and his friend. The old ladies stared in silence.

“Call the police!” Mitch yelled as he backed away from the railing. Both men sprang across the lobby and hit the stairs. Mitch waited five seconds, and returned to the railing. The bartender had not moved. The ladies were frozen.

There were heavy noises on the stairs. Mitch sat on the railing, dropped his briefcase, swung his legs over, paused, then jumped twenty feet onto the carpet of the lobby. He fell like a rock, but landed squarely on both feet. Pain shot through his ankles and hips. The football knee buckled, but did not collapse.

Behind him, next to the elevators, was a small haberdashery with windows full of ties and Ralph Lauren’s latest. He limped into it. A kid of no more than nineteen waited eagerly behind the counter. There were no customers. An outside door opened onto Union.

“Is that door locked?” Mitch asked calmly.

“Yes, sir.”

“You wanna make a thousand dollars cash? Nothing illegal.” Mitch quickly peeled off ten hundred-dollar bills and threw them on the counter.

“Uh, sure. I guess.”

“Nothing illegal, okay? I swear. I wouldn’t get you in trouble. Unlock that door, and when two men come running in here in about twenty seconds, tell them I ran through that door and jumped in a cab.”

The kid smiled even brighter and raked up the money. "Sure. No problem."

"Where's the dressing room?"

"Yes, sir, over there next to the closet."

"Unlock the door," Mitch said as he slid into the dressing room and sat down. He rubbed his knees and ankles.

The clerk was straightening ties when the Nordic and his partner ran through the door from the lobby. "Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"Did you see a man running through here, medium build, dark gray suit, red tie?"

"Yes, sir. He just ran through there, through that door, and jumped in a cab."

"A cab! Damn!" The door opened and closed, and the store was silent. The kid walked to a shoe rack near the closet. "They're gone, sir."

Mitch was rubbing his knees. "Good. Go to the door and watch for two minutes. Let me know if you see them."

Two minutes later, he was back. "They're gone."

Mitch kept his seat and smiled at the door. "Great. I want one of those kelly-green sport coats, forty-four long, and a pair of white buckskins, ten D. Bring them here, would you? And keep watching."

"Yes, sir." He whistled around the store as he collected the coat and shoes, then slid them under the door. Mitch yanked off his tie and changed quickly. He sat down.

"How much do I owe you?" Mitch asked from the room.

"Well, let's see. How about five hundred?"

"Fine. Call me a cab, and let me know when it's outside."

Tarrance walked three miles around his desk. The call was traced to the Peabody, but Laney arrived too late. He was back now, sitting nervously with Acklin. Forty minutes after the first call, the secretary's voice blasted through the intercom. "Mr. Tarrance. It's McDeere."

Tarrance lunged at the phone. "Where are you?"

"In town. But not for long."

"Look, Mitch, you won't last two days on your own. They'll fly in enough thugs to start another war. You've got to let us help you."

"I don't know, Tarrance. For some strange reason I just don't trust you boys right now. I can't imagine why. Just a bad feeling."

"Please, Mitch. Don't make this mistake."

"I guess you want me to believe you boys can protect me for the rest of my life. Sorta funny, isn't it, Tarrance? I cut a deal with the FBI, and I almost get gunned in my own office. That's real protection."

Tarrance breathed deeply into the phone. There was a long pause. "What about the documents? We've paid you a million for them."

"You're cracking up, Tarrance. You paid me a million for my clean files. You got them, and I got the million. Of course, that was just part of the deal. Protection was also a part of it."

"Give us the damned files, Mitch. They're hidden somewhere close to us, you told me that. Take off if you want to, but leave the files."

"Won't work, Tarrance. Right now I can disappear, and the Moroltos may or may not come after me. If you don't get the files, you don't get the indictments. If the Moroltos don't get indicted, maybe, if I'm lucky, one day they'll just forget about me. I gave them a real scare, but no permanent damage. Hell, they may even hire me back one of these days."

"You don't really believe that. They'll chase you until they find you. If we don't get the records, we'll be chasing too. It's that simple, Mitch."

"Then I'll put my money on the Moroltos. If you guys find me first, there'll be a leak. Just a small one."

"You're outta your mind, Mitch. If you think you can take your million and ride into the sunset, you're a fool. They'll have goons on camels riding the deserts looking for you. Don't do it, Mitch."

"Goodbye, Wayne. Ray sends his regards."

The line was dead. Tarrance grabbed the phone and threw it against the wall.

Mitch glanced at the clock on the airport wall. He punched in another call. Tammy answered.

“Hello, sweetheart. Hate to wake you.”

“Don’t worry, the couch kept me awake. What’s up?”

“Major trouble. Get a pencil and listen very carefully. I don’t have a second to waste. I’m running, and they’re right behind me.”

“Fire away.”

“First, call Abby at her parents’. Tell her to drop everything and get out of town. She doesn’t have time to kiss her mother goodbye or to pack any clothes. Tell her to drop the phone, get in her car and drive away. And don’t look back. She takes Interstate 64 to Huntington, West Virginia, and goes to the airport. She flies from Huntington to Mobile. In Mobile, she rents a car and drives east on Interstate 10 to Gulf Shores, then east on Highway 182 to Perdido Beach. She checks in at the Perdido Beach Hilton under the name of Rachel James. And she waits. Got that?”

“Yeah.”

“Second. I need you to get on a plane and fly to Memphis. I called Doc, and the passports, etc., are not ready. I cussed him, but to no avail. He promised to work all night and have them ready in the morning. I will not be here in the morning, but you will. Get the documents.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Third. Get on a plane and get back to the apartment in Nashville. Sit by the phone. Do not, under any circumstances, leave the phone.”

“Got it.”

“Fourth. Call Abanks.”

“Okay. What are your travel plans?”

“I’m coming to Nashville, but I’m not sure when I’ll be there. I gotta go. Listen, Tammy, tell Abby she could be dead within the hour if she doesn’t run. So run, dammit, run!”

“Okay, boss.”

He walked quickly to Gate 22 and boarded the 10:04 Delta flight to Cincinnati. He clutched a magazine full of one-way tickets, all bought with MasterCard. One to Tulsa on American Flight 233,

leaving at 10:14, and purchased in the name of Mitch McDeere; one to Chicago on Northwest Flight 861, leaving at 10:15, and purchased in the name of Mitchell McDeere; one to Dallas on United Flight 562, leaving at 10:30, and purchased in the name of Mitchell McDeere; and one to Atlanta on Delta Flight 790, leaving at 11:10, and purchased in the name of Mitchell McDeere.

The ticket to Cincinnati had been bought with cash, in the name of Sam Fortune.

Lazarov entered the power office on the fourth floor and every head bowed. DeVasher faced him like a scared, whipped child. The partners studied their shoelaces and held their bowels.

“We can’t find him,” DeVasher said.

Lazarov was not one to scream and cuss. He took great pride in being cool under pressure. “You mean he just got up and walked out of here?” he asked coolly.

There was no answer. None was needed.

“All right, DeVasher, this is the plan. Send every man you’ve got to the airport. Check with every airline. Where’s his car?”

“In the parking lot.”

“That’s great. He left here on foot. He walked out of your little fortress on foot. Joey’ll love this. Check with every rental-car company. Now, how many honorable partners do we have here.”

“Sixteen present.”

“Divide them up in pairs and send them to the airports in Miami, New Orleans, Houston, Atlanta, Chicago, L.A., San Francisco and New York. Roam the concourses of these airports. Live in these airports. Eat in these airports. Watch the international flights in these airports. We’ll send reinforcements tomorrow. You honorable esquires know him well, so go find him. It’s a long shot, but what have we got to lose? It’ll keep you counselors busy. And I hate to tell you boys, but these hours are not billable. Now, where’s his wife?”

“Danesboro, Kentucky. At her parents’.”

“Go get her. Don’t hurt her, just bring her in.”

“Do we start shredding?” DeVasher asked.

“We’ll wait twenty-four hours. Send someone to Grand Cayman and destroy those records. Now hurry, DeVasher.”

The power office emptied.

Voyles stomped around Tarrance’s desk and barked commands. A dozen lieutenants scribbled as he yelled. “Cover the airport. Check every airline. Notify every office in every major city. Contact customs. Do we have a picture of him?”

“We can’t find one, sir.”

“Find one, and find it quick. It needs to be in every FBI and customs office by tonight. He’s on the run. Sonofabitch!”

The bus left Birmingham shortly before 2 p.m., Wednesday. Ray sat in the rear and studied every person who climbed in and found a seat. He looked sporty. He had taken a cab to a mall in Birmingham and in thirty minutes had purchased a new pair of faded Levi's, a plaid short-sleeved golf shirt and a pair of red-and-white Reeboks. He had also eaten a pizza and received a severe Marine-style haircut. He wore aviator sunshades and an Auburn cap.

A short, fat, dark-skinned lady sat next to him.

He smiled at her. "*¿De dónde es usted?*" he asked. Where are you from?

Her face broke into unrestrained delight. A wide smile revealed few teeth. "*México,*" she said proudly. "*¿Habla español?*" she asked eagerly.

"*Sí.*"

For two hours, they jabbered in Spanish as the bus rolled along to Montgomery. She had to repeat occasionally, but he surprised himself. He was eight years out of practice and a little rusty.

Behind the bus, Special Agents Jenkins and Jones followed in a Dodge Aries. Jenkins drove while Jones slept. The trip had become boring ten minutes out of Knoxville. Just routine surveillance, they were told. If you lose him, no big deal. But try not to lose him.

The flight from Huntington to Atlanta was two hours away, and Abby sat in a secluded corner of a dark lounge watching. Just watching. In the chair next to her was a carry-on bag. Contrary to her urgent instructions, she had packed a toothbrush, makeup and a few clothes. She had also written a note to her parents, giving a

brief story about how she had to run to Memphis, needed to see Mitch, everything's fine, don't worry, hugs and kisses, love, Abby. She ignored the coffee and watched the arriving and departing.

She did not know if he was dead or alive. Tammy said he was scared, but very much in control. As always. She said he was flying to Nashville, and she, Tammy, was flying to Memphis. Confusing, but she was certain he knew what he was doing. Get to Perdido Beach and wait.

Abby had never heard of Perdido Beach. And she was certain he'd never been there either.

The lounge was nerve-racking. Every ten minutes a drunk businessman would venture over and throw something suggestive at her. Get lost, she said a dozen times.

After two hours, they boarded. Abby was stuck in the aisle seat. She buckled her belt and relaxed. And then she saw her.

She was a striking blonde with high cheekbones and a firm jaw that was almost unfeminine, yet strong and attractive. Abby had seen the partial face before. Partial, because the eyes were covered, as before. She looked at Abby and glanced away as she passed and went to her seat somewhere in the rear.

The Shipwreck Bar! The blonde in the Shipwreck Bar. The blonde who was eavesdropping on her and Mitch and Abanks. They had found her. And if they had found her, where was her husband? What had they done to him? She thought of the two-hour drive from Danesboro to Huntington, through the winding mountain roads. She had driven like a maniac. They could not have followed her.

They taxied from the terminal and minutes later lifted off for Atlanta.

For a second time in three weeks, Abby watched dusk from the inside of a 727 at the airport in Atlanta. She and the blonde. They were on the ground for thirty minutes and then left for Mobile.

From Cincinnati, Mitch flew to Nashville. He arrived at 6 p.m., Wednesday, long after the banks had closed. He found a U-Haul truck rental place in the phone book and flagged a cab.

He rented one of the smaller models, a sixteen-footer. He paid cash, but was forced to use his driver's license and a credit card for a deposit. If DeVasher could track him to a U-Haul place in Nashville, so be it. He bought twenty cardboard packing boxes and left for the apartment.

He had not eaten since Tuesday night, but he was in luck. Tammy had left a bag of microwave popcorn and two beers. He ate like a pig. At eight, he made his first call to the Perdido Beach Hilton. He asked for Lee Stevens. He had not arrived, she said. He stretched out on the den floor and thought of a hundred things that could happen to Abby. She could be dead in Kentucky and he wouldn't know. He couldn't call.

The couch had not been folded, and the cheap sheets hung off the end and fell to the floor. Tammy was not much for housework. He looked at the small, temporary bed and thought of Abby. Only five nights ago, they had tried to kill each other on the bed. Hopefully, she was on the plane. Alone.

In the bedroom, he sat on the unopened Sony box and marveled at the roomful of documents. Across the carpet she had built perfect columns of paper, all painstakingly divided into Cayman banks and Cayman companies. On top of each stack was a yellow legal pad, with the company name followed by pages of dates and entries. And names!

Even Tarrance could follow the paper trail. A grand jury would eat it up. The U.S. Attorney would call press conferences. And the trial juries would convict, and convict and convict.

Special Agent Jenkins yawned into the telephone receiver and punched the numbers to the Memphis office. He had not slept in twenty-four hours. Jones was snoring in the car.

"FBI," a male voice said.

"Yeah, who's there?" Jenkins asked. Just a routine check-in.

"Acklin."

"Hey, Rick. This is Jenkins. We've—"

“Jenkins! Where have you been? Hold on!” Jenkins quit yawning and looked around the bus terminal. An angry voice yelled into the earpiece.

“Jenkins! Where are you?” It was Wayne Tarrance.

“We’re at the bus station in Mobile. We’ve lost him.”

“You what? How could you lose him?”

Jenkins was suddenly alert and leaning into the phone. “Wait a minute, Wayne. Our instructions were to follow him for eight hours to see where he went. Routine, you said.”

“I can’t believe you lost him.”

“Wayne, we weren’t told to follow him for the rest of his life. Eight hours, Wayne. We’ve followed for twenty hours, and he’s disappeared. What’s the big deal?”

“Why haven’t you called in before now?”

“We called in twice. In Birmingham and Montgomery. Line was busy both times. What’s going on, Wayne?”

“Just a minute.”

Jenkins grabbed the phone tighter and waited. Another voice: “Hello, Jenkins?”

“Yes.”

“Director Voyles here. What the hell happened?”

Jenkins held his breath and looked wildly around the terminal. “Sir, we lost him. We followed him for twenty hours, and when he got off the bus here in Mobile, we lost him in the crowd.”

“That’s great, son. How long ago?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“All right, listen. We desperately need to find him. His brother has taken our money and disappeared. Call the locals there in Mobile. Tell them who you are, and that an escaped murderer is on the loose in town. They’ve probably got Ray McDeere’s name and picture stuck to the walls. His mother lives in Panama City Beach, so alert every local between there and Mobile. I’m sending in our troops.”

“Okay. I’m sorry, sir. We weren’t told to trail him forever.”

“We’ll discuss it later.”

At ten, Mitch called the Perdido Beach Hilton for the second time. He asked for Rachel James. No arrival. He asked for Lee Stevens. One moment, she said. Mitch sat on the floor and waited intently. The line to the room was ringing. After a dozen rings, someone picked up.

“Yeah.” It was quick.

“Lee?” Mitch asked.

A pause. “Yeah.”

“This is Mitch. Congratulations.”

Ray fell on the bed and closed his eyes. “It was so easy, Mitch. How’d you do it?”

“I’ll tell you when we have time. Right now, there are a bunch of folks trying to kill me. And Abby. We’re on the run.”

“Who, Mitch?”

“It would take ten hours to tell the first chapter. We’ll do it later. Write this number down. 615-889-4380.”

“That’s not Memphis.”

“No, it’s Nashville. I’m in an apartment that’s serving as mission control. Memorize that number. If I’m not here, the phone will be answered by a girl named Tammy.”

“Tammy?”

“It’s a long story. Just do as I say. Sometime tonight, Abby will check in there under the name of Rachel James. She’ll be in a rented car.”

“She’s coming here!”

“Just listen, Ray. The cannibals are chasing us, but we’re a step ahead of them.”

“Ahead of who?”

“The Mafia. And the FBI.”

“Is that all?”

“Probably. Now listen to me. There is a slight chance Abby is being followed. You’ve got to find her, watch her and make damned sure no one is behind her.”

“And if they are?”

“Call me, and we’ll talk about it.”

“No problem.”

“Don’t use the phone except to call this number. And we can’t talk much.”

“I’ve got a bunch of questions, little brother.”

“And I’ve got the answers, but not now. Take care of my wife and call me when she gets there.”

“Will do. And, Mitch, thanks.”

“Adios.”

An hour later Abby turned off Highway 182 onto the winding driveway to the Hilton. She parked the four-door Cutlass with Alabama tags and walked nervously under the sprawling veranda to the front doors. She stopped for a second, looked behind her at the driveway and went inside.

Two minutes later, a yellow cab from Mobile stopped under the veranda, behind the shuttle vans. Ray watched the cab. A woman was in the back seat leaning forward and talking to the driver. They waited a minute. She pulled money from her purse and paid him. She got out and waited until the cab drove away. The woman was a blonde, and that was the first thing he noticed. Very shapely, with tight black corduroy pants. And black sunglasses, which seemed odd to him because it was pushing midnight. She walked suspiciously to the front doors, waited a minute, then went in. He watched her carefully. He moved toward the lobby.

The blonde approached the only clerk behind the registration desk. “A single room, please,” he heard her say.

The clerk slid a registration form across the counter. The blonde wrote her name and asked, “That lady who just checked in before me, what’s her name? I think she’s an old friend.”

The clerk flipped through the registration cards. “Rachel James.”

“Yeah, that’s her. Where’s she from?”

“It’s a Memphis address,” the clerk said.

“What’s her room number? I’d like to say hello.”

“I can’t give room numbers,” the clerk said.

The blonde quickly pulled two twenties from her purse and slid them across the counter. “I just want to say hello.”

The clerk took the money. "Room 622."

The woman paid in cash. "Where are the phones?"

"Around the corner," the clerk said. Ray slid around the corner and found four pay phones. He grabbed a middle one and began talking to himself.

The blonde took a phone on the end and turned her back to him. She spoke softly. He could hear only pieces.

"... checked in ... Room 622 ... Mobile ... some help ... I can't ... an hour?... yes ... hurry ..."

She hung up, and he talked louder into his dead phone.

Ten minutes later, there was a knock at the door. The blonde jumped from the bed, grabbed her .45 and stuck it in the corduroys under the shirt. She ignored the safety chain and cracked the door.

It burst open and knocked her against the wall. Ray lunged at her, grabbed the gun and pinned her to the floor. With her face in the carpet, he stuck the barrel of the .45 in her ear. "If you make a sound, I'll kill you!"

She stopped struggling and closed her eyes. No response.

"Who are you?" Ray demanded. He pushed the barrel deeper into her ear. Again, no response.

"Not a move, not a sound. Okay? I'd love to blow your head off."

He relaxed, still sitting on her back, and ripped open her flight bag. He dumped its contents on the floor and found a pair of clean tennis socks. "Open your mouth," he demanded.

She did not move. The barrel returned to her ear, and she slowly opened her mouth. Ray crammed the socks in between her teeth, then tightly blindfolded her with the silk nightshirt. He bound her feet and hands with panty hose, then ripped the bedsheets into long strips. The woman did not move. When he finished the binding and gagging, she resembled a mummy. He slid her under the bed.

The purse contained six hundred dollars in cash and a wallet with an Illinois driver's license. Karen Adair from Chicago. Date of birth: March 4, 1962. He took the wallet and gun.

The phone rang at 1 a.m., and Mitch was not asleep. He was in bank records up to his waist. Fascinating bank records. Highly incriminating.

“Hello,” he answered cautiously.

“Is this mission control?” The voice was in the vicinity of a loud jukebox.

“Where are you, Ray?”

“A joint called the Floribama lounge. Right on the state line.”

“Where’s Abby?”

“She’s in the car. She’s fine.”

Mitch breathed easier and grinned into the phone. He listened.

“We had to leave the hotel. A woman followed Abby in—same woman you saw in some bar in the Caymans. Abby is trying to explain everything. The woman followed her all day and showed up at the hotel. I took care of her, and we disappeared.”

“You took care of her?”

“Yeah, she wouldn’t talk, but she’s out of the way for a short time.”

“Abby’s fine?”

“Yeah. We’re both dead tired. Exactly what do you have in mind?”

“You’re about three hours away from Panama City Beach. I know you’re dead tired, but you need to get away from there. Get to Panama City Beach, ditch the car and get two rooms at the Holiday Inn. Call me when you check in.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Trust me, Ray.”

“I do, but I’m beginning to wish I was back in prison.”

“You can’t go back, Ray. We either disappear or we’re dead.”

The cab stopped at a red light in downtown Nashville, and Mitch hopped out on stiff and aching legs. He limped through the busy intersection dodging the morning traffic.

The Southeastern Bank Building was a thirty-story glass cylinder, designed along the same lines as a tennisball can. The tint was dark, almost black. It stood prominently away from the street corner amidst a maze of sidewalks and fountains and manicured greenery.

Mitch entered the revolving doors with a swarm of employees rushing to work. In the marble-laden atrium he found the directory and rode the escalators to the third floor. He opened a heavy glass door and walked into a large circular office. A striking woman of forty or so watched him from behind the glass desk. She offered no smile.

“Mr. Mason Laycook, please,” he said.

She pointed. “Have a seat.”

Mr. Laycook wasted no time. He appeared from around a corner and was as sour as his secretary. “May I help you?” he asked through his nose.

Mitch stood. “Yes, I need to wire a little money.”

“Yes. Do you have an account at Southeastern?”

“Yes.”

“And your name?”

“It’s a numbered account.” In other words, you don’t get a name, Mr. Laycook. You don’t need a name.

“Very well. Follow me.” His office had no windows, no view. A row of keyboards and monitors sat on the credenza behind his glass desk. Mitch sat down.

“The account number, please.”

It came from memory. “214-31-35.”

Laycook pecked at his keyboard and watched a monitor. “That’s a Code Three account, opened by a T. Hemphill, with access only by her and a certain male meeting the following physical requirements: approximately six feet tall, one seventy-five to one eighty-five, blue eyes, brown hair, about twenty-five or twenty-six years old. You fit that description, sir.” Laycook studied the screen. “And the last four digits of your Social Security number are?”

“8585.”

“Very well. You are accessed. Now what can I do for you?”

“I want to wire in some funds from a bank in Grand Cayman.”

Laycook frowned and took a pencil from his pocket. “Which bank in Grand Cayman?”

“Royal Bank of Montreal.”

“What type of account?”

“It’s a numbered account.”

“I presume you have the number?”

“499DFH2122.”

Laycook wrote the number and stood. “I’ll be just a moment.” He left the room.

Ten minutes passed. Mitch tapped his bruised feet and looked at the monitors across the desk.

Laycook returned with his supervisor, Mr. Nokes, a vice president of something. Nokes introduced himself from behind the desk. Both men appeared nervous. They stared downward at Mitch.

Nokes did the talking. He held a small sheet of computer paper. “Sir, that is a restricted account. You must have certain information before we can start the wire.”

Mitch nodded confidently.

“The dates and amounts of the last three deposits, sir?” They watched him intently, knowing he would fail.

Again, it came from memory. No notes. “February third of this year, six and a half million. December fourteenth, last year, nine point two million. And October eighth, last year, eleven million.”

Laycook and Nokes gaped at the small printout. Nokes managed a tiny professional smile. "Very well. You are cleared to the Pen number."

Laycook stood ready with his pencil.

"Sir, what is your Pen number?" Nokes asked.

Mitch smiled and recrossed his damaged legs. "72083."

"And the terms of the wire?"

"Ten million dollars wired immediately into this bank, account 214-31-35. I'll wait."

"It's not necessary to wait, sir."

"I'll wait. When the wire is complete, I've got a few more for you."

"We'll be a moment. Would you like some coffee?"

"No. Thanks. Do you have a newspaper?"

"Certainly," Laycook said. "On the table there."

They scurried from the office, and Mitch's pulse began its descent. He opened the Nashville *Tennessean* and scanned three sections before he found a brief paragraph about the escape at Brushy Mountain. No picture. Few details. They were safe at the Holiday Inn on the Miracle Strip in Panama City Beach, Florida.

Their trail was clear, so far. He thought. He hoped.

Laycook returned alone. He was friendly now. A real backslapper. "Wire's complete. The money is here. Now what can we do for you?"

"I want to wire it out. Most of it, anyway."

"How many transfers?"

"Three."

"Give me the first one."

"A million dollars to the Coast National Bank in Pensacola, to a numbered account, accessible to only one person, a white female, approximately fifty years of age. I will provide her with the Pen number."

"Is this an existing account?"

"No. I want you to open it with the wire."

"Very well. The second transfer?"

“One million dollars to the Dane County Bank in Danesboro, Kentucky, to any account in the name of Harold or Maxine Sutherland, or both. It’s a small bank, but it has a correspondent relationship with United Kentucky in Louisville.”

“Very well. The third transfer?”

“Seven million to the Deutschebank in Zurich. Account number 772-03BL-600. The remainder of the money stays here.”

“This will take about an hour,” Laycook said as he wrote.

“I’ll call you in an hour to confirm.”

“Very well.”

“Thank you, Mr. Laycook.”

Each step was painful, but the pain was not felt. He moved in a controlled jog down the escalators and out of the building.

On the top floor of the Royal Bank of Montreal, Grand Cayman branch, a secretary from Wire Transfers slid a computer printout under the very pointed and proper nose of Randolph Osgood. She had circled an unusual transfer of ten million. Unusual because the money in this account did not normally return to the United States and unusual because it went to a bank they had never dealt with. Osgood studied the printout and called Memphis. Mr. Tolar was on leave of absence, the secretary informed him. Then Nathan Locke? he asked. Mr. Locke is out of town. Victor Milligan? Mr. Milligan is away also.

Osgood placed the printout in the pile of things to do tomorrow.

Along the Emerald Coast of Florida and Alabama, from the outskirts of Mobile east through Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach, Destin and Panama City, the warm spring night had been peaceful. Only one violent crime along the coast. A young woman was robbed, beaten and raped in her room at the Perdido Beach Hilton. Her boyfriend, a tall blond-headed man with strong Nordic features, had found her bound and gagged in her room. His name was Rimmer, Aaron Rimmer, and he was from Memphis.

The real excitement of the night was a massive manhunt in the Mobile area for the escaped murderer, Ray McDeere. He had been seen arriving at the bus station after dark. His mug shot was on the front page of the morning paper, and before ten, three witnesses had come forth and reported sightings. His movements were traced across Mobile Bay to Foley, Alabama, then to Gulf Shores.

Since the Hilton is only ten miles from Gulf Shores along Highway 182, and since the only known escaped murderer was in the vicinity when the only violent crime occurred, the conclusion was quick and inescapable. The hotel's night clerk made a probable ID of Ray McDeere, and the records reflected that he checked in around nine-thirty as a Mr. Lee Stevens. And he paid cash. Later, the victim checked in and was attacked. The victim also identified Mr. Ray McDeere.

The night clerk remembered that the victim asked about a Rachel James, who checked in five minutes before the victim and paid cash. Rachel James vanished sometime during the night without bothering to check out. Likewise for Ray McDeere, alias Lee Stevens. A parking-lot attendant made a probable ID of McDeere and said he got in a white four-door Cutlass with a woman between midnight and one. Said she was driving and appeared to be in a hurry. Said they went east on 182.

Calling from his room on the sixth floor of the Hilton, Aaron Rimmer anonymously told a Baldwin County sheriff's deputy to check the car rental companies in Mobile. Check them for an Abby McDeere. That's your white Cutlass, he told him.

From Mobile to Miami, the search began for the Cutlass rented from Avis by Abby McDeere. The sheriff's investigator promised to keep the victim's boyfriend, Aaron Rimmer, posted on all developments.

Mr. Rimmer would wait at the Hilton. He shared a room with Tony Verkler. Next door was his boss, DeVasher. Fourteen of his friends sat in their rooms on the seventh floor and waited.

It took seventeen trips from the apartment to the U-Haul, but by noon the Bendini Papers were ready for shipment. Mitch rested his swollen legs. He sat on the couch and wrote instructions to Tammy. He detailed the transactions at the bank and told her to wait a week before contacting his mother. She would soon be a millionaire.

He set the telephone in his lap and prepared himself for an unpleasant task. He called the Dane County Bank and asked for Harold Sutherland. It was an emergency, he said.

"Hello," his father-in-law answered angrily.

"Mr. Sutherland, this is Mitch. Have you—"

"Where's my daughter. Is she okay?"

"Yes. She's fine. She's with me. We'll be leaving the country for a few days. Maybe weeks. Maybe months."

"I see," he replied slowly. "And where might you be going?"

"Not sure. We'll just knock around for a while."

"Is something wrong, Mitch?"

"Yes, sir. Something is very wrong, but I can't explain now. Maybe one of these days. Watch the newspapers closely. You'll see a major story out of Memphis within two weeks."

"Are you in danger?"

"Sort of. Have you received any unusual wire transfers this morning?"

"As a matter of fact we have. Somebody parked a million bucks here about an hour ago."

"That somebody was me, and the money is yours."

There was a very long pause. "Mitch, I think I deserve an explanation."

"Yes, sir, you do. But I can't give you one. If we make it safely out of the country, you'll be notified in a week or so. Enjoy the money. Gotta run."

Mitch waited a minute and called Room 1028 at the Holiday Inn, Panama City Beach.

"Hello." It was Abby.

"Hi, babe. How are you?"

"Terrible, Mitch. Ray's picture is on the cover of every newspaper down here. At first it was the escape and the fact that someone saw

him in Mobile. Now the TV news is claiming he is the prime suspect in a rape last night.”

“What! Where!”

“At the Perdido Beach Hilton. Ray caught that blonde following me into the hotel. He jumped her in her room and tied her up. Nothing serious. He took her gun and her money, and now she’s claiming she was beaten and raped by Ray McDeere. Every cop in Florida is looking for the car I rented last night in Mobile.”

“Where’s the car?”

“We left it about a mile west of here at a big condo development. I’m so scared, Mitch.”

“Where’s Ray?”

“He’s lying on the beach trying to sunburn his face. The picture in the paper is an old one. He’s got long hair and looks real pale. It’s not a good picture. Now he’s got a crew cut and he’s trying to turn pink. I think it will help.”

“Are both rooms in your name?”

“Rachel James.”

“Listen, Abby. Forget Rachel and Lee and Ray and Abby. Wait until almost dark, then leave the rooms. Just walk away. About a half a mile east is a small motel called the Blue Tide. You and Ray enjoy a little walk on the beach until you find it. You go to the desk and get two rooms next to each other. Pay in cash. Tell them your name is Jackie Nagel. Got that? Jackie Nagel. Use that name, because when I get there I’ll ask for it.”

“What if they don’t have two rooms next to each other?”

“Okay, if anything goes wrong, two doors down is another dump called the Seaside. Check in there. Same name. I’m leaving here now, say one o’clock, and I should be there in ten hours.”

“What if they find the car?”

“They’ll find it, and they’ll throw a blanket over Panama City Beach. You’ve got to be careful. After dark, try to sneak into a drugstore and buy some hair dye. Cut your hair extremely short and dye it blond.”

“Blond!”

“Or red. I don’t give a damn. But change it. Tell Ray not to leave his room. Do not take any chances.”

“He’s got a gun, Mitch.”

“Tell him I said not to use it. There will be a thousand cops around there, probably tonight. He can’t win a gunfight.”

“I love you, Mitch. I’m so scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared, babe. Just keep thinking. They don’t know where you are, and they can’t catch you if you move. I’ll be there by midnight.”

Lamar Quin, Wally Hudson and Kendall Mahan sat in the conference room on the third floor and contemplated their next move. As senior associates, they knew about the fifth floor and the basement, about Mr. Lazarov and Mr. Morolto, about Hodge and Kozinski. They knew that when one joined the firm, one did not leave.

They told their stories about the Day. They compared it to the day they learned the sad truth about Santa Claus. A sad and frightening day, when Nathan Locke talked to them in his office and told them about their biggest client. And then he introduced them to DeVasher. They were employees of the Morolto family, and they were expected to work hard, spend their handsome paychecks and remain very quiet about it. All three did. There had been thoughts of leaving, but never serious plans. They were family men. In time, it sort of went away. There were so many clean clients to work for. So much hard, legitimate work.

The partners handled most of the dirty work, but growing seniority had brought increasing involvement in the conspiracy. They would never be caught, the partners assured them. They were too smart. They had too much money. It was a perfect cover. Of particular concern at the conference table was the fact that the partners had skipped town. There was not a single partner in Memphis. Even Avery Tolar had disappeared. He had walked out of the hospital.

They talked about Mitch. He was out there somewhere, scared and running for his life. If DeVasher caught him, he was dead and

they would bury him like Hodge and Kozinski. But if the feds caught him, they got the records, and they got the firm, which, of course, included the three of them.

What if, they speculated, no one caught him? What if he made it, just vanished? Along with his documents, of course. What if he and Abby were now somewhere on a beach, drinking rum and counting their money? They liked this thought and talked about it for a while.

Finally, they decided to wait until tomorrow. If Mitch was gunned down somewhere, they would stay in Memphis. If he was never found, they would stay in Memphis. If the feds caught him, they would hit the road, Jack.

Run, Mitch, run!

The rooms at the Blue Tide Motel were narrow and tacky. The carpet was twenty years old and badly worn. The bedspreads had cigarette burns. But luxury was unimportant.

After dark Thursday, Ray stood behind Abby with a pair of scissors and snipped delicately around her ears. Two towels under the chair were covered with her dark hair. She watched him carefully in the mirror next to the antique color television and was free with her instructions. It was a boyish cut, well above the ears, with bangs. He stepped back and admired his work.

“Not bad,” he said.

She smiled and brushed hair from her arms. “I guess I need to color it now,” she said sadly. She walked to the tiny bathroom and closed the door.

She emerged an hour later as a blonde. A yellowish blonde. Ray was asleep on the bedspread. She knelt on the dirty carpet and scooped up the hair.

She picked it from the floor and filled a plastic garbage bag. The empty dye bottle and the applicator were thrown in with the hair, and she tied the bag. There was a knock at the door.

Abby froze, and listened. The curtains were pulled tightly. She slapped Ray’s feet. Another knock. Ray jumped from the bed and

grabbed the gun.

“Who is it?” she whispered loudly at the window.

“Sam Fortune,” he whispered back.

Ray unlocked the door, and Mitch stepped in. He grabbed Abby and bear-hugged Ray. The door was locked, the lights turned off, and they sat on the bed in the darkness. He held Abby tightly. With so much to say, the three said nothing.

A tiny, weak ray of light from the outside filtered under the curtains and, as minutes passed, gradually lit the dresser and television. No one spoke. There were no sounds from the Blue Tide. The parking lot was virtually empty.

“I can almost explain why I’m here,” Ray finally said, “but I’m not sure why you’re here.”

“We’ve got to forget why we’re here,” Mitch said, “and concentrate on leaving here. All together. All safe.”

“Abby’s told me everything,” Ray said.

“I don’t know everything,” she said. “I don’t know who’s chasing us.”

“I’m assuming they’re all out there,” Mitch said. “DeVasher and his gang are nearby. Pensacola, I would guess. It’s the nearest airport of any size. Tarrance is somewhere along the coast directing his boys in their all-out search for Ray McDeere, the rapist. And his accomplice, Abby McDeere.”

“What happens next?” Abby asked.

“They’ll find the car, if they haven’t already done so. That will pinpoint Panama City Beach. The paper said the search extended from Mobile to Miami, so now they’re spread out. When they find the car, they zero in here. Now, there’s a thousand cheap motels just like this one along the Strip. For twelve miles, nothing but motels, condos and T-shirt shops. That’s a lot of people, a lot of tourists with shorts and sandals, and tomorrow we’ll be tourists too, shorts, sandals, the whole bit. I figure even if they have a hundred men after us, we’ve got two or three days.”

“Once they decide we’re here, what happens?” she asked.

“You and Ray could have simply abandoned the car and taken off in another one. They can’t be certain we’re on the Strip, but they’ll

start looking here. But they're not the Gestapo. They can't crash a door and search without probable cause."

"DeVasher can," Ray said.

"Yeah, but there's a million doors around here. They'll set up roadblocks and watch every store and restaurant. They'll talk to every hotel clerk, show them Ray's mug shot. They'll swarm like ants for a few days, and with luck, they'll miss us."

"What are you driving, Mitch?" Ray asked.

"A U-Haul."

"I don't understand why we don't get in the U-Haul, right now, and haul ass. I mean, the car is sitting a mile down the road, just waiting to be found, and we know they're coming. I say we haul it."

"Listen, Ray. They might be setting roadblocks right now. Trust me. Did I get you out of prison? Come on."

A siren went screaming past on the Strip. They froze, and listened to it fade away.

"Okay, gang," Mitch said, "we're moving out. I don't like this place. The parking lot is empty and too close to the highway. I've parked the U-Haul three doors down at the elegant Sea Gull's Rest Motel. I've got two lovely rooms there. The roaches are much smaller. We're taking a quiet stroll on the beach. Then we get to unpack the truck. Sound exciting?"

Joey Morolto and his squad of storm troopers landed at the Pensacola airport in a chartered DC-9 before sunrise Friday. Lazarov waited with two limos and eight rented vans. He briefed Joey on the past twenty-four hours as the convoy left Pensacola and traveled east on Highway 98. After an hour of briefing, they arrived at a twelve-floor condo called the Sandpiper, in the middle of the Strip at Destin. An hour from Panama City Beach. The penthouse on the top floor had been procured by Lazarov for only four thousand dollars a week. Off-season rates. The remainder of the twelfth floor and all of the eleventh had been leased, for the goons.

Mr. Morolto snapped orders like an agitated drill sergeant. A command post was set up in the great room of the penthouse, overlooking the calm emerald water. Nothing suited him. He wanted breakfast, and Lazarov sent two vans to a Delchamps supermarket nearby. He wanted McDeere, and Lazarov asked him to be patient.

By daybreak, the troops had settled into their condos. They waited.

Three miles away along the beach, and within view of the Sandpiper, F. Denton Voyles and Wayne Tarrance sat on the balcony of an eighth-floor room at the Sandestin Hilton. They drank coffee, watched the sun rise gently on the horizon and talked strategy. The night had not gone well. The car had not been found. No sign of Mitch. With sixty FBI agents and hundreds of locals scouring the coast, they should have at least found the car. With each passing hour, the McDeeres were farther away.

In a file by a coffee table inside were the warrants. For Ray McDeere, the warrant read: escape, unlawful flight, robbery and rape. Abby's sin was merely being an accomplice. The charges for Mitch required more creativity. Obstruction of justice and a nebulous racketeering charge. And of course the old standby, mail fraud. Tarrance was not sure where the mail fraud fit, but he worked for the FBI and had never seen a case that did not include mail fraud.

The warrants were issued and ready and had been fully discussed with dozens of reporters from newspapers and television stations throughout the Southeast. Trained to maintain a stone face and loathe the press, Tarrance was having a delightful time with the reporters.

Publicity was needed. Publicity was critical. The authorities must find the McDeeres before the Mob did.

Rick Acklin ran through the room to the balcony. "They've found the car!"

Tarrance and Voyles jumped to their feet. "Where?"

"Panama City Beach. In the parking lot of a high rise."

"Call our men in, every one of them!" Voyles yelled. "Stop searching everywhere. I want every agent in Panama City Beach. We'll turn the place inside out. Get all the locals you can. Tell them to set up roadblocks on every highway and gravel road in and out of there. Dust the car for prints. What's the town look like?"

"Similar to Destin. A twelve-mile strip along the beach with hotels, motels, condos, the works," Acklin answered.

"Start our men door to door at the hotels. Is her composite ready?"

"Should be," Acklin said.

"Get her composite, Mitch's composite, Ray's composite and Ray's mug shot in the hands of every agent and cop. I want people walking up and down the Strip waving those damn composites."

"Yes, sir."

"How far away is Panama City Beach?"

"About fifty minutes due east."

"Get my car."

The phone woke Aaron Rimmer in his room at the Perdido Beach Hilton. It was the investigator with the Baldwin County Sheriff's Department. They found the car, Mr. Rimmer, he said, in Panama City Beach. Just a few minutes ago. About a mile from the Holiday Inn. On Highway 98. Sorry again about the girl, he said. Hope she's doing better, he said.

Mr. Rimmer said thanks, and immediately called Lazarov at the Sandpiper. Ten minutes later, he and his roommate, Tony, and DeVasher and fourteen others were speeding east. Panama City Beach was three hours away.

In Destin, Lazarov mobilized the storm troopers. They moved out quickly, piled into the vans and headed east. The blitzkrieg had begun.

It took only a matter of minutes for the U-Haul to become a hot item. The assistant manager of the rental company in Nashville was a guy named Billy Weaver. He opened the office early Friday morning, fixed his coffee and scanned the paper. On the bottom half of the front page, Billy read with interest the story about Ray McDeere and the search along the coast. And then Abby was mentioned. Then the escapee's brother, Mitch McDeere, was mentioned. The name rang a bell.

Billy opened a drawer and flipped through the records of outstanding rentals. Sure enough, a man named McDeere had rented a sixteen-footer late Wednesday night. M. Y. McDeere, said the signature, but the driver's license read Mitchell Y. From Memphis.

Being a patriot and honest taxpayer, Billy called his cousin at Metro Police. The cousin called the Nashville FBI office, and fifteen minutes later, the U-Haul was a hot item.

Tarrance took the call on the radio while Acklin drove. Voyles was in the back seat. A U-Haul? Why would he need a U-Haul? He left Memphis without his car, clothes, shoes or toothbrush. He left the dog unfed. He took nothing with him, so why the U-Haul?

The Bendini records, of course. Either he left Nashville with the records in the truck or he was in the truck en route to get them. But

why Nashville?

Mitch was up with the sun. He took one long, lustful look at his wife with the cute blond hair and forgot about sex. It could wait. He let her sleep. He walked around the stacks of boxes in the small room and went to the bathroom. He showered quickly and slipped on a gray sweat suit he'd bought at a Wal-Mart in Montgomery. He eased along the beach for a half mile until he found a convenience store. He bought a sackful of Cokes, pastries and chips, sunglasses, caps and three newspapers.

Ray was waiting by the U-Haul when he returned. They spread the papers on Ray's bed. It was worse than they expected. Mobile, Pensacola and Montgomery had front-page stories with composites of Ray and Mitch, along with the mug shot again. Abby's composite had not been released, according to the Pensacola paper.

As composites go, they were close here and there and badly off in other areas. But it was hard to be objective. Hell, Mitch was staring at his own composite and trying to give an unbiased opinion about how close it was. The stories were full of all sorts of wild statements from one Wayne Tarrance, special agent, FBI. Tarrance said Mitchell McDeere had been spotted in the Gulf Shores-Pensacola area; that he and Ray both were known to be heavily armed and extremely dangerous; that they had vowed not to be taken alive; that reward money was being gathered; that if anyone saw a man who faintly resembled either of the McDeere brothers, please call the local police.

They ate pastries and decided the composites were not close. The mug shot was even comical. They eased next door and woke Abby. They began unpacking the Bendini Papers and assembling the video camera.

At nine, Mitch called Tammy, collect. She had the new IDs and passports. He instructed her to Federal Express them to Sam Fortune, front desk, Sea Gull's Rest Motel, 16694 Highway 98, West Panama City Beach, Florida. She read to him the front-page story about himself and his small gang. No composites.

He told her to ship the passports, then leave Nashville. Drive four hours to Knoxville, check into a big motel and call him at Room 39, Sea Gull's Rest. He gave her the number.

Two FBI agents knocked on the door of the old ragged trailer at 486 San Luis. Mr. Ainsworth came to the door in his underwear. They flashed their badges.

"So whatta you want with me?" he growled.

An agent handed him the morning paper. "Do you know those two men?"

He studied the paper. "I guess they're my wife's boys. Never met them."

"And your wife's name is?"

"Eva Ainsworth."

"Where is she?"

Mr. Ainsworth was scanning the paper. "At work. At the Waffle Hut. Say they're around here, huh?"

"Yes, sir. You haven't seen them?"

"Hell no. But I'll get my gun."

"Has your wife seen them?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Thanks, Mr. Ainsworth. We've got orders to set up watch here in the street, but we won't bother you."

"Good. These boys are crazy. I've always said that."

A mile away, another pair of agents parked discreetly next to a Waffle Hut and set up watch.

By noon, all highways and county roads into the coast around Panama City Beach were blocked. Along the Strip, cops stopped traffic every four miles. They walked from one T-shirt shop to the next, handing out composites. They posted them on the bulletin boards in Shoney's, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and a dozen more fast-food

places. They told the cashiers and waitresses to keep their eyes open for the McDeeres. Very dangerous people.

Lazarov and his men camped at the Best Western, two miles west of the Sea Gull's Rest. He rented a large conference room and set up command. Four of his troops were dispatched to raid a T-shirt shop, and they returned with all sorts of tourist clothes and straw hats and caps. He rented two Ford Escorts and equipped them with police scanners. They patrolled the Strip and listened to the endless squawking. They immediately caught the search for the U-Haul and joined in. DeVasher strategically spread the rented vans along the Strip. They sat innocently in large parking lots and waited with their radios.

Around two, Lazarov received an emergency call from an employee on the fifth floor of the Bendini Building. Two things. First, an employee snooping around the Caymans had found an old locksmith who, after being paid, recalled making eleven keys around midnight of April 1. Eleven keys, on two rings. Said the woman, a very attractive American, a brunette with nice legs, had paid cash and was in a hurry. Said the keys had been easy, except for the Mercedes key. He wasn't sure about that one. Second, a banker from Grand Cayman called. Thursday at 9:33 a.m., ten million dollars had been wired from the Royal Bank of Montreal to the Southeastern Bank in Nashville.

Between four and four-thirty, the police scanners went wild. The squawking was nonstop. A clerk at the Holiday Inn made a probable ID of Abby, as the woman who paid cash for two rooms at 4:17 a.m., Thursday. She paid for three nights, but had not been seen since the rooms were cleaned around one on Thursday. Evidently, neither room had been slept in Thursday night. She had not checked out, and the rooms were paid for through noon Saturday. The clerk saw no sign of a male accomplice. The Holiday Inn was swamped

with cops and FBI agents and Morolto thugs for an hour. Tarrance himself interrogated the clerk.

They were there! Somewhere in Panama City Beach. Ray and Abby were confirmed. It was suspected Mitch was with them, but it was unconfirmed. Until 4:58, Friday afternoon.

The bombshell. A county deputy pulled into a cheap motel and noticed the gray-and-white hood of a truck. He walked between two buildings and smiled at the small U-Haul truck hidden neatly between a row of two-story rooms and a large garbage Dumpster. He wrote down all the numbers on the truck and called it in.

It hit! In five minutes the motel was surrounded. The owner charged from the front office and demanded an explanation. He looked at the composites and shook his head. Five FBI badges flapped in his face, and he became cooperative.

Accompanied by a dozen agents, he took the keys and went door to door. Forty-eight doors.

Only seven were occupied. The owner explained as he unlocked doors that it was a slow time of the year at the Beachcomber Inn. All of the smaller motels struggle until Memorial Day, he explained.

Even the Sea Gull's Rest, four miles to the west, was struggling.

Andy Patrick received his first felony conviction at the age of nineteen and served four months for bad checks. Branded as a felon, he found honest work impossible, and for the next twenty years worked unsuccessfully as a small-time criminal. He drifted across the country shoplifting, writing bad checks and breaking into houses here and there. A small, frail nonviolent man, he was severely beaten by a fat, arrogant county deputy in Texas when he was twenty-seven. He lost an eye and lost all respect for the law.

Six months earlier, he landed in Panama City Beach and found an honest job paying four bucks an hour working the night shift at the front and only desk of the Sea Gull's Rest Motel. Around nine, Friday night, he was watching TV when a fat, arrogant county deputy swaggered through the door.

“Got a manhunt going on,” he announced, and laid copies of the composites and mug shot on the dirty counter. “Looking for these folks. We think they’re around here.”

Andy studied the composites. The one of Mitchell Y. McDeere looked pretty familiar. The wheels in his small-time felonious brain began to churn.

With his one good eye, he looked at the fat, arrogant county deputy and said, “Ain’t seen them. But I’ll keep an eye out.”

“They’re dangerous,” the deputy said.

You’re the dangerous one, Andy thought.

“Post these up on the wall there,” the deputy instructed.

Do you own this damned place? Andy thought. “I’m sorry, but I’m not authorized to post anything on the walls.”

The deputy froze, cocked his head sideways and glared at Andy through thick sunglasses. “Listen, Pee-wee, I authorized it.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t post anything on the walls unless my boss tells me to.”

“And where is your boss?”

“I don’t know. Probably in a bar somewhere.”

The deputy carefully picked up the composites, walked behind the counter and tacked them on the bulletin board. When he finished, he glared down at Andy and said, “I’ll come back in a coupla hours. If you remove these, I’ll arrest you for obstruction of justice.”

Andy did not flinch. “Won’t stick. They got me for that one time in Kansas, so I know all about it.”

The deputy’s fat cheeks turned red and he gritted his teeth. “You’re a little smart-ass, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You take these down and I promise you you’ll go to jail for something.”

“I’ve been there before, and it ain’t no big deal.”

Red lights and sirens screamed by on the Strip a few feet away, and the deputy turned and watched the excitement. He mumbled something and swaggered out the door. Andy threw the composites in the garbage. He watched the squad cars dodge each other on the

Strip for a few minutes, then walked through the parking lot to the rear building. He knocked on the door of Room 38.

He waited and knocked again.

“Who is it?” a woman asked.

“The manager,” Andy replied, proud of his title. The door opened, and the man who favored the composite of Mitchell Y. McDeere slid out.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “What’s going on?”

He was nervous, Andy could tell. “Cops just came by, know what I mean?”

“What do they want?” he asked innocently.

Your ass, Andy thought. “Just asking questions and showing pictures. I looked at the pictures, you know?”

“Uh-huh,” he said.

“Pretty good pictures,” Andy said.

Mr. McDeere stared at Andy real hard.

Andy said, “Cop said one of them escaped from prison. Know what I mean? I been in prison, and I think everybody ought to escape. You know?”

Mr. McDeere smiled, a rather nervous smile. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Andy.”

“I’ve got a deal for you, Andy. I’ll give you a thousand bucks now, and tomorrow, if you’re still unable to recognize anybody, I’ll give you another thousand bucks. Same for the next day.”

A wonderful deal, thought Andy, but if he could afford a thousand bucks a day, certainly he could afford five thousand a day. It was the opportunity of his career.

“Nope,” Andy said firmly. “Five thousand a day.”

Mr. McDeere never hesitated. “It’s a deal. Let me get the money.” He went in the room and returned with a stack of bills.

“Five thousand a day, Andy, that’s our deal?”

Andy took the money and glanced around. He would count it later. “I guess you want me to keep the maids away?” Andy asked.

“Great idea. That would be nice.”

“Another five thousand,” Andy said.

Mr. McDeere sort of hesitated. "Okay, I've got another deal. Tomorrow morning, a Fed Ex package will arrive at the desk for Sam Fortune. You bring it to me, and keep the maids away, and I'll give you another five thousand."

"Won't work. I do the night shift."

"Okay, Andy. What if you worked all weekend, around the clock, kept the maids away and delivered my package? Can you do that?"

"Sure. My boss is a drunk. He'd love for me to work all weekend."

"How much money, Andy?"

Go for it, Andy thought. "Another twenty thousand."

Mr. McDeere smiled. "You got it."

Andy grinned and stuck the money in his pocket. He walked away without saying a word, and Mitch retreated to Room 38.

"Who was it?" Ray snapped.

Mitch smiled as he glanced between the blinds and the windows.

"I knew we would have to have a lucky break to pull this off. And I think we just found it."

Mr. Morolto wore a black suit and a red tie and sat at the head of the plastic-coated executive conference table in the Dunes Room of the Best Western on the Strip. The twenty chairs around the table were packed with his best and brightest men. Around the four walls stood more of his trusted troops. Though they were thick-necked killers who did their deeds efficiently and without remorse, they looked like clowns in their colorful shirts and wild shorts and amazing potpourri of straw hats. He would have smiled at their silliness, but the urgency of the moment prevented smiling. He was listening.

On his immediate right was Lou Lazarov, and on his immediate left was DeVasher, and every ear in the small room listened as the two played tag team back and forth across the table.

"They're here. I know they're here," DeVasher said dramatically, slapping both palms on the table with each syllable. The man had rhythm.

Lazarov's turn: "I agree. They're here. Two came in a car, one came in a truck. We've found both vehicles abandoned, covered with fingerprints. Yes, they're here."

DeVasher: "But why Panama City Beach? It makes no sense."

Lazarov: "For one, he's been here before. Came here Christmas, remember? He's familiar with this place, so he figures with all these cheap motels on the beach it's a great place to hide for a while. Not a bad idea, really. But he's had some bad luck. For a man on the run, he's carrying too much baggage, like a brother who everybody wants. And a wife. And a truckload of documents, we presume. Typical schoolboy mentality. If I gotta run, I'm taking everybody

who loves me. Then his brother rapes a girl, they think, and suddenly every cop in Alabama and Florida is looking for them. Some pretty bad luck, really.”

“What about his mother?” Mr. Morolto asked.

Lazarov and DeVasher nodded at the great man and acknowledged this very intelligent question.

Lazarov: “No, purely coincidental. She’s a very simple woman who serves waffles and knows nothing. We’ve watched her since we got here.”

DeVasher: “I agree. There’s been no contact.”

Morolto nodded intelligently and lit a cigarette.

Lazarov: “So if they’re here, and we know they’re here, then the feds and the cops also know they’re here. We’ve got sixty people here, and they got hundreds. Odds are on them.”

“You’re sure they’re all three together?” Mr. Morolto asked.

DeVasher: “Absolutely. We know the woman and the convict checked in the same night at Perdido, that they left and three hours later she checked in here at the Holiday Inn and paid cash for two rooms and that she rented the car and his fingerprints were on it. No doubt. We know Mitch rented a U-Haul Wednesday in Nashville, that he wired ten million bucks of our money into a bank in Nashville Thursday morning and then evidently hauled ass. The U-Haul was found here four hours ago. Yes, sir, they are together.”

Lazarov: “If he left Nashville immediately after the money was wired, he would have arrived here around dark. The U-Haul was found empty, so they had to unload it somewhere around here, then hide it. That was probably sometime late last night, Thursday. Now, you gotta figure they need to sleep sometime. I figure they stayed here last night with plans of moving on today. But they woke up this morning and their faces were in the paper, cops running around bumping into each other, and suddenly the roads were blocked. So they’re trapped here.”

DeVasher: “To get out, they’ve got to borrow, rent or steal a car. No rental records anywhere around here. She rented a car in Mobile in her name. Mitch rented a U-Haul in Nashville in his name. Real

proper ID. So you gotta figure they ain't that damned smart after all."

Lazarov: "Evidently they don't have fake IDs. If they rented a car around here for the escape, the rental records would be in the real name. No such records exist."

Mr. Morolto waved his hand in frustration. "All right, all right. So they're here. You guys are geniuses. I'm so proud of you. Now what?"

DeVasher's turn: "The Fibbies are in the way. They're in control of the search, and we can't do nothing but sit and watch."

Lazarov: "I've called Memphis. Every senior associate in the firm is on the way down here. They know McDeere and his wife real well, so we'll put them on the beach and in restaurants and hotels. Maybe they'll see something."

DeVasher: "I figure they're in one of the little motels. They can give fake names, pay in cash and nobody'll be suspicious. Fewer people too. Less likelihood of being seen. They checked in at the Holiday Inn but didn't stay long. I bet they moved on down the Strip."

Lazarov: "First, we'll get rid of the feds and the cops. They don't know it yet, but they're about to move their show on down the road. Then, early in the morning, we start door to door at the small motels. Most of these dumps have less than fifty rooms. I figure two of our men can search one in thirty minutes. I know it'll be slow, but we can't just sit here. Maybe when the cops pull out, the McDeeres will breathe a little and make a mistake."

"You mean you want our men to start searching hotel rooms?" Mr. Morolto asked.

DeVasher: "There's no way we can hit every door, but we gotta try."

Mr. Morolto stood and glanced around the room. "So what about the water?" he asked in the direction of Lazarov and DeVasher.

They stared at each other, thoroughly confused by the question.

"The water!" Mr. Morolto screamed. "What about the water?"

All eyes shot desperately around the table and quickly landed upon Lazarov. "I'm sorry, sir, I'm confused."

Mr. Morolto leaned into Lazarov's face. "What about the water, Lou? We're on a beach, right? There's land and highways and railroads and airports on one side, and there's water and boats on the other. Now, if the roads are blocked and the airports and railroads are out of the question, where do you think they might go? It seems obvious to me they would try to find a boat and ease out in the dark. Makes sense, don't it, boys?"

Every head in the room nodded quickly. DeVasher spoke first. "Makes a hell of a lot of sense to me."

"Wonderful," said Mr. Morolto. "Then where are our boats?"

Lazarov jumped from his seat, turned to the wall and began barking orders at his lieutenants. "Go down to the docks! Rent every fishing boat you can find for tonight and all day tomorrow. Pay them whatever they want. Don't answer any questions, just pay 'em the money. Get our men on those boats and start patrolling as soon as possible. Stay within a mile of shore."

Shortly before eleven, Friday night, Aaron Rimmer stood at the checkout counter at an all-night Texaco in Tallahassee and paid for a root beer and twelve gallons of gas. He needed change for the call. Outside, next to the car wash, he flipped through the blue pages and called the Tallahassee Police Department. It was an emergency. He explained himself, and the dispatcher connected him with a shift captain.

"Listen!" Rimmer yelled urgently, "I'm here at this Texaco, and five minutes ago I saw these convicts everybody is looking for! I know it was them!"

"Which convicts?" asked the captain.

"The McDeeres. Two men and a woman. I left Panama City Beach not two hours ago, and I saw their pictures in the paper. Then I stopped here and filled up, and I saw them."

Rimmer gave his location and waited thirty seconds for the first patrol car to arrive with blue lights flashing. It was quickly followed by a second, third and fourth. They loaded Rimmer in a front seat and raced him to the South Precinct. The captain and a small crowd

waited anxiously. Rimmer was escorted like a celebrity into the captain's office, where the three composites and mug shot were waiting on the desk.

"That's them!" he shouted. "I just saw them, not ten minutes ago. They were in a green Ford pickup with Tennessee plates, and it was pulling a long double-axle U-Haul trailer."

"Exactly where were you?" asked the captain. The cops hung on every word.

"I was pumping gas, pump number four, regular unleaded, and they eased into the parking lot, real suspicious like. They parked away from the pumps, and the woman got out and went inside." He picked up Abby's composite and studied it. "Yep. That's her. No doubt. Her hair's a lot shorter, but it's dark. She came right back out, didn't buy a thing. She seemed nervous and in a hurry to get back to the truck. I was finished pumping, so I walked inside. Right when I opened the door, they drove within two feet of me. I saw all three of them."

"Who was driving?" asked the captain.

Rimmer stared at Ray's mug shot. "Not him. The other one." He pointed at Mitch's composite.

"Could I see your driver's license," a sergeant said.

Rimmer carried three sets of identification. He handed the sergeant an Illinois driver's license with his picture and the name Frank Temple.

"Which direction were they headed?" the captain asked.

"East."

At the same moment, about four miles away, Tony Verkler hung up the pay phone, smiled to himself and returned to the Burger King.

The captain was on the phone. The sergeant was copying information from Rimmer/Temple's driver's license and a dozen cops chatted excitedly when a patrolman rushed into the office "Just got a call! Another sighting, at a Burger King east of town. Same info! All three of them in a green Ford pickup pulling a U-Haul. Guy wouldn't leave a name, but said he saw their pictures in the paper.

Said they pulled through the carry-out window, bought three sacks of food and took off.”

“It’s gotta be them!” the captain said with a huge smile.

The Bay County sheriff sipped thick black coffee from a Styrofoam cup and rested his black boots on the executive conference table in the Caribbean Room at the Holiday Inn. FBI agents were in and out, fixing coffee, whispering and updating each other on the latest. His hero, the big man himself, Director F. Denton Voyles, sat across the table and studied a street map with three of his underlings. Imagine, Denton Voyles in Bay County. The room was a beehive of police activity. Florida state troopers filtered in and out. Radios and telephones rang and squawked on a makeshift command post in a corner. Sheriff’s deputies and city policemen from three counties loitered about, thrilled with the chase and suspense and presence of all those FBI agents. And Voyles.

A deputy burst through the door with a wild-eyed glow of sheer excitement. “Just got a call from Tallahassee! They’ve got two positive IDs in the last fifteen minutes! All three of them in a green Ford pickup with Tennessee tags!”

Voyles dropped his street map and walked over to the deputy. “Where were the sightings?” The room was silent, except for the radios.

“First one was at a Texaco Quick Shop. Second one was four miles away at a Burger King. They drove through the drive-in window. Both witnesses were positive and gave identical IDs.”

Voyles turned to the sheriff. “Sheriff, call Tallahassee and confirm. How far away is it?”

The black boots hit the floor. “Hour and a half. Straight down Interstate 10.”

Voyles pointed at Tarrance, and they stepped into a small room used as the bar. The quiet roar returned to mission control.

“If the sightings are real,” Voyles said quietly in Tarrance’s face, “we’re wasting our time here.”

“Yes, sir. They sound legitimate. A single sighting could be a fluke or a prank, but two that close together sound awfully legitimate.”

“How the hell did they get out of here?”

“It’s gotta be that woman, Chief. She’s been helping him for a month. I don’t know who she is, or where he found her, but she’s on the outside watching us and feeding him whatever he needs.”

“Do you think she’s with them?”

“Doubt it. She’s probably just following closely, away from the action, and taking directions from him.”

“He’s brilliant, Wayne. He’s been planning this for months.”

“Evidently.”

“You mentioned the Bahamas once.”

“Yes, sir. The million bucks we paid him was wired to a bank in Freeport. He later told me it didn’t stay there long.”

“You think, maybe, he’s headed there?”

“Who knows. Obviously he has to get out of the country. I talked to the warden today. He told me Ray McDeere can speak five or six languages fluently. They could be going anywhere.”

“I think we should pull out,” Voyles said.

“Let’s get the roadblocks set up around Tallahassee. They won’t last long if we’ve got a good description of the vehicle. We should have them by morning.”

“I want every cop in central Florida on the highways in an hour. Roadblocks everywhere. Every Ford pickup is automatically searched, okay? Our men will wait here until daybreak, then we’ll pull up stakes.”

“Yes, sir,” Tarrance answered with a weary grin.

Word of the Tallahassee sightings spread instantly along the Emerald Coast. Panama City Beach relaxed. The McDeeres were gone. For reasons unknown only to them, their flight had moved inland. Sighted and positively identified, not once but twice, they were now somewhere else speeding desperately toward the inevitable confrontation on the side of a dark highway.

The cops along the coast went home. A few roadblocks remained through the night in Bay County and Gulf County; the predawn hours of Saturday were almost normal. Both ends of the Strip remained blocked, with cops making cursory exams of driver's licenses. The roads north of town were free and clear. The search had moved east.

On the outskirts of Ocala, Florida, near Silver Springs on Highway 40, Tony Verkler lumbered from a 7-Eleven and stuck a quarter in a pay phone. He called the Ocala Police Department with the urgent report that he had just seen those three convicts everybody was looking for up around Panama City Beach. The McDeeres! Said he saw their pictures in the paper the day before when he was driving through Pensacola, and now he had just seen them. The dispatcher informed him all patrolmen were on the scene of a bad accident and asked if he would mind driving over to the police station so they could file a report. Tony said he was in a hurry, but since it was somewhat important, he would be there in a minute.

When he arrived, the chief of police was waiting in a T-shirt and blue jeans. His eyes were swollen and red, and his hair was not in place. He led Tony into his office and thanked him for coming by. He took notes as Tony explained how he was pumping gas in front of the 7-Eleven and a green Ford pickup with a U-Haul trailer behind it pulled up next to the store and a woman got out and used the phone. Tony was in the process, he explained, of driving from Mobile to Miami and had driven through the manhunt up around Panama City. He had seen the newspapers and had been listening to his radio and knew all about the three McDeeres. Anyway, he went in and paid for the gas and thought that he had seen the woman somewhere before. Then he remembered the papers. He walked over to a magazine rack in the front window and got a good look at the men. No doubt in his mind. She hung up, got back in the truck between the men, and they left. Green Ford with Tennessee plates.

The chief thanked him and called the Marion County Sheriff's Department. Tony said goodbye and returned to his car, where

Aaron Rimmer was asleep in the back seat.

They headed north, in the direction of Panama City Beach.

Saturday, 7 a.m. Andy Patrick looked east and west along the Strip, then walked quickly across the parking lot to Room 39. He knocked gently.

After a delay, she asked, "Who is it?"

"The manager," he answered. The door opened, and the man who resembled the composite of Mitchell Y. McDeere slid out. His hair was now very short and gold-colored. Andy stared at his hair.

"Good morning, Andy," he said politely while glancing around the parking lot.

"Good morning. I was kinda wondering if you folks were still here."

Mr. McDeere nodded and continued to look around the parking lot.

"I mean, according to the television this morning, you folks traveled halfway across Florida last night."

"Yeah, we're watching it. They're playing games, aren't they, Andy?"

Andy kicked at a rock on the sidewalk. "Television said there were three positive identifications last night. At three different places. Kinda strange, I thought. I was here all night, working and being on the lookout and all, and I didn't see you leave. Before sunrise I sneaked across the highway to a coffee shop, just over there, and as usual, there were cops in there. I sat close to them. According to them, the search has been called off around here. They said the FBI moved out right after the last sighting came in, around four this morning. Most of the other cops left too. They're gonna

keep the Strip blocked until noon and call it off. Rumor has it you've got help from the outside, and you're trying to get to the Bahamas."

Mr. McDeere listened closely as he watched the parking lot. "What else did they say?"

"They kept talking about a U-Haul truck full of stolen goods, and how they found the truck, and it was empty, and how nobody can figure out how you loaded the stolen goods into a trailer and sneaked outta town, right under their noses. They're very impressed, all right. Of course, I didn't say nothing, but I figured it was the same U-Haul you drove in here Thursday night."

Mr. McDeere was deep in thought and did not say anything. He didn't appear to be nervous. Andy studied his face carefully.

"You don't seem too pleased," Andy said. "I mean, the cops are leaving and calling off the search. That's good, ain't it?"

"Andy, can I tell you something?"

"Sure."

"It's more dangerous now than before."

Andy thought about this for a long minute, then said, "How's that?"

"The cops just wanted to arrest me, Andy. But there are some people who want to kill me. Professional killers, Andy. Many of them. And they're still here."

Andy narrowed his good eye and stared at Mr. McDeere. Professional killers! Around here? On the Strip? Andy took a step backward. He wanted to ask exactly who they were and why they were chasing him, but he knew he wouldn't get much of an answer. He saw an opportunity. "Why don't you escape?"

"Escape? How could we escape?"

Andy kicked another rock and nodded in the direction of a 1971 Pontiac Bonneville parked behind the office. "Well, you could use my car. You could get in the trunk, all three of you, and I could drive you outta town. You don't appear to be broke, so you could catch a plane and be gone. Just like that."

"And how much would that cost?"

Andy studied his feet and scratched his ear. The guy was probably a dooper, he thought, and the boxes were probably full of cocaine

and cash. And the Colombians were probably after him. "That'd be pretty expensive, you know. I mean, right now, at five thousand a day, I'm just an innocent motel clerk who's not very observant. Not part of nothing, you understand. But if I drive you outta here, then I become an accomplice, subject to indictment and jail and all that other crap I've been through, you know? So it'd be pretty expensive."

"How much, Andy?"

"A hundred thousand."

Mr. McDeere did not flinch or react; he just kept a straight face and glanced across the beach to the ocean. Andy knew immediately it was not out of the question.

"Let me think about it, Andy. For right now, you keep your eyes open. Now that the cops are gone, the killers will move in. This could be a very dangerous day, Andy, and I need your help. If you see anyone suspicious around here, call us quick. We're not leaving these rooms, okay?"

Andy returned to the front desk. Any fool would jump in the trunk and haul ass. It was the boxes, the stolen goods. That's why they wouldn't leave.

The McDeeres enjoyed a light breakfast of stale pastries and warm soft drinks. Ray was dying for a cold beer, but another trip to the convenience store was too risky. They ate quickly and watched the early-morning news. Occasionally a station along the coast would flash their composites on the screen. It scared them at first, but they got used to it.

A few minutes after 9 a.m., Saturday, Mitch turned off the television and resumed his spot on the floor among the boxes. He picked up a stack of documents and nodded at Abby, the camera operator. The deposition continued.

Lazarov waited until the maids were on duty, then scattered his troops along the Strip. They worked in pairs, knocking on doors, peeking in windows and sliding through dark hallways. Most of the small places had two or three maids who knew every room and

every guest. The procedure was simple, and most of the time it worked. A goon would find a maid, hand her a hundred-dollar bill, and show her the composites. If she resisted, he would continue giving money until she became cooperative. If she was unable to make the ID, he would ask if she had noticed a U-Haul truck, or a room full of boxes, or two men and a woman acting suspicious or scared, or anything unusual. If the maid was of no help, he would ask which rooms were occupied, then go knock on the doors.

Start with the maids, Lazarov had instructed them. Enter from the beach side. Stay away from the front desks. Pretend to be cops. And if you hit pay dirt, kill them instantly and get to a phone.

DeVasher placed four of the rented vans along the Strip near the highway. Lamar Quin, Kendall Mahan, Wally Hudson and Jack Aldrich posed as drivers and watched every vehicle that passed. They had arrived in the middle of the night on a private plane with ten other senior associates of Bendini, Lambert & Locke. In the souvenir shops and cafés, the former friends and colleagues of Mitch McDeere milled about with the tourists and secretly hoped they would not see him. The partners had been called home from airports around the country, and by midmorning they were walking the beach and inspecting pools and hotel lobbies. Nathan Locke stayed behind with Mr. Morolto, but the rest of the partners disguised themselves with golf caps and sunglasses and took orders from General DeVasher. Only Avery Tolar was missing. Since walking out of the hospital, he had not been heard from. Including the thirty-three lawyers, Mr. Morolto had almost a hundred men participating in his private little manhunt.

At the Blue Tide Motel, a janitor took a hundreddollar bill, looked at the composites and said he thought he might have seen the woman and one of the men check into two rooms early Thursday evening. He stared at Abby's sketch and became convinced it was her. He took some more money and went to the office to check the registration records. He returned with the information that the woman had checked in as Jackie Nagel and paid cash for two rooms

for Thursday, Friday and Saturday. He took some more money, and the two gunmen followed him to the rooms. He knocked on both doors. No answer. He unlocked them and allowed his new friends to inspect them. The rooms had not been used Friday night. One of the troops called Lazarov, and five minutes later DeVasher was poking around the rooms looking for clues. He found none, but the search was immediately constricted to a four-mile stretch of beach between the Blue Tide and the Beachcomber, where the U-Haul was found.

The vans moved the troops closer. The partners and senior associates scoured the beach and restaurants. And the gunmen knocked on doors.

Andy signed the Federal Express ticket at 10:35 and inspected the package for Sam Fortune. It had been shipped by Doris Greenwood, whose address was listed as 4040 Poplar Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee. No phone number. He was certain it was valuable and for a moment contemplated another quick profit. But its delivery had already been contracted for. He gazed along both ends of the Strip and left the office with the package.

After years of dodging and hiding, Andy had subconsciously trained himself to walk quickly in the shadows, near the corners, never in the open. As he turned the corner to cross the parking lot, he saw two men knocking on the door to Room 21. The room happened to be vacant, and he was immediately suspicious of the two. They wore odd-fitting matching white shorts that fell almost to their knees, although it was difficult to tell exactly where the shorts stopped and the snow-white legs began. One wore dark socks with battered loafers. The other wore cheap sandals and walked in obvious pain. White Panama hats adorned their beefy heads.

After six months on the Strip, Andy could spot a fake tourist. The one beating on the door hit it again, and when he did Andy saw the bulge of a large handgun stuck in the back of his shorts.

He quickly retraced his quiet footsteps and returned to the office. He called Room 39 and asked for Sam Fortune.

“This is Sam.”

“Sam, this is Andy at the desk. Don’t look out, but there are two very suspicious men knocking on doors across the parking lot.”

“Are they cops?”

“I don’t think so. They didn’t check in here.”

“Where are the maids?” Sam asked.

“They don’t come in till eleven on Saturday.”

“Good. We’re turning off the lights. Watch them and call when they leave.”

From a dark window in a closet, Andy watched the men go from door to door, knocking and waiting, occasionally getting one to open. Eleven of the forty-two rooms were occupied. No response at 38 and 39. They returned to the beach and disappeared. Professional killers! At his motel.

Across the Strip, in the parking lot of a miniature golf course, Andy saw two identical fake tourists talking to a man in a white van. They pointed here and there and seemed to be arguing.

He called Sam. “Listen, Sam, they’re gone. But this place is crawling with these people.”

“How many?”

“I can see two more across the Strip. You folks better run for it.”

“Relax, Andy. They won’t see us if we stay in here.”

“But you can’t stay forever. My boss’ll catch on before much longer.”

“We’re leaving soon, Andy. What about the package?”

“It’s here.”

“Good. I need to see it. Say, Andy, what about food? Could you ease across the street and get something hot?”

Andy was a manager, not a porter. But for five thousand a day the Sea Gull’s Rest could provide a little room service. “Sure. Be there in a minute.”

Wayne Tarrance grabbed the phone and fell across the single bed in his Ramada Inn room in Orlando. He was exhausted, furious, baffled and sick of F. Denton Voyles. It was 1:30 p.m., Saturday. He called Memphis. The secretary had nothing to report, except that Mary

Alice called and wanted to talk to him. They had traced the call to a pay phone in Atlanta. Mary Alice said she would call again at 2 p.m. to see if Wayne—she called him Wayne—had checked in. Tarrance gave his room number and hung up. Mary Alice. In Atlanta. McDeere in Tallahassee, then Ocala. Then no McDeere. No green Ford pickup with Tennessee plates and trailer. He had vanished again.

The phone rang once. Tarrance slowly lifted the receiver. “Mary Alice,” he said softly.

“Wayne baby! How’d you guess?”

“Where is he?”

“Who?” Tammy giggled.

“McDeere. Where is he?”

“Well, Wayne, you boys were hot for a while, but then you chased a wild rabbit. Now you’re not even close, baby. Sorry to tell you.”

“We’ve got three positive IDs in the past fourteen hours.”

“Better check them out, Wayne. Mitch told me a few minutes ago he’s never been to Tallahassee. Never heard of Ocala. Never driven a green Ford pickup. Never pulled a U-Haul trailer. You boys bit hard, Wayne. Hook, line and sinker.”

Tarrance pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed into the phone.

“So how’s Orlando?” she asked. “Gonna see Disney World while you’re in town?”

“Where the hell is he!”

“Wayne, Wayne, relax, baby. You’ll get the documents.”

Tarrance sat up. “Okay, when?”

“Well, we could be greedy and insist on the rest of our money. I’m at a pay phone, Wayne, so don’t bother to trace it, okay? But we’re not greedy. You’ll get your records within twenty-four hours. If all goes well.”

“Where are the records?”

“I’ll have to call you back, baby. If you stay at this number, I’ll call you every four hours until Mitch tells me where the documents are. But, Wayne, if you leave this number, I might lose you, baby. So stay put.”

“I’ll be here. Is he still in the country?”

“I think not. I’m sure he’s in Mexico by now. His brother speaks the language, you know?”

“I know.” Tarrance stretched out on the bed and said to hell with it. Mexico could have them, as long as he got the records.

“Stay where you are, baby. Take a nap. You gotta be tired. I’ll call around five or six.”

Tarrance laid the phone on the nightstand, and took a nap.

The dragnet lost its steam Saturday afternoon when the Panama City Beach police received the fourth complaint from motel owners. The cops were dispatched to the Breakers Motel, where an irate owner told of armed men harassing the guests. More cops were sent to the Strip, and before long they were searching the motels for gunmen who were searching for the McDeeres. The Emerald Coast was on the brink of war.

Weary and hot, DeVasher’s men were forced to work alone. They spread themselves even thinner along the beach and stopped the door-to-door work. They lounged in plastic chairs around the pools, watching the tourists come and go. They lay on the beach, dodging the sun, hiding behind dark shades, watching the tourists come and go.

As dusk approached, the army of goons and thugs and gunmen, and lawyers, slipped into the darkness and waited. If the McDeeres were going to move, they would do it at night. A silent army waited for them.

DeVasher’s thick forearms rested uncomfortably on a balcony railing outside his Best Western room. He watched the empty beach below as the sun slowly disappeared on the horizon. Aaron Rimmer walked through the sliding glass door and stopped behind DeVasher. “We found Tolar,” Rimmer said.

DeVasher did not move. “Where?”

“Hiding in his girlfriend’s apartment in Memphis.”

“Was he alone?”

“Yeah. They iced him. Made it look like a robbery.”

In Room 39, Ray inspected for the hundredth time the new passports, visas, driver's licenses and birth certificates. The passport photos for Mitch and Abby were current, with plenty of dark hair. After the escape, time would take care of the blondness. Ray's photo was a slightly altered Harvard Law School mug shot of Mitch, with the long hair, stubble and rough academic looks. The eyes, noses and cheekbones were similar, after careful analysis, but nothing else. The documents were in the names of Lee Stevens, Rachel James and Sam Fortune, all with addresses in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Doc did good work, and Ray smiled as he studied each one.

Abby packed the Sony video camera into its box. The tripod was folded and leaned against the wall. Fourteen videocassette tapes with stick-on labels were stacked neatly on the television.

After sixteen hours, the video deposition was over. Starting with the first tape, Mitch had faced the camera, raised his right hand and sworn to tell the truth. He stood next to the dresser with documents covering the floor around him. Using Tammy's notes, summaries and flowcharts, he methodically walked through the bank records first. He identified over two hundred and fifty secret accounts in eleven Cayman banks. Some had names, but most were just numbered. Using copies of computer printouts, he constructed the histories of the accounts. Cash deposits, wire transfers and withdrawals. At the bottom of each document used in his deposition, he wrote with a black marker the initials MM and then the exhibit number: MM1, MM2, MM3 and so on. After Exhibit MM1485, he had identified nine hundred million dollars hiding in Cayman banks.

After the bank records, he painstakingly pieced together the structure of the empire. In twenty years, more than four hundred Cayman corporations had been chartered by the Moroltos and their incredibly rich and incredibly corrupt attorneys. Many of the corporations owned all or pieces of each other and used the banks as registered agents and permanent addresses. Mitch learned quickly that he had only a fraction of the records and speculated, on camera, that most documents were hidden in the basement in

Memphis. He also explained, for the benefit of the jury, that it would take a small army of IRS investigators a year or so to piece together the Morolto corporate puzzle. He slowly explained each exhibit, marked it carefully and filed it away. Abby operated the camera. Ray watched the parking lot and studied the fake passports.

He testified for six hours on various methods used by the Moroltos and their attorneys to turn dirty money into clean. Easily the most favored method was to fly in a load of dirty cash on a Bendini plane, usually with two or three lawyers on board to legitimate the trip. With dope pouring in by land, air and sea, U.S. customs cares little about what's leaving the country. It was a perfect setup. The planes left dirty and came back clean. Once the money landed on Grand Cayman, a lawyer on board handled the required payoffs to Cayman customs and to the appropriate banker. On some loads, up to twenty-five percent went for bribes.

Once deposited, usually in unnamed, numbered accounts, the money became almost impossible to trace. But many of the bank transactions coincided nicely with significant corporate events. The money was usually deposited into one of a dozen numbered holding accounts. Or "super accounts," as Mitch called them. He gave the jury these account numbers, and the names of the banks. Then, as the new corporations were chartered, the money was transferred from the super accounts to the corporate accounts, often in the same bank. Once the dirty money was owned by a legitimate Cayman corporation, the laundering began. The simplest and most common method was for the company to purchase real estate and other clean assets in the United States. The transactions were handled by the creative attorneys at Bendini, Lambert & Locke, and all money moved by wire transfer. Often, the Cayman corporation would purchase another Cayman corporation that happened to own a Panama corporation that owned a holding company in Denmark. The Danes would purchase a ball-bearing factory in Toledo and wire in the purchase money from a subsidiary bank in Munich. And the dirty money was now clean.

After marking Exhibit MM4292, Mitch quit the deposition. Sixteen hours of testimony was enough. It would not be admissible at trial,

but it would serve its purpose. Tarrance and his buddies could show the tapes to a grand jury and indict at least thirty lawyers from the Bendini firm. He could show the tapes to a federal magistrate and get his search warrants.

Mitch had held to his end of the bargain. Although he would not be around to testify in person, he had been paid only a million dollars and was about to deliver more than was expected. He was physically and emotionally drained, and sat on the edge of the bed with the lights off. Abby sat in a chair with her eyes closed.

Ray peeked through the blinds. "We need a cold beer," he said.

"Forget it," Mitch snapped.

Ray turned and stared at him. "Relax, little brother. It's dark, and the store is just a short walk down the beach. I can take care of myself."

"Forget it, Ray. There is no need to take chances. We're leaving in a few hours, and if all goes well, you'll have the rest of your life to drink beer."

Ray was not listening. He pulled a baseball cap firmly over his forehead, stuck some cash in his pockets and reached for the gun.

"Ray, please, at least forget the gun," Mitch pleaded.

Ray stuck the gun under his shirt and eased out the door. He walked quickly in the sand behind the small motels and shops, hiding in the shadows and craving a cold beer. He stopped behind the convenience store, looked quickly around and was certain no one was watching, then walked to the front door. The beer cooler was in the rear.

In the parking lot next to the Strip, Lamar Quin hid under a large straw hat and made small talk with some teenagers from Indiana. He saw Ray enter the store and thought he might recognize something. There was a casualness about the man's stride that looked vaguely familiar. Lamar moved to the front window and glanced in the direction of the beer cooler. The man's eyes were covered with sunglasses, but the nose and cheekbones were certainly familiar. Lamar eased inside the small store and picked up a sack of potato chips. He waited at the checkout counter and came

face-to-face with the man, who was not Mitchell McDeere but greatly resembled him.

It was Ray. It had to be. The face was sunburned, and the hair was too short to be stylish. The eyes were covered. Same height. Same weight. Same walk.

“How’s it going?” Lamar said to the man.

“Fine. You?” the voice was similar.

Lamar paid for his chips and returned to the parking lot. He calmly dropped the bag in a garbage can next to a phone booth and quickly walked next door to a souvenir shop to continue his search for the McDeeres.

Darkness brought a cool breeze to the beach along the Strip. The sun disappeared quickly, and there was no moon to replace it. A distant ceiling of harmless dark clouds covered the sky, and the water was black.

Darkness brought fishermen to the Dan Russell Pier in the center of the Strip. They gathered in groups of three and four along the concrete structure and stared silently as their lines ran into the black water twenty feet below. They leaned motionless on the railing, occasionally spitting or talking to a friend. They enjoyed the breeze and the quietness and the still water much more than they enjoyed the occasional fish that ventured by and hit a hook. They were vacationers from the North who spent the same week each year at the same motel and came to the pier each night in the darkness to fish and marvel at the sea. Between them sat buckets full of bait and small coolers full of beer.

From time to time throughout the night, a nonfisherman or a pair of lovebirds would venture onto the pier and walk a hundred yards to the end of it. They would gaze at the black, gentle water for a few minutes, then turn and admire the glow of a million flickering lights along the Strip. They would watch the inert, huddled fishermen leaning on their elbows. The fishermen did not notice them.

The fishermen did not notice Aaron Rimmer as he casually walked behind them around eleven. He smoked a cigarette at the end of the pier and tossed the butt into the ocean. He gazed along the beach and thought of the thousands of motel rooms and condos.

The Dan Russell Pier was the westernmost of the three at Panama City Beach. It was the newest, the longest and the only one built with nothing but concrete. The other two were older and wooden. In the center there was a small brick building containing a tackle shop, a snack bar and rest rooms. Only the rest rooms were open at night.

It was probably a half mile east of the Sea Gull's Rest. At eleven-thirty, Abby left Room 39, eased by the dirty pool and began walking east along the beach. She wore shorts, a white straw hat and a wind-breaker with the collar turned up around her ears. She walked slowly, with her hands thrust deep in the pockets like an experienced, contemplative beachcomber. Five minutes later, Mitch left the room, eased by the dirty pool and followed her footsteps. He gazed at the ocean as he walked. Two joggers approached, splashing in the water and talking between breaths. On a string around his neck and tucked under his black cotton shirt was a whistle, just in case. In all four pockets he had crammed sixty thousand in cash. He looked at the ocean and nervously watched Abby ahead of him. When he was two hundred yards down the beach, Ray left Room 39 for the last time. He locked it and kept a key. Wrapped around his waist was a forty-foot piece of black nylon rope. The gun was stuck under it. A bulky windbreaker covered it all nicely. Andy had charged another two thousand for the clothing and items.

Ray eased onto the beach. He watched Mitch and could barely see Abby. The beach was deserted.

It was almost midnight, Saturday, and most of the fishermen had left the pier for another night. Abby saw three in a small cluster near the rest rooms. She slipped past them and nonchalantly strolled to the end of the pier, where she leaned on the concrete railing and stared at the vast blackness of the Gulf. Red buoy lights were scattered as far as she could see. Blue and white channel lights formed a neat line to the east. A blinking yellow light on some vessel inched away on the horizon. She was alone at the end of the pier.

Mitch hid in a beach chair under a folded umbrella near the entrance to the pier. He could not see her, but had a good view of

the ocean. Fifty feet away, Ray sat in the darkness on a brick ledge. His feet dangled in the sand. They waited. They checked their watches.

At precisely midnight, Abby nervously unzipped her windbreaker and untied a heavy flashlight. She glanced at the water below and gripped it fiercely. She shoved it into her stomach, shielded it with the wind-breaker, aimed at the sea and pushed the switch three times. On and off. On and off. On and off. The green bulb flashed three times. She held it tightly and stared at the ocean.

No response. She waited an eternity and two minutes later flashed again. Three times. No response. She breathed deeply and spoke to herself. "Be calm, Abby, be calm. He's out there somewhere." She flashed three more times. Then waited. No response.

Mitch sat on the edge of the beach chair and anxiously surveyed the sea. From the corner of an eye, he saw a figure walking, almost running from the west. It jumped onto the steps of the pier. It was the Nordic. Mitch bolted across the beach after him.

Aaron Rimmer walked behind the fishermen, around the small building, and watched the woman in the white hat at the end of the pier. She was bent over clutching something. It flashed again, three times. He walked silently up to her.

"Abby."

She jerked around and tried to scream. Rimmer lunged at her and shoved her into the railing. From the darkness, Mitch dived head first into the Nordic's legs, and all three went down hard on the slick concrete. Mitch felt the gun at the Nordic's back. He swung wildly with a forearm and missed. Rimmer whirled and landed a wicked smash to Mitch's left eye. Abby kicked and crawled away. Mitch was blind and dazed. Rimmer stood quickly and reached for the gun, but never found it. Ray charged like a battering ram and sent the Nordic crashing into the railing. He landed four bulletlike jabs to the eyes and nose, each one drawing blood. Skills learned in prison. The Nordic fell to all fours, and Ray snapped his head with four powerful kicks. He groaned pitifully and fell, face first.

Ray removed the gun and handed it to Mitch, who was standing now and trying to focus with his good eye. Abby watched the pier.

No one.

“Start flashing,” Ray said as he unwound the rope from his waist. Abby faced the water, shielded the flashlight, found the switch and began flashing like crazy.

“What’re you gonna do?” Mitch whispered, watching Ray and the rope.

“Two choices. We can either blow his brains out or drown him.”

“Oh my god!” Abby said as she flashed.

“Don’t fire the gun,” Mitch whispered.

“Thank you,” Ray said. He grabbed a short section of rope, twisted it tightly around the Nordic’s neck and pulled. Mitch turned his back and stepped between the body and Abby. She did not try to watch. “I’m sorry. We have no choice,” Ray mumbled almost to himself.

There was no resistance, no movement from the unconscious man. After three minutes, Ray exhaled loudly and announced, “He’s dead.” He tied the other end of the rope to a post, slid the body under the railing and lowered it quietly into the water.

“I’m going down first,” Ray said as he crawled through the railing and slid down the rope. Eight feet under the deck of the pier, an iron cross brace was attached to two of the thick concrete columns that disappeared into the water. It made a nice hideout. Abby was next. Ray grabbed her legs as she clutched the rope and eased downward. Mitch, with his one eye, lost his equilibrium and almost went for a swim.

But they made it. They sat on the cross brace, ten feet above the cold, dark water. Ten feet above the fish and the barnacles and the body of the Nordic. Ray cut the rope so the corpse could fall to the bottom properly before it made its ascent in a day or two.

They sat like three owls on a limb, watching the buoy lights and channel lights and waiting for the messiah to come walking across the water. The only sounds were the soft splashing of the waves below and the steady clicking of the flashlight.

And then voices from the deck above. Nervous, anxious, panicked voices, searching for someone. Then they were gone.

“Well, little brother, what do we do now?” Ray whispered.

“Plan B,” Mitch said.

“And what’s that?”

“Start swimming.”

“Very funny,” Abby said, clicking away.

An hour passed. The iron brace, though perfectly located, was not comfortable.

“Have you noticed those two boats out there?” Ray asked quietly.

The boats were small, about a mile offshore, and for the past hour had been cruising slowly and suspiciously back and forth in sight of the beach. “I think they’re fishing boats,” Mitch said.

“Who fishes at one o’clock in the morning?” Ray asked.

The three of them thought about this. There was no explanation.

Abby saw it first, and hoped and prayed it was not the body now floating toward them. “Over there,” she said, pointing, fifty yards out to sea. It was a black object, resting on the water and moving slowly in their direction. They watched intently. Then the sound, like that of a sewing machine.

“Keep flashing,” Mitch said. It grew closer.

It was a man in a small boat.

“Abanks!” Mitch whispered loudly. The humming noise died.

“Abanks!” he said again.

“Where the hell are you?” came the reply.

“Over here. Under the pier. Hurry, dammit!”

The hum grew louder, and Abanks parked an eight-foot rubber raft under the pier. They swung from the brace and landed in one joyous pile. They quietly hugged each other, then hugged Abanks. He revved up the five-horsepower electric trolling motor and headed for open water.

“Where have you been?” Mitch asked.

“Cruising,” Abanks answered nonchalantly.

“Why are you late?”

“I’m late because I’ve been dodging these fishing boats filled with idiots in tourist clothes posing as fishermen.”

“You think they’re Moroltos or Fibbies?” Abby asked.

“Well, if they’re idiots, they could be either one.”

“What happened to your green light?”

Abanks pointed to a flashlight next to the motor. "Battery went dead."

The boat was a forty-foot schooner that Abanks had found in Jamaica for only two hundred thousand. A friend waited by the ladder and helped them aboard. His name was George, just George, and he spoke English with a quick accent. Abanks said he could be trusted.

"There's whiskey if you like. In the cabinet," Abanks said. Ray found the whiskey. Abby found a blanket and lay down on a small couch. Mitch stood on the deck and admired his new boat. When Abanks and George had the raft aboard, Mitch said, "Let's get out of here. Can we leave now?"

"As you wish," George snapped properly.

Mitch gazed at the lights along the beach and said farewell. He went below and poured a cup of scotch.

Wayne Tarrance slept across the bed in his clothes. He had not moved since the last call, six hours earlier. The phone rang beside him. After four rings, he found it.

"Hello." His voice was slow and scratchy.

"Wayne, baby. Did I wake you?"

"Of course."

"You can have the documents now. Room 39, Sea Gull's Rest Motel, Highway 98, Panama City Beach. The desk clerk is a guy named Andy, and he'll let you in the room. Be careful with them. Our friend has them all marked real nice and precise, and he's got sixteen hours of videotape. So be gentle."

"I have a question," Tarrance said.

"Sure, big boy. Anything."

"Where did he find you? This would've been impossible without you."

"Gee, thanks, Wayne. He found me in Memphis. We got to be friends, and he offered me a bunch of money."

“How much?”

“Why is that important, Wayne? I’ll never have to work again. Gotta run, baby. It’s been real fun.”

“Where is he?”

“As we speak, he’s on a plane to South America. But please don’t waste your time trying to catch him. Wayne, baby, I love you, but you couldn’t even catch him in Memphis. Bye now.” She was gone.

Dawn. Sunday. The forty-foot schooner sped south with full sails under a clear sky. Abby was in a deep sleep in the master suite. Ray was in a scotch-induced coma on a couch. Abanks was somewhere below catching a nap.

Mitch sat on the deck sipping cold coffee and listening to George expound on the basics of sailing. He was in his late fifties, with long, gray, bleached hair and dark, sun-cured skin. He was small and wiry, much like Abanks. He was Australian by birth, but twenty-eight years earlier had fled his country after the largest bank heist in its history. He and his partner split eleven million in cash and silver and went their separate ways. His partner was now dead, he had heard.

George was not his real name, but he'd used it for twenty-eight years and forgotten the real one. He discovered the Caribbean in the late sixties, and after seeing its thousands of small, primitive English-speaking islands, decided he'd found home. He put his money in banks in the Bahamas, Belize, Panama and, of course, Grand Cayman. He built a small compound on a deserted stretch of beach on Little Cayman and had spent the past twenty-one years touring the Caribbean in his thirty-foot schooner. During the summer and early fall, he stayed close to home. But from October to June, he lived on his boat and hopped from island to island. He'd been to three hundred of them in the Caribbean. He once spent two years just in the Bahamas.

"There are thousands of islands," he explained. "And they'll never find you if you move a lot."

"Are they still looking for you?" Mitch asked.

“I don’t know. I can’t call and ask, you know. But I doubt it.”

“Where’s the safest place to hide?”

“On this boat. It’s a nice little yacht, and once you learn to sail it, it’ll be your home. Find you a little island somewhere, perhaps Little Cayman or Brac—they’re both still primitive—and build a house. Do as I’ve done. And spend most of your time on this boat.”

“When do you stop worrying about being chased?”

“Oh, I still think about it, you know. But I don’t worry about it. How much did you get away with?”

“Eight million, give or take,” Mitch said.

“That’s nice. You’ve got the money to do as you please, so forget about them. Just tour the islands for the rest of your life. There are worse things, you know.”

For days they sailed toward Cuba, then around it in the direction of Jamaica. They watched George and listened to his lectures. After twenty years of sailing through the Caribbean, he was a man of great knowledge and patience. Ray, the linguist, listened to and memorized words like spinnaker, mast, bow, stern, aft, tiller, halyard winches, masthead fittings, shrouds, lifelines, stanchions, sheet winch, bow pulpit, coamings, transom, clew outhaul, genoa sheets, mainsail, jib, jibstays, jib sheets, cam cleats and boom vang. George lectured on heeling, luffing, running, blanketing, backwinding, heading up, trimming and pointing. Ray absorbed the language of sailing; Mitch studied the technique.

Abby stayed in the cabin, saying little and smiling only when necessary. Life on a boat was not something she dreamed about. She missed her house and wondered what would happen to it. Maybe Mr. Rice would cut the grass and pull the weeds. She missed the shady streets and neat lawns and the small gangs of children riding bicycles. She thought of her dog, and prayed that Mr. Rice would adopt it. She worried about her parents—their safety and their fear. When would she see them again? It would be years, she decided, and she could live with that if she knew they were safe.

Her thoughts could not escape the present. The future was inconceivable.

During the second day of the rest of her life, she began writing letters; letters to her parents, Kay Quin, Mr. Rice and a few friends. The letters would never be mailed, she knew, but it helped to put the words on paper.

Mitch watched her carefully, but left her alone. He had nothing to say, really. Maybe in a few days they could talk.

By the end of the fourth day, Wednesday, Grand Cayman was in sight. They circled it slowly once and anchored a mile from shore. After dark, Barry Abanks said goodbye. The McDeeres simply thanked him, and he eased away in the rubber raft. He would land three miles from Bodden Town at another dive lodge, then call one of his dive captains to come get him. He would know if anyone suspicious had been around. Abanks expected no trouble.

George's compound on Little Cayman consisted of a small main house of white-painted wood and two smaller outbuildings. It was inland a quarter of a mile, on a tiny bay. The nearest house could not be seen. A native woman lived in the smallest building and maintained the place. Her name was Fay.

The McDeeres settled in the main house and tried to begin the process of starting over. Ray, the escapee, roamed the beaches for hours and kept to himself. He was euphoric, but could not show it. He and George took the boat out for several hours each day and drank scotch while exploring the islands. They usually returned drunk.

Abby spent the first days in a small room upstairs overlooking the bay. She wrote more letters and began a diary. She slept alone.

Twice a week, Fay drove the Volkswagen bus into town for supplies and mail. She returned one day with a package from Barry Abanks. George delivered it to Mitch. Inside the package was a parcel sent to Abanks from Doris Greenwood in Miami. Mitch ripped open the

thick legal-sized envelope and found three newspapers, two from Atlanta and one from Miami.

The headlines told of the mass indicting of the Bendini law firm in Memphis. Fifty-one present and former members of the firm were indicted, along with thirty-one alleged members of the Morolto crime family in Chicago. More indictments were coming, promised the U.S. Attorney. Just the tip of the iceberg. Director F. Denton Voyles allowed himself to be quoted as saying it was a major blow to organized crime in America. It should be a dire warning, he said, to legitimate professionals and businessmen who are tempted to handle dirty money.

Mitch folded the newspapers and went for a long walk on the beach. Under a cluster of palms, he found some shade and sat down. The Atlanta paper listed the names of every Bendini lawyer indicted. He read them slowly. There was no joy in seeing the names. He almost felt sorry for Nathan Locke. Almost. Wally Hudson, Kendall Mahan, Jack Aldrich and, finally, Lamar Quin. He could see their faces. He knew their wives and their children. Mitch gazed across the brilliant ocean and thought about Lamar and Kay Quin. He loved them, and he hated them. They had helped seduce him into the firm, and they were not without blame. But they were his friends. What a waste! Maybe Lamar would only serve a couple of years and then be paroled. Maybe Kay and the kids could survive. Maybe.

"I love you, Mitch." Abby was standing behind him. She held a plastic pitcher and two cups.

He smiled at her and waved to the sand next to him. "What's in the pitcher?"

"Rum punch. Fay mixed it for us."

"Is it strong?"

She sat next to him on the sand. "It's mostly rum. I told Fay we needed to get drunk, and she agreed."

He held her tightly and sipped the rum punch. They watched a small fishing boat inch through the sparkling water.

"Are you scared, Mitch?"

"Terrified."

“Me too. This is crazy.”

“But we made it, Abby. We’re alive. We’re safe. We’re together.”

“But what about tomorrow? And the next day?”

“I don’t know, Abby. Things could be worse, you know. My name could be in the paper there with the other freshly indicted defendants. Or we could be dead. There are worse things than sailing around the Caribbean with eight million bucks in the bank.”

“Do you think my parents are safe?”

“I think so. What would Morolto have to gain by harming your parents? They’re safe, Abby.”

She refilled the cups with rum punch and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll be okay, Mitch. As long as we’re together, I can handle anything.”

“Abby,” Mitch said slowly, staring at the water, “I have a confession to make.”

“I’m listening.”

“The truth is, I never wanted to be a lawyer anyway.”

“Oh, really.”

“Naw. Secretly, I’ve always wanted to be a sailor.”

“Is that so? Have you ever made love on the beach?”

Mitch hesitated for a slight second. “Uh, no.”

“Then drink up, sailor. Let’s get drunk and make a baby.”



JOHN
GRISHAM



THE APPEAL

A DELL  BOOK

JOHN
GRISHAM

THE
APPEAL

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A Dell Book

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PART ONE

THE VERDICT

CHAPTER 1

The jury was ready.

After forty-two hours of deliberations that followed seventy-one days of trial that included 530 hours of testimony from four dozen witnesses, and after a lifetime of sitting silently as the lawyers haggled and the judge lectured and the spectators watched like hawks for telltale signs, the jury was ready. Locked away in the jury room, secluded and secure, ten of them proudly signed their names to the verdict while the other two pouted in their corners, detached and miserable in their dissension. There were hugs and smiles and no small measure of self-congratulation because they had survived this little war and could now march proudly back into the arena with a decision they had rescued through sheer determination and the dogged pursuit of compromise. Their ordeal was over; their civic duty complete. They had served above and beyond. They were ready.

The foreman knocked on the door and rustled Uncle Joe from his slumbers. Uncle Joe, the ancient bailiff, had guarded them while he also arranged their meals, heard their complaints, and quietly slipped their messages to the judge. In his younger years, back when his hearing was better, Uncle Joe was rumored to also eavesdrop on his juries through a flimsy pine door he and he alone had selected and installed. But his listening days were over, and, as he had confided to no one but his wife, after the ordeal of this particular trial he might just hang up his old pistol once and for all. The strain of controlling justice was wearing him down.

He smiled and said, "That's great. I'll get the judge," as if the judge were somewhere in the bowels of the courthouse just waiting for a call from Uncle Joe. Instead, by custom, he found a clerk and passed along the wonderful news. It was truly exciting. The old

courthouse had never seen a trial so large and so long. To end it with no decision at all would have been a shame.

The clerk tapped lightly on the judge's door, then took a step inside and proudly announced, "We have a verdict," as if she had personally labored through the negotiations and now was presenting the result as a gift.

The judge closed his eyes and let loose a deep, satisfying sigh. He smiled a happy, nervous smile of enormous relief, almost disbelief, and finally said, "Round up the lawyers."

After almost five days of deliberations, Judge Harrison had resigned himself to the likelihood of a hung jury, his worst nightmare. After four years of bare-knuckle litigation and four months of a hotly contested trial, the prospect of a draw made him ill. He couldn't begin to imagine the prospect of doing it all again.

He stuck his feet into his old penny loafers, jumped from the chair grinning like a little boy, and reached for his robe. It was finally over, the longest trial of his extremely colorful career.

The clerk's first call went to the firm of Payton & Payton, a local husband-and-wife team now operating out of an abandoned dime store in a lesser part of town. A paralegal picked up the phone, listened for a few seconds, hung up, then shouted, "The jury has a verdict!" His voice echoed through the cavernous maze of small, temporary workrooms and jolted his colleagues.

He shouted it again as he ran to The Pit, where the rest of the firm was frantically gathering. Wes Payton was already there, and when his wife, Mary Grace, rushed in, their eyes met in a split second of unbridled fear and bewilderment. Two paralegals, two secretaries, and a bookkeeper gathered at the long, cluttered worktable, where they suddenly froze and gawked at one another, all waiting for someone else to speak.

Could it really be over? After they had waited for an eternity, could it end so suddenly? So abruptly? With just a phone call?

"How about a moment of silent prayer," Wes said, and they held hands in a tight circle and prayed as they had never prayed before. All manner of petitions were lifted up to God Almighty, but the common plea was for victory. Please, dear Lord, after all this time

and effort and money and fear and doubt, please, oh please, grant us a divine victory. And deliver us from humiliation, ruin, bankruptcy, and a host of other evils that a bad verdict will bring.

The clerk's second call was to the cell phone of Jared Kurtin, the architect of the defense. Mr. Kurtin was lounging peacefully on a rented leather sofa in his temporary office on Front Street in downtown Hattiesburg, three blocks from the courthouse. He was reading a biography and watching the hours pass at \$750 per. He listened calmly, slapped the phone shut, and said, "Let's go. The jury is ready." His dark-suited soldiers snapped to attention and lined up to escort him down the street in the direction of another crushing victory. They marched away without comment, without prayer.

Other calls went to other lawyers, then to the reporters, and within minutes the word was on the street and spreading rapidly.

Somewhere near the top of a tall building in lower Manhattan, a panic-stricken young man barged into a serious meeting and whispered the urgent news to Mr. Carl Trudeau, who immediately lost interest in the issues on the table, stood abruptly, and said, "Looks like the jury has reached a verdict." He marched out of the room and down the hall to a vast corner suite, where he removed his jacket, loosened his tie, walked to a window, and gazed through the early darkness at the Hudson River in the distance. He waited, and as usual asked himself how, exactly, so much of his empire could rest upon the combined wisdom of twelve average people in backwater Mississippi.

For a man who knew so much, that answer was still elusive.

People were hurrying into the courthouse from all directions when the Paytons parked on the street behind it. They stayed in the car

for a moment, still holding hands. For four months they had tried not to touch each other anywhere near the courthouse. Someone was always watching. Maybe a juror or a reporter. It was important to be as professional as possible. The novelty of a married legal team surprised people, and the Paytons tried to treat each other as attorneys and not as spouses.

And, during the trial, there had been precious little touching away from the courthouse or anywhere else.

“What are you thinking?” Wes asked without looking at his wife. His heart was racing and his forehead was wet. He still gripped the wheel with his left hand, and he kept telling himself to relax.

Relax. What a joke.

“I have never been so afraid,” Mary Grace said.

“Neither have I.”

A long pause as they breathed deeply and watched a television van almost slaughter a pedestrian.

“Can we survive a loss?” she said. “That’s the question.”

“We have to survive; we have no choice. But we’re not going to lose.”

“Attaboy. Let’s go.”

They joined the rest of their little firm and entered the courthouse together. Waiting in her usual spot on the first floor by the soft drink machines was their client, the plaintiff, Jeannette Baker, and when she saw her lawyers, she immediately began to cry. Wes took one arm, Mary Grace the other, and they escorted Jeannette up the stairs to the main courtroom on the second floor. They could’ve carried her. She weighed less than a hundred pounds and had aged five years during the trial. She was depressed, at times delusional, and though not anorexic, she simply didn’t eat. At thirty-four, she had already buried a child and a husband and was now at the end of a horrible trial she secretly wished she had never pursued.

The courtroom was in a state of high alert, as if bombs were coming and the sirens were wailing. Dozens of people milled about, or looked for seats, or chatted nervously with their eyes darting around. When Jared Kurtin and the defense army entered from a side door, everyone gawked as if he might know something they

didn't. Day after day for the past four months he had proven that he could see around corners, but at that moment his face revealed nothing. He huddled gravely with his subordinates.

Across the room, just a few feet away, the Paytons and Jeannette settled into their chairs at the plaintiff's table. Same chairs, same positions, same deliberate strategy to impress upon the jurors that this poor widow and her two lonely lawyers were taking on a giant corporation with unlimited resources. Wes Payton glanced at Jared Kurtin, their eyes met, and each offered a polite nod. The miracle of the trial was that the two men were still able to treat each other with a modest dose of civility, even converse when absolutely necessary. It had become a matter of pride. Regardless of how nasty the situation, and there had been so many nasty ones, each was determined to rise above the gutter and offer a hand.

Mary Grace did not look over, and if she had, she would not have nodded or smiled. And it was a good thing that she did not carry a handgun in her purse, or half of the dark suits on the other side wouldn't be there. She arranged a clean legal pad on the table before her, wrote the date, then her name, then could not think of anything else to log in. In seventy-one days of trial she had filled sixty-six legal pads, all the same size and color and now filed in perfect order in a secondhand metal cabinet in The Pit. She handed a tissue to Jeannette. Though she counted virtually everything, Mary Grace had not kept a running tally on the number of tissue boxes Jeannette had used during the trial. Several dozen at least.

The woman cried almost nonstop, and while Mary Grace was profoundly sympathetic, she was also tired of all the damned crying. She was tired of everything—the exhaustion, the stress, the sleepless nights, the scrutiny, the time away from her children, their run-down apartment, the mountain of unpaid bills, the neglected clients, the cold Chinese food at midnight, the challenge of doing her face and hair every morning so she could be somewhat attractive in front of the jury. It was expected of her.

Stepping into a major trial is like plunging with a weighted belt into a dark and weedy pond. You manage to scramble up for air, but

the rest of the world doesn't matter. And you always think you're drowning.

A few rows behind the Paytons, at the end of a bench that was quickly becoming crowded, the Paytons' banker chewed his nails while trying to appear calm. His name was Tom Huff, or Huffy to everyone who knew him. Huffy had dropped in from time to time to watch the trial and offer a silent prayer of his own. The Paytons owed Huffy's bank \$400,000, and the only collateral was a tract of farmland in Cary County owned by Mary Grace's father. On a good day it might fetch \$100,000, leaving, obviously, a substantial chunk of unsecured debt. If the Paytons lost the case, then Huffy's once promising career as a banker would be over. The bank president had long since stopped yelling at him. Now all the threats were by e-mail.

What had begun innocently enough with a simple \$90,000 second-mortgage loan against their lovely suburban home had progressed into a gaping hellhole of red ink and foolish spending. Foolish at least in Huffy's opinion. But the nice home was gone, as was the nice downtown office, and the imported cars, and everything else. The Paytons were risking it all, and Huffy had to admire them. A big verdict, and he was a genius. The wrong verdict, and he'd stand in line behind them at the bankruptcy court.

The moneymen on the other side of the courtroom were not chewing their nails and were not particularly worried about bankruptcy, though it had been discussed. Krane Chemical had plenty of cash and profits and assets, but it also had hundreds of potential plaintiffs waiting like vultures to hear what the world was about to hear. A crazy verdict, and the lawsuits would fly.

But they were a confident bunch at that moment. Jared Kurtin was the best defense lawyer money could buy. The company's stock had dipped only slightly. Mr. Trudeau, up in New York, seemed to be satisfied.

They couldn't wait to get home.

Thank God the markets had closed for the day.

Uncle Joe yelled, "Keep your seats," and Judge Harrison entered through the door behind his bench. He had long since cut out the

silly routine of requiring everyone to stand just so he could assume his throne.

“Good afternoon,” he said quickly. It was almost 5:00 p.m. “I have been informed by the jury that a verdict has been reached.” He was looking around, making sure the players were present. “I expect decorum at all times. No outbursts. No one leaves until I dismiss the jury. Any questions? Any additional frivolous motions from the defense?”

Jared Kurtin never flinched. He did not acknowledge the judge in any way, but just kept doodling on his legal pad as if he were painting a masterpiece. If Krane Chemical lost, it would appeal with a vengeance, and the cornerstone of its appeal would be the obvious bias of the Honorable Thomas Alsobrook Harrison IV, a former trial lawyer with a proven dislike for all big corporations in general and, now, Krane Chemical in particular.

“Mr. Bailiff, bring in the jury.”

The door next to the jury box opened, and somewhere a giant unseen vacuum sucked every ounce of air from the courtroom. Hearts froze. Bodies stiffened. Eyes found objects to fixate on. The only sound was that of the jurors’ feet shuffling across well-worn carpet.

Jared Kurtin continued his methodical scribbling. His routine was to never look at the faces of the jurors when they returned with a verdict. After a hundred trials he knew they were impossible to read. And why bother? Their decision would be announced in a matter of seconds anyway. His team had strict instructions to ignore the jurors and show no reaction whatsoever to the verdict.

Of course Jared Kurtin wasn’t facing financial and professional ruin. Wes Payton certainly was, and he could not keep his eyes from the eyes of the jurors as they settled into their seats. The dairy operator looked away, a bad sign. The schoolteacher stared right through Wes, another bad sign. As the foreman handed an envelope to the clerk, the minister’s wife glanced at Wes with a look of pity, but then she had been offering the same sad face since the opening statements.

Mary Grace caught the sign, and she wasn't even looking for it. As she handed another tissue to Jeannette Baker, who was practically sobbing now, Mary Grace stole a look at juror number six, the one closest to her, Dr. Leona Rocha, a retired English professor at the university. Dr. Rocha, behind red-framed reading glasses, gave the quickest, prettiest, most sensational wink Mary Grace would ever receive.

"Have you reached a verdict?" Judge Harrison was asking.

"Yes, Your Honor, we have," the foreman said.

"Is it unanimous?"

"No, sir, it is not."

"Do at least nine of you agree on the verdict?"

"Yes, sir. The vote is 10 to 2."

"That's all that matters."

Mary Grace scribbled a note about the wink, but in the fury of the moment she could not read her own handwriting. Try to appear calm, she kept telling herself.

Judge Harrison took the envelope from the clerk, removed a sheet of paper, and began reviewing the verdict—heavy wrinkles burrowing into his forehead, eyes frowning as he pinched the bridge of his nose. After an eternity he said, "It appears to be in order." Not one single twitch or grin or widening of the eyes, nothing to indicate what was written on the sheet of paper.

He looked down and nodded at his court reporter and cleared his throat, thoroughly relishing the moment. Then the wrinkles softened around his eyes, the jaw muscles loosened, the shoulders sagged a bit, and, to Wes anyway, there was suddenly hope that the jury had scorched the defendant.

In a slow, loud voice, Judge Harrison read: "Question number one: 'Do you find, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the groundwater at issue was contaminated by Krane Chemical Corporation?' " After a treacherous pause that lasted no more than five seconds, he continued, "The answer is 'Yes.' "

One side of the courtroom managed to breathe while the other side began to turn blue.

“Question number two: ‘Do you find, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the contamination was the proximate cause of the death or deaths of (a) Chad Baker and/or (b) Pete Baker?’ Answer: ‘Yes, for both.’ ”

Mary Grace managed to pluck tissues from a box and hand them over with her left hand while writing furiously with her right. Wes managed to steal a glance at juror number four, who happened to be glancing at him with a humorous grin that seemed to say, “Now for the good part.”

“Question number three: ‘For Chad Baker, what amount of money do you award to his mother, Jeannette Baker, as damages for his wrongful death?’ Answer: ‘Five hundred thousand dollars.’ ”

Dead children aren’t worth much, because they earn nothing, but Chad’s impressive award rang like an alarm because it gave a quick preview of what was to come. Wes stared at the clock above the judge and thanked God that bankruptcy had been averted.

“Question number four: ‘For Pete Baker, what amount of money do you award to his widow, Jeannette Baker, as damages for his wrongful death?’ Answer: ‘Two and a half million dollars.’ ”

There was a rustle from the money boys in the front row behind Jared Kurtin. Krane could certainly handle a \$3 million hit, but it was the ripple effect that suddenly terrified them. For his part, Mr. Kurtin had yet to flinch.

Not yet.

Jeannette Baker began to slide out of her chair. She was caught by both of her lawyers, who pulled her up, wrapped arms around her frail shoulders, and whispered to her. She was sobbing, out of control.

There were six questions on the list that the lawyers had hammered out, and if the jury answered yes to number five, then the whole world would go crazy. Judge Harrison was at that point, reading it slowly, clearing his throat, studying the answer. Then he revealed his mean streak. He did so with a smile. He glanced up a few inches, just above the sheet of paper he was holding, just over the cheap reading glasses perched on his nose, and he looked

directly at Wes Payton. The grin was tight, conspiratorial, yet filled with gleeful satisfaction.

“Question number five: ‘Do you find, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the actions of Krane Chemical Corporation were either intentional or so grossly negligent as to justify the imposition of punitive damages?’ Answer: ‘Yes.’ ”

Mary Grace stopped writing and looked over the bobbing head of her client to her husband, whose gaze was frozen upon her. They had won, and that alone was an exhilarating, almost indescribable rush of euphoria. But how large was their victory? At that crucial split second, both knew it was indeed a landslide.

“Question number six: ‘What is the amount of punitive damages?’ Answer: ‘Thirty-eight million dollars.’ ”

There were gasps and coughs and soft whistles as the shock waves rattled around the courtroom. Jared Kurtin and his gang were busy writing everything down and trying to appear unfazed by the bomb blast. The honchos from Krane in the front row were trying to recover and breathe normally. Most glared at the jurors and thought vile thoughts that ran along the lines of ignorant people, backwater stupidity, and so on.

Mr. and Mrs. Payton were again both reaching for their client, who was overcome by the sheer weight of the verdict and trying pitifully to sit up. Wes whispered reassurances to Jeannette while repeating to himself the numbers he had just heard. Somehow, he managed to keep his face serious and avoid a goofy smile.

Huffy the banker stopped crunching his nails. In less than thirty seconds he had gone from a disgraced, bankrupt former bank vice president to a rising star with designs on a bigger salary and office. He even felt smarter. Oh, what a marvelous entrance into the bank’s boardroom he would choreograph first thing in the morning. The judge was going on about formalities and thanking the jurors, but Huffy didn’t care. He had heard all he needed to hear.

The jurors stood and filed out as Uncle Joe held the door and nodded with approval. He would later tell his wife that he had predicted such a verdict, though she had no memory of it. He claimed he hadn’t missed a verdict in the many decades he had

worked as a bailiff. When the jurors were gone, Jared Kurtin stood and, with perfect composure, rattled off the usual post-verdict inquiries, which Judge Harrison took with great compassion now that the blood was on the floor. Mary Grace had no response. Mary Grace didn't care. She had what she wanted.

Wes was thinking about the \$41 million and fighting his emotions. The firm would survive, as would their marriage, their reputations, everything.

When Judge Harrison finally announced, "We are adjourned," a mob raced from the courtroom. Everyone grabbed a cell phone.

Mr. Trudeau was still standing at the window, watching the last of the sun set far beyond New Jersey. Across the wide room Stu the assistant took the call and ventured forward a few steps before mustering the nerve to say, "Sir, that was from Hattiesburg. Three million in actual damages, thirty-eight in punitive."

From the rear, there was a slight dip in the boss's shoulder, a quiet exhaling in frustration, then a mumbling of obscenities.

Mr. Trudeau slowly turned around and glared at the assistant as if he just might shoot the messenger. "You sure you heard that right?" he asked, and Stu desperately wished he had not.

"Yes, sir."

Behind him the door was open. Bobby Ratzlaff appeared in a rush, out of breath, shocked and scared and looking for Mr. Trudeau. Ratzlaff was the chief in-house lawyer, and his neck would be the first on the chopping block. He was already sweating.

"Get your boys here in five minutes," Mr. Trudeau growled, then turned back to his window.

The press conference materialized on the first floor of the courthouse. In two small groups, Wes and Mary Grace chatted patiently with reporters. Both gave the same answers to the same questions. No, the verdict was not a record for the state of Mississippi. Yes, they felt it was justified. No, it was not expected, not an award that large anyway. Certainly it would be appealed. Wes had great respect for Jared Kurtin, but not for his client. Their firm currently represented thirty other plaintiffs who were suing Krane Chemical. No, they did not expect to settle those cases.

Yes, they were exhausted.

After half an hour they finally begged off, and walked from the Forrest County Circuit Court building hand in hand, each lugging a heavy briefcase. They were photographed getting into their car and driving away.

Alone, they said nothing. Four blocks, five, six. Ten minutes passed without a word. The car, a battered Ford Taurus with a million miles, at least one low tire, and the constant click of a sticking valve, drifted through the streets around the university.

Wes spoke first. "What's one-third of forty-one million?"

"Don't even think about it."

"I'm not thinking about it. Just a joke."

"Just drive."

"Anyplace in particular?"

"No."

The Taurus ventured into the suburbs, going nowhere but certainly not going back to the office. They stayed far away from the neighborhood with the lovely home they had once owned.

Reality slowly settled in as the numbness began to fade. A lawsuit they had reluctantly filed four years earlier had now been decided in a most dramatic fashion. An excruciating marathon was over, and though they had a temporary victory, the costs had been great. The wounds were raw, the battle scars still very fresh.

The gas gauge showed less than a quarter of a tank, something that Wes would have barely noticed two years earlier. Now it was a much more serious matter. Back then he drove a BMW—Mary Grace

had a Jaguar—and when he needed fuel, he simply pulled in to his favorite station and filled the tank with a credit card. He never saw the bills; they were handled by his bookkeeper. Now the credit cards were gone, as were the BMW and the Jaguar, and the same bookkeeper was working at half salary and doling out a few dollars in cash to keep the Payton firm just above the waterline.

Mary Grace glanced at the gauge, too, a recently acquired habit. She noticed and remembered the price of everything—a gallon of gas, a loaf of bread, a half gallon of milk. She was the saver and he was the spender, but not too many years ago, when the clients were calling and the cases were settling, she had relaxed a bit too much and enjoyed their success. Saving and investing had not been a priority. They were young, the firm was growing, the future had no limits.

Whatever she had managed to put into mutual funds had long since been devoured by the *Baker* case.

An hour earlier they had been broke, on paper, with ruinous debts far outweighing whatever flimsy assets they might list. Now things were different. The liabilities had not gone away, but the black side of their balance sheet had certainly improved.

Or had it?

When might they see some or all of this wonderful verdict? Might Krane now offer a settlement? How long would the appeal take? How much time could they now devote to the rest of their practice?

Neither wanted to ponder the questions that were haunting both of them. They were simply too tired and too relieved. For an eternity they had talked of little else, and now they talked about nothing. Tomorrow or the next day they could begin the debriefing.

“We’re almost out of gas,” she said.

No retort came to his weary mind, so Wes said, “What about dinner?”

“Macaroni and cheese with the kids.”

The trial had not only drained them of their energy and assets; it had also burned away any excess weight they might have been carrying at the outset. Wes was down at least fifteen pounds, though he didn’t know for sure because he hadn’t stepped on the scale in

months. Nor was he about to inquire into this delicate matter with his wife, but it was obvious she needed to eat. They had skipped many meals—breakfasts when they were scrambling to dress the kids and get them to school, lunches when one argued motions in Harrison’s office while the other prepared for the next cross-examination, dinners when they worked until midnight and simply forgot to eat. PowerBars and energy drinks had kept them going.

“Sounds great,” he said, and turned left onto a street that would take them home.

Ratzlaff and two other lawyers took their seats at the sleek leather table in a corner of Mr. Trudeau’s office suite. The walls were all glass and provided magnificent views of skyscrapers packed into the financial district, though no one was in the mood for scenery. Mr. Trudeau was on the phone across the room behind his chrome desk. The lawyers waited nervously. They had talked nonstop to the eyewitnesses down in Mississippi but still had few answers.

The boss finished his phone conversation and strode purposefully across the room. “What happened?” he snapped. “An hour ago you guys were downright cocky. Now we got our asses handed to us. What happened?” He sat down and glared at Ratzlaff.

“Trial by jury. It’s full of risks,” Ratzlaff said.

“I’ve been through trials, plenty of them, and I usually win. I thought we were paying the best shysters in the business. The best mouthpieces money can buy. We spared no expense, right?”

“Oh yes. We paid dearly. Still paying.”

Mr. Trudeau slapped the table and barked, “What went wrong?!”

Well, Ratzlaff thought to himself and wanted to say aloud except that he very much treasured his job, let’s start with the fact that our company built a pesticide plant in Podunk, Mississippi, because the land and labor were dirt cheap, then we spent the next thirty years dumping chemicals and waste into the ground and into the rivers, quite illegally of course, and we contaminated the drinking water

until it tasted like spoiled milk, which, as bad as it was, wasn't the worst part, because then people started dying of cancer and leukemia.

That, Mr. Boss and Mr. CEO and Mr. Corporate Raider, is exactly what went wrong.

"The lawyers feel good about the appeal," Ratzlaff said instead, without much conviction.

"Oh, that's just super. Right now I really trust these lawyers. Where did you find these clowns?"

"They're the best, okay?"

"Sure. And let's just explain to the press that we're ecstatic about our appeal and perhaps our stock won't crash tomorrow. Is that what you're saying?"

"We can spin it," Ratzlaff said. The other two lawyers were glancing at the glass walls. Who wanted to be the first to jump?

One of Mr. Trudeau's cell phones rang and he snatched it off the table. "Hi, honey," he said as he stood and walked away. It was (the third) Mrs. Trudeau, the latest trophy, a deadly young woman whom Ratzlaff and everyone else at the company avoided at all costs. Her husband was whispering, then said goodbye.

He walked to a window near the lawyers and gazed at the sparkling towers around him. "Bobby," he said without looking, "do you have any idea where the jury got the figure of thirty-eight million for punitive damages?"

"Not right offhand."

"Of course you don't. For the first nine months of this year, Krane has averaged thirty-eight million a month in profits. A bunch of ignorant rednecks who collectively couldn't earn a hundred grand a year, and they sit there like gods taking from the rich and giving to the poor."

"We still have the money, Carl," Ratzlaff said. "It'll be years before a dime changes hands, if, in fact, that ever happens."

"Great! Spin that to the wolves tomorrow while our stock goes down the drain."

Ratzlaff shut up and slumped in his chair. The other two lawyers were not about to utter a sound.

Mr. Trudeau was pacing dramatically. "Forty-one million dollars. And there are how many other cases out there, Bobby? Did someone say two hundred, three hundred? Well, if there were three hundred this morning, there will be three thousand tomorrow morning. Every redneck in south Mississippi with a fever blister will now claim to have sipped the magic brew from Bowmore. Every two-bit ambulance chaser with a law degree is driving there now to sign up clients. This wasn't supposed to happen, Bobby. You assured me."

Ratzlaff had a memo under lock and key. It was eight years old and had been prepared under his supervision. It ran for a hundred pages and described in gruesome detail the company's illegal dumping of toxic waste at the Bowmore plant. It summarized the company's elaborate efforts to hide the dumping, to dupe the Environmental Protection Agency, and to buy off the politicians at the local, state, and federal level. It recommended a clandestine but effective cleanup of the waste site, at a cost of some \$50 million. It begged anyone who read it to stop the dumping.

And, most important at this critical moment, it predicted a bad verdict someday in a courtroom.

Only luck and a flagrant disregard for the rules of civil procedure had allowed Ratzlaff to keep the memo a secret.

Mr. Trudeau had been given a copy of it eight years earlier, though he now denied he'd ever seen it. Ratzlaff was tempted to dust it off now and read a few selected passages, but, again, he treasured his job.

Mr. Trudeau walked to the table, placed both palms flat on the Italian leather, glared at Bobby Ratzlaff, and said, "I swear to you, it will never happen. Not one dime of our hard-earned profits will ever get into the hands of those trailer park peasants."

The three lawyers stared at their boss, whose eyes were narrow and glowing. He was breathing fire, and finished by saying, "If I have to bankrupt it or break it into fifteen pieces, I swear to you on my mother's grave that not one dime of Krane's money will ever be touched by those ignorant people."

And with that promise, he walked across the Persian rug, lifted his jacket from a rack, and left the office.

CHAPTER 2

Jeannette Baker was taken by her relatives back to Bowmore, her hometown twenty miles from the courthouse. She was weak from shock and sedated as usual, and she did not want to see a crowd and pretend to celebrate. The numbers represented a victory, but the verdict was also the end of a long, arduous journey. And her husband and little boy were still quite dead.

She lived in an old trailer with Bette, her stepsister, on a gravel road in a forlorn Bowmore neighborhood known as Pine Grove. Other trailers were scattered along other unpaved streets. Most of the cars and trucks parked around the trailers were decades old, unpainted and dented. There were a few homes of the permanent variety, immobile, anchored on slabs fifty years earlier, but they, too, were aging badly and showed signs of obvious neglect. There were few jobs in Bowmore and even fewer in Pine Grove, and a quick stroll along Jeannette's street would depress any visitor.

The news arrived before she did, and a small crowd was gathering when she got home. They put her to bed, then they sat in the cramped den and whispered about the verdict and speculated about what it all meant.

Forty-one million dollars? How would it affect the other lawsuits? Would Krane be forced to clean up its mess? When could she expect to see some of the money? They were cautious not to dwell on this last question, but it was the dominant thought.

More friends arrived and the crowd spilled out of the trailer and onto a shaky wooden deck, where they pulled up lawn chairs and sat and talked in the cool air of the early evening. They drank bottled water and soft drinks. For a long-suffering people, the victory was sweet. Finally, they had won. Something. They had struck back at Krane, a company they hated with every ounce of energy they could muster, and they had finally landed a retaliatory

blow. Maybe the tide was turning. Somewhere out there beyond Bowmore someone had finally listened.

They talked about lawyers and depositions and the Environmental Protection Agency and the latest toxicology and geological reports. Though they were not well educated, they were fluent in the lingo of toxic waste and groundwater contamination and cancer clusters. They were living the nightmare.

Jeannette was awake in her dark bedroom, listening to the muffled conversations around her. She felt secure. These were her people, friends and family and fellow victims. The bonds were tight, the suffering shared. And the money would be, too. If she ever saw a dime, she planned to spread it around.

As she stared at the dark ceiling, she was not overwhelmed by the verdict. Her relief at being finished with the ordeal of the trial far outweighed the thrill of winning. She wanted to sleep for a week and wake up in a brand-new world with her little family intact and everyone happy and healthy. But, for the first time since she heard the verdict, she asked herself what, exactly, she might purchase with the award.

Dignity. A dignified place to live and a dignified place to work. Somewhere else of course. She would move away from Bowmore and Cary County and its polluted rivers and streams and aquifers. Not far, though, because everyone she loved lived nearby. But she dreamed of a new life in a new house with clean water running through it, water that did not stink and stain and cause sickness and death.

She heard another car door slam shut, and she was grateful for her friends. Perhaps she should fix her hair and venture out to say hello. She stepped into the tiny bathroom next to her bed, turned on the light, turned on the faucet at the sink, then sat on the edge of the tub and stared at the stream of grayish water running into the dark stains of the fake-porcelain bowl.

It was fit for flushing human waste, nothing else. The pumping station that produced the water was owned by the City of Bowmore, and the city itself prohibited the drinking of its own water. Three years earlier the council had passed a resolution urging the citizens

to use it only for flushing. Warning signs were posted in every public restroom. "DON'T DRINK THE WATER, by Order of the City Council." Clean water was trucked in from Hattiesburg, and every home in Bowmore, mobile and otherwise, had a five-gallon tank and dispenser. Those who could afford it had hundred-gallon reservoirs mounted on stilts near their back porches. And the nicest homes had cisterns for rainwater.

Water was a daily challenge in Bowmore. Every cup was contemplated, fussed over, and used sparingly because the supply was uncertain. And every drop that entered or touched a human body came from a bottle that came from a source that had been inspected and certified. Drinking and cooking were easy compared with bathing and cleaning. Hygiene was a struggle, and most of the women of Bowmore wore their hair short. Many of the men wore beards.

The water was legendary. Ten years earlier, the city installed an irrigation system for its youth baseball field, only to watch the grass turn brown and die. The city swimming pool was closed when a consultant tried treating the water with massive amounts of chlorine, only to watch it turn brackish and reek like a sewage pit. When the Methodist church burned, the firemen realized, during a losing battle, that the water, pumped from an untreated supply, was having an incendiary effect. Years before that, some residents of Bowmore suspected the water caused tiny cracks in the paint of their automobiles after a few wash jobs.

And we drank the stuff for years, Jeannette said to herself. We drank it when it started to stink. We drank it when it changed colors. We drank it while we complained bitterly to the city. We drank it after it was tested and the city assured us it was safe. We drank it after we boiled it. We drank it in our coffee and tea, certain the heat would cure it. And when we stopped drinking it, we showered and bathed in it and inhaled its steam.

What were we supposed to do? Gather at the well each morning like the ancient Egyptians and carry it home in pots on our heads? Sink our own wells at \$2,000 a hole and find the same putrid mix

the city had found? Drive to Hattiesburg and find a spare tap and haul it back in buckets?

She could hear the denials—those from long ago when the experts pointed at their charts and lectured the city council and the mob packed into a crowded boardroom, telling them over and over that the water had been tested and was just fine if properly cleansed with massive doses of chlorine. She could hear the fancy experts Krane Chemical had brought in at trial to tell the jury that, yes, there may have been some minor “leakage” over the years at the Bowmore plant, but not to worry because bichloronylene and other “unauthorized” substances had actually been absorbed by the soil and eventually carried away in an underground stream that posed no threat whatsoever to the town’s drinking water. She could hear the government scientists with their lofty vocabularies talk down to the people and assure them that the water they could barely stand to smell was fine to drink.

Denials all around as the body count rose. Cancer struck everywhere in Bowmore, on every street, in almost every family. Four times the national average. Then six times, then ten. At her trial, an expert hired by the Paytons explained to the jury that for the geographical area as defined by the Bowmore city limits, the rate of cancer was fifteen times the national average.

There was so much cancer that they got themselves studied by all manner of public and private researchers. The term “cancer cluster” became common around town, and Bowmore was radioactive. A clever magazine journalist labeled Cary County as Cancer County, U.S.A., and the nickname stuck.

Cancer County, U.S.A. The water placed quite a strain on the Bowmore Chamber of Commerce. Economic development disappeared, and the town began a rapid decline.

Jeannette turned off the tap, but the water was still there, unseen in the pipes that ran unseen through the walls and into the ground somewhere underneath her. It was always there, waiting like a stalker with unlimited patience. Quiet and deadly, pumped from the earth so polluted by Krane Chemical.

She often lay awake at night listening for the water somewhere in the walls.

A dripping faucet was treated like an armed prowler.

She brushed her hair with little purpose, once again tried not to look at herself too long in the mirror, then brushed her teeth with water from a jug that was always on the sink. She flipped on the light to her room, opened the door, forced a smile, then stepped into the cramped den, where her friends were packed around the walls.

It was time for church.

Mr. Trudeau's car was a black Bentley with a black chauffeur named Toliver who claimed to be Jamaican, though his immigration documents were as suspicious as his affected Caribbean accent. Toliver had been driving the great man for a decade and could read his moods. This was a bad one, Toliver determined quickly as they fought the traffic along the FDR toward midtown. The first signal had been clearly delivered when Mr. Trudeau slammed the right rear door himself before a lunging Toliver could fulfill his duties.

His boss, he had read, could have nerves of cold steel in the boardroom. Unflappable, decisive, calculating, and so on. But in the solitude of the backseat, even with the privacy window rolled up as tightly as possible, his real character often emerged. The man was a hothead with a massive ego who hated to lose.

And he had definitely lost this one. He was on the phone back there, not yelling but certainly not whispering. The stock would crash. The lawyers were fools. Everyone had lied to him. Damage control. Toliver caught only pieces of what was being said, but it was obvious whatever happened down there in Mississippi had been disastrous.

His boss was sixty-one years old and, according to *Forbes*, had a net worth of almost \$2 billion. Toliver often wondered, how much was enough? What would he do with another billion, then another? Why work so hard when he had more than he could ever spend?

Homes, jets, wives, boats, Bentleys, all the toys a real white man could ever want.

But Toliver knew the truth. No amount of money could ever satisfy Mr. Trudeau. There were bigger men in town, and he was running hard to catch them.

Toliver turned west on Sixty-third and inched his way to Fifth, where he turned suddenly and faced a set of thick iron gates that quickly swung back. The Bentley disappeared underground, where it stopped and a security guard stood waiting. He opened the rear door. "We'll leave in an hour," Mr. Trudeau barked in Toliver's general direction, then disappeared, carrying two thick briefcases.

The elevator raced up sixteen levels to the top, where Mr. and Mrs. Trudeau lived in lavish splendor. Their penthouse rambled over the top two floors and looked out from its many giant windows at Central Park. They had purchased the place for \$28 million shortly after their momentous wedding six years earlier, then spent another \$10 million or so bringing it up to designer-magazine quality. The overhead included two maids, a chef, a butler, his and hers valets, at least one nanny, and of course the obligatory personal assistant to keep Mrs. Trudeau properly organized and at lunch on time.

A valet took his briefcases and overcoat as he flung them off. He bounded up the stairs to the master suite, looking for his wife. He had no real desire to see her at the moment, but their little rituals were expected. She was in her dressing room, a hairdresser on each side, both working feverishly on her straight blond hair.

"Hello, darling," he said dutifully, more for the benefit of the hairdressers, both young males who seemed not the least bit affected by the fact that she was practically nude.

"Do you like my hair?" Brianna asked, glaring at the mirror as the boys stroked and fussed, all four hands doing something. Not, "How was your day?" Not, "Hello, dear." Not, "What happened with the trial?" Just simply, "Do you like my hair?"

"It's lovely," he said, already backing away. Ritual complete, he was free to go and leave her with her handlers. He stopped at their massive bed and looked at her evening gown—"Valentino," she had already advised him. It was bright red with a plunging neckline that

might or might not adequately cover her fantastic new breasts. It was short, almost sheer, probably weighed less than two ounces, and probably cost at least \$25,000. It was a size 2, which meant it would sufficiently drape and hang on her emaciated body so the other anorexics at the party would drool in mock admiration at how “fit” she looked. Frankly, Carl was growing weary of her obsessive routines: an hour a day with a trainer (\$300 per), an hour of one-on-one yoga (\$300 per), an hour a day with a nutritionist (\$200 per), all in an effort to burn off every last fat cell in her body and keep her weight between ninety and ninety-five pounds. She was always ready for sex—that was part of the deal—but now he sometimes worried about getting poked with a hip bone or simply crushing her in the pile. She was only thirty-one, but he had noticed a wrinkle or two just above her nose. Surgery could fix the problems, but wasn’t she paying a price for all this aggressive starvation?

He had more important things to worry about. A young, gorgeous wife was just one part of his magnificent persona, and Brianna Trudeau could still stop traffic.

They had a child, one that Carl could easily have forgone. He already had six, plenty, he reasoned. Three were older than Brianna. But she insisted, and for obvious reasons. A child was security, and since she was married to a man who loved ladies and adored the institution of marriage, the child meant family and ties and roots and, left unsaid, legal complications in the event things unraveled. A child was the protection every trophy wife needed.

Brianna delivered a girl and selected the hideous name of Sadler MacGregor Trudeau, MacGregor being Brianna’s maiden name and Sadler being pulled from the air. She at first claimed Sadler had been a roguish Scottish relative of some variety, but abandoned that little fiction when Carl stumbled across a book of baby names. He really didn’t care. The child was his by DNA only. He had already tried the father bit with prior families and had failed miserably.

Sadler was now five and had virtually been abandoned by both parents. Brianna, once so heroic in her efforts to become a mother, had quickly lost interest in things maternal and had delegated her

duties to a series of nannies. The current one was a thick young woman from Russia whose papers were as dubious as Toliver's. Carl could not, at that moment, remember her name. Brianna hired her and was thrilled because she spoke Russian and could perhaps pass on the language to Sadler.

"What language did you expect her to speak?" Carl had asked.

But Brianna had no response.

He stepped into the playroom, swooped up the child as if he couldn't wait to see her, exchanged hugs and kisses, asked how her day had been, and within minutes managed a graceful escape to his office, where he grabbed a phone and began yelling at Bobby Ratzlaff.

After a few fruitless calls, he showered, dried his perfectly dyed hair, half-gray, and got himself into his newest Armani tux. The waistband was a bit snug, probably a 34, up an inch from the early days when Brianna stalked him around the penthouse. As he dressed himself, he cursed the evening ahead and the party and the people he would see there. They would know. At that very moment, the news was racing around the financial world. Phones were buzzing as his rivals roared with laughter and gloated over Krane's misfortune. The Internet was bursting with the latest from Mississippi.

For any other party, he, the great Carl Trudeau, would simply call in sick. Every day of his life he did whatever he damned well pleased, and if he decided to rudely skip a party at the last minute, what the hell? But this was not just any event.

Brianna had wormed her way onto the board of the Museum of Abstract Art, and tonight was their biggest blowout. There would be designer gowns, tummy tucks and stout new breasts, new chins and perfect tans, diamonds, champagne, foie gras, caviar, dinner by a celebrity chef, a silent auction for the pinch hitters and a live auction for the sluggers. And, most important, there would be cameras on top of cameras, enough to convince the elite guests that they and only they were the center of the world. Oscar night, eat your heart out.

The highlight of the evening, at least for some, would be the auctioning of a work of art. Each year the committee commissioned

an “emerging” painter or sculptor to create something just for the event, and usually forked over a million bucks or so for the result. Last year’s painting had been a bewildering rendering of a human brain after a gunshot, and it went for six mill. This year’s item was a depressing pile of black clay with bronze rods rising into the vague outline of a young girl. It bore the mystifying title *Abused Imelda* and would have sat neglected in a gallery in Duluth if not for the sculptor, a tortured Argentine genius rumored to be on the verge of suicide, a sad fate that would instantly double the value of his creations, something that was not lost on savvy New York art investors. Brianna had left brochures around the penthouse and had dropped several hints to the effect that *Abused Imelda* would be stunning in their foyer, just off the elevator entrance.

Carl knew he was expected to buy the damned thing and was hoping there would not be a frenzy. And if he became its owner, he was already hoping for a quick suicide.

She and Valentino appeared from the dressing room. The hair boys were gone, and she had managed to get into the gown and the jewelry all by herself. “Fabulous,” Carl said, and it was indeed true. In spite of the bones and ribs, she was still a beautiful woman. The hair very much resembled what he had seen at six that morning when he kissed her goodbye as she sipped her coffee. Now, a thousand dollars later, he could tell little difference.

Oh, well. He knew very well the price of trophies. The prenuptial gave her \$100,000 a month to play with while married and twenty million when they split. She also got Sadler with liberal visitation for the father, if he so chose.

In the Bentley, they hurried from beneath the apartment building and were onto Fifth Avenue when Brianna said, “Oh, my, I forgot to kiss Sadler. What kind of mother am I?”

“She’s fine,” Carl said, who likewise had failed to say good night to the child.

“I feel awful,” Brianna said, feigning disgust. Her full-length black Prada coat was split so that the backseat was dominated by her amazing legs. Legs from the floor up to her armpits. Legs unadorned by hosiery or clothing or anything whatsoever. Legs for Carl to see

and admire and touch and fondle and she really didn't care if Toliver had a good look, either. She was on display, as always.

Carl rubbed them because they felt nice, but he wanted to say something like "These things are beginning to resemble broomsticks."

He let it pass.

"Any word from the trial?" she finally asked.

"The jury nailed us," he said.

"I'm so sorry."

"We're fine."

"How much?"

"Forty-one million."

"Those ignorant people."

Carl told her little about the complicated and mysterious world of the Trudeau Group. She had her charities and causes and lunches and trainers, and that kept her busy. He didn't want and didn't tolerate too many questions.

Brianna had checked online and knew exactly what the jury decided. She knew what the lawyers were saying about the appeal, and she knew Krane's stock would take a major hit early the next morning. She did her research and kept her secret notes. She was gorgeous and thin, but she was not stupid. Carl was on the phone.

The MuAb building was a few blocks south, between Fifth and Madison. As the traffic inched closer, they could see the popping flashes of a hundred cameras. Brianna perked up, crunched her perfect abs, brought her new additions to attention, and said, "God, I hate those people."

"Who?"

"All those photographers."

He snickered at the obvious lie. The car stopped and an attendant in a tuxedo opened the door as the cameras swung to the black Bentley. The great Carl Trudeau popped out without a smile, then the legs followed. Brianna knew precisely how to give the photographers, and thus the gossip pages and maybe, just maybe, a fashion magazine or two, what they wanted—miles of sensuous flesh without revealing everything. The right foot landed first, shoed

with Jimmy Choo at a hundred bucks per toe, and as she expertly swung around, the coat opened and Valentino cooperated upward and the whole world saw the real benefit of being a billionaire and owning a trophy.

Arm in arm they glided across the red carpet, waving at the photographers and ignoring the handful of reporters, one of whom had the audacity to yell, “Hey, Carl, any comment on the verdict in Mississippi?” Carl of course did not hear, or pretended not to. But his pace quickened slightly and they were soon inside, on somewhat safer turf. He hoped. They were greeted by paid greeters; coats were taken; smiles were offered; friendly cameras appeared; old pals materialized; and they were soon lost in the warm cluster of seriously rich people pretending to enjoy one another’s company.

Brianna found her soul mate, another anorexic trophy with the same unusual body—everything superbly starved but the ridiculous breasts. Carl went straight for the bar, and almost made it before he was practically tackled by the one jerk he hoped to avoid. “Carl, ole boy, bad news down south I hear,” the man boomed as loudly as possible.

“Yes, very bad,” Carl said in a much lower voice as he grabbed a champagne flute and began to drain it.

Pete Flint was number 228 on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans. Carl was number 310, and each man knew exactly where the other fit on the roster. Numbers 87 and 141 were also in the crowd, along with a host of unranked contenders.

“Thought your boys had things under control,” Flint pressed on, slurping a tall glass full of either scotch or bourbon. He somehow managed a frown while working hard to conceal his delight.

“Yes, we thought so, too,” Carl said, wishing he could slap the fat jowls twelve inches away.

“What about the appeal?” Flint asked gravely.

“We’re in great shape.”

At last year’s auction, Flint had valiantly hung on to the frenzied end and walked away with the *Brain After Gunshot*, a \$6 million artistic waste but one that launched the MuAb’s current capital

campaign. No doubt he would be in the hunt for tonight's grand prize.

"Good thing we shorted Krane last week," he said.

Carl started to curse him but kept his cool. Flint ran a hedge fund famous for its daring. Had he really shorted Krane Chemical in anticipation of a bad verdict? Carl's puzzled glare concealed nothing.

"Oh yes," Flint went on, pulling on his glass and smacking his lips. "Our man down there said you were screwed."

"We'll never pay a dime," Carl said gamely.

"You'll pay in the morning, ole boy. We're betting Krane's stock drops 20 percent." And with that he turned and walked away, leaving Carl to finish off his drink and lunge for another. Twenty percent? Carl's laser-quick mind did the math. He owned 45 percent of the outstanding common shares of Krane Chemical, a company with a market value of \$3.2 billion, based on the day's closing price. A 20 percent decline would cost him \$280 million, on paper. No real cash losses, of course, but still a rough day around the office.

Ten percent was more like it, he thought. The boys in finance agreed with him.

Could Flint's hedge fund short a significant chunk of Krane's stock without Carl knowing about it? He stared at a confused bartender and pondered the question. Yes, it was possible, but not likely. Flint was simply rubbing a little salt.

The museum's director appeared from nowhere, and Carl was delighted to see him. He would never mention the verdict, if he in fact knew about it. He would say only nice things to Carl, and of course he would comment on how fabulous Brianna looked. He would ask about Sadler and inquire into the renovation of their home in the Hamptons.

They chatted about such things as they carried their drinks through the crowded lobby, dodging little pockets of dangerous conversations, and settled themselves before *Abused Imelda*. "Magnificent, isn't it?" the director mused.

"Beautiful," Carl said, glancing to his left as number 141 happened by. "What will it go for?"

“We’ve been debating that all day around here. Who knows with this crowd. I say at least five million.”

“And what’s it worth?”

The director smiled as a photographer snapped their picture. “Now, that’s an entirely different issue, isn’t it? The sculptor’s last major work was sold to a Japanese gentleman for around two million. Of course, the Japanese gentleman was not donating large sums of money to our little museum.”

Carl took another sip and acknowledged the game. MuAb’s campaign goal was \$100 million over five years. According to Brianna, they were about halfway there and needed a big boost from the evening’s auction.

An art critic with the *Times* introduced himself and joined their conversation. Wonder if he knows about the verdict, Carl thought. The critic and the director discussed the Argentine sculptor and his mental problems as Carl studied *Imelda* and asked himself if he really wanted it permanently situated in the foyer of his luxurious penthouse. His wife certainly did.

CHAPTER 3

The Paytons' temporary home was a three-bedroom apartment on the second level of an old complex near the university. Wes had lived nearby in his college days and still found it hard to believe he was back in the neighborhood. But there had been so many drastic changes it was difficult to dwell on just one.

How temporary? That was the great question between husband and wife, though the issue hadn't been discussed in weeks, nor would it be discussed now. Maybe in a day or two, when the fatigue and the shock wore off and they could steal a quiet moment and talk about the future. Wes eased the car through the parking lot, passing an overfilled Dumpster with debris littered around it. Mainly beer cans and broken bottles. The college boys humored themselves by hurling their empties from the upper floors, across the lot, above the cars, in the general direction of the Dumpster. When the bottles crashed, the noise boomed through the complex and the students were amused. Others were not. For the two sleep-deprived Paytons, the racket was at times unbearable.

The owner, an old client, was widely considered the worst slumlord in town, by the students anyway. He offered the place to the Paytons, and their handshake deal called for a thousand bucks a month in rent. They had lived there for seven months, paid for three, and the landlord insisted he was not worried. He was patiently waiting in line with many other creditors. The law firm of Payton & Payton had once proven it could attract clients and generate fees, and its two partners were certainly capable of a dramatic comeback.

Try this comeback, Wes thought as he turned in to a parking place. Is a verdict of \$41 million drama enough? For a moment he felt feisty, then he was tired again.

Slaves to a dreadful habit, both got out of the car and grabbed their briefcases in the rear seat. “No,” Mary Grace announced suddenly. “We are not working tonight. Leave these in the car.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They hustled up the stairs, loud raunchy rap spilling from a window nearby. Mary Grace rattled the keys and unlocked the door, and suddenly they were inside, where both children were watching television with Ramona, their Honduran nanny. Liza, the nine-year-old, rushed forth yelling, “Mommy, we won, we won!” Mary Grace lifted her in the air and clutched her tightly.

“Yes, dear, we won.”

“Forty billion!”

“Millions, dear, not billions.”

Mack, the five-year-old, ran to his father, who yanked him up, and for a long moment they stood in the narrow foyer and squeezed their children. For the first time since the verdict, Wes saw tears in his wife’s eyes.

“We saw you on TV,” Liza was saying.

“You looked tired,” Mack said.

“I am tired,” Wes said.

Ramona watched from a distance, a tight smile barely visible. She wasn’t sure what the verdict meant, but she understood enough to be pleased with the news.

Overcoats and shoes were removed, and the little Payton family fell onto the sofa, a very nice thick leather one, where they hugged and tickled and talked about school. Wes and Mary Grace had managed to keep most of their furnishings, and the shabby apartment was decorated with fine things that not only reminded them of the past but, more important, reminded them of the future. This was just a stop, an unexpected layover.

The den floor was covered with notebooks and papers, clear evidence that the homework had been done before the television was turned on.

“I’m starving,” Mack announced as he tried in vain to undo his father’s tie.

“Mom says we’re having macaroni and cheese,” Wes said.

“All right!” Both kids voiced their approval, and Ramona eased into the kitchen.

“Does this mean we get a new house?” Liza asked.

“I thought you liked this place,” Wes said.

“I do, but we’re still looking for a new house, right?”

“Of course we are.”

They had been careful with the children. They had explained the basics of the lawsuit to Liza—a bad company polluted water that harmed many people—and she quickly declared that she didn’t like the company, either. And if the family had to move into an apartment to fight the company, then she was all for it.

But leaving their fine new home had been traumatic. Liza’s last bedroom was pink and white and had everything a little girl could want. Now she shared a smaller room with her brother, and though she didn’t complain, she was curious about how long the arrangement might last. Mack was generally too preoccupied with full-day kindergarten to worry about living quarters.

Both kids missed the old neighborhood, where the homes were large and the backyards had pools and gym sets. Friends were next door or just around the corner. The school was private and secure. Church was a block away and they knew everyone there.

Now they attended a city elementary school where there were far more black faces than white, and they worshipped in a downtown Episcopal church that welcomed everyone.

“We won’t move anytime soon,” Mary Grace said. “But maybe we can start looking.”

“I’m starving,” Mack said again.

The topic of housing was routinely avoided when one of the kids raised it, and Mary Grace finally rose to her feet. “Let’s go cook,” she said to Liza. Wes found the remote and said to Mack, “Let’s watch *SportsCenter*.” Anything but local news.

“Sure.”

Ramona was boiling water and dicing a tomato. Mary Grace hugged her quickly and said, “A good day?” Yes, a good day, she agreed. No problems at school. Homework was already finished.

Liza drifted off to her bedroom. She had yet to show any interest in kitchen matters.

“A good day for you?” Ramona asked.

“Yes, very good. Let’s use the white cheddar.” She found a block of it in the fridge and began grating it.

“You can relax now?” Ramona asked.

“Yes, for a few days anyway.” Through a friend at church, they had found Ramona hiding and half-starved in a shelter in Baton Rouge, sleeping on a cot and eating boxed food sent south for hurricane victims. She had survived a harrowing three-month journey from Central America, through Mexico, then Texas, and on to Louisiana, where none of the things she had been promised materialized. No job, no host family, no paperwork, no one to take care of her.

Under normal circumstances, hiring an illegal and unnaturalized nanny had never occurred to the Paytons. They quickly adopted her, taught her to drive but only on a few selected streets, taught her the basics of the cell phone, computer, and kitchen appliances, and pressed her to learn English. She had a good foundation from a Catholic school back home, and she spent her daytime hours holed up in the apartment cleaning and mimicking the voices on television. In eight months, her progress was impressive. She preferred to listen, though, especially to Mary Grace, who needed someone to unload on. During the past four months, on the rare nights when Mary Grace prepared dinner, she chatted nonstop while Ramona absorbed every word. It was wonderful therapy, especially after a brutal day in a courtroom crowded with high-strung men.

“No trouble with the car?” Mary Grace asked the same question every night. Their second car was an old Honda Accord that Ramona had yet to damage. For many good reasons, they were terrified of turning loose on the streets of Hattiesburg an illegal, unlicensed, and quite uninsured alien in a Honda with a zillion miles and their two happy little children in the rear seat. They had trained Ramona to travel a memorized route through the backstreets, to the school, to the grocery, and, if necessary, to their

office. If the police stopped her, they planned to beg the cops, the prosecutor, and the judge. They knew them well.

Wes knew for a fact that the presiding city judge had his own illegal pulling his weeds and cutting his grass.

“A good day,” Ramona said. “No problem. Everything is fine.”

A good day indeed, Mary Grace thought to herself as she began melting cheese.

The phone rang and Wes reluctantly picked up the receiver. The number was unlisted because a crackpot had made threats. They used their cell phones for virtually everything. He listened, said something, hung up, and walked to the stove to disrupt the cooking.

“Who was it?” Mary Grace asked with concern. Every call to the apartment was greeted with suspicion.

“Sherman, at the office. Says there are some reporters hanging around, looking for the stars.” Sherman was one of the paralegals.

“Why is he at the office?” Mary Grace asked.

“Just can’t get enough, I guess. Do we have any olives for the salad?”

“No. What did you tell him?”

“I told him to shoot at one of them and the rest’ll disappear.”

“Toss the salad, please,” she said to Ramona.

They huddled over a card table wedged in a corner of the kitchen, all five of them. They held hands as Wes prayed and gave thanks for the good things of life, for family and friends and school. And for the food. He was also thankful for a wise and generous jury and a fantastic result, but he would save that for later. The salad was passed first, then the macaroni and cheese.

“Hey, Dad, can we camp out?” Mack blurted, after he’d swallowed.

“Of course!” Wes said, his back suddenly aching. Camping out in the apartment meant layering the den floor with blankets and quilts and pillows and sleeping there, usually with the television on late at night, usually on Friday nights. It worked only if Mom and Dad joined the fun. Ramona was always invited but wisely declined.

“Same bedtime, though,” Mary Grace said. “This is a school night.”

“Ten o’clock,” said Liza, the negotiator.

“Nine,” said Mary Grace, a thirty-minute add-on that made both kids smile.

Mary Grace was knee to knee with her children, savoring the moment and happy that the fatigue might soon be over. Maybe she could rest now, and take them to school, visit their classes, and eat lunch with them. She longed to be a mother, nothing more, and it would be a gloomy day when she was forced to reenter a courtroom.

Wednesday night meant potluck casseroles at the Pine Grove Church, and the turnout was always impressive. The busy church was located in the middle of the neighborhood, and many worshippers simply walked a block or two on Sundays and Wednesdays. The doors were open eighteen hours a day, and the pastor, who lived in a parsonage behind the church, was always there, waiting to minister to his people.

They ate in the fellowship hall, an ugly metal addition stuck to the side of the chapel, where folding tables were covered with all manner of home-cooked recipes. There was a basket of white dinner rolls, a large dispenser of sweet tea, and, of course, lots of bottled water. The crowd would be even larger tonight, and they hoped Jeannette would be there. A celebration was in order.

Pine Grove Church was fiercely independent with not the slightest link to any denomination, a source of quiet pride for its founder, Pastor Denny Ott. It had been built by Baptists decades earlier, then dried up like the rest of Bowmore. By the time Ott arrived, the congregation consisted of only a few badly scarred souls. Years of infighting had decimated its membership. Ott cleaned out the rest, opened the doors to the community, and reached out to the people.

He had not been immediately accepted, primarily because he was from “up north” and spoke with such a clean, clipped accent. He had met a Bowmore girl at a Bible college in Nebraska, and she

brought him south. Through a series of misadventures he found himself as the interim pastor of Second Baptist Church. He wasn't really a Baptist, but with so few young preachers in the area the church could not afford to be selective. Six months later all the Baptists were gone and the church had a new name.

He wore a beard and often preached in flannel shirts and hiking boots. Neckties were not forbidden but were certainly frowned upon. It was the people's church, a place where anyone could find peace and solace with no worries about wearing the Sunday best. Pastor Ott got rid of King James and the old hymnal. He had little use for the mournful anthems written by ancient pilgrims. Worship services were loosened up, modernized with guitars and slide shows. He believed and taught that poverty and injustice were more important social issues than abortion and gay rights, but he was careful with his politics.

The church grew and prospered, though he cared nothing about money. A friend from seminary ran a mission in Chicago, and through this connection Ott maintained a large inventory of used but very usable clothing in the church's "closet." He badgered the larger congregations in Hattiesburg and Jackson and with their contributions kept a well-stocked food bank at one end of the fellowship hall. He pestered drug companies for their leftovers, and the church's "pharmacy" was filled with over-the-counter medications.

Denny Ott considered all of Bowmore to be his mission, and no one would go hungry or homeless or sick if he could possibly prevent it. Not on his watch, and his watch never ended.

He had conducted sixteen funerals of his own people killed by Krane Chemical, a company he detested so bitterly that he constantly prayed for forgiveness. He didn't hate the nameless and faceless people who owned Krane, to do so would compromise his faith, but he most certainly hated the corporation itself. Was it a sin to hate a corporation? That furious debate raged in his soul every day, and to be on the safe side, he kept praying.

All sixteen were buried in the small cemetery behind the church. When the weather was warm, he cut the grass around the

headstones, and when it was cold, he painted the white picket fence that surrounded the cemetery and kept the deer away. Though he had not planned it, his church had become the hub of anti-Krane activity in Cary County. Almost all of its members had been touched by the illness or death of someone harmed by the company.

His wife's older sister finished Bowmore High with Mary Grace Shelby. Pastor Ott and the Paytons were extremely close. Legal advice was often dispensed in the pastor's study with the door closed and one of the Paytons on the phone. Dozens of depositions had been taken in the fellowship hall, packed with lawyers from big cities. Ott disliked the corporate lawyers almost as much as the corporation itself.

Mary Grace had phoned Pastor Ott often during the trial and had always warned him not to be optimistic. He certainly was not. When she called two hours earlier with the astounding news, Ott grabbed his wife and they danced through the house yelling and laughing. Krane had been nailed, humbled, exposed, brought to justice. Finally.

He was greeting his flock when he saw Jeannette enter with her stepsister Bette and the rest of her entourage. She was immediately engulfed by those who loved her, those who wanted to share in this great moment and offer a quiet word. They sat her in the rear of the room, near an old piano, and a receiving line materialized. She managed to smile a few times and even say thanks, but she looked so weak and frail.

With the casseroles growing colder by the minute, and with a full house, Pastor Ott finally called things to order and launched into a windy prayer of thanks. He finished with a flourish and said, "Let us eat."

As always, the children and old folks lined up first, and dinner was served. Ott made his way to the back and was soon sitting next to Jeannette. As the attention shifted away from her and to the food, she whispered to her pastor, "I'd like to go to the cemetery."

He led her through a side door, onto a narrow gravel drive that dipped behind the church and ran for fifty yards to the small graveyard. They walked slowly, silently, in the dark. Ott opened the

wooden gate, and they stepped into the cemetery, neat and tidy and well tended to. The headstones were small. These were working people, no monuments or crypts or gaudy tributes to great ones.

Four rows down on the right, Jeannette knelt between two graves. One was Chad's, a sickly child who'd lived only six years before tumors choked him. The other held the remains of Pete, her husband of eight years. Father and son, resting side by side forever. She visited them at least once a week and never failed to wish she could join them. She rubbed both headstones at the same time, then began talking softly. "Hello, boys, it's Mom. You won't believe what happened today."

Pastor Ott slipped away, leaving her alone with her tears and thoughts and quiet words that he did not want to hear. He waited by the gate, and as the minutes passed, he watched the shadows move through the rows of headstones as the moonlight shifted through the clouds. He had already buried Chad and Pete. Sixteen in all, and counting. Sixteen silent victims who perhaps were not so silent anymore. From within the little picket-fenced cemetery at the Pine Grove Church a voice had finally been heard. A loud angry voice that begged to be heard and was demanding justice.

He could see her shadow and hear her talking.

He had prayed with Pete in the minutes before he finally slipped away, and he had kissed the forehead of little Chad in his final hour. He had scraped together money for their caskets and funerals. Then he and two of his deacons had dug the graves. Their burials were eight months apart.

She stood, said her farewells, and began moving. "We need to go inside," Ott said.

"Yes, thank you," she said, wiping her cheeks.

Mr. Trudeau's table cost him \$50,000, and since he wrote the check, he could damned well control who sat with him. To his left was Brianna, and next to her was her close friend Sandy, another

skeleton who'd just been contractually released from her last marriage and was on the prowl for husband number three. To his right was a retired banker friend and his wife, pleasant folks who preferred to chat about the arts. Carl's urologist sat directly across from him. He and his wife were invited because they said little. The odd man out was a lesser executive at Trudeau Group who simply drew the short straw and was there by coercion.

The celebrity chef had whipped up a tasting menu that began with caviar and champagne, then moved on to a lobster bisque, a splash of sautéed foie gras with trimmings, fresh Scottish game hen for the carnivores, and a seaweed bouquet for the veggies. Dessert was a gorgeous layered gelato creation. Each round required a different wine, including dessert.

Carl cleaned every plate put before him and drank heavily. He spoke only to the banker because the banker had heard the news from down south and appeared to be sympathetic. Brianna and Sandy whispered rudely and, in the course of dinner, hammered every other social climber in the crowd. They managed to push the food around their plates while eating virtually none of it. Carl, half-drunk, almost said something to his wife while she tinkered with her seaweed. "Do you know how much that damned food cost?" he wanted to say, but there was no sense starting a fight.

The celebrity chef, one Carl had never heard of, was introduced and got a standing ovation from the four hundred guests, virtually all of them still hungry after five courses. But the evening wasn't about food. It was about money.

Two quick speeches brought the auctioneer to the front. *Abused Imelda* was rolled into the atrium, hanging dramatically from a small mobile crane, and left to hover twenty feet off the floor for all to see clearly. Concert-style spotlights made it even more exotic. The crowd grew quiet as the tables were cleared by an army of illegal immigrants in black coats and ties.

The auctioneer rambled on about *Imelda*, and the crowd listened. Then he talked about the artist, and the crowd really listened. Was he truly crazy? Insane? Close to suicide? They wanted details, but

the auctioneer held the high ground. He was British and very proper, which would add at least a million bucks to the winning bid.

"I suggest we start the bidding at five million," he said through his nose, and the crowd gasped.

Brianna was suddenly bored with Sandy. She moved closer to Carl, fluttered her eyelashes at him, and placed a hand on his thigh. Carl responded by nodding at the nearest floor assistant, a man he'd already spoken to. The assistant flashed a sign to the podium, and *Imelda* came to life.

"And we have five million," the auctioneer announced. Thunderous applause. "A nice place to start, thank you. And now onward to six."

Six, seven, eight, nine, and Carl nodded at ten. He kept a smile on his face, but his stomach was churning. How much would this abomination cost him? There were at least six billionaires in the room and several more in the making. No shortage of enormous egos, no shortage of cash, but at that moment none of the others needed a headline as desperately as Carl Trudeau.

And Pete Flint understood this.

Two bidders dropped out on the way to eleven million. "How many are left?" Carl whispered to the banker, who was watching the crowd and searching for the competition.

"It's Pete Flint, maybe one more."

That son of a bitch. When Carl nodded at twelve, Brianna practically had her tongue in his ear.

"We have twelve million." The crowd exploded with applause and hoorays, and the auctioneer wisely said, "Let's catch our breath here." Everyone took a sip of something. Carl gulped more wine. Pete Flint was behind him, two tables back, but Carl didn't dare turn around and acknowledge their little battle.

If Flint had really shorted Krane's stock, then he would reap millions from the verdict. Carl, obviously, had just lost millions because of it. It was all on paper, but then wasn't everything?

Imelda was not. It was real, tangible, a work of art that Carl could not lose, not to Pete Flint anyway.

Rounds 13, 14, and 15 were dragged out beautifully by the auctioneer, each ending in rapturous applause. Word had spread quickly, and everyone knew it was Carl Trudeau and Pete Flint. When the applause died, the two heavyweights settled in for more. Carl nodded at sixteen million, then accepted the applause.

“Do we have seventeen million?” boomed the auctioneer, quite excited himself.

A long pause. The tension was electric. “Very well, we have sixteen. Going once, going twice, ah yes—we have seventeen million.”

Carl had been making and breaking vows throughout the ordeal, but he was determined not to exceed seventeen million bucks. As the roar died down, he settled back in his seat, cool as any corporate raider with billions in play. He was finished, and quite happy about it. Flint was bluffing, and now Flint was stuck with the old girl for \$17 million.

“Dare I ask for eighteen?” More applause. More time for Carl to think. If he was willing to pay seventeen, why not eighteen? And if he jumped at eighteen, then Flint would realize that he, Carl, was staying to the bloody end.

It was worth a try.

“Eighteen?” asked the auctioneer.

“Yes,” Carl said, loud enough for many to hear. The strategy worked. Pete Flint retreated to the safety of his unspent cash and watched in amusement as the great Carl Trudeau finished off a lousy deal.

“Sold for eighteen million, to Mr. Carl Trudeau,” roared the auctioneer, and the crowd leaped to its feet.

They lowered *Imelda* so her new owners could pose with her. Many others, both envious and proud, gawked at the Trudeaus and their new addition. A band cranked up and it was time to dance. Brianna was in heat—the money had sent her into a frenzy—and halfway through the first dance Carl gently shoved her back a step. She was hot and lewd and flashing as much skin as possible. Folks were watching and that was fine with her.

“Let’s get out of here,” Carl said after the second dance.

CHAPTER 4

During the night, Wes had somehow managed to gain the sofa, a much softer resting place, and when he awoke before daylight, Mack was wedged tightly by his side. Mary Grace and Liza were sprawled on the floor beneath them, wrapped in blankets and dead to the world. They had watched television until both kids dropped off, then quietly opened and finished a bottle of cheap champagne they had been saving. The alcohol and the fatigue knocked them out, and they vowed to sleep forever.

Five hours later Wes opened his eyes and could not close them. He was back in the courtroom, sweating and nervous, watching the jurors file in, praying, searching for a sign, then hearing the majestic words of Judge Harrison. Words that would ring in his ears forever.

Today would be a fine day, and Wes couldn't waste any more of it on the sofa.

He eased away from Mack, covered him with a blanket, and moved silently to their cluttered bedroom, where he slipped into his running shorts and shoes and a sweatshirt. During the trial, he tried to run every day, often at midnight, often at five in the morning. A month earlier, he'd found himself six miles from home at 3:00 a.m. The running cleared his mind and relieved the stress. He plotted strategy, cross-examined witnesses, argued with Jared Kurtin, appealed to the jurors, did a dozen tasks as he pounded the asphalt in the dark.

Perhaps on this run he might concentrate on something, anything, other than the trial. Maybe a vacation. A beach. But the appeal was already bugging him.

Mary Grace did not move as he eased from the apartment and locked the door behind him. It was 5:15.

Without stretching, he took off and was soon on Hardy Street, headed for the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi. He

liked the safety of the place. He circled around the dorms where he once lived, around the football stadium where he once played, and after half an hour pulled into Java Werks, his favorite coffee shop, across the street from the campus. He placed four quarters on the counter and took a small cup of the house blend. Four quarters. He almost laughed as he counted them out. He had to plan his coffee and was always looking for quarters.

At the end of the counter was a collection of morning newspapers. The front-page headline of the *Hattiesburg American* screamed: "Krane Chemical Nailed for \$41 Million." There was a large, splendid photo of him and Mary Grace leaving the courthouse, tired but happy. And a smaller photo of Jeannette Baker, still crying. Lots of quotes from the lawyers, a few from the jurors, including a windy little speech by Dr. Leona Rocha, who, evidently, had been a force in the jury room. She was quoted as saying, among other gems, "We were angered by Krane's arrogant and calculated abuse of the land, by their disregard for safety, and then their deceit in trying to conceal it."

Wes loved that woman. He devoured the long article while ignoring his coffee. The state's largest paper was the *Clarion-Ledger*, out of Jackson, and its headline was somewhat more restrained, though still impressive: "Jury Faults Krane Chemical—Huge Verdict." More photos, quotes, details of the trial, and after a few minutes Wes caught himself skimming. The *Sun Herald* from Biloxi had the best line so far: "Jury to Krane—Fork It Over."

Front-page news and photos in the big dailies. Not a bad day for the little law firm of Payton & Payton. The comeback was under way, and Wes was ready. The office phones would start ringing with potential clients in need of divorces and bankruptcies and a hundred other nuisances that Wes had no stomach for. He would politely send them away, to other small-timers, of which there was an endless supply, and he would check the nets each morning and look for the big ones. A massive verdict, photos in the paper, the talk of the town, and business was about to increase substantially.

He drained his coffee and hit the street.

Carl Trudeau also left home before sunrise. He could hide in his penthouse all day and let his communications people deal with the disaster. He could hide behind his lawyers. He could hop on his jet and fly away to his villa on Anguilla or his mansion in Palm Beach. But not Carl. He had never run from a brawl, and he wouldn't start now.

Plus, he wanted to get away from his wife. She'd cost him a fortune last night and he was resenting it.

"Good morning," he said abruptly to Toliver as he scampered into the rear seat of the Bentley.

"Good morning, sir." Toliver wasn't about to ask something stupid, such as "How are you doing, sir?" It was 5:30, not an unusual hour for Mr. Trudeau, but not a customary one, either. They normally left the penthouse an hour later.

"Let's push it," the boss said, and Toliver roared down Fifth Avenue. Twenty minutes later, Carl was in his private elevator with Stu, an assistant whose only job was to be on call 24/7 in case the great man needed something. Stu had been alerted an hour earlier and given instructions: Fix the coffee, toast a wheat bagel, squeeze the orange juice. He was given a list of six newspapers to arrange on Mr. Trudeau's desk, and was in the midst of an Internet search for stories about the verdict. Carl barely acknowledged his presence.

In his office, Stu took his jacket, poured his coffee, and was told to hurry along with the bagel and juice.

Carl settled into his aerodynamic designer chair, cracked his knuckles, rolled himself up to his desk, took a deep breath, and picked up the *New York Times*. Front page, left column. Not front page of the Business section, but the front page of the whole damned paper!! Right up there with a bad war, a scandal in Congress, dead bodies in Gaza.

The front page. "Krane Chemical Held Liable in Toxic Deaths," read the headline, and Carl's clenched jaw began to slacken. Byline, Hattiesburg, Mississippi: "A state court jury awarded a young widow

\$3 million in actual damages and \$38 million in punitive damages in her wrongful-death claims against Krane Chemical.” Carl read quickly—he knew the wretched details. The *Times* got most of them right. Every quote from the lawyers was so predictable. Blah, blah, blah.

But why the front page?

He took it as a cheap shot, and was soon hit with another on page 2 of Business, where an analyst of some variety held forth on Krane’s other legal problems, to wit, hundreds of potential lawsuits claiming pretty much the same thing Jeannette Baker had claimed. According to the expert, a name Carl had never seen, which was unusual, Krane’s exposure could be “several billion” in cash, and since Krane, with its “questionable policies regarding liability insurance,” was practically “naked,” such exposure could be “catastrophic.”

Carl was cursing when Stu hurried in with juice and a bagel. “Anything else, sir?” he asked.

“No, now close the door.”

Carl rallied briefly in the Arts section. On the front page beneath the fold there was a story about last night’s MuAb event, the highlight of which had been a spirited bidding war, and so on. In the bottom right-hand corner was a decent-sized color photo of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Trudeau posing with their newest acquisition. Brianna, ever photogenic, as she damned well should be, emanated glamour. Carl looked rich, thin, and young, he thought, and *Imelda* was as baffling in print as she was in person. Was she really a work of art? Or was she just a hodgepodge of bronze and cement thrown together by some confused soul working hard to appear tortured?

The latter, according to a *Times* art critic, the same pleasant gentleman Carl had chatted with before dinner. When asked by the reporter if Mr. Trudeau’s \$18 million purchase was a prudent investment, the critic answered, “No, but it is certainly a boost for the museum’s capital campaign.” He then went on to explain that the market for abstract sculpture had been stagnant for over a decade and wasn’t likely to improve, at least in his opinion. He saw little future for *Imelda*. The story concluded on page 7 with two

paragraphs and a photo of the sculptor, Pablo, smiling at the camera and looking very much alive and, well, sane.

Nevertheless, Carl was pleased, if only for a moment. The story was positive. He appeared unfazed by the verdict, resilient, in command of his universe. The good press was worth something, though he knew its value was somewhere far south of \$18 million. He crunched the bagel without tasting it.

Back to the carnage. It was splashed across the front pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and *USA Today*. After four newspapers, he was tired of reading the same quotes from the lawyers and the same predictions from the experts. He rolled back from his desk, sipped his coffee, and reminded himself of exactly how much he loathed reporters. But he was still alive. The battering by the press was brutal, and it would continue, but he, the great Carl Trudeau, was taking their best shots and still on his feet.

This would be the worst day of his professional life, but tomorrow would be better.

It was 7:00 a.m. The market opened at 9:30. Krane's stock closed at \$52.50 the day before, up \$1.25 because the jury was taking forever and appeared to be hung. The morning's experts were predicting panic selling, but their damage estimates were all over the board.

He took a call from his communications director and explained that he would not talk to any reporters, journalists, analysts, whatever they called themselves and regardless of how many were calling or camped out in the lobby. Just stick to the company line—"We are planning a vigorous appeal and expect to prevail." Do not deviate one word.

At 7:15, Bobby Ratzlaff arrived with Felix Bard, the chief financial officer. Neither had slept more than two hours, and both were amazed that their boss had found the time to go partying. They unpacked their thick files, made the obligatory terse greetings, then huddled around the conference table. They would be there for the next twelve hours. There was much to discuss, but the real reason for the meeting was that Mr. Trudeau wanted some company in his bunker when the market opened and all hell broke loose.

Ratzlaff went first. A truckload of post-trial motions would be filed, nothing would change, and the case would move on to the Mississippi Supreme Court. “The court has a history of being plaintiff-friendly, but that’s changing. We have reviewed the rulings in big tort cases over the past two years, and the court usually splits 5 to 4 in favor of the plaintiff, but not always.”

“How long before the final appeal is over?” Carl asked.

“Eighteen to twenty-four months.”

Ratzlaff moved on. A hundred and forty lawsuits were on file against Krane because of the Bowmore mess, about a third of them being death cases. According to an exhaustive and ongoing study by Ratzlaff, his staff, and their lawyers in New York, Atlanta, and Mississippi, there were probably another three hundred to four hundred cases with “legitimate” potential, meaning that they involved either death, probable death, or moderate to severe illness. There could be thousands of cases in which the claimants suffered minor ailments such as skin rashes, lesions, and nagging coughs, but for the time being, these were classified as frivolous.

Because of the difficulty and cost of proving liability, and linking it with an illness, most of the cases on file had not been pushed aggressively. This, of course, was about to change. “I’m sure the plaintiff’s lawyers down there are quite hungover this morning,” Ratzlaff said, but Carl did not crack a smile. He never did. He was always reading, never looking at the person with the floor, and missed nothing.

“How many cases do the Paytons have?” he asked.

“Around thirty. We’re not sure, because they have not actually filed suit in all of them. There’s a lot of waiting here.”

“One article said that the *Baker* case almost bankrupted them.”

“True. They hocked everything.”

“Bank loans?”

“Yes, that’s the rumor.”

“Do we know which banks?”

“I’m not sure if we know that.”

“Find out. I want the loan numbers, terms, everything.”

“Got it.”

There were no good options, Ratzlaff said, working from his outline. The dam has cracked, the flood is coming. The lawyers will attack with a vengeance, and defense costs would quadruple to \$100 million a year, easily. The nearest case could be ready for trial in eight months, same courtroom, same judge. Another big verdict, and, well, who knows.

Carl glanced at his watch and mumbled something about making a call. He left the table again, paced around the office, then stopped at the windows looking south. The Trump Building caught his attention. Its address was 40 Wall Street, very near the New York Stock Exchange, where before long the common shares of Krane Chemical would be the talk of the day as investors jumped ship and speculators gawked at the roadkill. How cruel, how ironic, that he, the great Carl Trudeau, a man who had so often watched happily from above as some unfortunate company flamed out, would now be fighting off the vultures. How many times had he engineered the collapse of a stock's price so he could swoop down and buy it for pennies? His legend had been built with such ruthless tactics.

How bad would it be? That was the great question, always followed soon by number two: How long would it last?

He waited.

CHAPTER 5

Tom Huff put on his darkest and finest suit, and after much debate decided to arrive at work at the Second State Bank a few minutes later than usual. An earlier entry would seem too predictable, perhaps a little too cocky. And, more important, he wanted everyone in place when he arrived—the old tellers on the main floor, the cute secretaries on the second, and the vice somethings, his rivals, on the third floor. Huffy wanted a triumphant arrival with as big an audience as possible. He'd gambled bravely with the Paytons, and the moment belonged to him.

What he got instead was an overall dismissal by the tellers, a collective cold shoulder from the secretaries, and enough devious grins from his rivals to make him suspicious. On his desk he found a message marked "Urgent" to see Mr. Kirkhead. Something was up, and Huffy began to feel considerably less cocky. So much for a dramatic entrance. What was the problem?

Mr. Kirkhead was in his office, waiting, with the door open, always a bad sign. The boss hated open doors, and in fact boasted of a closed-door management style. He was caustic, rude, cynical, and afraid of his shadow, and closed doors served him well.

"Sit down," he barked, with no thought of a "Good morning" or a "Hello" or, heaven forbid, a "Congratulations." He was camped behind his pretentious desk, fat hairless head bent low as if he sniffed the spreadsheets as he read them.

"And how are you, Mr. Kirkhead?" Huffy chirped. How badly he wanted to say "Prickhead" because he said it every other time he referred to his boss. Even the old gals on the main floor sometimes used the substitution.

"Swell. Did you bring the Payton file?"

"No, sir. I wasn't asked to bring the Payton file. Something the matter?"

“Two things, actually, now that you mention it. First, we have this disastrous loan to these people, over \$400,000, past due of course and horribly under-collateralized. By far the worst loan in the bank’s portfolio.”

He said “these people” as if Wes and Mary Grace were credit card thieves.

“This is nothing new, sir.”

“Mind if I finish? And now we have this obscene jury award, which, as the banker holding the paper, I guess I’m supposed to feel good about, but as a commercial lender and business leader in this community, I think it really sucks. What kind of message do we send to prospective industrial clients with verdicts like this?”

“Don’t dump toxic waste in our state?”

Prickhead’s fat jowls turned red as he swept away Huffy’s retort with the wave of a hand. He cleared his throat, almost gargling with his own saliva.

“This is bad for our business climate,” he said. “Front page all over the world this morning. I’m getting phone calls from the home office. A very bad day.”

Lots of bad days over in Bowmore, too, Huffy thought. Especially with all those funerals.

“Forty-one million bucks,” Prickhead went on. “For a poor woman who lives in a trailer.”

“Nothing wrong with trailers, Mr. Kirkhead. Lots of good folks live in them around here. We make the loans.”

“You miss the point. It’s an obscene amount of money. The whole system has gone crazy. And why here? Why is Mississippi known as a judicial hellhole? Why do trial lawyers love our little state? Just look at some of the surveys. It’s bad for business, Huff, for our business.”

“Yes, sir, but you must feel better about the Payton loan this morning.”

“I want it repaid, and soon.”

“So do I.”

“Give me a schedule. Get with these people and put together a repayment plan, one that I will approve only when it looks sensible.

And do it now.”

“Yes, sir, but it might take a few months for them to get back on their feet. They’ve practically shut down—”

“I don’t care about them, Huff. I just want this damned thing off the books.”

“Yes, sir. Is that all?”

“Yes. And no more litigation loans, you understand?”

“Don’t worry.”

Three doors down from the bank, the Honorable Jared Kurtin made a final inspection of the troops before heading back to Atlanta and the icy reception waiting there. Headquarters was a recently renovated old building on Front Street. The well-heeled defense of Krane Chemical had leased it two years earlier, then retrofitted it with an impressive collection of technology and personnel.

The mood was somber, as might be expected, though many of the locals were not troubled by the verdict. After months of working under Kurtin and his arrogant henchmen from Atlanta, they felt a quiet satisfaction in watching them retreat in defeat. And they would be back. The verdict guaranteed new enthusiasm from the victims, more lawsuits, trials, and so on.

On hand to witness the farewell was Frank Sully, local counsel and partner in a Hattiesburg defense firm first hired by Krane and later demoted in favor of a “big firm” from Atlanta. Sully had been given a seat at the rather crowded defense table and had suffered the indignity of sitting through a four-month trial without saying a word in open court. Sully had disagreed with virtually every tactic and strategy employed by Kurtin. So deep was his dislike and distrust of the Atlanta lawyers that he had circulated a secret memo to his partners in which he predicted a huge punitive award. Now he gloated privately.

But he was a professional. He served his client as well as his client would allow, and he never failed to do what Kurtin instructed him

to do. And he would gladly do it all over again because Krane Chemical had paid his little firm over a million dollars to date.

He and Kurtin shook hands at the front door. Both knew they would speak by phone before the day was over. Both were quietly thrilled by the departure. Two leased vans hauled Kurtin and ten others to the airport, where a handsome little jet was waiting for the seventy-minute flight, though they were in no hurry. They missed their homes and families, but what could be more humiliating than limping back from Podunk with their tails between their legs?

Carl remained safely tucked away on the forty-fifth floor, while on the Street the rumors raged. At 9:15, his banker from Goldman Sachs called, for the third time that morning, and delivered the bad news that the exchange might not open trading with Krane's common shares. It was too volatile. There was too much pressure to sell.

"Looks like a fire sale," he said bluntly, and Carl wanted to curse him.

The market opened at 9:30 a.m., and Krane's trading was delayed. Carl, Ratzlaff, and Felix Bard were at the conference table, exhausted, sleeves rolled up, elbows deep in papers and debris, phones in each hand, all conversations frantic. The bomb finally landed just after 10:00 a.m., when Krane began trading at \$40.00 a share. There were no buyers, and none at \$35.00. The plunge was temporarily reversed at \$29.50 when speculators entered the fray and began buying. Up and down it went for the next hour. At noon, it was at \$27.25 in heavy trading, and to make matters worse, Krane was the big business story of the morning. For their market updates, the cable shows happily switched to their Wall Street analysts, all of whom gushed about the stunning meltdown of Krane Chemical.

Then back to the headlines. Body count from Iraq. The monthly natural disaster. And Krane Chemical.

Bobby Ratzlaff asked permission to run to his office. He took the stairs, one flight down, and barely made it to the men's room. The stalls were empty. He went to the far one, raised the lid, and vomited violently.

His ninety thousand shares of Krane common had just decreased in value from about \$4.5 million to around \$2.5 million, and the collapse wasn't over. He used the stock as collateral for all his toys—the small house in the Hamptons, the Porsche Carrera, half interest in a sailboat. Not to mention overhead items such as private school tuition and golf club memberships. Bobby was now unofficially bankrupt.

For the first time in his career, he understood why they jumped from buildings in 1929.

The Paytons had planned to drive to Bowmore together, but a last-minute visit to their office by their banker changed things. Wes decided to stay behind and deal with Huffy. Mary Grace took the Taurus and drove to her hometown.

She went to Pine Grove, then to the church, where Jeannette Baker was waiting along with Pastor Denny Ott and a crowd of other victims represented by the Payton firm. They met privately in the fellowship hall and lunched on sandwiches, one of which was eaten by Jeannette herself, a rarity. She was composed, rested, happy to be away from the courthouse and all its proceedings.

The shock of the verdict was beginning to wear off. The possibility of money changing hands lightened the mood, and it also prompted a flood of questions. Mary Grace was careful to downplay expectations. She detailed the arduous appeals ahead for the *Baker* verdict. She was not optimistic about a settlement, or a cleanup, or even the next trial. Frankly, she and Wes did not have the funds, nor the energy, to take on Krane in another long trial, though she did not share this with the group.

She was confident and reassuring. Her clients were at the right place; she and Wes had certainly proved that. There would soon be many lawyers sniffing around Bowmore, looking for Krane victims, making promises, offering money perhaps. And not just local lawyers, but the national tort boys who chased cases from coast to coast and often arrived at the crash sites before the fire trucks. Trust no one, she said softly but sternly. Krane will flood the area with investigators, snitches, informants, all looking for things that might be used against you one day in court. Don't talk to reporters, because something said in jest could sound quite different in a trial. Don't sign anything unless it's first reviewed by the Paytons. Don't talk to other lawyers.

She gave them hope. The verdict was echoing through the judicial system. Government regulators had to take note. The chemical industry could no longer ignore them. Krane's stock was crashing at that very moment, and when the stockholders lost enough money, they would demand changes.

When she finished, Denny Ott led them in prayer. Mary Grace hugged her clients, wished them well, promised to see them again in a few days, then walked with Ott to the front of the church for her next appointment.

The journalist's name was Tip Shepard. He had arrived about a month earlier, and after many attempts had gained the confidence of Pastor Ott, who then introduced him to Wes and Mary Grace. Shepard was a freelancer with impressive credentials, several books to his credit, and a Texas twang that neutralized some of Bowmore's distrust of the media. The Paytons had refused to talk to him during the trial, for many reasons. Now that it was over, Mary Grace would do the first interview. If it went well, there might be another.

“Mr. Kirkhead wants his money,” Huffy was saying. He was in Wes's office, a makeshift room with unpainted Sheetrock walls, stained concrete floor, and Army-surplus furniture.

"I'm sure he does," Wes shot back. He was already irritated that his banker would arrive just hours after the verdict with signs of attitude. "Tell him to get in line."

"We're way past due here, Wes, come on."

"Is Kirkhead stupid? Does he think that the jury gives an award one day and the defendant writes a check the next?"

"Yes, he's stupid, but not that stupid."

"He sent you over here?"

"Yes. He jumped me first thing this morning, and I expect to get jumped for many days to come."

"Couldn't you wait a day, two days, maybe a week? Let us breathe a little, maybe enjoy the moment?"

"He wants a plan. Something in writing. Repayments, stuff like that."

"I'll give him a plan," Wes said, his words trailing off. He did not want to fight with Huffy. Though not exactly friends, they were certainly friendly and enjoyed each other's company. Wes was extremely grateful for Huffy's willingness to roll the dice. Huffy admired the Paytons for losing it all as they risked it all. He had spent hours with them as they surrendered their home, office, cars, retirement accounts.

"Let's talk about the next three months," Huffy said. The four legs of his folding chair were uneven and he rocked slightly as he talked.

Wes took a deep breath, gave a roll of the eyes. He suddenly felt very tired. "Once upon a time, we were grossing fifty thousand a month, clearing thirty, before taxes. Life was good, you remember. It'll take a year to crank up that treadmill, but we can do it. We have no choice. We'll survive until the appeals run their course. If the verdict stands, Kirkhead can take his money and take a hike. We'll retire, time for the sailboat. If the verdict is reversed, we'll go bankrupt and start advertising for quickie divorces."

"Surely the verdict will attract clients."

"Of course, but most of it'll be junk."

By using the word "bankrupt," Wes had gently placed Huffy back in his box, along with old Prickhead and the bank. The verdict could not be classified as an asset, and without it the Paytons' balance

sheet looked as bleak as it did a day earlier. They had lost virtually everything already, and to be adjudged bankrupt was a further indignity they were willing to endure. Pile it on.

They would be back.

“I’m not giving you a plan, Huffy. Thanks for asking. Come back in thirty days and we’ll talk. Right now I’ve got clients who’ve been ignored for months.”

“So what do I tell Mr. Prickhead?”

“Simple. Push just a little bit harder, and he can use the paper to wipe with. Ease off, give us some time, and we’ll satisfy the debt.”

“I’ll pass it along.”

At Babe’s Coffee Shop on Main Street, Mary Grace and Tip Shepard sat in a booth near the front windows and talked about the town. She remembered Main Street as a busy place where people shopped and gathered. Bowmore was too small for the large discount stores, so the downtown merchants survived. When she was a kid, traffic was often heavy, parking hard to find. Now half the storefronts were covered with plywood, and the other half were desperate for business.

A teenager with an apron brought two cups of black coffee and left without a word. Mary Grace added sugar while Shepard watched her carefully. “Are you sure the coffee is safe?” he asked.

“Of course. The city finally passed an ordinance forbidding the use of its water in restaurants. Plus, I’ve known Babe for thirty years. She was one of the first to buy her water.”

Shepard took a cautious sip, then arranged his tape recorder and notebook.

“Why did you take the cases?” he asked.

She smiled and shook her head and kept stirring. “I’ve asked myself that a thousand times, but the answer is really simple. Pete, Jeannette’s husband, worked for my uncle. I knew several of the victims. It’s a small town, and when so many people became ill, it

was obvious there had to be a reason. The cancer came in waves, and there was so much suffering. After attending the first three or four funerals, I realized something had to be done.”

He took notes and ignored the pause.

She continued. “Krane was the biggest employer, and for years there had been rumors of dumping around the plant. A lot of folks who worked there got sick. I remember coming home from college after my sophomore year and hearing people talk about how bad the water was. We lived a mile outside of town and had our own well, so it was never a problem for us. But things got worse in town. Over the years, the rumors of dumping grew and grew until everyone came to believe them. At the same time, the water turned into a putrid liquid that was undrinkable. Then the cancer hit—liver, kidney, urinary tract, stomach, bladder, lots of leukemia. I was in church one Sunday with my parents, and I could see four slick, shiny bald heads. Chemo. I thought I was in a horror movie.”

“Have you regretted the litigation?”

“No, never. We’ve lost a lot, but then so has my hometown. Hopefully, the losing is over now. Wes and I are young; we’ll survive. But many of these folks are either dead or deathly ill.”

“Do you think about the money?”

“What money? The appeal will take eighteen months, and right now that seems like an eternity. You have to see the big picture.”

“Which is?”

“Five years from now. In five years, the toxic dump will be cleaned up and gone forever and no one will ever be hurt by it again. There will be a settlement, one big massive settlement where Krane Chemical, and its insurers, are finally brought to the table with their very deep pockets and are forced to compensate the families they have ruined. Everybody gets their share of damages.”

“Including the lawyers.”

“Absolutely. If not for the lawyers, Krane would still be here manufacturing pillamar 5 and dumping its byproducts in the pits behind the plant, and no one could hold them accountable.”

“Instead, they are now in Mexico—”

“Oh yes, manufacturing pillamar 5 and dumping its by-products in the pits behind the plants. And nobody gives a damn. They don’t have these trials down there.”

“What are your chances on appeal?”

She sipped the stale and heavily sugared coffee and was about to answer when an insurance agent stopped by, shook her hand, hugged her, said thanks several times, and appeared to be on the verge of tears when he walked away. Then Mr. Greenwood, her junior high principal, now retired, spotted her as he entered and practically crushed her in a bear hug. He ignored Shepard while rambling on about how proud he was of her. He thanked her, promised to keep praying for her, asked about her family, and so on. As he withdrew in a windy farewell, Babe, the owner, came over for a hug and another lengthy round of congratulations.

Shepard finally stood and eased out the door. A few minutes later, Mary Grace made her exit. “Sorry about that,” she said. “It’s a big moment for the town.”

“They are very proud.”

“Let’s go see the plant.”

The Krane Chemical Bowmore Plant Number Two, as it was officially known, was in an abandoned industrial park on the east side of the city limits. The plant was a series of flat-roofed cinder-block buildings, connected by massive piping and conveyors. Water towers and storage silos rose behind the buildings. Everything was overgrown with kudzu and weeds. Because of the litigation, the company had secured the facility with miles of twelve-foot chain-link fencing, topped with glistening razor wire. Heavy gates were chained and padlocked. Like a prison, where bad things happened, the plant shut out the world and kept its secrets buried within.

Mary Grace had visited the plant at least a dozen times during the litigation, but always with a mob—other lawyers, engineers, former Krane employees, security guards, even Judge Harrison. The last visit had been two months earlier when the jurors were given a tour.

She and Shepard stopped at the main gate and examined the padlocks. A large, decaying sign identified the plant and its owner.

As they stared through the chain-link fence, Mary Grace said, “Six years ago, when it became apparent that litigation was inevitable, Krane fled to Mexico. The employees were given three days’ notice and \$500 in severance pay; many of them had worked here for thirty years. It was an incredibly stupid way to leave town, because some of their former workers were our best witnesses during the trial. The bitterness was, and is, astounding. If Krane had any friends in Bowmore, it lost every one of them when it screwed its employees.”

A photographer working with Shepard met them at the front gate and began snapping away. They strolled along the fence, with Mary Grace directing the brief tour. “For years, this place was unlocked. It was routinely vandalized. Teenagers hung out here, drinking and doing drugs. Now people stay as far away as possible. The gates and fences are really not needed. No one wants to get near this place.”

From the north side, a long row of thick metal cylinders was visible in the midst of the plant. Mary Grace pointed and explained, “That’s known as Extraction Unit Two. The bichloronylene was reduced as a byproduct and stored in those tanks. From there, some was shipped away for a proper disposal, but most was taken into the woods there, farther back on the property, and simply dumped into a ravine.”

“Proctor’s Pit?”

“Yes, Mr. Proctor was the supervisor in charge of disposal. He died of cancer before we could subpoena him.” They walked twenty yards along the fence. “We really can’t see from here, but there are three ravines in there, deep in the woods, where they simply hauled the tanks and covered them with dirt and mud. Over the years, they began to leak—they were not even sealed properly—and the chemicals soaked into the earth. This went on for years, tons and tons of bichloronylene and cartolox and aklar and other proven carcinogens. If you can believe our experts, and the jury evidently did, the poisons finally contaminated the aquifer from which Bowmore pumps its water.”

A security detail in a golf cart approached on the other side of the fence. Two overweight guards with guns stopped and stared. “Just

ignore them,” Mary Grace whispered.

“What’re you lookin’ for?” a guard asked.

“We’re on the right side of the fence,” she answered.

“What’re you lookin’ for?” he repeated.

“I’m Mary Grace Payton, one of the attorneys. You boys move along.”

Both nodded at once, and then slowly drove away.

She glanced at her watch. “I really need to be going.”

“When can we meet again?”

“We’ll see. No promises. Things are quite hectic right now.”

They drove back to the Pine Grove Church and said goodbye. When Shepard was gone, Mary Grace walked three blocks to Jeannette’s trailer. Bette was at work, the place was quiet. For an hour, she sat with her client under a small tree and drank bottled lemonade. No tears, no tissues, just girl talk about life and families and the past four months together in that awful courtroom.

CHAPTER 6

With an hour to go before trading closed, Krane bottomed at \$18 a share, then began a rather feeble rally, if it could be called that. It nibbled around \$20 a share for half an hour before finding some traction at that price.

To add to the catastrophe, investors for some reason chose to exact revenge on the rest of Carl's empire. His Trudeau Group owned 45 percent of Krane and smaller chunks of six other public companies—three chemical companies, an oil exploration firm, an auto parts maker, and a chain of hotels. Shortly after lunch, the common shares of the other six began slipping as well. It made no sense whatsoever, but then the market often cannot be explained. Misery is contagious on Wall Street. Panic is common and rarely understood.

Mr. Trudeau did not see the chain reaction coming, nor did Felix Bard, his savvy financial wizard. As the minutes dragged by, they watched in horror as a billion dollars in market value slipped away from the Trudeau Group.

Blame was rampant. Obviously, it all went back to the verdict in Mississippi. But many analysts, especially the babbling experts on cable, made much of the fact that Krane Chemical had for years chosen to go brazenly forward without the benefit of full liability insurance. The company had saved a fortune in premiums, but was now giving it back in spades. Bobby Ratzlaff was listening to one such analyst on a television in a corner when Carl snapped, "Turn that thing off!"

It was almost 4:00 p.m., the magic hour when the exchange closed and the bloodshed ended. Carl was at his desk, phone stuck to his head. Bard was at the conference table watching two monitors and recording the latest stock prices. Ratzlaff was pale and sick and

even more bankrupt than before, and he went from window to window as if selecting the one for his final flight.

The other six stocks rallied at the final buzzer, and though they were down significantly, the damage was not ruinous. The companies were solid performers, and their stocks would readjust themselves in due course. Krane, on the other hand, was a train wreck. It closed at \$21.25, a full \$31.25 collapse since the day before. Its market value had shrunk from \$3.2 billion to \$1.3 billion. Mr. Trudeau's 45 percent share of the misery was about \$850 million. Bard quickly added the declines from the other six companies and computed a one-day loss for his boss at \$1.1 billion. Not a record, but probably enough to land Carl on someone's Top Ten list.

After a review of the closing numbers, Carl ordered Bard and Ratzlaff to put on their jackets, straighten their ties, and follow him.

Four floors below, in the corporate offices of Krane Chemical, its top executives were hunkered down in a small dining room reserved exclusively for themselves. The food was notoriously bland, but the view was impressive. Lunch had not been important that day; no one had an appetite. They had been waiting for an hour, shell-shocked and expecting an explosion from above. A mass funeral would have been a livelier event. But Mr. Trudeau managed to brighten up the room. He marched purposefully in, his two minions in tow—Bard with a plastic grin, Ratzlaff green at the gills—and, instead of yelling, thanked the men (all boys) for their hard work and commitment to the company.

A wide smile, and Carl said, "Gentlemen, this is not a very good day. One which I'm sure we'll remember for a long time." His voice was pleasant, just another friendly little drop-in from the man at the top.

"But today is now over, thankfully, and we are still standing. Tomorrow, we start kicking ass."

A few nervous looks, maybe a smile or two. Most were expecting to be sacked on the spot.

He continued: "I want you to remember three things that I'm about to say on this historic occasion. First, no one in this room is

losing his job. Second, Krane Chemical will survive this miscarriage of justice. And third, I do not intend to lose this fight.”

He was the epitome of the confident leader, the captain rallying his troops in their foxholes. A victory sign and long cigar and he could’ve been Churchill in his finest hour. He ordered chins up, backs to the wall, and so on.

Even Bobby Ratzlaff began to feel better.

Two hours later, Ratzlaff and Bard were finally dismissed and sent home. Carl wanted time to reflect, to lick his wounds, to clear his head. To help matters, he fixed himself a scotch and took off his shoes. The sun was setting somewhere beyond New Jersey, and he said good riddance to such an unforgettable day.

He glanced at his computer and checked the day’s phone calls. Brianna had called four times, nothing urgent. If she had an important matter, Carl’s secretary logged it as “Your Wife” and not “Brianna.” He’d call her later. He was in no mood for the summary of her daily workouts.

There were over forty calls, and number twenty-eight caught his attention. Senator Grott had checked in from Washington. Carl barely knew him personally, but every serious corporate player knew of The Senator. Grott had served three terms in the U.S. Senate from New York before he retired, voluntarily, and joined a powerful law firm to make his fortune. He was Mr. Washington, the ultimate insider, the seasoned counselor and adviser with offices on Wall Street, Pennsylvania Avenue, and anywhere else he chose. Senator Grott had more contacts than anyone, often golfed with whoever happened to occupy the White House, traveled the world in search of more contacts, offered advice only to the powerful, and was generally regarded as the top connection between big corporate America and big government. If The Senator called, you called him back, even though you’d just lost a billion dollars. The Senator knew exactly how much you had lost and was concerned about it.

Carl dialed the private number. After eight rings a gruff voice said, "Grott."

"Senator Grott, Carl Trudeau here," Carl said politely. He was deferential to very few people, but The Senator demanded and deserved respect.

"Oh yes, Carl," came the reply, as if they had played golf many times. Just a couple of old pals. Carl heard the voice and thought of the countless times he'd seen The Senator on the news. "How is Amos?" he asked.

The contact, the name that linked both men to this call. "Great. Had lunch with him last month." A lie. Amos was the managing partner of the corporate law firm Carl had been using for a decade. Not The Senator's firm, not even close. But Amos was a substantial person, certainly big enough to be mentioned by The Senator.

"Give him my regards."

"Certainly." Now get on with it, Carl was thinking.

"Listen, I know it's been a long day, so I won't keep you." A pause. "There is a man in Boca Raton that you should see, name is Rinehart, Barry Rinehart. He's a consultant of sorts, though you'll never find him in the phone book. His firm specializes in elections."

A long pause, and Carl had to say something. So he said, "Okay. I'm listening."

"He is extremely competent, smart, discreet, successful, and expensive. And if anyone can fix this verdict, Mr. Rinehart is your man."

"Fix this verdict," Carl repeated.

The Senator continued: "If you're interested, I'll give him a call, open the door."

"Well, yes, I'd certainly be interested."

Fix this verdict. It was music.

"Good, I'll be in touch."

"Thank you."

And with that the conversation was over. So typical of The Senator. A favor here, the payback there. All contacts running to and fro, everybody's back getting properly scratched. The call was free, but one day The Senator would be paid.

Carl stirred his scotch with a finger and looked at the rest of his calls. Nothing but misery.

Fix this verdict, he kept repeating.

In the center of his immaculate desk was a memo marked “CONFIDENTIAL.” Weren’t all of his memos confidential? On the cover sheet someone had scrawled with a black marker the name “PAYTON.” Carl picked it up, arranged both feet on his desk, and flipped through it. There were photos, the first from yesterday’s trial when Mr. and Mrs. Payton were leaving the courthouse, walking hand in hand in glorious triumph. There was an earlier one of Mary Grace from a bar publication, with a quick bio. Born in Bowmore, college at Millsaps, law school at Ole Miss, two years in a federal clerkship, two in a public defender’s office, past president of the county bar association, certified trial lawyer, school board, member of the state Democratic Party and a few tree-hugger groups.

From the same publication, a photo and bio of James Wesley Payton. Born in Monroe, Louisiana, lettered in football at Southern Miss, law school at Tulane, three years as an assistant prosecutor, member of all the available trial lawyer groups, Rotary Club, Civitan, and so on.

Two backwater ambulance chasers who had just orchestrated Carl’s exit from the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans.

Two children, an illegal nanny, public schools, Episcopal church, near foreclosures on both home and office, near repossessions of two automobiles, a law practice (no other partners, just support staff) that was now ten years old and was once fairly profitable (by small-town standards) but now sought refuge in an abandoned dime store where the rent was at least three months in arrears. And then the good part—heavy debts, at least \$400,000 to Second State Bank on a line of credit that is basically unsecured. No payments, not even on the interest, in five months. Second State Bank was a local outfit with ten offices in south Mississippi. Four hundred thousand dollars borrowed for the sole purpose of financing the lawsuit against Krane Chemical.

“Four hundred thousand dollars,” Carl mumbled. So far he’d paid almost \$14 million to defend the damned thing.

Bank accounts are empty. Credit cards no longer in use. Other clients (non-Bowmore variety) rumored to be frustrated by lack of attention.

No other substantial verdicts to speak of. Nothing close to \$1 million.

Summary: These people are heavily in debt and hanging on by their fingernails. A little push, and they're over the edge. Strategy: Drag out the appeals, delay, delay. Crank up pressure from the bank. Possible buyout of Second State, then call the loan. Bankruptcy would be the only course. Huge distraction as appeals rage on. Also, Paytons would be unable to pursue their other thirty (or so) cases versus Krane and would probably decline more clients.

Bottom line: this little law firm can be destroyed.

The memo was unsigned, which was no surprise, but Carl knew it was written by one of two hatchet men working in Ratzlaff's office. He'd find out which one and give the boy a raise. Good work.

The great Carl Trudeau had dismantled large conglomerates, taken over hostile boards of directors, fired celebrity CEOs, upset entire industries, fleeced bankers, manipulated stock prices, and destroyed the careers of dozens of his enemies.

He could certainly ruin a garden-variety mom-and-pop law firm in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Toliver delivered him home shortly after 9:00 p.m., a time selected by Carl because Sadler would be in bed and he would not be forced to dote on a child he had no interest in. The other child could not be avoided. Brianna was waiting, dutifully, for him. They would dine by the fire.

When he walked through the door, he came face-to-face with *Imelda*, already permanently ensconced in the foyer and looking more abused than the night before. He couldn't help but gawk at the sculpture. Did the pile of brass rods really resemble a young girl?

Where was the torso? Where were the limbs? Where was her head? Had he really paid that much money for such an abstract mess?

And how long might she haunt him in his own penthouse?

As his valet took his coat and briefcase, Carl stared sadly at his masterpiece, then heard the dreaded words “Hello, darling.” Brianna swept into the room, a flowing red gown trailing after her. They pecked cheeks.

“Isn’t it stunning?” she gushed, flopping an arm at *Imelda*.

“Stunning is the word,” he said.

He looked at Brianna, then he looked at *Imelda*, and he wanted to choke both of them. But the moment passed. He could never admit defeat.

“Dinner is ready, darling,” she cooed.

“I’m not hungry. Let’s have a drink.”

“But Claudelle has fixed your favorite—grilled sole.”

“No appetite, dear,” he said, yanking off his tie and tossing it to his valet.

“Today was awful, I know,” she said. “A scotch?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me about it?” she asked.

“I’d love to.”

Brianna’s private money manager, a woman unknown to Carl, had called throughout the day with updates on the collapse. Brianna knew the numbers, and she had heard the reports that her husband was down a billion or so.

She dismissed the kitchen staff, then changed into a much more revealing nightgown. They met by the fire and chatted until he fell asleep.

CHAPTER 7

At 10:00 a.m. Friday, two days post-verdict, the Payton firm met in The Pit, a large open space with unpainted Sheetrock walls lined with homemade bookshelves and cluttered with a heavy collage of aerial photos, medical summaries, juror profiles, expert-witness reports, and a hundred other trial documents and exhibits. In the center of the room was a table of sorts—four large pieces of inch-thick plywood mounted on sawhorses and surrounded with a sad collection of metal and wooden chairs, almost all of which were missing a piece or two. The table had obviously been the center of the storm for the past four months, with piles of papers and stacks of law books. Sherman, a paralegal, had spent most of the previous day hauling out coffee cups, pizza boxes, Chinese food containers, and empty water bottles. He'd also swept the concrete floors, though no one could tell.

Their previous office, a three-story building on Main Street, had been beautifully decorated, well-appointed, and spruced up each night by a cleaning service. Appearance and neatness were important back then.

Now they were just trying to survive.

In spite of the dismal surroundings, the mood was light, and for obvious reasons. The marathon was over. The incredible verdict was still hard to believe. United by sweat and hardship, the tight-knit little firm had taken on the beast and won a big one for the good guys.

Mary Grace called the meeting to order. The phones were put on hold because Tabby, the receptionist, was very much a part of the firm and was expected to participate in the discussion. Thankfully, the phones were beginning to ring again.

Sherman and Rusty, the other paralegal, wore jeans, sweatshirts, no socks. Working in what was once a dime store, who could care

about a dress code? Tabby and Vicky, the other receptionist, had abandoned nice clothes when both snagged dresses on the hand-me-down furniture. Only Olivia, the matronly bookkeeper, turned herself out each day in proper office attire.

They sat around the plywood table, sipping the same bad coffee they were now addicted to, and listened with smiles as Mary Grace did her recap. "There will be the usual post-trial motions," she was saying. "Judge Harrison has scheduled a hearing in thirty days, but we expect no surprises."

"Here's to Judge Harrison," Sherman said, and they toasted him with their coffee.

It had become a very democratic firm. Everyone present felt like an equal. Anyone could speak whenever he or she felt like it. Only first names were used. Poverty is a great equalizer.

Mary Grace continued: "For the next few months, Sherman and I will handle the *Baker* case as it moves forward, and we will keep the other Bowmore cases current. Wes and Rusty will take everything else and start generating some cash."

Applause.

"Here's to cash," Sherman said, another toast. He possessed a law degree from a night school but had not been able to pass the bar exam. He was now in his mid-forties, a career paralegal who knew more law than most lawyers. Rusty was twenty years younger and contemplating med school.

"While we're on the subject," Mary Grace continued, "Olivia has given me the latest red-ink summary. Always a pleasure." She picked up a sheet of paper and looked at the numbers. "We are now officially three months behind in rent, for a total of \$4,500."

"Oh, please evict us," Rusty said.

"But the landlord is still our client and he's not worried. All other bills are at least two months past due, except, of course, the phones and electricity. Salaries have not been paid in four weeks—"

"Five," Sherman said.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"As of today. Today is payday, or at least it used to be."

“Sorry, five weeks past due. We should have some cash in a week if we can settle the *Raney* case. We’ll try to catch up.”

“We’re surviving,” Tabby said. She was the only single person in the firm. All others had spouses with jobs. Though budgets were painfully tight, they were determined to survive.

“How about the Payton family?” Vicky asked.

“We’re fine,” Wes said. “I know you’re concerned, thank you, but we’re getting by just like you. I’ve said this a hundred times, but I’ll say it again. Mary Grace and I will pay you as soon as we possibly can. Things are about to improve.”

“We’re more concerned about you,” Mary Grace added.

No one was leaving. No one was threatening.

A deal had been struck long ago, though it was not in writing. If and when the Bowmore cases paid off, the money would be shared by the entire firm. Maybe not equally, but everyone present knew they would be rewarded.

“How about the bank?” Rusty asked. There were no secrets now. They knew Huffy had stopped by the day before, and they knew how much Second State Bank was owed.

“I stiff-armed the bank,” Wes said. “If they push a little more, then we’ll file Chapter 11 and screw ’em.”

“I vote to screw the bank,” Sherman said.

It seemed to be unanimous around the room that the bank should get screwed, though everyone knew the truth. The lawsuit would not have been possible without Huffy’s lobbying on their behalf and convincing Mr. Prickhead to raise the line of credit. They also knew that the Paytons would not rest until the bank was paid.

“We should clear twelve thousand from the *Raney* case,” Mary Grace said. “And another ten thousand from the dog bite.”

“Maybe fifteen,” Wes said.

“Then what? Where is the next settlement?” Mary Grace threw this on the table for all to consider.

“Geeter,” Sherman said. It was more of a suggestion.

Wes looked at Mary Grace. Both gave blank looks to Sherman. “Who’s Geeter?”

“Geeter happens to be a client. Slip and fall at the Kroger store. Came in about eight months ago.” There were some odd glances around the table. It was obvious that the two lawyers had forgotten one of their clients.

“I don’t recall that one,” Wes admitted.

“What’s the potential?” Mary Grace asked.

“Not much. Shaky liability. Maybe twenty thousand. I’ll review the file with you on Monday.”

“Good idea,” Mary Grace said and quickly moved on to something else. “I know the phones are ringing, and we are definitely broke, but we are not about to start taking a bunch of junk. No real estate or bankruptcies. No criminal cases unless they can pay the freight. No contested divorces—we’ll do the quickies for a thousand bucks, but everything must be agreed on. This is a personal injury firm, and if we get loaded down with the small stuff, we won’t have time for the good cases. Any questions?”

“There’s a lot of weird stuff coming in by phone,” Tabby said. “And from all over the country.”

“Just stick to the basics,” Wes said. “We can’t handle cases in Florida or Seattle. We need quick settlements here at home, at least for the next twelve months.”

“How long will the appeals take?” Vicky asked.

“Eighteen to twenty-four months,” Mary Grace answered. “And there’s not much we can do to push things along. It’s a process, and that’s why it’s important to hunker down now and generate some fees elsewhere.”

“Which brings up another point,” Wes said. “The verdict changes the landscape dramatically. First, expectations are through the roof right now, and our other Bowmore clients will soon be pestering us. They want their day in court, their big verdict. We must be patient, but we can’t let these people drive us crazy. Second, the vultures are descending on Bowmore. Lawyers will be chasing one another looking for clients. It will be a free-for-all. Any contact from another attorney is to be reported immediately. Third, the verdict places even greater pressure on Krane. Their dirty tricks will get even dirtier. They have people watching us. Trust no one. Speak to no

one. Nothing leaves this office. All papers are shredded. As soon as we can afford it, we'll hire nighttime security. Bottom line—watch everyone and watch your backs.”

“This is fun,” Vicky said. “Like a movie.”

“Any questions?”

“Yes,” Rusty said. “Can Sherman and I start chasing ambulances again? It’s been four months, you know, since the beginning of the trial. I really miss the excitement.”

“I haven’t seen the inside of an ER in weeks,” Sherman added. “And I miss the sounds of the sirens.”

It wasn’t clear if they were joking or not, but the moment was humorous and good for a laugh. Mary Grace finally said, “I really don’t care what you do; I just don’t want to know everything.”

“Meeting adjourned,” Wes said. “And it’s Friday. Everyone has to leave at noon. We’re locking the doors. See you Monday.”

They picked up Mack and Liza from school, and after fast food for lunch they headed south through the countryside for an hour, until they saw the first sign for Lake Garland. The roads narrowed before finally turning to gravel. The cabin was at the dead end of a dirt trail, perched above the water on stilts and wedged into a tight spot where the woods met the shoreline. A short pier ran from the porch into the water, and beyond it the vast lake seemed to stretch for miles. There was no other sign of human activity, either on the lake or anywhere around it.

The cabin was owned by a lawyer friend in Hattiesburg, a man Wes had once worked for and who had declined to get involved in the Bowmore mess. That decision had seemed a wise one, until about forty-eight hours ago. Now there was considerable doubt.

The original idea had been to drive a few more hours to Destin and have a long weekend on the beach. But they simply couldn’t afford it.

They unloaded the car as they roamed through the spacious cabin, an A-frame with a huge loft, which Mack surveyed and declared perfect for another night of “camping out.”

“We’ll see,” Wes said. There were three small bedrooms on the main level, and he planned to find a comfortable bed. Serious sleep was the goal for the weekend. Sleep and time with the kids.

As promised, the fishing gear was in a storage room under the porch. The boat was winched at the end of the pier, and the children watched with anticipation as Wes lowered it into the water. Mary Grace fiddled with the life jackets and made sure both kids were properly secured. An hour after they arrived, she was tucked away comfortably under a quilt in a lounge chair on the porch, book in hand, watching the rest of her family inch across the blue horizon of Lake Garland, three small silhouettes in search of bream and crappie.

It was mid-November, and red and yellow leaves were falling, twisting in the breeze, and covering the cabin, the pier, and the water around it. There were no sounds. The small boat motor was too far away. The wind was too soft. The birds and wildlife were elsewhere for the moment. Perfect stillness, a rare event in any life but one that she especially treasured now. She closed the book, closed her eyes, and tried to think of something unrelated to the past few months.

Where would they be in five years? She concentrated on the future because the past was thoroughly consumed by the *Baker* case. They would certainly be in a house, though never again would they hock their future with a fat mortgage on a showy little castle in the suburbs. She wanted a home, nothing more. She no longer cared about imported cars and an expensive office and all the other toys that once seemed so important. She wanted to be a mother to her children, and she wanted a home to raise them in.

Family and assets aside, she wanted more lawyers. Their firm would be larger and full of smart and talented lawyers who did nothing but pursue the creators of toxic dumps and bad drugs and defective products. One day Payton & Payton would be known not

for the cases it won but for the crooks it hauled into court for judgment.

She was forty-one years old, and she was tired. But the fatigue would pass. The old dreams of full-time motherhood and a cushy retirement were forever forgotten. Krane Chemical had converted her into a radical and a crusader. After the last four months, she would never be the same.

Enough. Her eyes were wide open.

Every thought took her back to the case, to Jeannette Baker, the trial, Krane Chemical. She would not spend this quiet and lovely weekend dwelling on such matters. She opened her book and started to read.

For dinner, they roasted hot dogs and marshmallows over a stone pit near the water, then sat on the pier in the darkness and watched the stars. The air was clear and cool, and they huddled together under a quilt. A distant light flickered on the horizon, and after some discussion it was agreed upon that it was just a boat.

“Dad, tell us a story,” Mack said. He was squeezed between his sister and his mother.

“What kind of story?”

“A ghost story. A scary one.”

His first thought was about the dogs of Bowmore. For years a pack of stray dogs had roamed the outskirts of the town. Often, in the dead of night, they shrieked and yelped and made more noise than a pack of coyotes. Legend held that the dogs were rabid and had been driven crazy because they drank the water.

But he’d had enough of Bowmore. He remembered one about a ghost who walked on water in the night, looking for his beloved wife, who’d drowned. He began to tell it, and the children squeezed closer to their parents.

CHAPTER 8

A uniformed guard opened the gates to the mansion, then nodded smartly to the driver as the long black Mercedes rushed by, in a hurry as always. Mr. Carl Trudeau had the rear seat, alone, already lost in the morning's papers. It was 7:30 a.m., too early for golf or tennis and too early for Saturday morning traffic in Palm Beach. Within minutes, the car was on Interstate 95, racing south.

Carl ignored the market reports. Thank God the week was finally over. Krane closed at \$19.50 the day before and showed no signs of finding a permanent floor. Though he would be forever known as one of the very few men who'd lost a billion dollars in a day, he was already plotting his next legend. Give him a year and he'd have his billion back. In two years, he'd double all of it.

Forty minutes later he was in Boca Raton, crossing the waterway, headed for the clusters of high-rise condos and hotels packed along the beach. The office building was a shiny glass cylinder ten floors tall with a gate and a guard and not one word posted on a sign of any type. The Mercedes was waved through and stopped under a portico. A stern-faced young man in a black suit opened the rear door and said, "Good morning, Mr. Trudeau."

"Good morning," Carl said, climbing out.

"This way, sir."

According to Carl's hasty research, the firm of Troy-Hogan worked very hard at not being seen. It had no Web site, brochure, advertisements, listed phone number, or anything else that might attract clients. It was not a law firm, because it was not registered with the State of Florida, or any other state for that matter. It had

no registered lobbyists. It was a corporation, not a limited partnership or some other variety of association. It was unclear where the name originated because there was no record of anyone named Troy or Hogan. The firm was known to provide marketing and consulting services, but there was no clue as to the nature of this business. It was domiciled in Bermuda and had been registered in Florida for eight years. Its domestic agent was a law firm in Miami. It was privately owned, and no one knew who owned it.

The less Carl learned about the firm, the more he admired it.

The principal was one Barry Rinehart, and here the trail grew somewhat warmer. According to friends and contacts in Washington, Rinehart had passed through D.C. twenty years earlier without leaving a fingerprint. He had worked for a congressman, the Pentagon, and a couple of midsize lobbying outfits—the typical résumé of a million others. He left town for no apparent reason in 1990 and surfaced in Minnesota, where he ran the successful campaign of a political unknown who got elected to Congress. Then he went to Oregon, where he worked his magic in a Senate race. As his reputation began to rise, he abruptly quit doing campaigns and disappeared altogether. End of trail.

Rinehart was forty-eight years old, married and divorced twice, no children, no criminal record, no professional associations, no civic clubs. He had a degree in political science from the University of Maryland and a law degree from the University of Nevada.

No one seemed to know what he was doing now, but he was certainly doing it well. His suite on the top floor of the cylinder was beautifully decorated with minimalist contemporary art and furniture. Carl, who spared no expense with his own office, was impressed.

Barry was waiting at the door of his office. The two shook hands and exchanged the usual pleasantries as they took in the details of the other's suit, shirt, tie, shoes. Nothing off-the-rack. No detail left undone, even though it was a Saturday morning in south Florida. Impressions were crucial, especially to Barry, who was thrilled at the prospect of snaring a new and substantial client.

Carl had half-expected a slick car salesman with a bad suit, but he was pleasantly surprised. Mr. Rinehart was dignified, soft-spoken, well-groomed, and very much at ease in the presence of such a powerful man. He was certainly not an equal, but he seemed to be comfortable with this.

A secretary asked about coffee as they stepped inside and met the ocean. From the tenth floor, beachside, the Atlantic stretched forever. Carl, who gazed at the Hudson River several times a day, was envious. "Beautiful," he said, staring from the row of ten-foot glass windows.

"Not a bad place to work," Barry said.

They settled into beige leather chairs as the coffee arrived. The secretary closed the door behind her, giving the place a nice secure feel.

"I appreciate you meeting me on a Saturday morning and with such short notice," Carl said.

"The pleasure is mine," Barry said. "It's been a rough week."

"I've had better. I take it you've spoken personally with Senator Grott."

"Oh yes. We chat occasionally."

"He was very vague about your firm and what you do."

Barry laughed and crossed his legs. "We do campaigns. Have a look." He picked up a remote and pushed the button, and a large white screen dropped from the ceiling and covered most of a wall, then the entire nation appeared. Most of the states were in green, the rest were in a soft yellow. "Thirty-one states elect their appellate and supreme court judges. They are in green. The yellow ones have the good sense to appoint their courts. We make our living in the green ones."

"Judicial elections."

"Yes. That's all we do, and we do it very quietly. When our clients need help, we target a supreme court justice who is not particularly friendly, and we take him, or her, out of the picture."

"Just like that."

"Just like that."

"Who are your clients?"

“I can’t give you the names, but they’re all on your side of the street. Big companies in energy, insurance, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, timber, all types of manufacturers, plus doctors, hospitals, nursing homes, banks. We raise tons of money and hire the people on the ground to run aggressive campaigns.”

“Have you worked in Mississippi?”

“Not yet.” Barry punched another button and America was back. The green states slowly turned black. “The darker states are the ones we’ve worked in. As you can see, they’re coast-to-coast. We maintain a presence in all thirty-nine.”

Carl took some coffee, and nodded as if he wanted Barry to keep talking.

“We employ about fifty people here, the entire building is ours, and we accumulate enormous amounts of data. Information is power, and we know everything. We review every appellate decision in the green states. We know every appellate judge, their backgrounds, families, prior careers, divorces, bankruptcies, all the dirt. We review every decision and can predict the outcome of almost every case on appeal. We track every legislature and keep up with bills that might affect civil justice. We also monitor important civil trials.”

“How about the one in Hattiesburg?”

“Oh yes. We were not at all surprised at the verdict.”

“Then why were my lawyers surprised?”

“Your lawyers were good but not great. Plus, the plaintiff has a better case. I’ve studied a lot of toxic dumps, and Bowmore is one of the worst.”

“So we’ll lose again?”

“That’s my prediction. The flood is coming.”

Carl glanced at the ocean and drank some more coffee. “What happens on appeal?”

“Depends on who’s on the Mississippi Supreme Court. Right now, there’s a very good chance the verdict will be affirmed in a 5-to-4 decision. The state has been notoriously sympathetic to plaintiffs for the past two decades and, as you probably know, has a well-earned

reputation as a hotbed of litigation. Asbestos, tobacco, fen-phen, all sorts of crazy class actions. Tort lawyers love the place.”

“So I’ll lose by one vote?”

“More or less. The court is not entirely predictable, but, yes, it’s usually a 5-to-4 split.”

“So all we need is a friendly judge?”

“Yes.”

Carl placed his cup on a table and shot to his feet. He slid out of his jacket, hung it over a chair, then walked to the windows and stared at the ocean. A cargo ship inched along a mile out, and he watched it for several minutes. Barry slowly sipped his coffee.

“Do you have a judge in mind?” Carl finally asked.

Barry hit the remote. The screen went blank, then disappeared into the ceiling. He stretched as if he had a sore back, then said, “Perhaps we should talk business first.”

Carl nodded and took his chair. “Let’s hear it.”

“Our proposal goes something like this. You hire our firm, the money gets wired into the proper accounts, then I will give you a plan for restructuring the Supreme Court of Mississippi.”

“How much?”

“There are two fees. First, a million as a retainer. This is all properly reported. You officially become our client, and we provide consulting services in the area of government relations, a wonderfully vague term that covers just about anything. The second fee is seven million bucks, and we take it offshore. Some of this will be used to fund the campaign, but most will be preserved. Only the first fee goes on the books.”

Carl was nodding, understanding. “For eight million, I can buy myself a supreme court justice.”

“That’s the plan.”

“And this judge earns how much a year?”

“Hundred and ten thousand.”

“A hundred and ten thousand dollars,” Carl repeated.

“It’s all relative. Your mayor in New York City spent seventy-five million to get elected to a job that pays a tiny fraction of that. It’s politics.”

“Politics,” Carl said as if he wanted to spit. He sighed heavily and slumped an inch or two in his chair. “I guess it’s cheaper than a verdict.”

“Much cheaper, and there will be more verdicts. Eight million is a bargain.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not. These are bruising campaigns, but we know how to win them.”

“I want to know how the money is spent. I want the basic plan.”

Barry walked over and replenished his coffee from a silver thermos. Then he walked to his magnificent windows and gazed out at the Atlantic. Carl glanced at his watch. He had a 12:30 tee time at the Palm Beach Country Club; not that it mattered that much. He was a social golfer who played because he was expected to play.

Rinehart drained his cup and returned to his chair. “The truth, Mr. Trudeau, is that you really don’t want to know how the money is spent. You want to win. You want a friendly face on the supreme court so that when *Baker versus Krane Chemical* is decided in eighteen months, you’ll be certain of the outcome. That’s what you want. That’s what we deliver.”

“For eight million bucks I would certainly hope so.”

You blew eighteen on a bad piece of sculpture three nights ago, Barry thought but wouldn’t dare say. You have three jets that cost forty million each. Your “renovation” in the Hamptons will set you back at least ten million. And these are just a few of your toys. We’re talking business here, not toys. Barry’s file on Carl was much thicker than Carl’s file on Barry. But then, in fairness, Mr. Rinehart worked hard to avoid attention, while Mr. Trudeau worked even harder to attract it.

It was time to close the deal, so Barry quietly pressed on. “Mississippi has its judicial elections a year from now, next November. We have plenty of time, but none to waste. Your timing is convenient and lucky. As we slug it out through the election next year, the case plods along through the appellate process. Our new man will take office a year from January, and about four months later will come face-to-face with *Baker versus Krane Chemical*.”

For the first time, Carl saw a flash of the car salesman, and it didn't bother him at all. Politics was a dirty business where the winners were not always the cleanest guys in town. One had to be a bit of a thug to survive.

"My name cannot be at risk," he said sternly.

Barry knew he had just collected another handsome fee. "It's impossible," he said with a fake smile. "We have fire walls everywhere. If one of our operatives gets out of line, does something wrong, we make sure another guy takes the fall. Troy-Hogan has never been even remotely tarnished. And if they can't catch us, they damned sure can't find you."

"No paperwork."

"Only for the initial fee. We are, after all, a legitimate consulting and government relations firm. We will have an official relationship with you: consulting, marketing, communications—all those wonderfully nebulous words that hide everything else. But the offshore arrangement is completely confidential."

Carl thought for a long time, then smiled and said, "I like it. I like it a lot."

CHAPTER 9

The law office of F. Clyde Hardin & Associates had no associates. It was just Clyde and Miriam, his feeble secretary who outranked him because she had been there for over forty years, far longer than Clyde. She had typed deeds and wills for his father, who came home from the Second War without a leg and was famous for removing his wooden one in front of juries to distract them. The old man was gone now, long gone, and he had bequeathed his old office and old furniture and old secretary to his only child, Clyde, who was fifty-four and very old himself.

The Hardin law office had been a fixture on Main Street in Bowmore for over sixty years. It had survived wars, depressions, recessions, sit-ins, boycotts, and desegregation, but Clyde wasn't so sure it could survive Krane Chemical. The town was drying up around him. The nickname Cancer County was simply too much to overcome. From his ringside seat, he had watched merchants and cafés and country lawyers and country doctors throw in the towel and abandon the town.

Clyde never wanted to be a lawyer, but his father gave him no choice. And though he survived on deeds and wills and divorces, and though he managed to appear reasonably happy and colorful with his seersucker suits, paisley bow ties, and straw hats, he silently loathed the law and the small-town practice of it. He despised the daily grind of dealing with people too poor to pay him, of hassling with other deadbeat lawyers trying to steal said clients, of bickering with judges and clerks and just about everybody else who crossed his path. There were only six lawyers left in Bowmore, and Clyde was the youngest. He dreamed of retiring to a lake or a beach, anywhere, but those dreams would never come true.

Clyde had sugared coffee and one fried egg at 8:30 every morning at Babe's, seven doors to the right of his office, and a grilled cheese

and iced tea every noon at Bob's Burgers, seven doors to the left. At five every afternoon, as soon as Miriam tidied up her desk and said goodbye, Clyde pulled out the office bottle and had a vodka on the rocks. He normally did this alone, in the solitude of the day, his finest hour. He cherished the stillness of his own little happy hour. Often the only sounds were the swishing of a ceiling fan and the rattling of his ice cubes.

He'd had two sips, gulps really, and the booze was beginning to glow somewhere in his brain when there was a rather aggressive knock on his door. No one was expected. Downtown was deserted by five every afternoon, but there was the occasional client looking for a lawyer. Clyde was too broke to ignore the traffic. He placed his tumbler on a bookshelf and walked to the front. A well-dressed gentleman was waiting. He introduced himself as Sterling Bitch or something of that order. Clyde looked at his business card. Bintz. Sterling Bintz. Attorney-at-Law. From Philadelphia, PA.

Mr. Bintz was about forty years old, short and thin, intense, with the smugness that Yankees can't help but exude when they venture into decaying towns of the Deep South.

How could anyone live like this? their smirks seemed to ask.

Clyde disliked him immediately, but he also wanted to return to his vodka, so he offered Sterling a cocktail. Sure, why not?

They settled around Clyde's desk and began to drink. After a few minutes of boring chitchat, Clyde said, "Why don't you get to the point?"

"Certainly." The accent was sharp and crisp and oh so grating. "My firm specializes in class actions for mass torts. That's all we do."

"And you're suddenly interested in our little town. What a surprise."

"Yes, we are interested. Our research tells us that there may be over a thousand potential cases around here, and we'd like to sign up as many as possible. But we need local counsel."

"You're a bit late, bud. The ambulance chasers have been combing this place for the past five years."

“Yes, I understand that most of the death cases have been secured, but there are many other types. We’d like to find those victims with liver and kidney problems, stomach lesions, colon trouble, skin diseases, as many as a dozen other afflictions, all caused, of course, by Krane Chemical. We screen them with our doctors, and when we have a few dozen, we hit Krane with a class action. This is our specialty. We do it all the time. The settlement could be huge.”

Clyde was listening but pretending to be bored. “Go on,” he said.

“Krane’s been kicked in the crotch. They cannot continue to litigate, so they’ll eventually be forced to settle. If we have the first class action, we’re in the driver’s seat.”

“We?”

“Yes. My firm would like to associate with your firm.”

“You’re looking at my firm.”

“We’ll do all the work. We need your name as local counsel, and your contacts and presence here in Bowmore.”

“How much?” Clyde was known to be rather blunt. No sense mincing words with this little shyster from up north.

“Five hundred bucks per client, then 5 percent of the fees when we settle. Again, we do all the work.”

Clyde rattled his ice cubes and tried to do the math.

Sterling pressed on. “The building next door is vacant. I—”

“Oh yes, there are many vacant buildings here in Bowmore.”

“Who owns the one next door?”

“I do. It’s part of this building. My grandfather bought it a thousand years ago. And I got one across the street, too. Empty.”

“The office next door is the perfect place for a screening clinic. We fix it up, give it a medical ambience, bring in our doctors, then advertise like hell for anyone who thinks he or she might be sick. They’ll flock in. We sign them up, get the numbers, then file a massive action in federal court.”

It had the distinct ring of something fraudulent, but Clyde had heard enough about mass torts to know that Sterling here knew what he was talking about. Five hundred clients, at \$500 a pop, plus 5 percent when they won the lottery. He reached for the office bottle and refilled both glasses.

“Intriguing,” Clyde said.

“It could be very profitable.”

“But I don’t work in federal court.”

Sterling sipped the near-lethal serving and offered a smile. He knew perfectly well the limitations of this small-town blowhard. Clyde would have trouble defending a shoplifting case in city court. “Like I said. We do all the work. We’re hardball litigators.”

“Nothing unethical or illegal,” Clyde said.

“Of course not. We’ve been winning class action in mass tort cases for twenty years. Check us out.”

“I’ll do that.”

“And do it quick. This verdict is attracting attention. From now on, it’s a race to find the clients and file the first class action.”

After he left, Clyde had a third vodka, his limit, and near the end of it found the courage to tell all the locals to go to hell. Oh, how they would love to criticize him! Advertising for victims/clients in the county’s weekly paper, turning his office into a cheap clinic for assembly-line diagnoses, crawling into bed with some slimy lawyers from up north, profiting from the misery of his people. The list would be long and the gossip would consume Bowmore, and the more he drank, the more determined he became to throw caution to the wind and, for once, try to make some money.

For a character with such a blustery personality, Clyde was secretly afraid of the courtroom. He had faced a few juries years earlier and had been so stricken with fear that he could hardly talk. He had settled into a safe and comfortable office practice that paid the bills but kept him away from the frightening battles where the real money was made and lost.

For once, why not take a chance?

And wouldn’t he be helping his people? Every dime taken from Krane Chemical and deposited somewhere in Bowmore was a victory. He poured a fourth drink, swore it was the last, and decided

that, yes, damn it, he would hold hands with Sterling and his gang of class action thieves and strike a mighty blow for justice.

Two days later, a subcontractor Clyde had represented in at least three divorces arrived early with a crew of carpenters, painters, and gofers, all desperate for work, and began a quick renovation of the office next door.

Twice a month Clyde played poker with the owner of the *Bowmore News*, the county's only paper. Like the town itself, the weekly was declining and trying to hang on. In its next edition, the front page was dominated by news about the verdict over in Hattiesburg, but there was also a generous story about Lawyer Hardin's association with a major national law firm from Philadelphia. Inside was a full-page ad that practically begged every citizen of Cary County to drop by the new "diagnostic facility" on Main Street for screening that was absolutely free.

Clyde enjoyed the crowd and the attention and was already counting his money.

It was 4:00 a.m., cold and dark with a threat of rain, when Buck Burleson parked his truck in the small employees' lot at the Hattiesburg pumping station. He collected his thermos of coffee, a cold biscuit with ham, and a 9-millimeter automatic pistol and carried it all to an eighteen-wheel rig with unmarked doors and a ten-thousand-gallon tanker as its payload. He started the engine and checked the gauges, tires, and fuel.

The night supervisor heard the diesel and walked out of the second-floor monitoring room. "Hello, Buck," he called down.

"Mornin', Jake," Buck said with a nod. "She loaded?"

"Ready to go."

That part of the conversation had not changed in five years. There was usually an exchange about the weather, then a farewell. But on this morning, Jake decided to add a wrinkle to their dialogue, one

he'd been contemplating for a few days. "Those folks any happier over in Bowmore?"

"Damned if I know. I don't hang around."

And that was it. Buck opened the driver's door, gave his usual "See you later," and closed himself inside. Jake watched the tanker ease along the drive, turn left at the street, and finally disappear, the only vehicle moving at that lonesome hour.

On the highway, Buck carefully poured coffee from the thermos into its plastic screw-on cup. He glanced at his pistol on the passenger's seat. He decided to wait on the biscuit. When he saw the sign announcing Cary County, he glanced at his gun again.

He made the trip three times a day, four days a week. Another driver handled the other three days. They swapped up frequently to cover vacations and holidays. It was not the career Buck had envisioned. For seventeen years he'd been a foreman at Krane Chemical in Bowmore, earning three times what they now paid him to haul water to his old town.

It was ironic that one of the men who'd done so much to pollute Bowmore's water now hauled in fresh supplies of it. But irony was lost on Buck. He was bitter at the company for fleeing and taking his job with it. And he hated Bowmore because Bowmore hated him.

Buck was a liar. This had been proven several times, but never in a more spectacular fashion than during a brutal cross-examination a month earlier. Mary Grace Payton had gently fed him enough rope, then watched him hang himself in front of the jury.

For years, Buck and most of the supervisors at Krane had flatly denied any chemical dumping whatsoever. They were ordered to do so by their bosses. They denied it in company memos. They denied it when talking to company lawyers. They denied it in affidavits. And they certainly denied it when the plant was investigated by the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Attorney's Office. Then the litigation began. After denying it for so long and so fervently, how could they suddenly flip their stories and tell the truth? Krane, after fiercely promoting the lying for so long, vanished. It escaped one weekend and found a new home in Mexico.

No doubt some tortilla-eating jackass down there was doing Buck's job for \$5 a day. He swore as he sipped his coffee.

A few of the managers came clean and told the truth. Most clung to their lies. It didn't matter, really, because they all looked like fools at trial, at least those who testified. Some tried to hide. Earl Crouch, perhaps the biggest liar of all, had been relocated to a Krane plant near Galveston. There was a rumor that he had disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Buck again glanced at the 9-millimeter.

So far, he had received only one threatening phone call. He wasn't sure about the other managers. All had left Bowmore, and they did not keep in touch.

Mary Grace Payton. If he'd had the pistol during his cross-examination, he might have shot her, her husband, and a few of the lawyers for Krane, and he would have saved one bullet for himself. For four devastating hours, she had exposed one lie after another. Some of the lies were safe, he'd been told. Some were hidden away in memos and affidavits that Krane kept buried. But Ms. Payton had all the memos and all the affidavits and much more.

When the ordeal was almost over, when Buck was bleeding and the jury was furious and Judge Harrison was saying something about perjury, Buck almost snapped. He was exhausted, humiliated, half-delirious, and he almost jumped to his feet, looked at the jurors, and said, "You want the truth, I'll give it to you. We dumped so much shit into those ravines it's a wonder the whole town didn't explode. We dumped gallons every day—BCL and cartolynx and aklar, all class-1 carcinogens—hundreds of gallons of toxic stuff directly into the ground. We dumped it from vats and buckets and barrels and drums. We dumped it at night and in broad daylight. Oh sure, we stored a lot of it in sealed green drums and paid a fortune to a specialty firm to haul it away. Krane complied with the law. They kissed the EPA's ass. You've seen the paperwork, everything nice and proper. Real legal like. While the starched shirts in the front office were filling out forms, we were out back in the pits burying the poison. It was much easier and much cheaper to dump it. And you know what? Those same assholes up front knew exactly

what we were doing out back.” Here he would point a deadly finger at the Krane executives and their lawyers. “They covered it up! And they’re lying to you now. Everybody’s lying.”

Buck gave this speech out loud as he drove, though not every morning. It was oddly comforting to do so, to think about what he should have said instead of what he did. A piece of his soul and most of his manhood had been left behind in that courtroom. Lashing out in the privacy of his big truck was therapeutic.

Driving to Bowmore, however, was not. He was not from there and had never liked the town. When he lost his job, he had no choice but to leave.

As the highway became Main Street, he turned right and drove for four blocks. The distribution point had been given the nickname the “city tank.” It was directly below the old water tower, an unused and decayed relic whose metal panels had been eaten from the inside by the city’s water. A large aluminum reservoir now served the town. Buck pulled his tanker onto an elevated platform, killed the engine, stuffed the pistol into his pocket, and got out of the truck. He went about his business of unloading his cargo into the reservoir, a discharge that took thirty minutes.

From the reservoir, the water would go to the town’s schools, businesses, and churches, and though it was safe enough to drink in Hattiesburg, it was still greatly feared in Bowmore. The pipes that carried it along were, for the most part, the same pipes that had supplied the old water.

Throughout the day, a constant stream of traffic arrived at the reservoir. The people pulled out all manner of plastic jugs and metal cans and small drums, filled them, then took them home.

Those who could afford to contracted with private suppliers. Water was a daily challenge in Bowmore.

It was still dark as Buck waited for his tank to empty. He sat in the cab with the heater on, door locked, pistol close by. There were two families in Pine Grove that he thought about each morning as he waited. Tough families, with men who’d served time. Big families with uncles and cousins. Each had lost a kid to leukemia. Each was now suing.

And Buck was a well-known liar.

Eight days before Christmas, the combatants gathered for the last time in Judge Harrison's courtroom. The hearing was to wrap up all loose ends, and especially to argue the post-trial motions.

Jared Kurtin looked fit and tanned after two weeks of golf in Mexico. He greeted Wes warmly and even managed to smile at Mary Grace. She ignored him by talking to Jeannette, who still looked gaunt and worried but at least wasn't crying.

Kurtin's pack of subordinates shuffled papers at hundreds of dollars an hour each, while Frank Sully, the local counsel, watched them smugly. It was all for show. Harrison wasn't about to grant any relief to Krane Chemical, and everybody knew it.

Others were watching. Huffy held his usual spot, curious as always, still worried about the loan and his future. There were several reporters, and even a courtroom artist, the same one who'd covered the trial and sketched faces that no one could recognize. Several plaintiffs' lawyers were there to observe and to monitor the progress of the case. They were dreaming of a massive settlement that would allow them to become rich while avoiding the type of brutal trial the Paytons had just endured.

Judge Harrison called things to order and charged ahead. "So nice to see everyone again," he said drily. "There are a total of fourteen motions that have been filed—twelve by the defense, two by the plaintiff—and we are going to dispose of all of them before noon." He glared at Jared Kurtin, as if daring him to utter one superfluous word.

He continued: "I've read all the motions and all the briefs, so please don't tell me anything that you've already put in writing. Mr. Kurtin, you may proceed."

The first motion was for a new trial. Kurtin quickly went through all the reasons his client got screwed, beginning with a couple of jurors he wanted to bounce, but Harrison refused. Kurtin's team had

conjured up a total of twenty-two errors they deemed grave enough to complain about, but Harrison felt otherwise. After listening to the lawyers argue for an hour, the judge ruled against the motion for a new trial.

Jared Kurtin would have been shocked at any other ruling. These were routine matters now, the battle had been lost, but not the war.

The other motions followed. After a few minutes of uninspired argument on each one, Judge Harrison said, "Overruled."

When the lawyers finished talking, and as papers were being gathered and briefcases were being closed, Jared Kurtin addressed the court and said, "Your Honor, it's been a pleasure. I'm sure we'll do the whole thing over in about three years."

"Court's adjourned," His Honor said rudely, then rapped his gavel loudly.

Two days after Christmas, late on a raw, windy afternoon, Jeannette Baker walked from her trailer through Pine Grove to the church and to the cemetery behind it. She kissed the small headstone at Chad's grave, then sat down and leaned against her husband Pete's. This was the day he died, five years earlier.

In five years she had learned to dwell on the good memories, though she couldn't get rid of the bad ones. Pete, a big man, down to 120 pounds, unable to eat, finally unable to force water through the tumors in his throat and esophagus. Pete, thirty years old and as gaunt and pale as a dying man twice that age. Pete, the tough guy, crying at the unrelenting pain and begging her for more morphine. Pete, the big talker and spinner of big tales, unable to emit anything but a pitiful groan. Pete, begging her to help him end it all.

Chad's final days had been relatively calm. Pete's had been horrific. She had seen so much.

Enough of the bad memories. She was there to talk about their life together, their romance, their first apartment in Hattiesburg, the birth of Chad, the plans for more children and a larger house, and

all the dreams they once laughed about. Little Chad with a fishing pole and an impressive string of bream from her uncle's pond. Little Chad in his first T-ball uniform with Coach Pete by his side. Christmas and Thanksgiving, a vacation at Disney World when they were both sick and dying.

She stayed until after dark, as she always did.

Denny Ott watched her from the kitchen window of the parsonage. The little cemetery he maintained so carefully was getting more than its share of traffic these days.

CHAPTER 10

The New Year began with another funeral. Miss Inez Perdue died after a lengthy and painful deterioration of her kidneys. She was sixty-one years old, a widow, with two adult children who'd luckily left Bowmore as soon as they were old enough. Uninsured, she died in her small home on the outskirts of town, surrounded by friends and her pastor, Denny Ott. After he left her, Pastor Ott went to the cemetery behind the Pine Grove Church and, with the help of another deacon, began digging her grave, number seventeen.

As soon as the crowd thinned, the body of Miss Inez was loaded into an ambulance and taken directly to the morgue at the Forrest County Medical Center in Hattiesburg. There, a doctor hired by the Payton law firm spent three hours removing tissue and blood and conducting an autopsy. Miss Inez had agreed to this somber procedure when she signed a contract with the Paytons a year earlier. A probe of her organs and an examination of her tissue might produce evidence that one day would be crucial in court.

Eight hours after her death, she was back in Bowmore, in a cheap casket tucked away for the night in the sanctuary of the Pine Grove Church.

Pastor Ott had long since convinced his flock that once the body is dead and the spirit ascends into heaven, the earthly rituals are silly and of little significance. Funerals, wakes, embalming, flowers, expensive caskets—all were a waste of time and money. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. God sent us into the world naked and that's how we should leave.

The following day he conducted Miss Inez's service before a full house that included Wes and Mary Grace, as well as a couple of other lawyers looking on with curiosity. During these services, and he was certainly becoming accomplished, Pastor Ott strove to make the occasion uplifting, at times even humorous. Miss Inez was the

backup piano player for the church, and though she played with heavy hands and great enthusiasm, she usually missed about half the notes. And since she was practically deaf, she had no idea how bad she sounded. Recollections of her performances lightened the mood.

It would be easy to bash Krane Chemical and its multitude of sins, but Pastor Ott never mentioned the company. She was dead and nothing could change that. Everybody knew who killed her.

After a one-hour service, the pallbearers lifted her wooden casket onto Mr. Earl Mangram's authentic buckboard, the only one left in the county. Mr. Mangram had been an early victim of Krane, burial number three in Denny Ott's career, and he specifically requested that his casket be hauled away from the church and to the cemetery on his grandfather's buckboard with his ancient mare, Blaze, under tack. The short procession had been such a hit that it became an instant tradition at Pine Grove.

When Miss Inez's casket was placed on the carriage, Pastor Ott, standing next to Blaze, pulled her bridle and the old quarter horse began lumbering along, leading the little parade away from the front of the church, down the side road, and back to the cemetery.

Holding fast to the southern tradition, her farewell was followed by a potluck get-together in the fellowship hall. For a people so accustomed to dying, the post-burial meal allowed the mourners to lean on one another and share their tears. Pastor Ott made the rounds, chatting with everyone, praying with some.

The great question at these dark moments was, who was next? In many ways, they felt like prisoners. Isolated, suffering, not sure which one would be chosen by the executioner. Rory Walker was a fourteen-year-old who was losing ground fast in his decadelong battle with leukemia. He was probably next. He was at school and missed the Perdue service, but his mother and grandmother were there.

The Paytons huddled in a corner with Jeannette Baker and talked about everything but the case. Over paper plates sparsely covered with a broccoli-and-cheese casserole, they learned that she was now working as a night clerk in a convenience store and had her eye on a nicer trailer. She and Bette were fighting. Bette had a new boyfriend who slept over often and seemed much too interested in Jeannette's legal situation.

Jeannette looked stronger and her mind was sharper. She had gained a few pounds and said she was no longer taking all those antidepressants. People were treating her differently. She explained in a very low voice as she watched the others: "For a while these people were really proud. We struck back. We won. Finally, somebody on the outside had listened to us, all these poor little people in this poor little town. Everybody circled around me and said sweet things. They cooked for me, cleaned the trailer, somebody was always stopping by. Anything for poor little Jeannette. But as the days went by, I started hearing the money talk. How long will the appeal take? When will the money come in? What was I planning to do with it? And on and on. Bette's younger brother stayed over one night, drank too much, and tried to borrow a thousand dollars. We got into a fight and he said everybody in town knew that I'd already received some of the money. I was shocked. People were talking. All kinds of rumors. Twenty million this and twenty million that. How much will I give away? What kind of new car am I going to get? Where will I build my big new house? They watch everything I buy now, which isn't much. And the men—every tomcat in four counties is calling, wanting to stop by and say hello or take me to the movies. I know for a fact that two of them are not even divorced yet. Bette knows their cousins. I couldn't care less about men."

Wes glanced away.

"Are you talking to Denny?" Mary Grace asked.

"Some. And he's wonderful. He tells me to keep praying for those who gossip about me. I pray for them all right. I really do. But I get the feeling that they're praying harder for me and the money." She looked around suspiciously.

Dessert was banana pudding. It was also an excuse to drift away from Jeannette. The Paytons had several other clients present, and each needed to be given some attention. When Pastor Ott and his wife began clearing the tables, the mourners finally headed for the door.

Wes and Mary Grace met with Denny in his study next to the sanctuary. It was time for the post-burial legal update. Who had fallen ill? What were the new diagnoses? Who in Pine Grove had hired another law firm?

“This Clyde Hardin thing is out of control,” Denny said. “They’re advertising on the radio and once a week in the paper, full page. They’re almost guaranteeing money. People are flocking in.”

Wes and Mary Grace had walked down Main Street prior to the service for Miss Inez. They wanted to see firsthand the new screening clinic next to F. Clyde’s office. On the sidewalk, there were two large coolers filled with bottled water and packed with ice. A teenager with a Bintz & Bintz T-shirt handed them a bottle each. The label read: “Pure Spring Water. Compliments of Bintz & Bintz, Attorneys.” There was a toll-free number.

“Where does the water come from?” Wes had asked the kid.

“Not from Bowmore,” came the quick retort.

As Mary Grace chatted up the boy, Wes stepped inside, where he joined three other potential clients who were waiting to get themselves screened. None gave any indication of being ill. Wes was greeted by a comely young lady of no more than eighteen, who handed him a brochure, a form on a clipboard, and a pen and instructed him to fill out both front and back. The brochure was professionally done and gave the basics of the allegations against Krane Chemical, a company now “proven in court” to have contaminated the drinking water of Bowmore and Cary County. All inquiries were directed to the firm of Bintz & Bintz in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The questions on the form were all background and

medical, except for the last two: (1) Who referred you to this office? and (2) Do you know anyone else who might be a potential victim of Krane Chemical? If so, list names and phone numbers. As Wes was scribbling on the form, the doctor entered the waiting room from somewhere in the rear and called for the next patient. He wore a white physician's office jacket, complete with a stethoscope around his neck. He was either Indian or Pakistani and looked no older than thirty.

After a few minutes inside, Wes excused himself and left.

"It's small-time stuff," Wes said to Denny. "They'll sign up a few hundred cases, most of them frivolous. Then they'll file a class action in federal court. If they're lucky, it'll be settled years from now for a few thousand bucks each. The lawyers will skim off some nice fees. But there's a better chance that Krane will never settle, and if that happens, then all those new clients get nothing and Clyde Hardin will be forced to go back to drafting deeds."

"How many from your church have signed up?" Mary Grace asked.

"I don't know. They don't tell me everything."

"We're not worried about it," Wes said. "Frankly, we have enough of these cases to keep us busy for a long time."

"Did I see a couple of spies at the service today?" Mary Grace asked.

"Yes. One was a lawyer named Crandell, from Jackson. He's been hanging around since the trial. He's actually stopped by here to say hello. Just a hustler."

"I've heard of him," Wes said. "Has he hooked any cases?"

"Not from this church."

They discussed the lawyers for a while, then had their usual conversation about Jeannette and the new pressures she was facing. Ott was spending time with her and was confident she was listening to him.

After an hour they wrapped up their meeting. The Paytons drove back to Hattiesburg, another client in the ground, another injury case now converted into a wrongful-death suit.

The preliminary paperwork arrived at the Mississippi Supreme Court in the first week of January. The trial transcript, 16,200 pages, was finalized by the court reporters, and copies were sent to the clerk of the court and to the lawyers. An order was entered giving Krane Chemical, the appellant, ninety days to file its brief. Sixty days after that, the Paytons would file their rebuttal.

In Atlanta, Jared Kurtin passed the file to the firm's appellate unit, the "eggheads," as they were known, brilliant legal scholars who functioned poorly in normal circles and were best kept in the library. Two partners, four associates, and four paralegals were already hard at work on the appeal when the massive transcript arrived and they had their first look at every word that was recorded at trial. They would dissect it and find dozens of reasons for a reversal.

In a lesser section of Hattiesburg, the transcript was plopped on the plywood table in The Pit. Mary Grace and Sherman gawked at it in disbelief, almost afraid to touch it. Mary Grace had once tried a case that went on for ten full days. Its transcript had been twelve hundred pages long, and she read it so many times that the sight of it made her ill. Now this.

If they had an advantage, it was because they had been in the courtroom throughout the entire trial and knew most of what was in the transcript. Indeed, Mary Grace appeared on more pages than any other participant.

But it would be read many times, and procrastination was not an option. The trial and its verdict would be cleverly and savagely attacked by Krane's lawyers. Jeannette Baker's lawyers had to match them argument for argument, word for word.

In the heady days after the verdict, the plan had been for Mary Grace to concentrate on the Bowmore cases while Wes worked the other files to generate income. The publicity had been priceless; the phones rang incessantly. Every nutcase in the Southeast suddenly needed the Paytons. Lawyers mired in hopeless lawsuits called for help. Family members who'd lost loved ones to cancer saw the verdict as a hopeful sign. And the usual assortment of criminal defendants, divorcing spouses, battered women, bankrupt businesses, slip-and-fall hustlers, and fired employees called or even stopped by in pursuit of these famous lawyers. Very few could pay a decent fee.

Legitimate personal injury cases, however, had proven scarce. The "Big One," the perfect case with clear liability and a defendant with deep pockets, the case upon which retirement dreams often rest, had not yet found its way to the Payton law firm. There were a few more car wrecks and workers' compensation cases, but nothing worth a trial.

Wes worked feverishly to close as many files as possible, and with some success. The rent was now current, at least at the office. All past-due wages had been paid. Huffy and the bank were still on edge but afraid to push harder. No payments had been made, either on principal or on interest.

CHAPTER 11

They settled on a man named Ron Fisk, a lawyer unknown outside of his small town of Brookhaven, Mississippi, an hour south of Jackson, two hours west of Hattiesburg, and fifty miles north of the Louisiana state line. He was selected from a pool of similar résumés, though none of those considered had the slightest hint that their names and backgrounds were being so carefully evaluated. Young white male, one marriage, three children, reasonably handsome, reasonably well dressed, conservative, devout Baptist, Ole Miss law school, no ethical glitches in the law career, not a hint of criminal trouble beyond a speeding ticket, no affiliation with any trial lawyer group, no controversial cases, no experience whatsoever on the bench.

There was no reason anyone outside of Brookhaven would ever have heard the name of Ron Fisk, and that was exactly what made him their ideal candidate. They picked Fisk because he was just old enough to cross their low threshold of legal experience, but still young enough to have ambitions.

He was thirty-nine years old, a junior partner in a five-man firm that specialized in defending lawsuits involving car wrecks, arson, injured workers, and a myriad of other routine liability claims. The firm's clients were insurance companies who paid by the hour, thus allowing the five partners to earn comfortable but not lucrative salaries. As a junior partner, Fisk made \$92,000 the year before. A far cry from Wall Street but not bad money in small-town Mississippi.

A supreme court justice was currently earning \$110,000.

Fisk's wife, Doreen, earned \$41,000 as the assistant director of a privately owned mental health clinic. Everything was mortgaged—home, both cars, even some furniture. But the Fisks had a perfect credit rating. They vacationed once a year with their children in

Florida, where they rented a condo in a high-rise for a thousand bucks a week. There were no trust funds and nothing significant to be expected from their parents' estates.

The Fisks were squeaky-clean. There was nothing to dig up in the heat of a nasty campaign. Absolutely nothing, they were certain of that.

Tony Zachary entered the building at five minutes before 2:00 p.m. and stated his business. "I have an appointment with Mr. Fisk," he said politely, and a secretary disappeared. As he waited, he examined the place. Sagging bookshelves laden with dusty tomes. Worn carpet. The musty smell of a fine old building in need of some work. A door opened, and a handsome young man stuck out a hand. "Mr. Zachary, Ron Fisk," he said warmly, as he probably did to all new clients.

"A pleasure."

"This is my office," Fisk said, sweeping his hand at the door. They walked through it, closed it, then settled around a large busy desk. Zachary declined coffee, water, a soda. "I'm fine, thanks," he said.

Fisk had his sleeves rolled up and his tie loosened, as if he'd been performing manual labor. Zachary liked the image immediately. Nice teeth, just a touch of gray above the ears, strong chin. This guy was definitely marketable.

They played Who-do-you-know? for a few minutes, with Zachary claiming to be a longtime resident of Jackson, where he'd spent most of his career in government relations, whatever that meant. Since he knew that Fisk had no history of political involvement, he had little fear of being exposed. In truth, he'd lived in Jackson less than three years and until very recently had worked as a lobbyist for an association of asphalt contractors. There was a state senator from Brookhaven they both knew, and they chatted about him for a few minutes, anything to pass the time.

When things were comfortable, Zachary said, "Let me apologize, I'm really not a new client. I'm here on some much more important business."

Fisk frowned and nodded. Keep talking, sir.

"Have you ever heard of a group called Judicial Vision?"

"No."

Few people had. In the murky world of lobbying and consulting, Judicial Vision was a newcomer.

Zachary moved on. "I'm the executive director for the state of Mississippi. It's a national group. Our sole purpose is to elect quality people to the appellate courts. By quality, I mean conservative, business oriented, temperate, highly moral, intelligent, and ambitious young judges who can literally, Mr. Fisk, and this is the core of what we believe, change the judicial landscape of this country. And if we can do that, then we can protect the rights of the unborn, restrict the cultural garbage that is consumed by our children, honor the sanctity of marriage, keep homosexuals out of our classrooms, fight off the gun-control advocates, seal our borders, and protect the true American way of life."

Both took a deep breath.

Fisk wasn't sure where he fit into this raging war, but his pulse was definitely up ten beats per minute. "Yes, well, sounds like an interesting group," he said.

"We're committed," Zachary said firmly. "And we're also determined to bring sanity back to our civil litigation system. Runaway verdicts and hungry trial lawyers are robbing us of economic advancement. We're scaring companies away from Mississippi, not attracting them."

"There's no doubt about that," Fisk said, and Zachary wanted to shout for joy.

"You see all the frivolous stuff they file. We work hand in hand with the national tort-reform groups."

"That's good. And why are you in Brookhaven?"

"Are you politically ambitious, Mr. Fisk? Ever thought about tossing your hat in the ring for elective office?"

"Not really."

“Well, we’ve done our research, and we think you’d be an excellent candidate for the supreme court.”

Fisk instinctively laughed at such foolishness, but it was the sort of nervous laugh that leads you to believe that whatever is supposed to be humorous is really not. It’s serious. It can be pursued.

“Research?” he said.

“Oh yes. We spend a lot of time looking for candidates who (a) we like and (b) can win. We study the opponents, the races, the demographics, the politics, everything, really. Our data bank is unmatched, as is our ability to generate serious funds. Care to hear more?”

Fisk kicked back in his reclining rocker, put his feet on his desk and his hands behind his head, and said, “Sure. Tell me why you’re here.”

“I’m here to recruit you to run against Justice Sheila McCarthy this November in the southern district of Mississippi,” he announced confidently. “She is very beatable. We don’t like her or her record. We have analyzed every decision she’s made in her nine years on the bench, and we think she’s a raging liberal who manages to hide her true colors, most of the time. Do you know her?”

Fisk was almost afraid to say yes. “We met once, just in passing. I don’t really know her.”

Actually, according to their research, Justice McCarthy had participated in three rulings in cases involving Ron Fisk’s law firm, and each time she had ruled the other way. Fisk had argued one of the cases, a hotly disputed arson mess involving a warehouse. His client lost on a 5-to-4 vote. It was quite likely that he had little use for Mississippi’s only female justice.

“She is very vulnerable,” Zachary said.

“What makes you think I can beat her?”

“Because you are a clean-cut conservative who believes in family values. Because of our expertise in running blitzkrieg campaigns. Because we have the money.”

“We do?”

“Oh yes. Unlimited. We partner with some powerful people, Mr. Fisk.”

“Please call me Ron.”

It’ll be Ronny Boy before you know it. “Yes, Ron, we coordinate the fund-raising with groups that represent banks, insurance companies, energy companies, big business, I’m talking serious cash here, Ron. Then we expand the umbrella to include the groups that are dearest to us—the conservative Christian folks, who, by the way, can produce huge sums of money in the heat of a campaign. Plus, they turn out the vote.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It’s never easy, Ron, but we seldom lose. We’ve honed our skills in a dozen or so races around the country, and we’re making a habit of pulling off victories that surprise a lot of people.”

“I’ve never sat on the bench.”

“We know that, and that’s why we like you. Sitting judges make tough decisions. Tough decisions are sometimes controversial. They leave trails, records that opponents can use against them. The best candidates, we have learned, are bright young guys like yourself who don’t carry the baggage of prior decisions.”

Inexperience had never sounded so good.

There was a long pause as Fisk tried to gather his thoughts. Zachary stood and walked to the Wall of Respect, this one covered in diplomas, Rotary Club citations, golfing photos, and lots of candid shots of the family. Lovely wife Doreen. Ten-year-old Josh in a baseball uniform. Seven-year-old Zeke with a fish almost as big as himself. Five-year-old Clarissa dressed for soccer. “Beautiful family,” Zachary said, as if he knew nothing about them.

“Thanks,” Fisk said, truly beaming.

“Gorgeous kids.”

“Good genes from their mother.”

“First wife?” Zachary asked, offhanded and innocent.

“Oh yes. Met her in college.”

Zachary knew that, and much more. He returned to his seat and resumed his position.

“I haven’t checked recently,” Fisk said, somewhat awkwardly, “but what does the job pay now?”

“One ten,” Tony said and suppressed a smile. He was making more progress than he realized.

Fisk grimaced slightly as if he couldn’t afford such a drastic cut in pay. His mind was racing, though, dizzy with the possibilities. “So you’re recruiting candidates for the supreme court,” he said, almost in a daze.

“Not for every seat. We have some good judges here, and we’ll support them if they draw opponents. But McCarthy has got to go. She is a feminist who’s soft on crime. We’re going to take her out. I hope it’s with you.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then we’ll go to the next name on our list. You’re number one.”

Fisk shook his head, bewildered. “I don’t know,” he said. “It would be hard to leave my firm.”

But at least he was thinking about leaving the firm. The bait was in the water, and the fish was watching it. Zachary nodded in agreement. Completely sympathetic. The firm was a collection of worn-out paper pushers who spent their time deposing drunk drivers and settling fender benders the day before trial. For fourteen years, Fisk had been doing the same thing over and over. Each file was the same.

They took a booth in a pastry shop and ordered ice cream sundaes. “What is a blitzkrieg campaign?” Fisk asked. They were alone. All other booths were empty.

“It’s basically an ambush,” Zachary replied, warming up to his favorite subject. “Right now Judge McCarthy has no idea she has an opponent. She’s thinking, hoping, actually confident, that no one will challenge her. She has six thousand bucks in her campaign account, and she won’t raise another dime if she doesn’t have to. Let’s say you decide to run. The qualifying deadline is four months away, and we’ll wait until the last minute to announce your candidacy. However, we get busy right now. We put your team

together. We get the money in the bank. We print all the yard signs, bumper stickers, brochures, direct mail materials. We cut your television ads, hire the consultants, pollsters, and the like. When you announce, we flood the district with direct mail. The first wave is the friendly stuff—you, your family, your minister, Rotary Club, Boy Scouts. The second wave is a hard but honest look at her record. You start campaigning like a madman. Ten speeches a day, every day, all over the district. We'll buzz you around in private planes. She won't know where to begin. She will be overwhelmed from the first day. On June 30, you'll report a million bucks in your campaign fund. She won't have ten thousand. The trial lawyers will scramble and raise some money for her, but it'll be a drop in the bucket. After Labor Day, we start hitting hard with television ads. She's soft on crime. Soft on gays. Soft on guns. Against the death penalty. She'll never recover."

The sundaes arrived and they began eating. "How much will this cost?" Fisk asked.

"Three million bucks."

"Three million bucks! For a supreme court race?"

"Only if you want to win."

"And you can raise that much money?"

"Judicial Vision already has the commitments. And if we need more, we'll get more."

Ron took a mouthful of ice cream and, for the first time, asked himself why an organization was willing to spend a fortune to unseat a supreme court justice who had little impact on the social issues of the day. The Mississippi courts rarely were drawn into cases involving abortion, gay rights, guns, immigration. They dealt with the death penalty all the time, but were never expected to abolish it. The weightier matters were always in federal court.

Perhaps the social issues were important, but something else was at work here. "This is about liability, isn't it?" Fisk asked.

"It's a package, Ron, with several elements. But, yes, limiting liability is a huge priority of our organization and its affiliated groups. We're going to find a horse for this race—hope it's you, but if not, then we'll go to the next guy—and when we find our man, we

will expect a firm commitment to limit liability in civil litigation. The trial lawyers must be stopped.”

Doreen brewed decaf coffee late that night. The kids were asleep, but the adults definitely were not. Nor would they be anytime soon. Ron had called her from the office after Mr. Zachary left, and since then they had thought of nothing but the supreme court.

Issue number one: They had three young children. Jackson, home of the supreme court, was an hour away, and the family was not leaving Brookhaven. Ron thought he would need to spend only two nights a week in Jackson, at most. He could commute; it was an easy drive. And he could work from home. Secretly, to him, the idea of getting away from Brookhaven for a couple of nights each week was not altogether unappealing. Secretly, to her, the idea of having the house to herself occasionally was refreshing.

Issue number two: The campaign. How could he play politics for the rest of the year while continuing to practice law? His firm would be supportive, he thought, but it would not be easy. But then, nothing worthwhile is without sacrifice.

Issue number three: Money, though this was not a significant concern. The increase in pay was obvious. His net from the law firm's profits rose slightly each year, but no big bonuses were likely. Judicial salaries in Mississippi were increased periodically by the legislature. Plus, the state had a better retirement plan and health coverage.

Issue number four: His career. After fourteen years of doing the same thing, with no break in sight, he found the idea of a sudden career change exhilarating. The mere thought of leaving the ranks of thousands to become only one of nine was thrilling. Jumping from the county courthouse to the pinnacle of the state's legal system in one boisterous somersault was so exciting that it made him laugh. Doreen was not laughing, though she was very amused and engaged.

Issue number five: Failure. What if he lost? In a landslide? Would they be humiliated? This was a humbling thought, but he kept repeating what Tony Zachary had said. "Three million bucks will win the race, and we'll get the money."

Which brought up the rather large issue of who exactly was Tony Zachary, and could they believe him? Ron had spent an hour online tracking down Judicial Vision and Mr. Zachary. Everything looked legitimate. He called a friend from law school, a career man with the attorney general's office in Jackson, and, without revealing his motives, nibbled around the edges of Judicial Vision. The friend had heard of them, he thought, but didn't know much about them. And besides, he dealt with offshore oil rights and stayed away from politics.

Ron had called the Judicial Vision office in Jackson and was routed through a maze back to Mr. Zachary's secretary, who informed him that her boss was traveling in south Mississippi. After she hung up, she called Tony and reported the contact.

The Fisks met Tony for lunch the following day at the Dixie Springs Café, a small restaurant near a lake ten miles south of Brookhaven, far away from potential eavesdroppers in the town's restaurants.

For the occasion, Zachary adopted a slightly different posture. Today he was the man with other options. Here's the deal—take it or leave it because my list is long and I have other young white Protestant male lawyers to talk to. He was gentle and perfectly charming, especially to Doreen, who began the lunch with suspicion but was soon won over.

At some point during the sleepless night, both Mr. and Mrs. Fisk had independently arrived at the same conclusion. Life would be much fuller, much richer in their little town if Lawyer Fisk became Justice Fisk. Their status would be elevated magnificently. No one could touch them, and while they didn't seek power or notoriety, the allure was irresistible.

“What’s your principal concern?” Tony asked after fifteen minutes of worthless chatter.

“Well, it’s January,” Ron began. “And for the next eleven months I will do little else but plan and execute the campaign. Naturally, I’m worried about my law practice.”

“Here’s one solution,” Tony said without hesitation. He had solutions for everything. “Judicial Vision is a well-coordinated and concerted effort. We have lots of friends and supporters. We can arrange for some legal work to be shifted to your firm. Timber, energy, natural gas, big clients with interests in this part of the state. Your firm might want to add a lawyer or two to handle things while you’re busy elsewhere, but that should ease the strain. If you choose to run, you will not suffer financially. Quite the opposite.”

The Fisks couldn’t help but look at each other. Tony buttered a saltine and took a large bite.

“Legitimate clients?” Doreen asked, then wished she’d kept her mouth shut.

Tony frowned as he chewed, then when he could speak he said, rather sternly, “Everything we do, Doreen, is legitimate. We are completely ethical to begin with—our ultimate mission is to clean up the court, not trash it. And everything we do will be scrutinized. This race will become heated and attract a lot of attention. We do not stumble.”

Chastised, she lifted her knife and went for a roll.

Tony continued: “No one can question legitimate legal work and fair fees paid by clients, whether big or small.”

“Of course,” Ron said. He was already thinking about the wonderful conversation with his partners as they anticipated this infusion of new business.

“I can’t see myself as a political wife,” Doreen said. “You know, out on the campaign trail giving speeches. I’ve never even thought about it.”

Tony smiled and exuded charm. He even offered a quick laugh. “You can do as much or as little as you like. With three young children, I would guess that you’ll be pretty busy on the home front.”

Over catfish and hush puppies, they agreed to meet again in a few days when Tony was passing through. They would have another lunch, and a final decision would be made. November was far away, but there was so much work to do.

CHAPTER 12

She once laughed at herself when she went through the dreaded ritual of crawling onto her stationary bike at dawn and pedaling away, going nowhere as the sun crept up and lightened her little gym. For a woman whose public veneer was a somber face behind an intimidating black robe, she was amused at what people would think if they could see her on the bike, in old sweats, hair a mess, eyes swollen, face unadorned with cosmetics. But that was a long time ago. Now she just went through the routine with little thought of how she looked or what anyone might think. Of particular concern now was the fact that she had gained five pounds over the holidays, eleven since her divorce. The gaining had to be stopped before the losing could commence. At fifty-one, the pounds were clinging now, refusing to burn away as quickly as when she was younger.

Sheila McCarthy was not a morning person. She hated mornings, hated getting out of bed before her sleep was finished, hated the cheery voices on television, hated the traffic on the way to the office. She didn't eat breakfast, because she hated breakfast food. She hated coffee. She had always secretly loathed those who reveled in their early morning exploits—the joggers, yoga nuts, workaholics, hyperactive soccer moms. As a young circuit court judge in Biloxi, she had often scheduled trials for 10:00 a.m., a scandalous hour. But it was her court and she made the rules.

Now she was one of nine, and the tribunal on which she served clung desperately to its traditions. On certain days she could roll in at noon and work until midnight, her preferred schedule, but most of the time she was expected by 9:00 a.m.

She was sweating after one mile. Eighty-four calories burned. Less than a cup of Häagen-Dazs chocolate chip mint, her most serious temptation. A television hung from a rack above the bike, and she

watched and listened as the locals gushed over the latest car wrecks and murders. Then the weatherman was back for the third time in twelve minutes, clucking on about snow in the Rockies because there wasn't a single cloud at home to analyze.

After two miles, and down 161 calories, Sheila stopped for water and a towel, then crawled onto the treadmill for more work. She switched to CNN for a quick review of the national gossip. When she had burned 250 calories, Sheila quit and went to the shower. An hour later, she left her two-story condo on the reservoir, got into her bright red BMW convertible sports car, and headed to work.

The Mississippi Supreme Court is divided into three neat districts—northern, central, and southern—with three justices elected from each. A term is eight years, with no limit. Judicial elections take place in the off years, those quiet ones in which there are no races for local, legislative, or other statewide positions. Once obtained, a seat on the court lasts for a long time, usually until death or voluntary retirement.

The elections are nonpartisan, with all candidates running as independents. Campaign finance laws limit contributions from individuals at \$5,000 each, and \$2,500 from organizations, including political action committees and corporations.

Sheila McCarthy was appointed to the bench nine years earlier by a friendly governor, following the death of her predecessor. She ran unopposed once and was certainly planning on another easy victory. There was not the faintest whiff of a rumor that someone out there had designs on her seat.

With nine years' experience, she outranked only three others, and was still considered by most members of the state bar to be a relative newcomer. Tracking her written opinions and her voting record baffled liberals and conservatives alike. She was a moderate, a consensus builder, neither a strict constructionist nor a judicial activist, but more or less a practical fence straddler who, some said,

decided the best outcome first, then found enough law to support it. As such, she was an influential member of the court. She could broker a deal between the hard right-wingers, of which there were always automatically four in number, and the liberals, of which there were two on most days and none on others. Four on the right and two on the left meant Sheila had two comrades in the center, though this simplistic analysis had burned many a lawyer trying to predict an outcome. Most cases on the docket defied categorization. Where's the liberal or conservative side in a big messy divorce, or a boundary line dispute between two timber companies? Many cases were decided 9–0.

The supreme court does its work in the Carroll Gartin Justice Building in downtown Jackson, across the street from the state capitol. Sheila parked in her reserved space underneath the building. She rode the elevator to the fourth floor alone and stepped into her suite at exactly 8:45. Paul, her chief clerk, a strikingly handsome twenty-eight-year-old single straight male of whom she was extremely fond, walked into her office seconds after she did.

“Good morning,” Paul said. He had long dark curly hair and a small diamond in his ear, and he somehow managed to maintain a perfect growth of three days' worth of stubble. Hazel eyes. She often expected to see Paul modeling Armani suits in the fashion magazines stacked around her condo. Paul had more to do with her gym time than she cared to admit.

“Good morning,” she said coolly, as if she had barely noticed him.

“You have the *Sturdivant* hearing at nine.”

“I know that,” she said, glancing at his rear end as he walked across her office. Faded jeans. The ass of a model.

He walked out, her eyes following every step.

Her secretary took his place. She locked the door and pulled out a small makeup kit, and when Justice McCarthy was ready, the touch-up was done quickly. The hair—short, almost above the ear, half sandy blond and half gray, and now carefully colored twice a month at \$400 a pop—was fussed into place, then sprayed.

“What are my chances with Paul?” Sheila asked with her eyes closed.

“A bit young, don’t you think?”

The secretary was older than her boss and had been doing the touch-ups for almost nine years. She kept powdering.

“Of course he’s young. That’s the point.”

“I don’t know. I hear he’s awfully busy with that redhead in Albritton’s office.”

Sheila had heard the rumors, too. A gorgeous new clerk from Stanford was getting plenty of attention down the hall, and Paul usually had his pick.

“Have you read the *Sturdivant* briefs?” Sheila asked, standing as she prepared to be robed.

“Yes.” The secretary carefully draped the black robe over her shoulders. The zipper ran down the front. Both ladies tugged and fussed until the bulky garment was perfect.

“Who killed the cop?” Sheila asked, gently pulling the zipper.

“It wasn’t *Sturdivant*.”

“I agree.” She stepped before a full-length mirror, and both ladies inspected the presentation. “Can you tell I’ve gained weight?” Sheila asked.

“No.” Same answer to the same question.

“Well, I have. And that’s why I love these things. They can hide twenty pounds.”

“You love it for another reason, dear, and we both know it. You’re the only girl out there with eight boys, and none of them are as tough or as smart as you.”

“And sexy. Don’t forget sexy.”

The secretary laughed at the idea. “No competition, dear. Those old goats can only dream about sex.”

And they went off, out of the office, down the hall, where they met Paul again. He rattled off some key points in the *Sturdivant* case as they rode the elevator to the third floor, where the courtroom was located. One lawyer might argue this, and the other might possibly argue that. Here are some questions to trip both of them.

Three blocks away from where Justice McCarthy assumed her position on the bench, a group of rather intense men and (two) women gathered to discuss her demise. They met in a windowless conference room in a nondescript building, one of many clustered near the state capitol where countless civil servants and lobbyists ground out the work of running Mississippi.

The meeting was hosted by Tony Zachary and Judicial Vision. The guests were the directors of other like-minded “government relations” firms, some with vague names that deflected categorization—Freedom Network, Market Partnership, Commerce Council, Enterprise Advocacy. Other names got right to the point—Citizens Opposed to Lawsuit Tyranny (COLT), Fair Litigation Association, Jury Watch, Tort Reform Committee of Mississippi. And the old guard was there, the associations representing the interests of banks, insurance, oil, medicine, manufacturing, retail, commerce, trade, and the best of our American way of life.

In the murky world of legislative manipulation, where loyalties shift overnight and a friend can become an enemy by noon, the people in the room were known, at least to Tony Zachary, to be worthy of trust.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Tony began, standing with a half-eaten croissant on the plate before him, “the purpose of this meeting is to inform you that we will remove Sheila McCarthy from the supreme court in November and her replacement will be a young justice committed to economic growth and limited liability.”

There was light applause around the table. Everyone else was seated, all curious and listening. No one was certain who was behind Judicial Vision. Zachary had been around a few years and had a fair reputation, but he had no personal money. Nor did his group have much of a membership. Nor had he ever shown much interest in the civil justice system. His newfound passion for changing liability laws seemed to spring from nowhere.

But there was no doubt that Zachary and Judicial Vision were well funded. And in their game, that meant everything.

“We have the initial financing on the table, with more committed down the road,” he said proudly. “More, of course, will be needed from you. We have a campaign plan, a strategy, and we, Judicial Vision, will be running the show.”

More applause. The biggest obstacle was always coordination. There were so many groups, so many issues, so many egos. Raising the money was easy, from their side of the street anyway, but spending it wisely was often the challenge. The fact that Tony had, rather aggressively, assumed control was wonderful news. The rest of them were more than content to write the checks and turn out the voters.

“What about a candidate?” someone asked.

Tony smiled and said, “You’ll love him. Can’t give you his name right now, but you’ll love him. Made for television.” Ron Fisk had not yet said yes to the campaign, but Tony knew that he would. And if, for some reason, he did not, there were more names on the list. They would indeed have themselves a candidate, and soon, even if it took sackfuls of cash.

“Shall we talk money?” Tony asked, then plunged headlong into the issue before anyone could respond. “We have a million bucks on the table. I want to spend more than both candidates spent in the last contested race. That was two years ago, and I don’t need to remind you that your boy in that race came up short. My boy in this race will not lose. To guarantee this, I need two million from you and your members.”

Three million for such a race was a shock. In the last governor’s race, a race that covered all eighty-two counties and not just a third of them, the winner spent \$7 million and the loser spent half that. And a good governor’s race was always a major spectacle, the centerpiece of state politics. Passions were high, turnouts even higher.

A race for a seat on the supreme court, when one did occur, seldom drew more than a third of the registered voters.

“How do you plan to spend \$3 million?” someone asked. It was telling that the question was not about raising so much money. It was assumed they had access to pockets deep enough.

“Television, television, television,” Tony responded. This was partly true. Tony would never reveal his entire strategy. He and Mr. Rinehart planned to spend a lot more than three million, but many of their expenditures would be either in cash or carefully hidden out of state.

An assistant popped up and began passing around thick folders. “This is what we’ve done in other states,” Tony was saying. “Please take it with you and read it at your leisure.”

There were questions about his plan, and more about his candidate. Tony revealed little, but continually emphasized his need for their financial commitments, the sooner the better. The only blip in the meeting came when the director of COLT informed them that his group had been actively recruiting candidates to run against McCarthy and that he himself had a plan to take her out. COLT advertised eight thousand members, though that number was dubious. Most of its activists were ex-litigants who’d been burned in a lawsuit of some variety. The organization had credibility, but it did not have a million dollars. After a brief but tense flare-up, Tony invited the COLT guy to go run his own campaign, at which time he backed down quickly and rejoined ranks.

Before adjourning, Tony urged secrecy, a vital element of the campaign. “If the trial lawyers find out now that we have a horse in the race, they will crank up their fund-raising machine. They beat you the last time.”

They were irked by this second reference to “their” loss in the last race, as if they would’ve won if only they’d had Tony. But everyone let it pass. The mere mention of the trial lawyers immediately refocused their attention.

They were too excited about the race to bicker.

The class action claimed to include “over three hundred” victims injured in various ways by the gross negligence of Krane Chemical at its Bowmore plant. Only twenty were named as plaintiffs, and of

these twenty perhaps half had significant afflictions. Whether their ailments were linked to polluted groundwater would be a question for another day.

It was filed in Hattiesburg at the federal courthouse, a good stone's throw from the Forrest County Circuit Court building, where Dr. Leona Rocha and her jury had rendered its verdict barely two months earlier. Lawyers Sterling Bintz of Philadelphia and F. Clyde Hardin of Bowmore were on hand to do the filing, and also to chat with any reporters who'd responded to their prefiling press alert. Sadly, there were no television cameras, only a couple of green print reporters. At least for F. Clyde, though, it was an adventure. He hadn't been near a federal courthouse in over thirty years.

For Mr. Bintz, the pathetic lack of recognition was appalling. He had dreamed of huge headlines and long stories with splendid photographs. He had filed many important class actions and had usually managed to get them adequately covered by the media. What was wrong with the rural Mississippians?

F. Clyde hurried back to Bowmore, to his office, where Miriam was lingering to see how things went. "What channel?" she asked.

"None."

"What?" It was without a doubt the biggest day in the history of the firm of F. Clyde Hardin & Associates, and Miriam couldn't wait to watch it all on television.

"We decided not to deal with those reporters. Can't trust them," F. Clyde explained as he glanced at his watch. It was a quarter after five, past time for Miriam to leave the office. "No need to stick around," he said, flinging his jacket. "I've got things under control here."

She quickly left, disappointed, and F. Clyde went straight for the office bottle. The chilled, thick vodka soothed him immediately, and he began to replay his big day. With a bit of luck, the Hattiesburg paper would include his photo.

Bintz was claiming three hundred clients. At \$500 each, F. Clyde was due a nice referral fee. So far he'd been paid only \$3,500, most of which he used for back taxes.

He poured a second drink and said what the hell. Bintz wouldn't screw him, because he needed him. He, F. Clyde Hardin, was now an attorney of record in one of the most important class action cases in the country. All roads ran through Bowmore, and F. Clyde was the man.

CHAPTER 13

It was explained to his firm that Mr. Fisk would be in Jackson for the entire day, something to do with personal business. In other words, don't ask. As a partner he had earned the right to come and go as he pleased, though Fisk was so disciplined and organized that anyone in the firm could usually find him within five minutes.

He left Doreen on the front steps at dawn. She was invited to make the trip, but with a job and three kids it simply wasn't possible, not with such short notice. Ron left the house without breakfast, not that time was a factor. Tony Zachary had said, "We'll eat on the plane," and this was enough to entice Ron to skip his bran flakes.

The Brookhaven airstrip was too small for the jet, so Ron happily agreed to rush off to the airport in Jackson. He had never been within a hundred yards of a private jet, and had never given much thought to flying on one. Tony Zachary was waiting at the general aviation terminal with a hearty handshake and a vigorous "Good morning, Your Honor." They walked purposefully across the tarmac, past a few old turboprops and pistons—smaller, inferior vessels. Waiting in the distance was a magnificent carrier, as sleek and exotic as a spaceship. Its navigation lights were flickering. Its handsome stairway was extended down, a splendid invitation to its special passengers. Ron followed Tony up the steps to the landing, where a pretty flight attendant in a short skirt welcomed them aboard, took their jackets, and showed them their selection of seats.

"Ever been on a Gulfstream before?" Tony asked as they settled in. One of the pilots said hello as he pushed a button to retract the stairway.

"No," Ron said, gawking at the polished mahogany and soft leather and gold trimmings.

“This is a G5, the Mercedes of private jets. This one could take us to Paris, nonstop.”

Then let’s go to Paris instead of Washington, Ron thought as he leaned into the aisle to absorb the length and size of the airplane. A quick count revealed seating for at least a dozen pampered folks. “It’s beautiful,” he said. He wanted to ask who owned it. Who was paying for the trip? Who was behind this gold-plated recruitment? But to inquire would be rude, he told himself. Just relax, enjoy the trip, enjoy the day, and remember all the details because Doreen will want to hear them.

The flight attendant was back. She explained emergency procedures, then asked what they might like for breakfast. Tony wanted scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns. Ron ordered the same.

“Bathroom and kitchen are in the back,” Tony said, as if he traveled by G5 every day. “The sofa pulls out if you need a nap.” Coffee arrived as they began to taxi. The flight attendant offered a variety of newspapers. Tony grabbed one, yanked it open, waited a few seconds, then asked, “You keeping up with that Bowmore litigation?”

Ron pretended to look at a newspaper as he continued to soak in the luxury of the jet. “Somewhat,” he said.

“They filed a class action yesterday,” Tony said in disgust. “One of those national tort firms out of Philadelphia. I guess the vultures have arrived.” It was his first comment to Ron on the subject, but it definitely would not be his last.

The G5 took off. It was one of three owned by various entities controlled by the Trudeau Group, and leased through a separate charter company that made it impossible to track the true owner. Ron watched the city of Jackson disappear below him. Minutes later, when they leveled off at forty-one thousand feet, he could smell the rich aroma of bacon in the skillet.

At Dulles general aviation, they were whisked into the rear of a long black limo, and forty minutes later they were in the District, on K Street. Tony explained en route that they had a 10:00 a.m. meeting with one group of potential backers, then a quiet lunch, then a 2:00 p.m. meeting with another group. Ron would be home in time for dinner. He was almost dizzy from the excitement of such luxurious travel and feeling so important.

On the seventh floor of a new building, they stepped into the rather plain lobby of the American Family Alliance and spoke to an even plainer receptionist. Tony's summary on the jet had been: "This group is perhaps the most powerful of all the conservative Christian advocates. Lots of members, lots of cash, lots of clout. The Washington politicians love them and fear them. Run by a man named Walter Utley, a former congressman who got fed up with all the liberals in Congress and left to form his own group."

Fisk had heard of Walter Utley and his American Family Alliance.

They were escorted into a large conference room where Mr. Utley himself was waiting with a warm smile and handshake and several introductions to other men, all of whom had been included in Tony's briefing on the jet. They represented such groups as Prayer Partnership, Global Light, Family Roundtable, Evangelical Initiative, and a few others. All significant players in national politics, according to Tony.

They settled around the table, behind notepads and briefing papers, as if they were about to place Mr. Fisk under oath and take his deposition. Tony led off with a summary of the Supreme Court of Mississippi and kept his comments generally positive. Most of the judges were good men with solid voting records. But, of course, there was the matter of Justice Sheila McCarthy and her closet liberalism. She couldn't be trusted on the issues. She was divorced. She was rumored to have loose morals, but Tony stopped without going into specifics.

To challenge her, they needed Ron here to step forward and answer the bell. Tony ran through a quick biography of their man and, in doing so, did not offer a single fact that was not already

known by those present. He handed off to Ron, who cleared his throat and thanked them for the invitation. He began talking about his life, education, upbringing, parents, wife, and kids. He was a devout Christian, a deacon in St. Luke's Baptist Church, a Sunday school teacher. Rotary Club, Ducks Unlimited, youth league baseball coach. He stretched his résumé as far as he could, then shrugged as if to say, "There's nothing else."

He and his wife had been praying about this decision. They had even met with their pastor for yet more prayer, hopefully at a higher level. They were comfortable. They were ready.

Everyone was still warm, friendly, delighted he was there. They asked about his background—was there anything back there that could haunt him? An affair, a DUI, a stupid fraternity prank in college? Any ethics complaints? First and only marriage? Yes, good, we thought so. Any claims of sexual harassment from your staff? Anything like that? Anything whatsoever to do with sex because sex is the killer in a hot campaign? And while they were on the subject, what about gays? Gay marriage? Absolutely not! Civil unions? No, sir, not in Mississippi. Gays adopting children? No, sir.

Abortion? Opposed. All abortions? Opposed.

Death penalty? Very much in favor.

No one seemed to grasp the contradiction between the two.

Guns, the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms, and so on? Ron loved his guns, but was curious for a second about why these religious men were concerned about weapons. Then it hit him—it's all about politics and getting elected. His lifetime of hunting pleased them mightily, and he dragged it out as much as possible. No animal seemed safe.

Then the squeaky-voiced director of the Family Roundtable pursued a line of questions dealing with the separation of church and state, and everybody seemed to nod off. Ron held his ground, answering thoughtfully, and seemed to satisfy those few who were listening. He also began to realize that it was all a show. Their minds had been made up long before he left Brookhaven that morning. He was their man, and at the moment he was simply preaching to the choir.

The next round of questions dealt with freedom of speech, especially religious speech. "Should a smalltown judge be allowed to hang the Ten Commandments in his courtroom?" was the question. Ron sensed that this issue intrigued them, and he was at first inclined to be perfectly honest and say no. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that it's a violation of the separation of church and state, and Ron happened to agree. He did not, however, want to upset the party, so he said, "One of my heroes is my local circuit court judge in Brookhaven." He began to bob and weave. "A great man. He's had the Ten Commandments hanging on his wall for thirty years, and I've always admired him."

A slick nonanswer that they recognized for what it was. They also recognized that it was a fine example of slickness that could help Mr. Fisk survive a heated campaign. So there was no follow-up, no objection. They were, after all, battle-tested political operatives, and they could appreciate a savvy nonresponse when they heard one.

After an hour, Walter Utley glanced at his watch and announced that he was a bit behind schedule. The day held many more important meetings. He concluded the little meet and greet with a declaration that he was very impressed with Ron Fisk and saw no reason why his American Family Alliance could not only endorse him but hit the ground running down there and get some votes. Everyone nodded around the table, and Tony Zachary seemed as proud as a new father.

"There's been a change in our lunch plans," he said when they were once again tucked away in the limo. "Senator Rudd would like to see you."

"Senator Rudd?" Fisk asked in disbelief.

"You got it," Tony said proudly.

Myers Rudd was halfway through his seventh term (thirty-nine years) in the U.S. Senate, and for at least the last three elections he had scared away all opposition. He was despised by at least 40

percent of the people and loved by at least 60 percent, and he had perfected the art of helping those on his side of the street and dismissing all others. He was a legend in Mississippi politics, the fixer, the inveterate meddler in local races, the king who picked his candidates, the assassin who slaughtered those who ran against his candidates, the bank who could finance any race and funnel hoards of cash, the wise old man who led his party, and the thug who destroyed the others.

“Senator Rudd has an interest in this case?” Fisk asked, so innocently.

Tony gave him a wary look. How naive can one be? “Of course he does. Senator Rudd is very close to those folks you just met. He maintains a perfect voting record in their score books. Perfect, mind you. Not 95 percent, but perfect. One of only three in the Senate, and the other two are rookies.”

What will Doreen say about this? Ron thought to himself. Lunch with Senator Rudd, in Washington! They were somewhere near the Capitol when the limo ducked into a one-way street. “Let’s jump out here,” Tony said before the driver could get out. They headed for a narrow door next to an old hotel called the Mercury. An ancient doorman in a green uniform frowned as they approached. “To see Senator Rudd,” Tony said abruptly, and the frown lessened somewhat. Inside, they were led along the edge of an empty and gloomy dining room and down a passageway. “It’s The Senator’s private quarters,” Tony said quietly. Ron was greatly impressed. Ron was noticing the worn carpet and peeling paint, but the old building had a strong dose of shabby elegance. It had a history. How many deals have been put together inside these walls? he asked himself.

At the end of the hallway, they walked into a small private dining room where all manner of serious power was on display. Senator Rudd was seated at the small table, cell phone stuck to his head. Ron had never met him, but he certainly looked familiar. Dark suit, red tie, thick shiny gray hair plastered to the left and held in place with no small amount of spray, large round face that seemed to grow thicker each year. No fewer than four of his minders and

handlers were hovering like bees, all engaged in urgent cell phone chats, probably with one another.

Tony and Fisk waited, watching the show. Government in action.

Suddenly The Senator slapped his phone shut, and the other four conversations were instantly concluded. "Clear out," the great man grunted, and his minions fled like mice. "How are you, Zachary?" he said, standing behind the table. Introductions were made, small talk pursued for a moment. Rudd seemed to know everyone back home in Brookhaven, an aunt once lived there, and he was honored to meet this Mr. Fisk that he'd heard so much about. At some predetermined point, Tony said, "I'll be back in an hour," and vanished. He was replaced by a waiter in a tuxedo.

"Sit down," Rudd insisted. "The food's not much, but the privacy is great. I eat here five times a week." The waiter ignored the comment and handed over menus.

"It's lovely," Ron said, looking around at the walls lined with books that had been neither read nor dusted in a hundred years. They were dining in a small library. No wonder it's so private. They ordered soup and grilled swordfish. The waiter closed the door when he left.

"I have a meeting at one," Rudd said, "so let's talk fast." He began pouring sugar into his iced tea and stirring it with a soup spoon.

"Certainly."

"You can win this race, Ron, and God knows we need you."

Words from the king, and hours later Ron would quote them over and over to Doreen. It was a guarantee from a man who'd never lost, and from that opening volley Ron Fisk was a candidate.

"As you know," Rudd continued because he really wasn't accustomed to listening, especially in conversations with small-time politicians from back home, "I don't get involved in local races." Fisk's first impulse was to laugh, and loudly, but he quickly realized that The Senator was dead serious.

"However, this race is too important. I'll do what I can, which is nothing to sneeze at, you know?"

"Of course."

“I’ve made some powerful friends in this business, and they will be happy to support your campaign. Just takes a phone call from me.”

Ron was nodding politely. Two months earlier, *Newsweek* ran a cover story on the mountains of special-interest cash in Washington and the politicians who took it. Rudd topped the list. He had over \$11 million in his campaign war chest, yet had no foreseeable race. The notion of a viable opponent was too ridiculous to even consider. Big business owned him—banks, insurance, oil, coal, media, defense, pharmaceuticals—no segment of corporate America had escaped the tentacles of his fund-raising machine.

“Thank you,” Ron said because he felt obligated.

“My folks can put together a lot of money. Plus, I know the people in the trenches. The governor, the legislators, the mayors. Ever hear of Willie Tate Ferris?”

“No, sir.”

“He’s a supervisor, beat four, Adams County, in your district. I kept his brother out of prison, twice. Willie Tate will walk the streets for me. And he is the most powerful politician in those parts. One phone call from me, and you got Adams County.” He snapped his fingers. Just like that the votes were falling in place.

“Ever hear of Link Kyzer? Sheriff in Wayne County?”

“Maybe.”

“Link’s an old friend. Two years ago he needed new patrol cars, new radios, new bulletproof vests and guns and everything. County wouldn’t give him crap, so he calls me. I go to Homeland Security, talk to some friends, twist some arms, and Wayne County suddenly gets six million bucks to fight terrorism. They got more patrol cars than they got cops to drive them. Their radio system is better than the navy’s. And, lo and behold, the terrorists have decided to stay the hell out of Wayne County.” He laughed at his own punch line, and Ron was obliged to guffaw along with him. Nothing like wasting a few more million tax dollars.

“You need Link, you got Link, and Wayne County,” Rudd promised as he slugged down some tea.

With two counties under his belt, Ron began contemplating the other twenty-five in the southern district. Would the next hour be spent listening to war stories from all of them? He rather hoped not. The soup arrived.

“This gal, McCarthy,” Rudd said between slurps. “She’s never been on board.” Which Ron took as an indictment on the grounds of not supporting Senator Rudd. “She’s too liberal, plus, between us boys, she just ain’t cut out for the black robe. Know what I mean?”

Ron nodded slightly as he studied his soup. Little wonder The Senator preferred dining in private. He doesn’t know her first name, Ron said to himself. He knows very little about her, except that she is indeed female and, in his opinion, out of place.

To ease things away from the good ole white boy talk, Ron decided to interject a semi-intelligent question. “What about the Gulf Coast? I have very few contacts down there.”

Predictably, Rudd scoffed at the question. No problem. “My wife’s from Bay St. Louis,” he said, as if that alone could guarantee a landslide for his chosen one. “You got those defense contractors, naval shipyards, NASA, hell, I own those people.”

And they probably own you, Ron thought. Sort of a joint ownership.

A cell phone hummed next to The Senator’s tea glass. He glanced at it, frowned, and said, “Gotta take this. It’s the White House.” He gave the impression of being quite irritated.

“Should I step outside?” Ron asked, at once impressed beyond words but also horrified that he might eavesdrop on some crucial matter.

“No, no,” Rudd said as he waved him down. Fisk tried to concentrate on his soup, and tea, and roll, and though it was a lunch he would never forget, he suddenly wished it would quickly come to an end. The phone call did not. Rudd grunted and mumbled and gave no clue as to which crisis he was averting. The waiter returned with the swordfish, which sizzled a bit at first but soon cooled off. The white beets beside it were swimming in a large pool of butter.

When the world was safe again, Rudd hung up and stuck a fork into the center of his swordfish. “Sorry about that,” he said.

“Damned Russians. Anyway, I want you to run, Ron. It’s important to the state. We have got to get our court in line.”

“Yes, sir, but—”

“And you have my complete support. Nothing public, mind you, but I’ll work my ass off in the background. I’ll raise serious cash. I’ll crack the whip, break some arms, the usual routine down there. It’s my game, son, trust me.”

“What if—”

“No one beats me in Mississippi. Just ask the governor. He was twenty points down with two months to go, and was trying to do it himself. Didn’t need my help. I flew down, had a prayer meeting, the boy got converted, and he won in a landslide. I don’t like to get involved down there, but I will. And this race is that important. Can you do it?”

“I think so.”

“Don’t be silly, Ron. This is a onetime chance to do something great. Think of it, you, at the age of, uh—”

“Thirty-nine.”

“Thirty-nine, damned young, but you’re on the Supreme Court of Mississippi. And once we get you there, you’ll never leave. Just think about it.”

“I’m thinking very hard, sir.”

“Good.”

The phone hummed again, probably the president. “Sorry,” Rudd said as he stuck it in his ear and took a huge bite of fish.

The third and final stop on the tour was at the office of the Tort Reform Network on Connecticut Avenue. With Tony back in charge, they blitzed through the introductions and short speeches. Fisk answered a few benign questions, much lighter fare than what had been served up by the religious boys that morning. Once again, he was overwhelmed by the impression that everyone was going through the motions. It was important for them to touch and hear

their candidate, but there seemed to be little interest in a serious evaluation. They were relying on Tony, and since he'd found his man, then so had they.

Unknown to Ron Fisk, the entire forty-minute meeting was captured by a hidden camera and sent upstairs to a small media room where Barry Rinehart was watching carefully. He had a thick file on Fisk, one with photos and various summaries, but he was anxious to hear his voice, watch his eyes and hands, listen to his answers. Was he photogenic, telegenic, well dressed, handsome enough? Was his voice reassuring, trustworthy? Did he sound intelligent or dull? Was he nervous in front of such a group, or calm and confident? Could he be packaged and properly marketed?

After fifteen minutes, Barry was convinced. The only negative was a hint of nervousness, but then that was to be expected. Yank a man out of Brookhaven and thrust him before a strange crowd in a strange city and he's likely to stutter a few times. Nice voice, nice face, decent suit. Barry had certainly worked with less.

He would never meet Ron Fisk, and, as in all of Barry's campaigns, the candidate would never have the slightest clue about who was pulling the strings.

Flying home, Tony ordered a whiskey sour and tried to force a drink on Ron, who declined and stuck with coffee. It was the perfect setting for a drink—aboard a luxurious jet, with a gorgeous young lady as the bartender, at the end of a long and stressful day, with no one in the world watching and knowing.

“Just coffee,” Ron said. Regardless of the setting, he knew he was still being evaluated. Plus, he was a teetotaler anyway. The decision was easy.

Not that Tony was much of a drinker. He took a few sips of his cocktail, loosened his tie, settled deep into his seat, and eventually said, “Rumor has it that this McCarthy gal hits the booze pretty hard.”

Ron simply shrugged. The rumor had not made its way to Brookhaven. He figured that at least 50 percent of the people there couldn't name any of the three justices from the southern district, let alone their habits, good or bad.

Another sip, and Tony kept going. "Both of her parents were heavy drinkers. Of course, they're from the Coast, so that's not unexpected. Her favorite hangout is a club called Tuesday's, near the reservoir. Ever hear of it?"

"No."

"Kind of a meat market for the middle-aged swingers, so I hear. Never been there myself."

Fisk refused to take the bait. Such low gossip seemed to bore him. This didn't bother Tony. In fact, he found it admirable. Let the candidate keep the high ground. The mud would be slung by others.

"How long have you known Senator Rudd?" Fisk asked, changing the subject.

"A long time." And for the remainder of the short trip they talked about their great senator and his colorful career.

Ron raced home, still floating from such a heady encounter with power and its trappings. Doreen was waiting for the details. They ate warmed-up spaghetti while the kids finished homework and prepared for bed.

She had many questions, and Ron struggled with some of the answers. Why were so many diverse groups willing to spend so much on an unknown and thoroughly inexperienced politician? Because they were committed. Because they preferred bright, clean-cut young men with the right beliefs and without the baggage of prior service. And if Ron said no, they would find another candidate just like him. They were determined to win, to clean up the court. It was a national movement, and a critical one.

The fact that her husband had dined alone with Senator Myers Rudd was the clincher. They would take a dramatic plunge into the

unknown world of politics, and they would conquer.

CHAPTER 14

Barry Rinehart took the shuttle to LaGuardia, and from there a private car to the Mercer hotel in SoHo. He checked in, showered, and changed into a heavier wool suit because snow was expected. He picked up a fax at the front desk, then walked eight blocks to a tiny Vietnamese restaurant near the Village, one that had yet to appear in the travel guides. Mr. Trudeau preferred it for discreet meetings. It was empty and he was early, so Barry settled himself onto a bar stool and ordered a drink.

F. Clyde Hardin's cheap class action may have been small news in Mississippi, but it was a far better story in New York. The daily financial publications ran with it, and the battered shares of Krane's common stock took another drubbing.

Mr. Trudeau had spent the day working the phones and yelling at Bobby Ratzlaff. Krane's stock had been trading between \$18.00 and \$20.00, but the class action knocked it back a few bucks. It closed at \$14.50, a new low, and Carl pretended to be upset. Ratzlaff, who had borrowed a million bucks from his retirement fund, seemed even more depressed.

The lower the better. Carl wanted the stock to fall as far as possible. He'd already lost a billion on paper and he could lose more, because one day it would all come roaring back. Unknown to anyone, except two bankers in Zurich, Carl was already buying Krane's stock through a wonderfully nebulous company in Panama. He was carefully gathering shares in small lots so that his buying would not upset the downward trend. Five thousand shares on a slow day and twenty thousand on a busy one, but nothing that

would draw attention. Fourth-quarter earnings were due soon, and Carl had been cooking the books since Christmas. The stock would continue to slide. Carl would continue to buy.

He sent Ratzlaff away after dark, then returned a few calls. At seven, he crawled into the backseat of his Bentley and Toliver drove him to the Vietnamese place.

Carl had not seen Rinehart since their first meeting in Boca Raton, back in November, three days after the verdict. They did not use regular mail, e-mail, faxes, overnight parcels, landlines, or standard cell phones. Each had a secure smart phone that was linked solely to the other, and once a week, when Carl had the time, he called for an update.

They were led through a bamboo curtain to a dimly lit side room with one table. A waiter brought drinks. Carl was going through the motions of cursing class actions and the lawyers who bring them. "We're down to nosebleeds and skin rashes," he said. "Every redneck who ever drove by the plant down there is suddenly a plaintiff. No one remembers the good old days when we paid the highest wages in south Mississippi. Now the lawyers have created a stampede and it's a race to the courthouse."

"It could get worse," Barry said. "We know of another group of lawyers who are rounding up clients. If they file, then their class will be added to the first one. I wouldn't sweat it."

"You wouldn't sweat it? You're not burning cash in legal fees."

"You're going to get it back, Carl. Relax." It was now Carl and Barry, first names and lots of familiarity.

"Relax. Krane closed today at \$14.50. If you owned twenty-five million shares, you might find it hard to relax."

"I would be relaxed, and I would be buying."

Carl knocked back his scotch. "You're getting pretty cocky."

"I saw our boy today. He made the rounds in Washington. Nice-looking fella, so clean-cut it's frightening. Smart, good speaker, handles himself well. Everybody was impressed."

"Has he signed on?"

"He will tomorrow. He had lunch with Senator Rudd, and the ole boy knows how to twist arms."

“Myers Rudd,” Carl said, shaking his head. “What a fool.”

“Indeed, but he can always be bought.”

“They can all be bought. I spent over four million last year in Washington. Sprinkled it around like Christmas candy.”

“And I’m sure Rudd got his share. You and I know he’s a moron, but the people in Mississippi don’t. He’s the king and they worship him down there. If he wants our boy to run, then the race is on.”

Carl squirmed out of his jacket and flung it across a chair. He removed his cuff links, rolled up his sleeves, and, with no one to watch, loosened his tie and slouched in his chair. He sipped his scotch. “Do you know the story about Senator Rudd and the EPA?” he asked, with full knowledge that fewer than five people knew the details.

“No,” Barry said, tugging at his own tie.

“Seven, maybe eight years ago, before the lawsuits started, the EPA came to Bowmore and started their mischief. The locals there had been complaining for years, but EPA is not known for swift action. They poked around, ran some tests, became somewhat alarmed, then got pretty agitated. We were watching all this very closely. We had people all over the place. Hell, we have people inside the EPA. Maybe we cut some corners with our waste, I don’t know, but the bureaucrats really became aggressive. They were talking about criminal investigations, calling in the U.S. attorney, bad stuff, but still kept internal. They were on the verge of going public with all sorts of demands—a zillion-dollar cleanup, horrendous fines, maybe even a shutdown. A man named Gabbard was CEO of Krane at the time; he’s gone now, but a decent sort who knew how to persuade. I sent Gabbard to Washington with a blank check. Several blank checks. He got with our lobbyists and set up a new PAC, another one that supposedly worked to further the interests of chemical and plastics manufacturers. They mapped out a plan, the key to which was getting Senator Rudd on our side. They’re scared of him down there, and if he wants the EPA to get lost, then you can forget the EPA. Rudd’s been on the Appropriations Committee for a hundred years, and if EPA threatens to buck him, then he simply threatens to cut their funding. It’s

complicated, but it's also very simple. Plus, this is Mississippi, Rudd's backyard, and he had more contacts and clout than anyone else. So our boys at the new PAC wine and dine Rudd, and he knew exactly what was happening. He's a simpleton, but he's played the game for so long he's written most of the rules."

Platters of shrimp and noodles arrived and were casually ignored. Another round of drinks.

"Rudd finally decided that he needed a million bucks for his campaign account, and we agreed to route it through all the dummy corporations and fronts that you guys use to hide it. Congress has made it legal, but it would otherwise be known as bribery. Then Rudd wanted something else. Turns out he's got this slightly retarded grandson who has some weird fixation on elephants. Kid loves elephants. Got pictures all over his walls. Watches wildlife videos. And so on. And what The Senator would really like is one of those first-class, four-star African safaris so he can take his grandson to see a bunch of elephants. No problem. Then he decides that the entire family would enjoy such a trip, so our lobbyists arrange the damned thing. Twenty-eight people, two private jets, fifteen days in the African bush drinking Dom Pérignon, eating lobster and steak, and, of course, gawking at a thousand elephants. The bill was close to three hundred grand and he never had a clue it was paid for by me."

"A bargain."

"An absolute bargain. He buried the EPA and they fled Bowmore. They couldn't touch us. And, as a side benefit, Senator Rudd is now an expert on all issues dealing with Africa. AIDS, genocide, famine, human rights abuses—you name it and he's an expert because he spent two weeks in the Kenyan outback watching wild game from the back of a Land Rover."

They shared a laugh and made the first advance upon the noodles. "Did you ever contact him when the lawsuits started?" Barry asked.

"No. The lawyers took over with a vengeance. I remember one conversation with Gabbard about Rudd, but it was the combined wisdom back then that politics would not mix with the litigation. We were pretty confident. How wrong we were."

They ate for a few minutes, but neither seemed thrilled with the food.

“Our boy’s name is Ron Fisk,” Barry said as he handed over a large manila envelope. “Here are the basics. Some photos, a background check, no more than eight pages, at your request.”

“Fisk?”

“That’s him.”

Brianna’s mother was in the area, her twice-yearly drop-in, and for such visits Carl insisted that they use the mansion in the Hamptons and leave him alone in the city. Her mother was two years younger than Carl and fancied herself attractive enough to catch his eye. He spent less than an hour a year in her presence, and each time caught himself practically praying that Brianna had a different set of genes. He loathed the woman. The mother of a trophy wife is not automatically a trophy mother-in-law, and she is usually much too enamored with the topic of money. Carl had loathed each of his mothers-in-law. He detested the very notion that he had a mother-in-law in the first place.

So they were gone. The Fifth Avenue penthouse was all his. Brianna had loaded up Sadler MacGregor, the Russian nanny, her assistant, her nutritionist, and a maid or two and headed out in a small caravan to the island, where she could invade their fine home up there and abuse the staff.

Carl stepped from his private elevator, came face-to-face with *Abused Imelda*, cursed at the sight of her, ignored his valet, dismissed the rest of the staff, and when he was finally alone in the wonderful privacy of his bedroom, he put on his pajamas, a bathrobe, and heavy wool socks. He found a cigar, poured a single malt, and stepped out onto the small terrace overlooking Fifth Avenue and Central Park. The air was raw and windy, perfect.

Rinehart had cautioned him against fretting the details of the campaign. “You don’t want to know everything,” he said more than

once. “Trust me. This is my profession, and I’m very good at what I do.”

But Rinehart had never lost a billion dollars. According to one newspaper article, about Carl no less, only six other men had ever lost a billion dollars in one day. Barry would never know the humiliation of falling so fast and so hard in this city. Friends become harder to find. Carl’s jokes were not funny. Certain portions of the social circuit seemed to be closed (though he knew this was ever so temporary). Even his wife seemed a bit colder and less fawning. Not to mention the cold shoulders from those who really mattered—the bankers, fund managers, investment gurus, the elite of Wall Street.

As the wind reddened his cheeks, he looked slowly around at the buildings up and down Fifth Avenue. Billionaires everywhere. Did anyone feel sorry for him, or were they delighted at his fall? He knew the answer because he had taken so much delight when others had stumbled.

Keep laughing, boys, he said with a long pull on the malt. Laugh your asses off, because I, Carl Trudeau, now have a new secret weapon. His name is Ron Fisk, a nice, gullible young man purchased (offshore) by me for chump change.

Three blocks to the north, at the top of a building Carl could barely see, was the penthouse of Pete Flint, one of his many enemies. Two weeks earlier, Pete had made the cover of *Hedge Fund Reports*, dressed in an ill-fitting designer suit. He was obviously gaining weight. The story raved about Pete and his fund and, in particular, a spectacular final quarter last year, thanks almost solely to his shrewd shorting of Krane Chemical. Pete claimed to have made a half-billion dollars on Krane because of his brilliant prediction that the trial would end badly. Carl’s name wasn’t mentioned; it wasn’t necessary. It was common knowledge that he’d lost a billion, and there was Pete Flint claiming to have raked in half of it. The humiliation was beyond painful.

Mr. Flint knew nothing about Mr. Fisk. By the time he heard his name, it would be too late and Carl would have his money back. Plus a lot more.

CHAPTER 15

The winter meeting of the Mississippi Trial Advocates (MTA) was held each year in Jackson, in early February while the legislature was still in session. It was usually a weekend affair with speeches, seminars, political updates, and the like. Because the Paytons currently had the hottest verdict in the state, the trial lawyers wanted to hear from them. Mary Grace demurred. She was an active member, but it wasn't her scene. The gatherings typically included long cocktail hours and war stories from the trenches. Girls were not excluded, but they didn't exactly fit in, either. And someone needed to stay home with Mack and Liza.

Wes reluctantly volunteered. He, too, was an active member, but the winter meetings were usually boring. The summer conventions at the beach were more fun and family oriented, and the Payton clan had attended two of them.

Wes drove to Jackson on a Saturday morning and found the mini-convention at a downtown hotel. He parked far away so none of his fellow trial lawyers would see what he was driving these days. They were noted for their flashy cars and other toys, and Wes, at the moment, was embarrassed by the ragged Taurus that had survived the trip from Hattiesburg. He would not spend the night, because he could not afford a hundred bucks for a room. It could be argued that he was a millionaire, in someone's calculation, but three months after the verdict he was still squeezing every dime. Any payday from the Bowmore mess was a distant dream. Even with the verdict, he still questioned his sanity in getting involved with the litigation.

Lunch was in the grand ballroom with seating for two hundred, an impressive crowd. As the preliminaries dragged on, Wes, from his seat on the dais, studied the crowd.

Trial lawyers, always a colorful and eclectic bunch. Cowboys, rogues, radicals, longhairs, corporate suits, flamboyant mavericks,

bikers, deacons, good ole boys, street hustlers, pure ambulance chasers, faces from billboards and yellow pages and early morning television. They were anything but boring. They fought among themselves like a violent family, yet they had the ability to stop bickering, circle the wagons, and attack their enemies. They came from the cities, where they feuded over cases and clients, and they came from the small towns, where they honed their skills before simple jurors reluctant to part with anyone's money. Some had jets and buzzed around the country piecing together the latest class action in the latest mass tort. Others were repulsed by the mass tort game and clung proudly to the tradition of trying legitimate cases one at a time. The new breed were entrepreneurs who filed cases in bulk and settled them that way, rarely facing a jury. Others lived for the thrill of the courtroom. A few did their work in firms where they pooled money and talent, but firms of trial lawyers were notoriously difficult to keep together. Most were lone gunmen too eccentric to keep much of a staff. Some made millions each year, others scraped by, most were in the \$250,000 range. A few were broke at the moment. Many were up one year and down the next, always on the roller coaster and always willing to roll the dice.

If they shared anything, it was a streak of fierce independence and the thrill of representing David against Goliath.

On the political right, there is the establishment, the money, and big business and the myriad groups it finances. On the left, there are the minorities, labor unions, schoolteachers, and the trial lawyers. Only the trial lawyers have money, and it's pocket change compared with big business.

Though there were times when Wes wanted to choke them as a whole, he felt at home here. These were his colleagues, his fellow warriors, and he admired them. They could be arrogant, bullish, dogmatic, and they were often their own worst enemies. But no one fought as hard for the little guy.

As they lunched on cold chicken and even colder broccoli, the chairman of the legislative affairs committee delivered a rather bleak update on various bills that were still alive over at the capitol. The tort reformers were back and pushing hard to enact measures

designed to curtail liability and close courthouse doors. He was followed by the chairman of political affairs, who was more upbeat. Judicial elections were in November, and though it was too early in the year to be sure, it appeared as though their “good” judges at both the trial and the appellate levels would not draw serious opposition.

After frozen pie and coffee, Wes Payton was introduced and received a rousing welcome. He began by apologizing for the absence of his co-counsel, the real brains behind the Bowmore litigation. She hated to miss the event but believed she was needed more at home with the kids. Wes then launched into a long recap of the *Baker* trial, the verdict, and the current state of other lawsuits against Krane Chemical. Among such a crowd, a \$41 million verdict was a much-revered trophy, and they could have listened for hours to the man who obtained it. Only a few had felt firsthand the thrill of such a victory, and all of them had swallowed the bitter pill of a bad verdict.

When he finished, there was another round of boisterous applause, then an impromptu question-and-answer session. Which experts had been effective? How much were the litigation expenses? (Wes politely refused to give the amount. Even in a room of big spenders, the sum was too painful to discuss.) What was the status of settlement talks, if any? How would the class action affect the defendant? What about the appeal? Wes could have talked for hours and kept his audience.

Later that afternoon, during an early cocktail hour, he held court again, answering more questions, deflecting more gossip. A group that was circling a toxic dump in the northern part of the state descended on him and wheedled advice. Would he take a look at their file? Recommend some experts? Come visit the site? He finally escaped by going to the bar, and there he bumped into Barbara Mellinger, the savvy and battle-weary executive director of the MTA and its chief lobbyist.

“Got a minute?” she asked, and they retreated to a corner where no one could hear them.

"I've picked up a frightening rumor," she said, sipping gin and watching the crowd. Mellinger had spent twenty years in the halls of the capitol and could read the terrain like no other. And she was not prone to gossip. She heard more than anyone, but when she passed along a rumor, it was usually more than just that.

"They're coming after McCarthy," she said.

"They?" Wes was standing next to her, also watching the crowd.

"The usual suspects—Commerce Council and that group of thugs."

"They can't beat McCarthy."

"Well, they can certainly try."

"Does she know it?" Wes had lost interest in his diet soda.

"I don't think so. No one knows it."

"Do they have a candidate?"

"If they do, I don't know who it is. But they have a knack for finding people to run."

What, exactly, was Wes supposed to say or do? Campaign funding was the only defense, and he couldn't contribute a dime.

"Do these guys know?" he asked, nodding at the little pockets of conversation.

"Not yet. We're lying low right now, waiting. McCarthy, typically, has no money in the bank. The Supremes think they're invincible, above politics and all that, and by the time an opponent pops up, they've been lulled to sleep."

"You got a plan?"

"No. It's wait and see for now. And pray that it's only a rumor. Two years ago, in the McElwayne race, they waited until the last minute to announce, and by then they had a million plus in the bank."

"But we won that race."

"Indeed. But tell me you were not terrified."

"Beyond terrified."

An aging hippie with a ponytail lurched forward and boomed, "Y'all kicked their asses down there." His opening gave every impression that he would consume at least the next half hour of Wes's life. Barbara began her escape. "To be continued," she whispered.

Driving home, Wes savored the occasion for a few miles, then slipped into a dark funk over the McCarthy rumor. He kept nothing from Mary Grace, and after dinner that night they slipped out of the apartment and went for a long walk. Ramona and the children were watching an old movie.

Like all good lawyers, they had always watched the supreme court carefully. They read and discussed every opinion, a habit they started when their partnership began and one they clung to with conviction. In the old days, membership on the court changed little. Openings were created by deaths, and the temporary appointments usually became permanent. Over the years, the governors had wisely chosen the fill-ins, and the court was respected. Noisy campaigns were unheard-of. The court took pride in keeping politics out of its agenda and rulings. But the genteel days were changing.

“But we beat them with McElwayne,” she said more than once.

“By three thousand votes.”

“It’s a win.”

Two years earlier, when Justice Jimmy McElwayne got himself ambushed, the Paytons had been too mired in the Bowmore litigation to contribute financially. Instead, they had devoted what little spare time they had to a local committee. They had even worked the polls on Election Day.

“We’ve won the trial, Wes, and we’re not losing the appeal,” she said.

“Agreed.”

“It’s probably just a rumor.”

The following Monday afternoon, Ron and Doreen Fisk sneaked away from Brookhaven and drove to Jackson for a late meeting with Tony Zachary. There were some people they needed to meet.

It had been agreed that Tony would serve as the official director of the campaign. The first person he brought into the conference room was the proposed director of finance, a sharply dressed young man with a long history of statewide campaigns, in a dozen states no less. His name was Vancona, and he quickly, and confidently, laid out the basic structure of their financial plan. He used a laptop and a projector and everything was flashed against a white screen, in vivid color. On the income side, the coalition of supporters would contribute \$2.5 million. Many of these were the folks Ron had met in Washington, and for good measure Vancona presented a long list of groups. The names were a blur, but the sheer number was impressive. They could expect another \$500,000 from individual donors around the district, moneys that would be generated when Ron hit the stump and began to win friends and impress folks.

“I know how to raise the money,” Vancona said more than once, but without being offensive. Three million dollars was the magic number, and it virtually guaranteed a win. Ron and Doreen were overwhelmed.

Tony watched them carefully. They weren’t stupid. They were just as easily misled as anyone else would be under the circumstances. They asked a few questions, but only because they had to.

On the expense side, Vancona had all the numbers. Television, radio, and newspaper ads, direct mail, travel, salaries (his would be \$90,000 for the venture), office rental, all the way down to bumper stickers, yard signs, billboards, and rental cars. His grand total was \$2.8 million, which left some wiggle room.

Tony slid over two thick binders, each majestically labeled: “SUPREME COURT, SOUTHERN DISTRICT, RON FISK VERSUS SHEILA MCCARTHY. CONFIDENTIAL.”

“It’s all in there,” he said.

Ron flipped some pages, asked a few benign questions.

Tony nodded gravely as if his boy had genuine insight.

The next visitor—Vancona stayed in the room, a member of the team now—was a saucy sixty-year-old woman from D.C. whose specialty was advertising. She introduced herself as Kat something

or other. Ron had to glance at his notebook to confirm—Broussard. Next to her name was her title: Director of Advertising.

Where had Tony found all these people?

Kat was filled with big-city hyperactivity. Her firm specialized in state races and had worked in over a hundred.

What's your winning percentage? Ron wanted to ask, but Kat left few openings for questions. She adored his face and voice and felt confident they would put together the "visuals" that would adequately convey his depth and sincerity. Wisely, she spent most of her time looking at Doreen as she talked, and the girls connected. Kat took a seat.

Communications would be handled by a Jackson firm. Its boss was another fast-talking lady named Candace Grume, and, not surprisingly, she had vast experience in these matters. She explained that a successful campaign must coordinate in communications at all times. "Loose lips sink ships," she chirped. "They also lose elections." The current governor was a client, and she saved the best for last. Her firm had represented Senator Rudd for over a decade. Enough said.

She yielded the floor to the pollster, a brainy statistician named Tedford who managed to claim, in less than five minutes, that he had correctly predicted the outcome of virtually every race in recent history. He was from Atlanta. If you're from the big city of Atlanta and you find yourself in the outback, then it's important to remind everyone there that you are indeed from Atlanta. After twenty minutes they were tired of Tedford.

The field coordinator was not from Atlanta but from Jackson. His name was Hobbs, and Hobbs looked vaguely familiar, at least to Ron. He boasted that he had been running successful campaigns in the state—sometimes out front, sometimes in the background—for fifteen years. He threw out the names of his winners without a thought of mentioning his losers. He preached about the necessity of local organization, grassroots democracy, knocking on doors, turning out the vote, and so on. He had an oily voice, and at times his eyes glowed with the fervor of a street preacher. Ron disliked

him immediately. Later, Doreen would admit she found him charming.

Two hours after the parade began, Doreen was almost catatonic, and Ron's notepad was bristling with the drivel he wrote in an effort to remain engaged.

The team was now complete. Five well-paid professionals. Six including Tony, but his salary would be covered by Judicial Vision. Ron, poring through his notebook while Hobbs was ranting, found the column that projected "professional salaries" at \$200,000 and "consultants" at \$175,000. He made a note to quiz Tony about these amounts later. They seemed much too high, but then what did he know about the ins and outs of a high-powered campaign?

They broke for coffee, and Tony herded the others out of the room. They left with warm farewells, excitement about the thrilling race ahead, and promises to meet again as soon as possible.

When Tony was alone again with his clients, he suddenly looked tired. "Look, I know this is a lot. Forgive me, but everybody is busy and time is crucial. I thought one big meeting would work better than a bunch of smaller ones."

"No problem," Ron managed to say. The coffee was working.

"Remember, this is your campaign," Tony continued, straight-faced.

"Are you sure about that?" Doreen asked. "Doesn't really feel like it."

"Oh yes, Doreen. I've assembled the best team available, but you can cut any one of them right now. Just say the word, and I'll be on the phone finding a replacement. Someone you don't like?"

"No, it's just that—"

"It's overwhelming," Ron admitted. "That's all."

"Of course it is. It's a major campaign."

"Major campaigns don't have to be overwhelming. I realize I'm a novice here, but I'm not naive. Two years ago in the McElwayne race, the challenger raised and spent about two million dollars and ran a great race. Now we're tossing around numbers that are far more than that. Where is the money coming from?"

Tony snapped on his reading glasses and reached for a binder. “Well, I thought we covered that,” he said. “Vancona went over the numbers.”

“I can read, Tony,” Ron shot across the table. “I see the names and amounts. That’s not the question. I want to know why these people are willing to pony up three million bucks to support someone they’ve never heard of.”

Tony slowly peeled off his reading glasses with an air of exasperation. “Ron, haven’t we covered this a dozen times? Last year, Judicial Vision spent almost four million to elect a guy in Illinois. We spent close to six million in Texas. These numbers are outrageous, but winning has become very expensive. Who’s writing the checks? The folks you met in Washington. The economic development movement. The conservative Christians. Doctors who are being abused by the system. These are people who are demanding change, and they are willing to pay for it.”

Ron drank some more coffee and looked at Doreen. A long, silent moment passed.

Tony re-shifted, cleared his throat, and said softly, “Look, if you want out, then just say the word. It’s not too late.”

“I’m not quitting, Tony,” Ron said. “But this is too much for one day. All these professional consultants and—”

“I’ll handle these people. That’s my job. Yours is to hit the stump and convince the voters you’re the man. The voters, Ron and Doreen, will never see these people. They will never see me, thank God. You are the candidate. It’s your face, your ideas, your youth and enthusiasm that will convince them. Not me. Not a bunch of staff members.”

Fatigue overcame them and the conversation lagged. Ron and Doreen gathered up the bulky notebooks and said their goodbyes. The drive home was quiet, but not unpleasant. By the time they drove through an empty downtown Brookhaven, they were once again excited by the challenge.

The Honorable Ronald M. Fisk, Justice, Mississippi Supreme Court.

CHAPTER 16

Justice McCarthy eased into her office late Saturday morning and found it deserted. She flipped through her mail as she turned on her computer. Online, at her official e-mail address, there was the usual court business. At her personal address, there was a note from her daughter confirming dinner that night at her home in Biloxi. There were notes from two men, one she'd been dating and one who was still a possibility.

She wore jeans, sneakers, and a brown tweed riding jacket her ex-husband gave her many years ago. There was no weekend dress code at the supreme court because only the clerks showed up.

Her chief clerk, Paul, materialized without a sound and said, "Good morning."

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"The usual. Reading briefs."

"Anything of interest?"

"No." He tossed a magazine on her desk and said, "This one is on the way. Could be fun."

"What is it?"

"The big verdict from Cancer County. Forty-one million dollars. Bowmore."

"Oh yes," she said, picking up the magazine. Every lawyer and judge in the state claimed to know someone who knew something about the *Baker* verdict. The coverage had been extensive, during the trial and especially afterward. It was often discussed by Paul and the other clerks. They were already watching it, anticipating the arrival in a few months of the appellate briefs.

The article covered all aspects of the Bowmore waste site and the litigation it created. There were photos of the town, desolate and boarded up; photos of Mary Grace peering at the razor wire outside the Krane plant and sitting with Jeannette Baker under a shade tree,

each holding a bottle of water; photos of twenty of the alleged victims—blacks, whites, kids, and old folks. The central character, though, was Mary Grace, and her importance grew as the paragraphs flew by. It was her case, her cause. Bowmore was her town and her friends were dying.

Sheila finished the article and was suddenly bored with the office. The drive to Biloxi would take three hours. She left without seeing another person and headed south, in no particular hurry. She stopped for gas in Hattiesburg and, on a whim, turned east, suddenly curious about Cancer County.

When she presided over trials, Judge McCarthy often sneaked to the scene of the dispute for a furtive firsthand look at the site. The murky details of a tanker collision on a busy bridge became much clearer after she spent an hour on the bridge, alone, at night, at the precise moment of the accident. In a murder case, the defendant's claim of self-defense was discounted by her after she ventured into the alleyway where the body was found. A light from a warehouse window glared down, illuminating the spot. During the trial of a wrongful death at a railroad crossing, she drove the street night and day, twice stopping for trains, and became convinced the driver was at fault. She kept these opinions to herself, of course. The jury was the trier of fact, not the judge, but a strange curiosity often attracted her to the scene. She wanted to know the truth.

Bowmore was as bleak as the article said. She parked behind a church two blocks from Main Street and took a walk. It was unlikely that she would see another red BMW convertible in the town, and the last thing she wanted was attention.

Even for a Saturday, traffic and commerce were slow. Half the storefronts were boarded up, and only a few of the survivors were open. A pharmacy, a discount store, a few other retail merchants. She paused at the office of F. Clyde Hardin & Associates. He was mentioned in the article.

As was Babe's Coffee Shop, where Sheila took a stool at the counter in anticipation of learning something about the case. She would not be disappointed.

It was almost 2:00 p.m. and no one else was at the counter. Two mechanics from the Chevrolet place were having a late lunch in a front booth. The diner was quiet, dusty, in need of paint and refinished floors, and apparently hadn't changed much in decades. The walls were covered with football schedules dating back to 1961, class pictures, old newspaper articles, anything anybody wanted to display. A large sign announced: "We Use Only Bottled Water."

Babe appeared across the counter and began with a friendly "What would you like, dear?" She wore a starched white uniform, spotless burgundy apron with "Babe" embroidered in pink, white hose, and white shoes, and could have stepped from a 1950s movie. She had probably been around that long, though her teased hair was still aggressively colored. It almost matched her apron. She had the wrinkled eyes of a smoker, but the wrinkles were no match for the thick layer of foundation Babe caulked on every morning.

"Just some water," Sheila said. She was curious about the water.

Babe performed most of her tasks while gazing forlornly at the street through the large windows. She grabbed a bottle and said, "You're not from around here."

"Just passing through," Sheila said. "I have some kinfolks over in Jones County." And it was true. A distant aunt, one she thought might still be alive, had always lived next door in Jones County.

In front of her, Babe placed a six-ounce bottle of water with the simple label "Bottled for Bowmore." She explained that she, too, had kinfolks in Jones County. Before they went too far down the genealogical road, Sheila hastily changed subjects. In Mississippi, sooner or later, everyone is related.

"What's this?" she asked, holding the bottle.

"Water," Babe said with a puzzled look.

Sheila held it closer, allowing Babe to take charge of the conversation. "All our water here in Bowmore is bottled. Trucked in from Hattiesburg. Can't drink the stuff they pump here. It's contaminated. Where you from?"

“The Coast.”

“You ain’t heard about the Bowmore water?”

“Sorry.” Sheila unscrewed the cap and took a swig. “Tastes like water,” she said.

“You oughta taste the other stuff.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Good Lord, honey,” Babe said and glanced around to see if anyone else had heard this shocking question. There was no one else, so Babe popped the top on a diet soda and sidled up the counter. “You ever heard of Cancer County?”

“No.”

Another look of disbelief. “That’s us. This county has the highest rate of cancer in the country because the drinking water is polluted. There used to be a chemical plant here, Krane Chemical, buncha smart boys from New York. For many years—twenty, thirty, forty, depending on who you believe—they dumped all kinds of toxic crap—pardon my language—into some ravines behind the plant. Barrels and barrels, drums and drums, tons and tons of the crap went into the pit, and it eventually filtered into an underground aquifer that the city—run by some real dunces, mind you—built a pump over back in the late eighties. The drinking water went from clear to light gray to light yellow. Now it’s brown. It began smelling funny, then it began stinking. We fought with the city for years to clean it up, but they stonewalled us. Boy, did they ever. Anyway, the water became a huge fight, and then, honey, the bad stuff started. Folks started dying. Cancer hit like the plague around here. Folks were dying right and left. Still are. Inez Perdue succumbed in January. I think she was number sixty-five. Something like that. It all came out in the trial.” She paused to examine two pedestrians who were strolling along the sidewalk.

Sheila carefully sipped the water. “There was a trial?” she asked.

“You ain’t heard of the trial either?”

Sheila gave an innocent shrug and said again, “I’m from the Coast.”

“Oh, boy.” Babe switched elbows and leaned on the right one. “For years there was talk about lawsuits. I get all the lawyers in here

for their little coffee chats and no one taught those boys how to whisper. I heard it all. Still hearing it. Big talk for a long time. They're gonna sue Krane Chemical for this and for that, but nothing happened. I think that the suit was just too big, plus you're taking on a big chemical company with lots of money and lots of slick lawyers. The talk died down, but the cancer didn't. Kids were dying of leukemia. Folks with tumors in their kidneys, liver, bladder, stomach, and, honey, it's been awful. Krane made a fortune off a pesticide called pillamar 5, which was outlawed twenty years ago. Outlawed here, but not down in Guatemala and places like that. So they kept making pillamar 5 here, shipping it off to the banana republics, where they sprayed it on their fruits and vegetables and then shipped 'em all back here for us to eat. That came out in the trial, too, and they tell me it really ticked off the jury. Something sure ticked 'em off."

"Where was the trial?"

"You sure you don't have any kinfolks here?"

"I'm sure."

"Any friends here in Bowmore?"

"None."

"And you ain't no reporter, are you?"

"Nope. I'm just passing through."

Satisfied with her audience, Babe took a deep breath and plunged on. "They moved it out of Bowmore, which was a smart move because any jury here would've handed down a death penalty for Krane and the crooks who run it, and they tried the case over in Hattiesburg. Judge Harrison, one of my favorites. Cary County is in his district, and he's been eating here for many years. He likes the ladies, but that's okay. I like the men. Anyway, for a long time the lawyers just talked, but no one would dare take on Krane. Then a local girl, a young woman, mind you, one of our own, said to hell with it and filed a massive suit. Mary Grace Payton, grew up a mile out of town. Bowmore High School class valedictorian. I remember when she was a kid. Her daddy, Mr. Truman Shelby, still comes in from time to time. I love that girl. Her husband is a lawyer, too, they practice together in Hattiesburg. They sued for Jeannette

Baker, sweet girl, whose husband and little boy died of cancer eight months apart. Krane fought like hell, had a hundred lawyers, according to the traffic. The trial lasted for months and damned near broke the Paytons, from what I hear. But they won. Jury threw the book at Krane. Forty-one million dollars. I can't believe you missed it. How could anyone miss it? It put Bowmore on the map. You want something to eat, honey?"

"How about a grilled cheese?"

"You got it." Babe threw two pieces of white bread on the grill without missing a beat. "Case is on appeal, and I pray every night that the Paytons'll win. And the lawyers are back, sniffing around, looking for new victims. Ever hear of Clyde Hardin?"

"Never met him."

"He's seven doors down, on the left, been here forever. A member of my eight-thirty coffee club, a bunch of blowhards. He's okay, but his wife's a snot. Clyde is afraid of the courtroom, so he hooked up with some real shysters from Philadelphia—Pennsylvania, not Mississippi—and they've filed a class action on behalf of a bunch of deadbeats who are trying to join the parade. Rumor has it that some of their so-called clients don't even live here. They're just looking for a check." She unwrapped two slices of processed cheddar and placed them on the hot bread. "Mayonnaise?"

"No."

"How about some fries?"

"No thanks."

"Anyway, the town's split worse than ever. The folks who are really sick are angry at these new victims who are just claiming to be. Funny what money does to some folks. Always looking for a handout. Some of the lawyers think Krane'll finally give in and make a big settlement. Folks'll get rich. Lawyers'll get even richer. But others are convinced Krane will never admit any wrongdoing. They never have. Six years ago, when the lawsuit talk was hot, they simply folded up one weekend and fled to Mexico, where I'm sure they're free to dump and pollute all they want to. Probably killing Mexicans right and left. It's criminal what that company did. It killed this town."

When the bread was almost black, she put the sandwich together, sliced it in two, and served it with a slice of dill pickle.

“What happened to the Krane employees?”

“Got screwed. No surprises there. A lot of them left the area to find work. Ain’t much in the way of jobs around here. Some were nice folks, others knew what was happening and kept quiet. If they squealed, they’d get fired. Mary Grace found some of them and hauled them back for the trial. Some told the truth. Some lied, and Mary Grace ripped them to pieces, according to what I hear. I never watched the trial, but I got reports almost daily. The whole town was on pins and needles. There was a man named Earl Crouch who ran the plant for many years. Made good money, and rumor has it that Krane bought him off when they tucked tail. Crouch knew all about the dumping, but during his deposition he denied everything. Lied like a dog. That was two years ago. They say that Crouch has disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Mary Grace couldn’t find him to come testify at trial. He’s gone. AWOL. Not even Krane could find him.”

She let this rich little nugget hang in the air for a moment as she sauntered over to check on the Chevrolet mechanics. Sheila chewed on the first bite of the sandwich and pretended to have little interest in the story.

“How’s the grilled cheese?” Babe asked when she was back.

“Great.” Sheila took a sip of water and waited for the narrative to continue. Babe leaned in closer and lowered her voice.

“There’s a family over in Pine Grove, the Stones. Tough bunch. In and out of prison for stealing cars and such. Not the kinda folks you’d want to start a fight with. Four, maybe five years ago, one of the little Stone boys caught cancer and died quick. They hired the Paytons and their suit is still pending. What I hear is that the Stones found Mr. Earl Crouch somewhere out in Texas and got their revenge. Just a rumor, and folks here ain’t talking about it. Wouldn’t surprise me, though. Nobody messes with the Stones. Feelings are raw, very raw. You mention Krane Chemical around here people want to fight.”

Sheila wasn't about to mention it. Nor was she about to pry much deeper. The mechanics stood, stretched, went for the toothpicks, and headed for the cash register. Babe met them there and insulted them as she took their money, about \$4 each. Why were they working on a Saturday? What did their boss think he was accomplishing? Sheila managed to choke down half the sandwich.

"You want another one?" Babe asked when she returned to her stool.

"No thanks. I need to be going." Two teenagers ambled in and settled at a table.

Sheila paid her bill, thanked Babe for the conversation, promised to stop in again. She walked to her car, then spent half an hour crisscrossing the town. The magazine article mentioned Pine Grove and Pastor Denny Ott. She drove slowly through the neighborhood around the church and was struck by its depressed state. The article had been kind. She found the abandoned industrial park, then the Krane plant, gloomy and haunted but protected behind the razor wire.

After two hours in Bowmore, Sheila left, hopefully never to return. She understood the anger that led to the verdict, but judicial reasoning must exclude all emotions. There was little doubt Krane Chemical had done bad things, but the issue was whether their waste actually caused the cancers. The jury certainly thought so.

It would soon be the job of Justice McCarthy and her eight colleagues to settle the matter.

They tracked her movements to the Coast, to her home three blocks off the Bay of Biloxi. She was there for sixty-five minutes, then drove a mile to her daughter's home on Howard Street. After a long dinner with her daughter, son-in-law, and two small grandchildren, she returned to her home and spent the night, apparently alone. At ten on Sunday morning, she had brunch at the Grand Casino with a female acquaintance. A quick check of license plates revealed this

person to be a well-known local divorce lawyer, probably an old friend. After brunch, McCarthy returned to her home, changed into blue jeans, and left with her overnight bag. She drove nonstop to her condo in north Jackson, arriving at 4:10. Three hours later, a man by the name of Keith Christian (white male, age forty-four, divorced, history professor) showed up with what appeared to be a generous supply of take-out Chinese food. He did not leave the McCarthy condo until seven the following morning.

Tony Zachary summarized these reports himself, pecking away at a laptop he still despised. He'd been a terrible typist long before the Internet, and his skills had improved only marginally. But the details could be trusted to no one—no assistant, no secretary. The matter demanded the utmost secrecy. Nor could his summaries be e-mailed or faxed. Mr. Rinehart insisted that they be sent by overnight letter via Federal Express.

PART TWO

THE CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 17

In the old town of Natchez there is a slice of land below a bluff, near the river, known as Under-the-Hill. It has a long and colorful history that begins with the earliest days of steamboat traffic on the Mississippi. It attracted all the characters—the merchants, traders, boat captains, speculators, and gamblers—headed to New Orleans. Because money was changing hands, it also attracted ruffians, vagabonds, swindlers, bootleggers, gunrunners, whores, and every imaginable misfit from the underworld. Natchez was rich with cotton, most of which was shipped and traded through its port, Under-the-Hill. Easy money created the need for bars, gambling dens, brothels, and flophouses. A young Mark Twain was a regular during his days as a steamboat pilot. Then the Civil War killed river traffic. It also wiped out the fortunes in Natchez, and most of its nightlife. Under-the-Hill suffered a long period of decline.

In 1990, the Mississippi legislature approved a bill that allowed riverboat gambling, the idea being that a handful of fake paddle wheelers would churn up and down the river while their cargo of retirees played bingo and blackjack. Along the Mississippi River, businessmen rushed to establish these floating casinos. Remarkably, once the legislation was actually read and analyzed, it was discovered that the boats would not be required to physically leave the shore. Nor were they required to be equipped with any type of engine to propel them. As long as they touched the river, or any of its chutes, sloughs, oxbow lakes, man-made canals, or backwaters, the structures qualified as riverboats under the legislation. Under-the-Hill made a brief comeback.

Unfortunately, upon further analysis, the legislation accidentally approved full-fledged Vegas-style casino gambling, and within a few years this roaring new industry had settled itself along the Gulf Coast and in Tunica County, near Memphis. Natchez and the other

river towns missed the boom, but did manage to hang on to a few of their engineless, stationary casinos.

One such establishment was the Lucky Jack. There, at his favorite blackjack table with his favorite dealer, Clete Coley sat hunched over a stack of \$25 chips and sipped a rum and soda. He was up \$1,800 and it was time to quit. He watched the door, waiting on his appointment.

Coley was a member of the bar. He had a degree, a license, a name in the yellow pages, an office with the word “Attorney” on the door, a secretary who answered the occasional phone call with an unenthusiastic “Law Office,” and business cards with all the necessary data. But Clete Coley wasn’t a real lawyer. He had few clients to speak of. He wouldn’t draft a will, or a deed, or a contract, at gunpoint. He didn’t hang around the courthouse, and he disliked most of the other lawyers in Natchez. Clete was simply a rogue, a big, loud, hard-drinking rogue of a lawyer who made more money at the casinos than he did at the office. He’d once dabbled in politics, and barely missed an indictment. He’d dabbled in government contracts, and dodged another one. In his early years, after college, he’d done some pot smuggling, but abruptly abandoned that career when a partner was found dead. In fact, his conversion was so complete that he became an undercover narcotics officer. He went to law school at night and finally passed the bar exam on his fourth attempt.

He doubled-down on an eight and a three, drew a jack, and collected another \$100. His favorite cocktail waitress brought him another drink. No one spent as much time in the Lucky Jack as Mr. Coley. Anything for Mr. Coley. He watched the door, checked his watch, and kept gambling.

“You expecting someone?” asked Ivan, the dealer.

“Would I tell you?”

“Reckon not.”

The man he was expecting had also escaped a few indictments. They went back almost twenty years, though they were anything but friends. This would be their second meeting. The first had gone well enough to lead to this one.

Ivan was showing fourteen when he drew a queen and went bust. Another \$100 for Clete. He had his rules. When he won \$2,000 he quit, and when he lost \$500 he quit. Anything between those limits and he would play and drink all night. The IRS would never know it, but he was up eighty grand for the year. Plus, all the rum was free.

He flipped two chips to Ivan and began the elaborate task of freeing his massive body from the elevated chair.

"Thanks, Mr. Coley," Ivan said.

"Always a pleasure." Clete stuffed the rest of the chips into the pockets of his light brown suit. Always brown, always a suit, always with shiny Lucchese cowboy boots. At six feet four, he weighed at least 280, though no one knew for sure, but he was more thick than fat. He lumbered away toward the bar, where his appointment had arrived. Marlin was taking a seat at a corner table, one with a view of the floor. No greetings of any sort, no eye contact. Clete dropped into a chair and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. A waitress brought them drinks.

"I have the money," Marlin said, finally.

"How much?"

"Same deal, Clete. Nothing's changed. We're just waiting on you to say yes or no."

"And I'll ask you again. Who is 'we'?"

"It's not me. I'm an independent contractor, paid a fee for a job well done. I'm on no one's payroll. I've been hired to recruit you for the race, and if you say no, then I might be hired to recruit someone else."

"Who's paying you?"

"That's confidential, Clete. I explained this a dozen times last week."

"You did. Maybe I'm a little dense. Or maybe I'm just a little nervous. Perhaps I want answers. Otherwise, I'm not in."

Based on their first meeting, Marlin was doubtful that Clete Coley would eventually say no to \$100,000 in cash in unmarked bills. Marlin had virtually put it on the table. A hundred grand to get in the race and stir things up. Coley would make a beautiful candidate—loud, outrageous, colorful, able to say anything with no concern about the fallout. An anti-politician the press would follow like ants.

“Here’s what I can tell you,” Marlin said, with a rare eyeball-to-eyeball glance at Clete. “Fifteen years ago, in a county far away from here, a young man and his young family returned home from church one night. They didn’t know it, but two black punks were in the house, a very nice house, and they were burglarizing the hell out of it. The punks were hopped up on crack, pistols in every pocket, nasty characters. When the young family came home and surprised them, things got out of control. The girls got raped. Everybody got a bullet in the head, then the punks set the house on fire. Cops caught them the next day. Full confessions, DNA, the works. They’ve been on death row at Parchman ever since. Turns out the young man’s family has serious money. His father had a nervous breakdown, went insane, poor guy. But he’s back and he’s pissed. He’s furious that the punks are still alive. He’s livid that his beloved state never executes anybody. He hates the judicial system, and he especially hates the nine honorable members of the supreme court. He, Clete, is where the money is coming from.”

It was all a lie, but lying was a part of the job.

“I like that story,” Clete said, nodding.

“The money is peanuts to him. It’s yours if you jump in the race and talk about nothing but the death penalty. Hell, it’s a natural. The people here love the death penalty. We got polls that show almost 70 percent believe in it and more than that are upset because we don’t use it enough in Mississippi. You can blame it on the supreme court. It’s a perfect issue.”

Clete was still nodding. For a week he’d thought of little else. It was indeed the perfect issue, and the court was the perfect target. A race would be a hell of a lot of fun.

“You mentioned a couple of groups,” he said, slugging his double rum.

“There are several, but two in particular. One is Victims Watching, a tough bunch who’ve lost loved ones and been chewed up by the system. They don’t have a lot of members, but they are committed. Between me and you, Mr. X is also secretly funding this group. The other is the Law Enforcement Coalition, a very legitimate law-and-order group with some clout. Both of these will jump on board.”

Clete was nodding, grinning, watching a cocktail waitress glide by with a tray loaded with drinks. “Such balance,” he said, just loud enough to be heard.

“I really have nothing else to add,” Marlin said without pushing.

“Where’s the money?”

Marlin took a deep breath and couldn’t conceal a smile. “In the trunk of my car. Half of it, fifty grand. Take that now, and the day you officially announce, you get the other fifty.”

“Fair enough.”

They shook hands, then both grabbed their drinks. Marlin pulled keys out of a pocket. “My car is a green Mustang with a black top, on your left when you leave. Take the keys, take the car, take the money, I don’t want to see it. I’ll sit here and play blackjack until you return.”

Clete grabbed the keys, struggled to his feet, then strutted across the casino floor and out the door.

Marlin waited for fifteen minutes, then called the cell phone of Tony Zachary. “Looks like we’ve hooked us one,” he said.

“He took the money?” Tony asked.

“The deal is going down now, but, yes, you’ll never see that money again. I suspect that the Lucky Jack will get its share, but, regardless, he’s in.”

“Excellent.”

“This guy is going to be a scream, you know? The cameras will love him.”

“Let’s hope so. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Marlin found a spot at a \$5 table and managed to lose a hundred bucks in half an hour.

Clete was back, grinning, the happiest man in Natchez. Marlin was certain that his trunk was now empty.

They returned to the bar and drank until midnight.

Two weeks later, Ron Fisk was leaving baseball practice when his cell phone rang. He was the head coach of his son Josh’s Little League team, the Raiders, and the first game was a week away. Josh was in the backseat with two of his teammates, sweaty and dirty and very happy.

At first, Ron ignored the phone, then glanced at the caller ID. It was Tony Zachary. They talked at least twice a day. “Hello, Tony,” he said.

“Ron, you got a minute?” Tony always asked this, as if he were willing to call back later. Ron had learned that Tony was never willing to call back later. Every call was urgent.

“Sure.”

“A bit of a wrinkle, I’m afraid. Looks like the race might be more crowded than we thought. Are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Just got it from a good source that some crackpot named Clete Coley, from Natchez, I believe, will announce tomorrow that he is running against Judge McCarthy.”

Ron took a deep breath, then pulled onto the street next to the city’s baseball complex. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“Ever heard of him?”

“No.” Ron knew several lawyers in Natchez, but not this one.

“Me neither. We’re doing a background check now. The preliminary stuff is not too impressive. Sole practitioner, not much of a reputation, at least as a lawyer. Got his license suspended eight years ago for six months, something to do with neglecting clients.

Two divorces. No bankruptcies. One DUI but no other criminal record. That's about all we know, but we're digging."

"Where does this fit?"

"Don't know. Let's wait and see. I'll call when I hear more."

Ron dropped off Josh's friends, then rushed home to tell Doreen. They fretted over dinner, then stayed up late tossing around scenarios.

At ten the following morning, Clete Coley wheeled to a stop at the edge of High Street, directly in front of the Carroll Gartin Justice Building. Two rented vans were behind him. All three vehicles were parked illegally, but then their drivers were looking for trouble. A half-dozen volunteers quickly spilled out of the vans and began carrying large posters up a few steps to the sweeping concrete terrace that surrounded the building. Another volunteer hauled up a makeshift podium.

A capitol policeman noticed this activity and strolled over to inquire.

"I'm announcing my candidacy for the supreme court," Clete explained at full volume. He was flanked by two beefy young men in dark suits, one white, one black, both almost as large as Clete himself.

"You got a permit?" the officer asked.

"Yep. Got it from the attorney general's office."

The cop disappeared, in no particular hurry. The display was put together rapidly, and when it was complete, it stood twenty feet high, thirty feet long, and was nothing but faces. High school graduation portraits, candid snapshots, family photos, all enlarged and in color. The faces of the dead.

As the volunteers scurried about, the reporters began arriving. Cameras were mounted on tripods. Microphones were mounted on the podium. Photographers began snapping away, and Clete was ecstatic. More volunteers arrived, some with homemade posters

with proclamations such as “Vote the Liberals Out,” “Support the Death Penalty,” and “Victims Have Voices.”

The cop was back. “I can’t seem to find anyone who knows anything about your permit,” he said to Clete.

“Well, you found me, and I’m telling you that I have permission.”

“From who?”

“One of those assistant attorney generals in there.”

“You got a name?”

“Oswalt.”

The cop left to go find Mr. Oswalt.

The commotion attracted the attention of those inside the building, and work came to a halt. Rumors flew, and when word reached the fourth floor that someone was about to announce a campaign for a seat on the court, three of its justices dropped everything and hustled to a window. The other six, those whose terms expired in later years, likewise ventured over out of curiosity.

Sheila McCarthy’s office faced High Street, and it was soon filled with her clerks and staff, all suddenly alarmed. She whispered to Paul, “Why don’t you go down there and see what’s up?”

Others, from the court and from the attorney general’s office, eased down, too, and Clete was thrilled with the mob that was quickly gathering in front of his podium. The cop returned with reinforcements, and just as Clete was about to give his speech, he was confronted by the officers. “Sir, we’re gonna have to ask you to leave.”

“Hang on, boys, I’ll be through in ten minutes.”

“No, sir. This is an illegal gathering. Disband it now, or else.”

Clete stepped forward, chest to chest with the much smaller officer, and said, “Don’t show your ass, okay? You got four television cameras watching everything. Just be cool, and I’ll be outta here before you know it.”

“Sorry.”

With that, Clete strode to the podium, and a wall of volunteers closed ranks behind him. He smiled at the cameras and said, “Good morning, and thanks for coming. My name is Clete Coley. I’m a lawyer from Natchez, and I’m announcing my candidacy for the

supreme court. My opponent is Judge Sheila McCarthy, without a doubt the most liberal member of this criminal-coddling, do-nothing supreme court.” The volunteers roared with approval. The reporters smiled at their good fortune. A few almost laughed.

Paul swallowed hard at this unbelievable volley. The man was loud, fearless, and colorful and was loving every second of the attention.

And he was just warming up. “Behind me you see the faces of one hundred and eighty-three people. Black, white, grandmothers, babies, educated, illiterate, from all over the state and from all walks of life. All innocent, all dead, all murdered. Their killers are, as we speak, preparing for lunch up at Parchman, on death row. All duly convicted by juries in this state, all properly sent to death row to be executed.” He paused and grandly waved at the faces of the innocents.

“In Mississippi, we have sixty-eight men and two women on death row. They’re safe there, because this state refuses to execute them. Other states do not. Other states are serious about following their laws. Since 1978, Texas has executed 334 killers. Virginia, 81; Oklahoma, 76; Florida, 55; North Carolina, 41; Georgia, 37; Alabama, 32; and Arkansas, 24. Even northern states like Missouri, Ohio, and Indiana. Hell, Delaware has executed 14 killers. Where is Mississippi? Currently in nineteenth place. We have executed only 8 killers, and that, my friends, is why I’m running for the supreme court.”

The capitol police now numbered almost a dozen, but they seemed content to watch and listen. Riot control was not a specialty, and besides, the man was sounding pretty good.

“Why don’t we execute?” Clete yelled at the crowd. “I’ll tell you why. It’s because our supreme court pampers these thugs and allows their appeals to drag on forever. Bobby Ray Root killed two people in cold blood during the robbery of a liquor store. Twenty-seven years ago. He’s still on death row, getting three meals a day, seeing his mother once a month, with no execution date in sight. Willis Briley murdered his four-year-old stepdaughter.” He stopped and pointed to the photo of a little black girl at the top of the display.

“That’s her, cute little thing in the pink dress. She’d be thirty years old now. Her murderer, a man she trusted, has been on death row for twenty-four years. I could go on and on, but the point is well made. It’s time to shake up this court and show all of those who have committed murder or who might do so that, in this state, we’re serious about enforcing our laws.”

He paused for another boisterous round of applause, one that obviously inspired him.

“Justice Sheila McCarthy has voted to reverse more murder convictions than any other member of the court. Her opinions are filled with legalistic nit-pickings that warm the soul of every criminal defense lawyer in the state. The ACLU loves her. Her opinions drip with sympathy for these murderers. They give hope to the thugs on death row. It is time, ladies and gentlemen, to take away her robe, her pen, her vote, her power to trample the rights of the victims.”

Paul considered scribbling down some of this, but he was too petrified to move. He wasn’t sure his boss voted so often in favor of capital defendants, but he was certain that virtually all of their convictions were affirmed. Regardless of shoddy police work, racism, malice by prosecutors, stacked juries, and boneheaded rulings by presiding judges, regardless of how horribly defective the trial was, the supreme court rarely reversed a conviction. Paul found it sickening. The split was usually 6–3, with Sheila leading a vocal but overmatched minority. Two of the justices had never voted to reverse a capital conviction. One had never voted to reverse a criminal conviction.

Paul knew that privately his boss was opposed to capital punishment, but she was also committed to upholding the laws of the state. A great deal of her time was spent on death cases, and he had never once seen her substitute her personal beliefs for a strict following of the law. If the trial record was clean, she did not hesitate to join the majority and affirm a conviction.

Clete did not yield to the temptation of speaking too long. He’d made his points. His announcement was a fabulous success. He lowered his voice, grew more sincere, and finished by saying: “I

urge all Mississippians who care about law and order, all who are sick of random, senseless crimes, to join with me in turning this court upside down. Thank you.” More applause.

Two of the larger officers moved in close to the podium. The reporters began to throw questions. “Have you ever served as a judge? How much financial support do you have? Who are these volunteers? Do you have specific proposals to shorten the appeals?”

Clete was about to begin with his answers when an officer grabbed his arm and said, “That’s it, sir. Party’s over.”

“Go to hell,” Clete said as he yanked his arm away. The rest of the police contingent scurried forward, jostling through the volunteers, many of whom began yelling at them.

“Let’s go, buddy,” the officer said.

“Get lost.” Then to the cameras he boomed, “Look at this. Soft on crime but to hell with the freedom of speech.”

“You’re under arrest.”

“Arrest! You’re arresting me because I’m making a speech.” As he said this, he gently, and voluntarily, placed both hands behind his back.

“You don’t have a permit, sir,” one officer said as two more slapped on the handcuffs.

“Look at these supreme court guards, sent down from the fourth floor by the very people I’m running against.”

“Let’s go, sir.”

As he moved from the podium, Clete kept yelling, “I won’t be in jail long, and when I get out, I’ll hit the streets telling the truth about these liberal bastards. You can count on that.”

Sheila watched the spectacle from the safety of her window. Another clerk, standing near the reporters, relayed the news via cell phone.

That nut down there had chosen her.

Paul lingered until the display was removed and the crowd drifted away, then he raced up the steps to Sheila's office. She was at her desk, with the other clerk and Justice McElwayne. The air was heavy, the mood somber. They looked at Paul as if he might by chance have some good news.

"This guy's crazy," he said. They nodded their agreement.

"He doesn't appear to be a pawn for big business," McElwayne said.

"I've never heard of him," Sheila said softly. She appeared to be in shock. "I guess an easy year just became very complicated."

The idea of starting a campaign from scratch was overwhelming.

"How much did your race cost?" Paul asked. He had just joined the court two years earlier, when Justice McElwayne was under assault.

"One point four million."

Sheila grunted and laughed. "I have \$6,000 in my campaign account. It's been there for years."

"But I had a legitimate opponent," McElwayne added. "This guy is a nut."

"Nuts get elected."

Twenty minutes later, Tony Zachary watched the show in his locked office, four blocks away. Marlin had captured it all on video, and was more than pleased to see it again.

"We've created a monster," Tony said, laughing.

"He's good."

"Maybe too good."

"Anybody else you want in the race?"

"No, I think the ballot is complete at this point. Nice work."

Marlin left, and Tony punched the number for Ron Fisk. Not surprisingly, the busy lawyer answered after the first ring. "I'm afraid it's true," Tony said gravely, then recounted the announcement and the arrest.

“The guy must be crazy,” Ron said.

“Definitely. My first impression is that this is not all bad. In fact, it could help us. This clown will generate a lot of coverage, and he seems perfectly willing to take a hatchet to McCarthy.”

“Why do I have a knot in my stomach?”

“Politics is a rough game, Ron, something you’re about to learn. I’m not worried, not right now. We stick to our game plan, nothing changes.”

“It seems to me that a crowded field only helps the incumbent,” Ron observed. And he was right, as a general rule.

“Not necessarily. There’s no reason to panic. Besides, we can’t do anything about others who jump in. Stay focused. Let’s sleep on it and talk tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 18

Clete Coley's colorful launch landed with perfect timing. There was not another interesting story throughout the entire state. The press seized Coley's announcement and beat it like a drum. And who could blame them? How often does the public get to see vivid footage of a lawyer getting handcuffed and dragged away while yelling about those "liberal bastards." And such a loud, large lawyer at that? His haunting display of dead faces was irresistible. His volunteers, especially the relatives of the victims, were more than happy to chat with the reporters and tell their stories. His gall in holding the rally directly under the noses of the supreme court was humorous, even admirable.

He was rushed downtown to central headquarters, and there he was booked, fingerprinted, and photographed. He assumed, correctly, that his mug shot would find its way to the press in short order, and so he had a few moments to think about its message. An angry scowl might confirm the suspicion that this guy was a bit off his rocker. A goofy smile might lead to questions about his sincerity—who smiles when he's just arrived at the jail? He settled on a simple blank face, with just a trace of a curious glare, as if to say, "Why are they picking on me?"

Procedures called for every inmate to strip, shower, and change into an orange jumpsuit, and this usually happened before the mug shot. But Clete would have none of it. The charge was simple trespass, with a maximum fine of \$250. Bail was twice that, and Clete, his pockets bulging with \$100 bills, flashed enough money around to let the authorities know he was on his way out of jail, not the other way around. So they skipped the shower and the jumpsuit, and Clete was photographed in his nicest brown suit, starched white shirt, paisley silk tie in a perfect knot. His long, graying hair was in place.

The process took less than an hour, and when he emerged a free man, he was thrilled to see that most of the reporters had followed him. On a city sidewalk, he answered their questions until they finally grew weary.

On the evening news, he was the lead story, with all the drama of the day. On the late night news, he was back. He watched it all on a wide-screen TV in a bikers' bar in south Jackson, where he was holed up for the night, buying drinks for everyone who could get in the door. His tab was over \$1,400. A campaign expense.

The bikers loved him and promised to turn out in droves to get him elected. Of course, not a single one was a registered voter. When the bar closed, Clete was driven away in a bright red Cadillac Escalade, just leased by the campaign at a thousand dollars a month. Behind the wheel was one of his new bodyguards, the white one, a young man only slightly more sober than his boss. They made it to the motel without further arrest.

At the offices of the Mississippi Trial Advocates on State Street, Barbara Mellinger, executive director and chief lobbyist, met for an early round of coffee with her assistant, Skip Sanchez. For the first cup, they mulled over the morning newspapers. They had copies of four of the dailies from the southern district—Biloxi, Hattiesburg, Laurel, and Natchez—and Mr. Coley's face was on the front page of all four. The Jackson paper reported little else. The *Times-Picayune* out of New Orleans had a readership along the Coast, and it ran an AP story, with photo (handcuffs) on page 4.

"Perhaps we should advise all our candidates to get themselves arrested when they do their announcements," Barbara said drily and with no attempt at humor. She hadn't smiled in twenty-four hours. She drained her first cup and went for more.

"Who the hell is Clete Coley?" Sanchez asked, staring at the various photos of the man. Jackson and Biloxi had the mug shot—

the look of a man who would throw a punch and ask questions after it landed.

“I called Walter last night, down in Natchez,” she was saying. “He says Coley has been around for years, always on the edge of something shady but smart enough not to get caught. He thinks that at one time he did oil and gas work. There was a bad deal with some small business loans. Now he fancies himself a gambler. Never been seen within six blocks of the courthouse. He’s unknown.”

“Not anymore.”

Barbara got up and moved slowly around the office. She refilled the cups, then sat down and resumed her study of the newspapers.

“He’s not a tort reformer,” Skip said, though not without some doubt. “He doesn’t fit their mold. He’s got too much baggage for a hard campaign. There’s at least one DUI, at least two divorces.”

“I think I agree, but if he’s never been involved before, then why is he suddenly screaming about the death penalty? Where does this conviction come from? This passion? Plus, his show yesterday was well organized. He’s got people. Where do they come from?”

“Do we really care? Sheila McCarthy beats him two to one. We should be thrilled he is what he is—a buffoon who, we think, is not being financed by the Commerce Council and all the corporate boys. Why aren’t we happy?”

“Because we’re trial lawyers.”

Skip turned gloomy again.

“Should we arrange a meeting with Judge McCarthy?” Barbara asked after a long, heavy pause.

“In a couple of days. Let the dust settle.”

Judge McCarthy was up early, and why not? She certainly couldn’t sleep. At 7:30 she was seen leaving her condo. She was trailed to the Belhaven section of Jackson, an older neighborhood. She parked in the driveway of the Honorable Justice James Henry McElwayne.

Tony was hardly surprised by this little get-together.

Mrs. McElwayne greeted her warmly and invited her inside, through the den and kitchen and all the way back to his study. Jimmy, as he was known to his friends, was just finishing the morning papers.

McElwayne and McCarthy. Big Mac and Little Mac, as they were sometimes referred to. They spent a few minutes chatting about Mr. Coley and his astounding press coverage, then got down to business.

“Last night, I went through my campaign files,” McElwayne said as he handed over a folder an inch thick. “The first section is a list of contributors, beginning with the heavy hitters and going south. All the big checks were written by trial lawyers.”

The next section summarized his campaign’s expenses, numbers that Sheila found hard to believe. After that there were reports from consultants, sample ads, poll results, a dozen other campaign-related reports.

“This brings back bad memories,” he said.

“Sorry. This is not what I wanted, believe me.”

“You have my sympathy.”

“Who’s behind this guy?”

“I thought about it all night. He could be a decoy. He’s definitely a nut. Whatever he is, you can’t take him lightly. If he’s your only opponent, sooner or later the bad guys will find their way into his camp. They’ll bring their money. And this guy with a fat checkbook could really be frightening.”

McElwayne had once been a state senator, then an elected chancery court judge. He’d fought the political wars. Two years earlier, Sheila watched helplessly as he was savaged and abused in a bitter campaign. At its lowest point, when his opponent’s television ads (later known to be financed by the American Rifle Association) accused him of being in favor of gun control (there is no greater sin in Mississippi), she had told herself that she would never, under any circumstances, allow herself to be so degraded. It wasn’t worth it. She would scamper back to Biloxi, open a little boutique firm, and see her grandchildren every other day. Someone else could have the job.

Now she wasn't so sure. She was angered by Coley's attacks. Her blood was not yet boiling, but it wouldn't take much more. At fifty-one, she was too young to quit and too old to start over.

They talked politics for over an hour. McElwayne spun yarns of old elections and colorful politicians, and Sheila gently nudged him back to the battles she now faced. His campaign had been expertly run by a young lawyer who took a leave of absence from a large Jackson firm. McElwayne promised to call him later in the day and check his pulse. He promised to call the big donors and the local operatives. He knew the editors of the newspapers. He would do whatever he could to protect her seat on the bench.

Sheila left at 9:14, drove nonstop to the Gartin building, and parked.

The Coley announcement was noted at Payton & Payton, but little was said. On April 18, the day after, three important events occurred, and the firm had no interest in other news. The first event was well received. The others were not.

The good news was that a young lawyer from the tiny town of Bogue Chitto stopped by and cut a deal with Wes. The lawyer, an office practitioner with no personal injury experience, had somehow managed to become the attorney for the survivors of a pulpwood cutter who'd been killed in a horrible accident on Interstate 55 near the Louisiana line. According to the highway patrol, the accident had been caused by the recklessness of the driver of an eighteen-wheeler owned by a large company. An eyewitness was already on record stating that the truck passed her in a wild rush, and she was doing "around" seventy miles per hour. The lawyer had a contingency agreement that would give him 30 percent of any recovery. He and Wes agreed to equally split it. The pulpwood cutter was thirty-six years old and earned about \$40,000 a year. The math was easy. A million-dollar settlement was quite possible. Wes drew up a lawsuit in less than an hour and was ready to file. The

case was especially gratifying because the young lawyer chose the Payton firm on account of its recent reputation. The *Baker* verdict had finally attracted a worthwhile client.

The depressing news was the arrival of Krane's appellant brief. It was 102 pages long—twice the limit—and gave every impression of being beautifully researched and written by an entire team of very bright lawyers. It was too long and two months late, but the concessions had been granted by the court. Jared Kurtin and his men had been very persuasive in their arguments for more time and more pages. It was, obviously, not a routine case.

Mary Grace would have sixty days to respond. After the brief was gawked at by the rest of the firm, she hauled it to her desk for the first reading. Krane was claiming a grand total of twenty-four errors at trial, each worthy of correction on appeal. It began pleasantly enough with an exhaustive review of all the comments and rulings by Judge Harrison that allegedly revealed his intense bias against the defendant. Then it challenged the selection of the jury. It attacked the experts called on behalf of Jeannette Baker: the toxicologist who testified as to the near-record levels of BCL and cartolox and aklar in Bowmore's drinking water; the pathologist who described the highly carcinogenic nature of these chemicals; the medical researcher who described the record rate of cancer in and around Bowmore; the geologist who tracked the toxic wastes through the ground and into the aquifer under the town's well; the driller who drilled the test holes; the doctors who performed the autopsies on both Chad and Pete Baker; the scientist who studied pesticides and said ghastly things about pillamar 5; and the most crucial expert, the medical researcher who linked BCL and cartolox to the cancerous cells found in the bodies. The Paytons had used fourteen expert witnesses, and each was criticized at length and declared unqualified. Three were described as charlatans. Judge Harrison was wrong time and again for allowing them to testify. Their reports, entered into evidence after lengthy fights, were picked apart, condemned in scholarly language, and labeled as "junk science." The verdict itself was against the overwhelming weight of the evidence and a clear indication of undue sympathy on

the part of the jury. Harsh but skillful words were used to attack the punitive element. The plaintiff fell far short in her efforts to prove that Krane had contaminated the drinking water either by gross negligence or by outright intent. Finally, the brief ended with a strident plea for a reversal and new trial, or, better yet, an outright dismissal by the supreme court. "This outrageous and unjustified verdict should be reversed and rendered," it read in closing. In other words, throw it out forever.

The brief was well written, well reasoned, and persuasive, and after two hours of nonstop reading Mary Grace finished it with a splitting headache. She took three Advil, then gave it to Sherman, who eyed it with all the caution he would have given a rattlesnake.

The third event, and the most alarming news, came in a phone call from Pastor Denny Ott. Wes took it after dark, then walked to his wife's office and closed the door.

"That was Denny," he said.

As Mary Grace looked at her husband's face, her first thought was that another client had passed away. There had been so many sad phone calls from Bowmore that she could almost anticipate one. "What is it?"

"He talked to the sheriff. Mr. Leon Gatewood is missing."

Though they had no affection whatsoever for the man, the news was still troubling. Gatewood was an industrial engineer who had worked at the Krane plant in Bowmore for thirty-four years. A company man to the core, he had retired when Krane fled to Mexico, and had admitted, in deposition and on cross-examination at trial, that the company had given him a termination package worth three years' salary, or about \$190,000. Krane was not known for such generosity. The Paytons had found no other employee with such a sweet deal.

Gatewood had retired to a little sheep farm in the southwest corner of Cary County, about as far from Bowmore and its water as

one could possibly get and still reside in the county. During his three-day deposition, he steadfastly denied any dumping at the plant. At trial, with a stack of documents, Wes had grilled him without mercy. Gatewood called the other Krane employees liars. He refused to believe records that showed tons of toxic by-products had, in fact, not been hauled away from the plant, but had simply gone missing. He laughed at incriminating photographs of some of the six hundred decomposed BCL drums dug up from the ravine behind the plant. "You doctored those," he shot back at Wes. His testimony was so blatantly fabricated that Judge Harrison talked openly, in chambers, of perjury charges. Gatewood was arrogant, belligerent, and short-tempered and made the jury despise Krane Chemical. He was a powerful witness for the plaintiff, though he testified only after being dragged to court by a subpoena. Jared Kurtin could have choked him.

"When did this happen?" she asked.

"He went fishing alone two days ago. His wife is still waiting."

The disappearance of Earl Crouch in Texas two years earlier was still an unsolved mystery. Crouch had been Gatewood's boss. Both had vehemently defended Krane and denied what had become obvious. Both had complained of harassment, even death threats. And they weren't alone. Many of the people who worked there, who made the pesticides and dumped the poisons, had been threatened. Most had drifted away from Bowmore, to escape the drinking water, to look for other jobs, and to avoid getting sucked into the coming storm of litigation. At least four had died of cancer.

Others had testified and told the truth. Others, including Crouch, Gatewood, and Buck Burleson, had testified and lied. Each group hated the other, and collectively they were hated by the remainder of Cary County.

"I guess the Stones are at it again," Wes said.

"You don't know that."

"No one will ever know. I'm just happy they're our clients."

"Our clients are restless down there," she said. "It's time for a meeting."

"It's time for dinner. Who's cooking?"

“Ramona.”

“Tortillas or enchiladas?”

“Spaghetti.”

“Let’s go find a bar and have a drink, just the two of us. We need to celebrate, dear. This little case from Bogue Chitto might just be a quick million-dollar settlement.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

CHAPTER 19

After ten performances, Coley's Faces of the Dead Tour came to an end. It ran out of gas in Pascagoula, the last of the big towns in the southern district. Though he tried desperately along the way, Clete was unable to get himself arrested again. He did, however, manage to generate quite a buzz at every stop. The reporters loved him. Admirers grabbed his brochures and began writing checks, albeit small ones. The local cops watched his announcements with silent approval.

But after ten days, Clete needed a break. He returned to Natchez and was soon at the Lucky Jack taking cards from Ivan. He had no real campaign strategy, no plan. He'd left nothing behind in the places he stopped, except for some fleeting publicity. There was no organization, except for a few volunteers that he would soon ignore. Frankly, he wasn't about to spend the time or the money necessary to rev up a campaign of respectable size. He wasn't about to touch the cash Marlin had given him, not for campaign expenses anyway. He would spend whatever contributions trickled in, but he had no plans to lose money on this adventure. The attention was addictive and he would show up when necessary to make a speech, attack his opponent, and attack liberal judges of all stripes, but his priority was gambling and drinking. Clete had no dreams of winning. Hell, he wouldn't take the job if they handed it to him. He had always hated those thick law books.

Tony Zachary flew to Boca Raton and was picked up by a chauffeur-driven car. He had been to Mr. Rinehart's office once before and

looked forward to the return. They would spend most of the next two days together.

Over a splendid lunch with a beautiful view of the ocean, they had a great time reviewing the antics of their stooge, Clete Coley. Barry Rinehart had read every press clipping and seen every TV news report. They were quite pleased with their decoy.

Next, they analyzed the results of their first major poll. It covered five hundred registered voters in the twenty-seven counties of the southern district and had been conducted the day after Coley's tour ended. Not surprisingly, at least to Barry Rinehart, 66 percent could not name any of the three supreme court judges from the southern district. Sixty-nine percent were unaware that the voters actually elected the members of the supreme court.

"And this is a state where they elect highway commissioners, public service commissioners, the state treasurer, state commissioners of insurance and agriculture, county tax collectors, county coroners, everybody but the dogcatcher," Barry said.

"They vote every year," Tony said, peering over his reading glasses. He had stopped eating and was looking at some graphs.

"Every single year. Whether it's municipal, judicial, state and local, or federal, they go to the polls every year. Such a waste. Small wonder turnout is low. Hell, the voters are sick of politics."

Of the 34 percent who could name a supreme court justice, only half mentioned Sheila McCarthy. If the election were held today, 18 percent would vote for her, 15 percent would vote for Clete Coley, and the rest either were undecided or simply wouldn't vote because they didn't know anyone in the race.

After some initial straightforward questions, the poll began to reveal its slant. Would you vote for a supreme court candidate who is opposed to the death penalty? Seventy-three percent said they would not.

Would you vote for a candidate who supports the legal marriage of two homosexuals? Eighty-eight percent said no.

Would you vote for a candidate who is in favor of tougher gun-control laws? Eight-five percent said no.

Do you own at least one gun? Ninety-six percent said yes.

The questions had multiple parts and follow-ups, and were obviously designed to walk the voter down a path lined with hot-button issues. No effort was made to explain that the supreme court was not a legislative body; it did not have the responsibility or jurisdiction to make laws dealing with these issues. No effort was made to keep the field level. Like many polls, Rinehart's skillfully shifted into a subtle attack.

Would you support a liberal candidate for the supreme court? Seventy percent would not.

Are you aware that Justice Sheila McCarthy is considered the most liberal member of the Mississippi Supreme Court? Eighty-four percent said no.

If she is the most liberal member of the court, will you vote for her? Sixty-five percent said no, but most of those being polled didn't like the question. If? Was she or wasn't she the most liberal? Anyway, Barry considered the question useless. The promising part was how little name recognition Sheila McCarthy had after nine years on the bench, though, in his experience, this was not unusual. He could argue with anyone, privately, that this was another perfect reason why state supreme court judges shouldn't be elected in the first place. They should not be politicians. Their names should not be well-known.

The poll then shifted away from the supreme court and settled onto the individual participants. There were questions about religious faith, belief in God, church attendance, financial support of the church, and so on. And there were questions about certain issues—where do you stand on abortion, stem cell research, et cetera?

The poll wrapped up with the basics—race, marital status, number of children, if any, approximate income status, and voting history.

The overall results confirmed what Barry suspected. The voters were conservative, middle-class, and white (78 percent) and could easily be turned against a liberal judge. The trick, of course, was to convert Sheila McCarthy from the sensible moderate she was into the raging liberal they needed her to be. Barry's researchers were analyzing every word she had ever written in a legal ruling, both at

the circuit court level and on the supreme court. She could not escape her words; no judge could ever do that. And Barry planned to hang her with her own words.

After lunch, they moved to the conference table, where Barry had a display of the initial mock-ups of Ron Fisk's campaign literature. There were hundreds of new photographs of the Fisk family in all its wholesomeness—walking into church, on the front porch, at the baseball park, the parents together, alone, dripping with love and affection.

The first soft ads were still being edited, but Barry wanted to share them anyway. They had been filmed by a crew sent from Washington to Mississippi. The first was of Fisk standing by a Civil War monument at the Vicksburg battlefield, gazing off into the distance as if listening to distant cannons. His soft, richly accented voice played over: "I'm Ron Fisk. My great-great-grandfather was killed on this spot in July of 1863. He was a lawyer, a judge, and a member of the state legislature. His dream was to serve on the supreme court. That's my dream today. I am a seventh-generation Mississippian, and I ask for your support."

Tony was surprised. "The Civil War?"

"Oh yes. They love it."

"What about the black vote?"

"We'll get 30 percent of it, from the churches. That's all we need."

The next ad was shot in Ron's office. Jacket off, sleeves rolled up, desk arranged in a careful clutter. Looking sincerely at the camera, Ron talked about his love of the law, the pursuit of truth, the demands of fairness from those who sit on the bench. It was a fairly bland effort, but it did convey warmth and intelligence.

There were a total of six ads. "Just the soft ones," Barry promised. A couple would not survive editing, and there was a good chance the camera crew would be sent back for more.

"What about the nasty ones?" Tony asked.

"Still in the writing stage. We won't need them until after Labor Day."

"How much have we spent so far?"

"Quarter of a million. A drop in the bucket."

They spent two hours with an Internet consultant whose firm did nothing but raise money for political races. So far, he had put together an e-mail bank with just over forty thousand names—individuals with a history of contributing, members of the associations and groups already on board, known political activists at the local level, and a smaller number of people outside of Mississippi who would feel sympathetic enough to send a check. He guessed that the list would grow by another ten thousand, and he projected total contributions at somewhere in the range of \$500,000. Most important, his list was ready and waiting. When given the green light, he simply pushed a button, the solicitation flew out, and the checks started coming.

The green light was the principal topic over a long dinner that night. The deadline to qualify was a month away. Though there were the usual rumors, Tony firmly believed that the race would attract no one else. “There will be only three horses,” he said. “And we own two of them.”

“What’s McCarthy doing?” Barry asked. He received daily updates on her movements, which so far had revealed little.

“Not much. She appears to be shell-shocked. One day she’s unopposed; the next day she’s got some crazy cowboy named Coley calling her a liberal convict lover and the newspapers are printing everything he says. I’m sure she’s getting advice from McElwayne, her sidekick, but she has yet to put together a staff for the campaign.”

“Is she raising money?”

“The trial lawyers issued one of their standard panic e-mails last week, begging for money from the membership. I have no idea how that’s going.”

“Sex?”

“Just the usual boyfriend. You’ve got the report. No real dirt yet.”

Shortly after opening the second bottle of a fine Oregon pinot noir, they decided to launch Fisk in two weeks. The boy was ready, straining at the leash, desperate to hit the trail. Everything was in place. He was taking a six-month leave from his firm, and his partners were happy. And well they should be. They had just picked up five new clients—two large timber companies, a pipeline contractor from Houston, and two natural gas firms. The vast coalition of lobbying groups was on board, ready with cash and foot soldiers. McCarthy was afraid of her shadow and apparently hoping Clete Coley would simply go away or self-destruct.

They touched glasses and toasted the eve of an exciting campaign.

As always, the meeting was held in the fellowship hall of the Pine Grove Church. And as usual, several non-clients tried to wiggle their way in to hear the latest. They were politely escorted out by Pastor Ott, who explained that this was a very confidential meeting between the lawyers and their clients.

Other than the *Baker* case, the Paytons had thirty Bowmore cases. Eighteen involved people who were already dead. The other twelve involved people with cancer in various stages. Four years earlier, the Paytons had made the tactical decision to take their best case—Jeannette Baker's—and try it first. It would be far cheaper than trying all thirty-one at one time. Jeannette was the most sympathetic, having lost her entire family in the span of eight months. That decision now looked brilliant.

Wes and Mary Grace hated these meetings. A sadder, more tragic group of people could not be found anywhere. They had lost children, husbands, and wives. They were terminally ill and living with incredible pain. They asked questions that could not be answered, over and over, in slightly different variations because no two cases were identical. Some wanted to quit, and others wanted to fight forever. Some wanted money, and others just wanted Krane to

be held accountable. There were always tears, and harsh words, and for this reason Pastor Ott was there as a calming influence.

Now, with the *Baker* verdict legendary, the Paytons knew the rest of their clients had much higher expectations. Six months after the verdict, the clients were more anxious than ever. They called the office more often. They sent more letters and e-mails.

The meeting had the extra tension caused by the funeral, three days earlier, of Leon Gatewood, a man they all despised. His body was found in a pile of brush three miles downriver from his capsized fishing boat. There was no evidence of foul play, but everyone suspected it. The sheriff was busy with an investigation.

All thirty families were represented. The notepad Wes passed around had sixty-two names on it, names he knew well, including that of Frank Stone, a caustic bricklayer who usually said little during these meetings. It was assumed, without a shred of evidence, that if Leon Gatewood's death had been caused by someone else, then Frank Stone knew something about it.

Mary Grace began with a warm hello. She thanked them for coming, and for their patience. She talked about the *Baker* appeal, and for a little dramatic effect she hoisted the thick brief filed by Krane's lawyers as evidence that many hours were being spent on the appellate front. All briefs would be in by September, then the supreme court would decide how to handle the case. It had the option of passing it off to a lower court, the court of appeals, for an initial review, or it could simply keep it. A case of this magnitude would eventually be decided by the supreme court, and she and Wes were of the opinion that it would bypass the lower court. If that happened, oral arguments would be scheduled for later in the year, or perhaps early next year. Her best guess was a final ruling in about a year.

If the court affirmed the verdict, there were several possible scenarios. Krane would be under enormous pressure to settle the remaining claims, which, of course, would be a highly favored result. If Krane refused to settle, she was of the opinion that Judge Harrison would consolidate the other cases and try them in one huge trial. In that event, their firm would have the resources to fight

on. She confided in the clients that they had spent borrowed funds in excess of \$400,000 to get the *Baker* case to a jury, and they simply could not do it again unless the first verdict was upheld.

As poor as the clients were, they were not nearly as broke as their lawyers.

“What if the *Baker* verdict is rejected by the court?” asked Eileen Johnson. Her head was bare from chemo, and she weighed less than a hundred pounds. Her husband held her hand throughout the meeting.

“That’s a possibility,” Mary Grace admitted. “But we are confident it won’t happen.” She said this with more assurance than she possessed. The Paytons felt good about the appeal, but any rational lawyer would be nervous. “But if it happens, the court will send it back for another trial. It could be on all issues, or simply on damages. It’s hard to predict.”

She moved on, anxious to get away from more talk about losing. She assured them that their cases were still receiving the full attention of their firm. Hundreds of documents were being processed each week and filed away. Other experts were being sought. They were in a holding pattern, but still working hard.

“What about this class action?” asked Curtis Knight, the father of a teenage boy who’d died four years earlier. The question seemed to arouse the crowd. Others, less deserving, were encroaching on their territory.

“Forget about it,” she said. “Those plaintiffs are at the bottom of the pile. They win only if there’s a settlement, and any settlement must first satisfy your claims. We control the settlement. You are not competing with those people.”

Her answer seemed good enough.

Wes took over with cautionary words. Because of the verdict, the pressure on Krane Chemical was greater than ever. They probably had investigators in the area, watching the plaintiffs, trying to gather information that might be damaging. Be careful who you talk to. Be wary of strangers. Report anything even remotely unusual.

For a long-suffering people, this was not welcome news. They had enough to worry about.

The questions continued and went on for over an hour. The Paytons worked hard to reassure, to show compassion and confidence, to give hope. But the tougher challenge was keeping a lid on expectations.

If anyone in the room was concerned about a supreme court race, it was never mentioned.

CHAPTER 20

When he stepped forward and gazed at the large congregation on Sunday morning, Ron Fisk had no idea how many pulpits he would visit over the next six months. Nor did he realize that the pulpit would become a symbol of his campaign.

He thanked his minister for the opportunity, then thanked his congregation, his fellow members of St. Luke's Baptist Church, for their indulgence. "Tomorrow, down the street at the Lincoln County Courthouse, I will announce my candidacy for the Mississippi Supreme Court. Doreen and I have been struggling with and praying about this for several months now. We have counseled with Pastor Rose. We have discussed it with our children, our families, and our friends. And we are finally at peace with our decision and want to share it with you before the announcement tomorrow."

He glanced at his notes, looked a little nervous, then continued.

"I have no background in politics. Frankly, I've never had the stomach for it. Doreen and I have established a happy life here in Brookhaven, raising our kids, worshipping here with you, taking part in our community. We are blessed, and we thank God every day for his goodness. We thank God for this church and for friends like you. You are our family."

Another nervous pause.

"I seek to serve on the supreme court because I cherish the values that we share. Values based on the Bible and our faith in Christ. The sanctity of the family—man and woman. The sanctity of life. The freedom to enjoy life without fear of crime and government intervention. Like you, I am frustrated by the erosion of our values. They are under attack by our society, by our depraved culture, and by many of our politicians. Yes, also by our courts. I offer my candidacy as one man's fight against liberal judges. With your help, I can win. Thank you."

Mercifully brief—another long-winded sermon was surely coming next—Ron’s words were so well received that a polite round of applause rippled through the sanctuary as he returned to his seat and sat with his family.

Two hours later, while the white churchgoers in Brookhaven were having lunch and the black ones were just getting cranked up, Ron bounded up red-carpeted steps to the massive podium of the Mount Pisgah Church of God in Christ on the west side of town and delivered a lengthier version of the morning’s comments. (He omitted the word “liberal.”) Until two days earlier, he had never met the reverend of the town’s largest black congregation. A friend pulled some strings and manipulated an invitation.

That night, in the middle of a rowdy Pentecostal holy hour, he grabbed the pulpit, waited for the racket to die down, then introduced himself and made his appeal. He ignored his notes and spoke longer. He went after the liberals again.

Driving home afterward, he was struck by how few people he actually knew in his small town. His clients were insurance companies, not people. He rarely ventured outside the security of his neighborhood, his church, his social circle. Frankly, he preferred to stay there.

At nine Monday morning he gathered on the steps of the courthouse with Doreen and the kids, his law firm, a large group of friends, courthouse employees and regulars, and most of his Rotary Club, and he announced his candidacy to the rest of the state. It was not planned as a media event. Only a few reporters and cameras showed up.

Barry Rinehart subscribed to the strategy of peaking on Election Day, not when the announcement is made.

Ron delivered his carefully worded and rehearsed remarks for fifteen minutes, with lots of applause thrown in. He answered every question the reporters had, then moved inside to a small, empty courtroom, where he happily gave a thirty-minute exclusive to one of the political reporters for the Jackson newspaper.

The party then moved three blocks down the street, where Ron cut the ribbon across the door of his official campaign headquarters

in an old building that had been freshly painted and covered with campaign propaganda. Over coffee and biscuits, he chatted with friends, posed for pictures, and sat for another interview, this one with a newspaper he'd never heard of. Tony Zachary was there, supervising the festivities and watching the clock.

Simultaneously, a press release of his announcement was sent to every newspaper in the state and to the major dailies throughout the Southeast. One was also e-mailed to each member of the supreme court, each member of the legislature, every other elected official in the state, every registered lobbyist, thousands of state employees, every doctor with a license, and every lawyer admitted to the bar. There were 390,000 registered voters in the southern district. Rinehart's Internet consultants had found e-mail addresses for about a fourth of them, and these lucky folks received the news online while Ron was still at the courthouse making his speech. A total of 120,000 e-mails went out in one blast.

Forty-two thousand solicitations for money were sent by e-mail, along with a message that touted the virtues of Ron Fisk while attacking the social evils caused by "liberal, left-leaning judges who substitute their own agendas for those of the people."

From a rented warehouse in south Jackson, a building Ron Fisk did not know about and would never lay eyes on, 390,000 stuffed envelopes were removed and taken to the central post office. Inside each was a campaign brochure with lots of endearing photos, a warm letter from Ron himself, a smaller envelope if one wished to send back a check, and a complimentary bumper sticker. The colors were red, white, and blue, and the artwork was obviously done by professionals. Every detail in the mailing was of the highest quality.

At 11:00 a.m., Tony moved the show south to McComb, the eleventh-largest city in the district. (Brookhaven ranked fourteenth with a population of 10,800.) Traveling in a newly leased Chevrolet Suburban, with a volunteer named Guy at the wheel, with his new but already indispensable first assistant, Monte, in the front seat and on the phone, and with Doreen sitting by his side on the rather spacious middle bench of the SUV, Ron Fisk smiled smugly at the countryside flying by him. It was a moment to be savored. His first

foray into politics, and in such grand style. All those supporters, their enthusiasm, the press and the cameras, the heady challenge of the job ahead, the thrill of winning, all in just the first two hours of the campaign. The strong rush of adrenaline was only a sample of what was coming. He imagined a great victory in November. He could see himself springing from the mundane anonymity of a small-town law practice to the prestige of the supreme court. It all lay before him.

Tony followed closely behind, relaying a quick update to Barry Rinehart.

At the City Hall in McComb, Ron announced again. The crowd was small but loud. There were a few friends, but the rest were total strangers. After two quick interviews, with photos, he was driven to the McComb airstrip, where he boarded a Lear 55, a handsome little jet built like a rocket, although, as Ron couldn't help but notice, much smaller than the G5 that had whisked him to Washington. Doreen barely managed to suppress her excitement at her first encounter with a private jet. Tony joined the flight. Guy raced ahead with the SUV.

Fifteen minutes later they landed in Hattiesburg, population forty-eight thousand, the third-largest city in the district. At 1:00 p.m., Ron and Doreen were the guests at a Prayer Lunch thrown together by a loose coalition of fundamentalist pastors. The setting was an old Holiday Inn. Tony waited in the bar.

Over badly fried chicken and butter beans, Ron did more listening than talking. Several of the preachers, evidently still inspired by their Sunday labors, felt the need to bless him with their views on various issues and evils. Hollywood, rap music, celebrity culture, rampant pornography, the Internet, underage drinking, underage sex, and on and on. Ron nodded sincerely and was soon ready to escape. When he did say a few words, he chose all the right ones. He and Doreen had prayed about this race and felt the Lord's hand in it. Laws created by man should strive to emulate the laws of God. Only men of clear moral vision should judge the problems of others. And so on. He was unequivocally endorsed on the spot.

Freed from the meeting, Ron addressed a group of two dozen supporters outside the Forrest County Circuit Court building. The event was covered by the Hattiesburg TV station. After a few questions, he walked along Main Street, shaking hands with any and all, passing out his slick brochures, and ducking into every law office for a quick heyhowdy. At 3:30, the Lear 55 took off and headed to the Coast. At eight thousand feet and climbing, it flew over the southwest corner of Cancer County.

Guy was waiting with the Suburban at the Gulfport-Biloxi Regional Airport. Ron kissed Doreen goodbye, and the plane took her back to McComb. Another driver there would take her to Brookhaven. At the Harrison County Courthouse, Ron announced again, answered the same questions, then sat down for a long interview with the *Sun Herald*.

Biloxi was the home of Sheila McCarthy. It was adjacent to Gulfport, the largest city in the southern district, with a population of sixty-five thousand. Biloxi and Gulfport were the center of the Coast region, a three-county area along the Gulf with 60 percent of the votes. To the east was Ocean Springs, Gautier, Moss Point, Pascagoula, and then Mobile. To the west was Pass Christian, Long Beach, Waveland, Bay St. Louis, then New Orleans.

Tony planned for Ron to spend at least half of his time there during the campaign. At 6:00 p.m., the candidate was introduced to his Coast office, a renovated fast-food franchise on Highway 90, the heavily traveled four-lane at the beach. Brightly colored campaign signs blanketed the area around the headquarters, and a large crowd gathered to hear and meet their candidate. Ron knew none of them. Nor did Tony. Virtually all were employees of some of the companies indirectly financing the campaign. Half worked in the regional office of a national auto insurance company. When Ron arrived and saw his headquarters, its decorations, and the crowd, he marveled at the organizational skills of Tony Zachary. This might be easier than he thought.

The Gulf Coast's economy is now fueled by casinos, so he throttled back his high moral comments and dwelled on his conservative approach to judicial thought. He talked about himself,

his family, his son Josh's undefeated Little League team. And for the first time, he voiced concern over the state's crime rate and its seeming indifference to executing condemned killers.

Clete Coley would've been proud.

Dinner that night was a fancy fund-raiser at the Biloxi Yacht Club, a thousand dollars a plate. The crowd was a mix of corporate suits, bankers, doctors, and insurance defense lawyers. Tony counted eighty-four present.

Late that night, with Ron asleep in the room next door, Tony called Barry Rinehart with a summary of the great day. It wasn't as colorful as Clete's dramatic entrance, but it was far more productive. Their candidate had handled himself well.

Day two began with a 7:30 Prayer Breakfast at a hotel in the shadows of the casinos. It was sponsored by a newly organized group known as the Brotherhood Coalition. Most of those in attendance were fundamentalist pastors from a dozen strains of Christianity. Ron was quickly learning the strategy of adapting to his audience, and he felt at home talking about his faith and how it would shape his decisions on the supreme court. He emphasized his long service to the Lord as a deacon and Sunday school teacher, and almost choked up when he recalled the story of his son's baptism. Again, he was endorsed on the spot.

At least half the state awoke to morning newspapers with full-page ads for candidate Ron Fisk. The ad in Jackson's *Clarion-Ledger* had a handsome photograph above the bold caption "Judicial Reform." Smaller print gave Ron's pertinent biographical data, with emphasis on his membership in his church, civic organizations, and the American Rifle Association. Still smaller print listed an impressive collection of endorsements: family groups, conservative Christian activists, panels of ministers, and associations that seemed to represent the rest of humanity; doctors, nurses, hospitals, dentists, nursing homes, pharmacists, retail merchants, real estate

agents, banks, savings and loans, finance companies, brokerage firms, mortgage banks, insurance companies (health, life, medical, fire, casualty, malpractice), highway contractors, architects, energy companies, natural gas producers, and three “legislative relations” groups that represented the manufacturers of virtually every product to be found in any store.

In other words, everyone who might get sued and therefore paid insurance premiums as protection. The list reeked of money and proclaimed that Ron Fisk, heretofore unknown, was now in the race as a serious player.

The ad cost \$12,000 in the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, \$9,000 in the Biloxi *Sun Herald*, and \$5,000 in the *Hattiesburg American*.

The two-day cost of the Fisk rollout was roughly \$450,000, which did not include travel expenses, the jet, and the Internet assault. The bulk of the money was spent on direct mail.

Ron spent the rest of Tuesday and Wednesday on the Coast, with every minute planned with precision. Campaigns habitually run late, but not with Tony in charge. They announced at the courthouses in Jackson and Hancock counties, prayed with preachers, stopped at dozens of law offices, worked a few busy streets handing out brochures, and shook hands. Ron even kissed his first baby. And it was all recorded by a film crew.

On Thursday, Ron made six more stops throughout south Mississippi, then hurried back to Brookhaven for a quick change of clothes. The game began at six. Doreen was already there with the kids. The Raiders were warming up, and Josh was pitching. The team was in the dugout listening to an assistant when Coach Fisk hustled in and took charge.

There was a nice crowd at the game. Ron already felt like a celebrity.

Rather than researching law, Sheila’s two clerks spent the day collecting press accounts of the Ron Fisk rollout. They gathered

copies of the full-page ads from the different newspapers. They tracked the news online. As the file grew thicker, their moods sank.

Sheila tried gamely to go about her job as if nothing was happening. The sky was falling, but she pretended to ignore it. Privately, and this usually meant a closed-door session with Big Mac, she was stunned and thoroughly overwhelmed. Fisk was spending what looked like a million dollars, and she had raised virtually nothing.

Clete Coley had convinced her she had light opposition. The Fisk ambush was so brilliantly executed she felt as though she'd been killed in battle.

The board of directors of the Mississippi Trial Advocates met in an emergency meeting late Thursday afternoon in Jackson. Its current president was Bobby Neal, a veteran trial lawyer with many verdicts under his belt and a long history of service to the MTA. Eighteen of the twenty directors were present, the highest number in many years.

The board, by its very nature, was a collection of high-strung and highly opinionated lawyers who worked by their own rules. Few had ever had a boss. Most had clawed their way up through the lower rungs of the profession to reach a level of great respectability, at least in their opinions. To them, no calling was higher than that of representing the poor, the injured, the unwanted, the troubled.

Typically, each gathering was long and loud and usually began with everyone present demanding the floor. And that was a normal meeting. Place the same group in an urgent setting with their backs pinned to the wall by the sudden and imminent threat of losing one of their most trusted allies on the supreme court, and all eighteen began arguing at once. Each had all the answers. Barbara Mellinger and Skip Sanchez sat in one corner, silent. No alcohol was being served. No caffeine. Only water.

After a raucous half hour, Bobby Neal managed to bring the meeting into some semblance of order. He got their attention when he informed them that he had spent an hour with Justice McCarthy earlier in the day. "She is in great spirits," he said with a smile, one of the few around the table that afternoon. "She is hard at work doing her job and really doesn't want to get sidetracked. However, she understands politics and said more than once that she will run a hard campaign and has every intention of winning. I promised our unwavering support."

He paused, shifted gears. "However, I found the meeting a bit discouraging. Clete Coley announced four weeks ago, and Sheila still doesn't even have a campaign manager. She has raised a few bucks, but she wouldn't say how much. I got the impression that she settled down after the Coley thing and convinced herself he was simply a nut with no credibility. She thought she could slide. Her thoughts have now changed dramatically. She's been asleep, and now she's running to catch up. As we know from experience, there is very little money on our side of the street, except ours."

"It'll take a million bucks to beat this guy," someone said, and the comment was rapidly drowned out in a wave of ridicule. A million wasn't close. The tort reformers spent two million against Judge McElwayne, and they lost by three thousand votes. They'll spend more than that this time around because they're better organized and really ticked off. And the guy who ran against McElwayne was a reprobate who'd never tried a lawsuit and had spent the last ten years teaching political science at a junior college. This guy Fisk is a real lawyer.

So they talked about Fisk for a while, at least four different conversations boiling at any given moment.

Tapping his water glass, Bobby Neal slowly dragged them back to his agenda. "There are twenty of us on this board. If we commit ten thousand each, right now, Sheila's campaign can at least get organized."

Instant silence. Deep breaths were taken. Water was gulped. Eyes darted here and there, searching for other eyes that might agree or disagree with this bold proposition.

Someone at the far end of the table barked, "That's ridiculous." The lights flickered. The AC vents went silent. Everyone gawked at Willy Benton, a fiery little Irish brawler from Biloxi. Benton rose slowly and spread his hands. They had heard his passionate summations before, and they settled in for another. Juries found him irresistible.

"Gentlemen, and lady, this is the beginning of the end. We can't fool ourselves. The forces of evil who want to slam the courthouse doors and deny our clients their rights, the same pro-business lobby that has slowly, methodically marched across this country and purchased one supreme court seat after another, that same bunch of assholes is here, banging on our door. You saw their names in those ads Fisk ran. It's a confederation of dunces, but they have the money. We have what I believe is a consistent one-vote majority on the supreme court, and here we sit, the only group who can fight these thugs, and we argue about how much we should give. I'll tell you what we should give. Everything! Because if we don't, then the practice of law as we know it will quickly fade away. We won't take cases anymore, because we won't be able to win them. The next generation of trial lawyers will not exist.

"I gave a hundred thousand dollars to Judge McElwayne, and it was a stretch. I'll do the same for Judge McCarthy. I don't have an airplane. I don't handle the mass torts and rake in outrageous fees. Y'all know me. I'm from the old school, one case at a time, one trial after another. But I'll sacrifice again. So should you. We all have our toys. If you can't pledge fifty thousand each, then get off this board and go home. You know you can afford it. Sell a condo, a car, a boat, skip a couple of vacations. Hock your wife's diamonds. You pay your secretaries fifty grand a year. Sheila McCarthy is far more important than any secretary or any associate."

"The limit is five thousand per person, Willy," someone said.

"Well aren't you a smart son of a bitch," he fired back. "I have a wife and four children. That's thirty grand right there. I also have two secretaries and some satisfied clients. I'll raise a hundred thousand bucks by the end of the week, and everyone here can do the same."

He sat down, his face red. After a long pause, Bobby Neal looked at Barbara Mellinger and asked, "How much did we give Judge McElwayne?"

"One point two, from about three hundred trial lawyers."

"How much did he raise?"

"One point four."

"How much would you guess McCarthy will need to win?"

It was a subject Barbara and Skip Sanchez had discussed for three days. "Two million," she said without hesitation.

Bobby Neal frowned and recalled the fund-raising efforts two years earlier on behalf of Jimmy McElwayne. Pulling teeth without anesthesia would have been easier.

"Then we have to raise two million bucks," he said with confidence. They nodded gravely and seemed to agree on that figure. They returned to the challenge on the table, and a fierce debate erupted about how much each should commit. The ones who earned a lot also spent a lot. Those who were struggling were afraid to commit. One admitted he'd lost his last three jury trials and was effectively broke at the moment. Another, a mass tort star with his own jet, promised \$150,000.

They adjourned without agreeing on a fixed amount, which surprised no one.

CHAPTER 21

The qualifying deadline passed with no other fireworks. Justice Calligan from the central district and Justice Bateman from the northern escaped opposition and were safe for another eight years. Both had a history of showing little sympathy for accident victims, consumers, and criminal defendants, and thus were greatly admired by the business community. At the local level, only two of the state's circuit court judges drew opposition.

One, though, was Judge Thomas Alsobrook Harrison IV. An hour before the deadline passed, a Hattiesburg real estate lawyer named Joy Hoover filed the necessary papers and fired a few shots in a press release. She was a local political activist, well regarded and well-known in the county. Her husband was a popular pediatrician who operated a free clinic for poor mothers as a hobby.

Hoover was recruited by Tony Zachary and Judicial Vision. She was a gift from Barry Rinehart to Carl Trudeau, who, on several occasions in quiet conversations with Rinehart, had voiced his strong feelings against the judge who presided over the *Baker* trial. That judge now had his hands full and would be unable to meddle, as he was prone to do, in other races. For a mere \$100,000, the legitimate, above-the-table commitment to Hoover, Judge Harrison now had much more serious matters on his hands.

Rinehart was scheming on several fronts. He picked a quiet day in late June to fire his next salvo.

Two gay men, Al Meyerchec and Billy Spano, had quietly arrived in Jackson three months earlier. They rented a small apartment near Millsaps College, registered to vote, and obtained Mississippi

driver's licenses. Their old ones were from Illinois. They claimed to be self-employed illustrators who worked at home. They kept to themselves and met no one.

On June 24, they walked into the offices of the Hinds County Circuit Clerk and requested the necessary forms to apply for a license to be married. The clerk balked and attempted to explain that the laws under which she operated did not allow same-sex marriages. Things grew tense, heated words were offered by Meyerchec and Spano, and they finally left. They called a reporter from the *Clarion-Ledger* and gave their side of the story.

The following day, with the reporter and a photographer, they returned to the clerk's office and again requested the paperwork. When it was denied, they began shouting and threatening to sue. The next day the story was front-page news, complete with a photograph of the two men as they berated the hapless clerk. They retained a radical lawyer, paid him \$10,000, and made good on their pledge to litigate the matter. The new lawsuit also made the front page.

It was shocking news. Stories of attempts by gay people to legally marry were common in places like New York, Massachusetts, and California but were unheard-of in Mississippi. What was the world coming to?

A follow-up story revealed that the two men were new to the area, were unknown in the gay community, and had no apparent ties to any business, any family, or anything else in the state. Graphic condemnations were offered by those who could be expected to say such things. A local state senator explained that these matters were governed by state laws and said laws were not about to be changed, not while he was running the legislature. Meyerchec and Spano were unavailable for comment. Their lawyer said they traveled extensively on business. In truth, they were back in Chicago, where one worked as an interior designer and the other owned a bar. They would retain their legal residence in Mississippi and return only when their lawsuit required it.

Jackson was then rocked by another brutal crime. Three gang members, all armed with assault weapons, invaded a rented duplex

occupied by twenty or so illegal immigrants from Mexico. The Mexicans were known to work eighteen hours a day, save every dime, then send it all home once a month. Such home invasions were not uncommon in Jackson and other southern cities. In the chaos of the crime, with the Mexicans scrambling about pulling cash from floors and walls and shrieking hysterically in Spanish as the gunmen screamed in very plain English, one of the Mexicans produced a pistol and fired some shots, hitting no one. The gunfire was returned, and a frantic scene turned even more horrific. When the shooting stopped, four of the Mexicans were dead, three were injured, and the gang members had retreated into the night. Their haul was estimated at about \$800, though the police would never be certain.

Barry Rinehart could not claim the event as one of his creations, but he was nonetheless pleased to hear about it.

A week later, at a forum sponsored by a law-enforcement association, Clete Coley seized the crime with zeal and hammered away at his usual themes of violence running unchecked and aided by a liberal court that was stifling executions in Mississippi. He pointed at Sheila McCarthy, onstage next to Ron Fisk, and harshly blamed her for the court's unwillingness to use the death chamber up at Parchman. The crowd loved him.

Ron Fisk was not to be outdone. He railed against gangs and drugs and lawlessness, and he criticized the supreme court, though in softer language. He then unveiled a five-step plan to streamline capital murder appeals, and his staff handed out the specific proposals as he spoke. It was an impressive showing, and Tony, seated in the rear, was delighted at the performance.

By the time Justice McCarthy rose to speak, the crowd was ready to throw stones. She calmly explained the complexities of death penalty appeals and said that a great deal of the court's time was devoted solely to these difficult cases. She stressed the need to be careful and thorough and make sure each defendant's rights were properly guarded. The law knows no greater burden than protecting the legal rights of those society has decided to execute. She reminded the crowd that at least 120 men and women condemned

to death row had later been completely exonerated, including two in Mississippi. Some of these people had spent twenty years waiting to die. In the nine years she had served on the court, she had participated in forty-eight death penalty cases. Of those, she had voted with the majority twenty-seven times to affirm the convictions, but only after being certain that fair trials had been conducted. In the other cases, she had voted to reverse the convictions and send the cases back for retrials. She did not regret a single vote. She did not consider herself a liberal, a conservative, or a moderate. She was a supreme court justice, sworn to fairly review her cases and uphold the law. Yes, she was personally opposed to the death penalty, but she had never substituted her convictions for the laws of the state.

When she finished, there was a scattering of light applause, but only of the polite variety. It was difficult not to admire her bluntness and courage. Few, if any, would vote for her, but the lady knew what she was talking about.

It was the first time all three candidates had appeared together, and the first time Tony had watched her under pressure. “She will not be a pushover,” he reported to Barry Rinehart. “She knows her stuff and sticks to her guns.”

“Yes, but she’s broke,” Barry said with a laugh. “This is a campaign, and it’s all about money.”

Mccarthy wasn’t exactly broke, but her campaign was off to a miserable start. She had no campaign manager, no one to coordinate the fifty things that needed to be done immediately while coordinating a thousand details for later. She had offered the job to three people. The first two declined after considering it for twenty-four hours. The third said yes, then a week later said no.

A campaign is a small, frantic business thrown together under great pressure and with the knowledge that it will have a very short life. The full-time staff works brutal hours for low pay. The

volunteers are invaluable but not always dependable. A forceful and decisive campaign manager is crucial.

Six weeks after Fisk's announcement, Justice McCarthy had managed to open a campaign office in Jackson, near her condo, and one in Biloxi, near her home. Both were run by longtime friends, volunteers, who stayed busy recruiting more staff and calling potential donors. There were piles of bumper stickers and yard signs, but the campaign had been unable to secure a decent firm to put together the ads, direct mail, and, hopefully, television spots. There was a very basic Web site, but no other Internet activity. Sheila had received \$320,000 in contributions, all but \$30,000 of it coming from trial lawyers. Bobby Neal and the board had promised her, in writing, that the MTA members would donate at least \$1 million, and she did not doubt that they would. But making promises was much easier than writing checks.

Getting organized was made more difficult by the fact that she had a demanding job that could not simply be ignored. The court's docket was backed up for a mile with cases that should have been decided months earlier. There was the constant strain of never catching up. The appeals would never stop. And lives were in the balance: men and women on death row; children pulled back and forth in messy divorces; horribly injured workers waiting on a final ruling that, hopefully, would bring relief. Some of her colleagues were professional enough to detach themselves from the real people behind the cases they considered, but Sheila had never been able to.

But it was summertime, and the schedule was less taxing. She was taking off Fridays and spending long weekends on the road, visiting her district. She worked hard Monday through Thursday, then became the candidate. She planned to spend the month getting her campaign organized and on track.

Her first opponent, Mr. Coley, generally loafed Monday through Friday, resting himself for the rigors of the blackjack table. He gambled only at night, and thus had plenty of time to campaign, if he wanted to. Generally he did not. He showed up at a few county fairs and delivered colorful speeches to enthusiastic crowds. If his volunteers from Jackson were in the mood, they would drive down

and erect the Faces of the Dead display, and Clete raised the volume. Every town has a dozen civic clubs, most of which are always looking for speakers. Word spread that candidate Coley could liven up the lunch, and he received an invitation or two each week. Depending on the drive, and the severity of his hangover, he would entertain the idea. By late July, his campaign had received \$27,000 in donations, more than enough to cover the costs of his leased SUV and his part-time bodyguards. He'd also spent \$6,000 on brochures. Every politician must have something to hand out.

Sheila's second opponent, though, was leading a campaign that ran like a well-tuned engine. Ron Fisk worked hard at his desk on Mondays and Tuesdays, then hit the road with a detailed schedule that left only the tiniest of towns untouched. Using both the Lear 55 and a King Air, he and his traveling staff quickly circled the district. By mid-July, there was an organized committee in each of the twenty-seven counties, and Ron had given at least one speech in all of them. He spoke to civic clubs, volunteer fire departments, library teas, county bar associations, motorcycle clubs, bluegrass festivals, county fairs, and churches, churches, and churches. At least half of his speeches were in pulpits.

On July 18, Josh played his final baseball game of the season, and his father was free to campaign even more. Coach Fisk did not miss a game, though the team fell apart after he announced his candidacy. Most parents agreed that the two were not related.

In the rural areas, Ron's message never varied. Because of liberal judges, our values are under attack from those who support gay marriage, gun control, abortion, and unrestricted access to Internet pornography. Those judges must be replaced. His first loyalty was to the Bible. Laws made by men came next, but as a supreme court justice he would manage to reconcile both when necessary. He began each speech with a short prayer.

In the less rural areas, depending on the audience, he would often move a little from the far right and dwell on the death penalty. Ron found that audiences were captivated by graphic stories of brutal crimes committed by men who were sentenced to die twenty years ago. He worked a couple of these into his routine.

But regardless of where he was, the evil-liberal-judge theme dominated every speech. After a hundred or so, Ron himself believed that Sheila McCarthy was a raging leftist who'd caused many of the state's social problems.

On the money front, with Barry Rinehart quietly pulling the strings, contributions were arriving at a steady rate and managed to keep pace with expenses. By June 30, the first deadline to file financial reports, the Fisk campaign had received \$510,000 from twenty-two hundred people. Of his contributors, only thirty-five gave the maximum of \$5,000, and every one of these was a Mississippi resident. Ninety percent of donors were from within the state.

Barry knew the trial lawyers would scrutinize the contributors in the hope that out-of-state money was pouring in from big business interests. It had been a troublesome campaign issue before, and he would avoid it in the Fisk race. He was confident he would raise huge sums of money from out of state, but these donations would pour in at the chosen moment, late in the campaign when the state's benign reporting laws protected it from being an issue. In contrast, McCarthy's reports revealed that she was being financed by the trial lawyers, and Barry knew precisely how to wield this as an issue in his favor.

Barry also had the results of his latest poll, one that he would not share with the candidate. As of June 25, half the registered voters were now aware that there was a race. Of that number, 24 percent favored Ron Fisk, 16 percent Sheila McCarthy, and 10 percent Clete Coley. Those numbers were exciting. In less than two months, Barry had packaged an unknown lawyer who'd never worn a black robe and thrust him ahead of an opponent with nine years of experience.

And they had yet to run a single ad on television.

On July 1, the Second State Bank was purchased by New Vista Bank, a regional chain based in Dallas. Huffy called Wes Payton

with the news and was generally upbeat. The Hattiesburg office had been assured that nothing would change but the name. His loan portfolio had been reviewed by the new owners. They had quizzed him about the Paytons, and seemed content with Huffy's promises that the loan would eventually be satisfied.

For the fourth straight month, the Paytons sent Huffy a check for \$2,000.

CHAPTER 22

In another life, Nathaniel Lester had been a flamboyant criminal defense lawyer with an uncanny knack for winning murder trials. At one point, two decades earlier, he had put together a streak of twelve consecutive not-guilty verdicts, virtually all in small towns throughout Mississippi, the types of places where those accused of heinous crimes are generally presumed guilty the moment they are arrested. His notoriety attracted clients from the civil side, and his country law office in the town of Mendenhall prospered nicely.

Nat won big verdicts and negotiated even larger settlements. His specialty became catastrophic personal injuries on the offshore oil rigs where many local men went for high-paying jobs. He was active in various trial lawyer groups, gave huge sums to political candidates, built the biggest house in town, went through a series of wives, and began drinking heavily. The booze, along with a string of ethics complaints and legal skirmishes, finally slowed him down, and when he was ultimately boxed in, he surrendered his law license to avoid a prison sentence. He left Mendenhall, found a new wife, sobered up, and resurfaced in Jackson, where he embraced Buddhism, yoga, vegetarianism, and a simpler lifestyle. One of the few smart decisions he'd made during his heyday was to bury some of his money.

During the first week of August, he pestered Sheila McCarthy until she agreed to a quick lunch. Every lawyer in the state knew something of his colorful history, and she was understandably nervous. Over tofu and sprouts, he offered to run her campaign, at no cost. He would devote his considerable energies to nothing else for the next three months. She was apprehensive. His long gray hair fell to his shoulders. He had matching diamond earrings, and though they were quite small, they were still visible. He displayed one tattoo, on his left arm, and she didn't want to think of the

others and where they might be. He wore jeans and sandals and a collection of bright leather bracelets on each wrist.

But Nat had not been a successful courtroom lawyer because he was dull and unpersuasive. He most definitely was not. He knew the district, its towns and courthouses and the people who ran them. He had a passionate hatred of big business and the influence it bought, and he was bored and looking for a war.

She caved in and invited him to join hers. Driving away from the restaurant, she questioned her sanity, but she also had a gut feeling that Nathaniel Lester could be the spark her campaign so badly needed. Her own poll showed her trailing Fisk by five points, and a sense of desperation was settling in.

They met again that night at her Jackson headquarters, and in a four-hour meeting Nat assumed control. With a combination of wit, charm, and castigation, he whipped her ragtag staff into a near frenzy of excitement. To prove his mettle, he called three Jackson trial lawyers, at home, and, after a few pleasantries, asked them why in the hell they had not yet sent money to the McCarthy campaign. Using a speakerphone, he shamed them, cajoled them, berated them, and refused to hang up until each had promised significant contributions from themselves and their families, clients, and friends. Don't mail the checks, he said—he would personally drive over before noon tomorrow and get the money himself. The three commitments totaled \$70,000. From that moment, Nat was in charge.

The following day he picked up the checks and began the process of calling every trial lawyer in the state. He contacted labor groups and black leaders. He fired one staff member and hired two others. By the end of the week, Sheila was getting a morning printout of Nat's version of her daily schedule. She haggled a little, but not much. He was already working sixteen hours a day and expected that from the candidate and everyone else.

In Hattiesburg, Wes stopped by the home of Judge Harrison for a quiet lunch. With thirty Bowmore cases on his docket, it would be unwise to be seen in public. Though they had no intention of discussing pending business, the coziness would seem inappropriate. Tom Harrison had extended the invitation to Wes and Mary Grace, whenever they had the time. Mary Grace was out of town and sent her regrets.

The subject was politics. Tom's circuit court district covered Hattiesburg and Forrest County and the three rural counties of Cary, Lamar, and Perry. Almost 80 percent of the registered voters were in Hattiesburg, his home and also that of Joy Hoover, his opponent. She would do well in certain precincts in the city, but Judge Harrison was confident he would do even better. Nor was he worried about the smaller counties. In fact, he seemed generally unconcerned about losing. Hoover appeared to be well financed, probably with outside money, but Judge Harrison knew his district and enjoyed its politics.

Cary County had the smallest population of the four, and it was continuing to decline with no small measure of help from Krane Chemical and its toxic history. They avoided that topic and discussed various politicians in and around Bowmore. Wes assured him that the Paytons, as well as their clients, friends, Pastor Denny Ott, and Mary Grace's family, would do everything possible to reelect Judge Harrison.

Conversation shifted to other races, primarily that of Sheila McCarthy. She had passed through Hattiesburg two weeks earlier and spent half an hour at the Payton firm, where she awkwardly managed to avoid mentioning the Bowmore litigation while rounding up votes. The Paytons admitted they had no money to contribute but promised to work overtime to get her reelected. A truckload of yard signs and other campaign materials had been delivered to the office the following day.

Judge Harrison lamented the politicization of the supreme court. "It's unseemly," he was saying, "how they are forced to grovel for votes. You, as a lawyer representing a client in a pending case,

should have no contact whatsoever with a supreme court justice. But because of the system, one comes to your office seeking money and support. Why? Because some special interests with plenty of money have decided they would like to own her seat on the court. They're spending money to purchase a seat. She responds by raising money from her side of the street. It's a rotten system, Wes."

"How do you fix it?"

"Either take away the private money and finance the races with public funds or switch to appointments. Eleven other states have figured out how to make the appointment system work. I'm not sure their courts are vastly superior to ours in terms of legal talent, but at least the special interests don't control them."

"Do you know Fisk?" Wes asked.

"He's been in my courtroom a couple of times. Nice fella, green as hell. Looks nice in a suit, typical insurance defense routine. Opens his files, files his motions, settles, closes his files, never gets his hands dirty. He's never heard a case, mediated one, tried one, and he's never shown any interest in being a judge. Think about it, Wes. Every small town needs lawyers occasionally to serve as city judges or assistant magistrates or traffic court referees, and we all felt the obligation to step in when we were younger. Not this guy. Every small county needs lawyers to pinch-hit with youth court and drug court and the like, and those of us who aspired to be real judges volunteered. I mean, you gotta start somewhere. Not this guy. I'll bet he's never been to city court in Brookhaven or youth court in Lincoln County. He wakes up one day, decides he's suddenly passionate about the judiciary and, what the hell, he'll just start at the top. It's an insult to those of us who toil in the system and make it work."

"I doubt if running was his idea."

"No, he was recruited. That makes it even more shameful. They look around, pick some greenhorn with a nice smile and no record to attack, and package him with their slick marketing. That's politics. But it shouldn't contaminate the judiciary."

"We beat them two years ago with McElwayne."

"So you're optimistic?"

“No, Judge, I’m terrified. I haven’t slept well since Fisk announced, and I won’t sleep well until he’s defeated. We’re broke and in debt, so we can’t write a check, but every member of our firm has agreed to spend one hour a day knocking on doors, passing out brochures, putting up yard signs, and making phone calls. We’ve written letters to our clients. We’re leaning on our friends. We’ve organized Bowmore. We’re doing everything possible because if we lose the *Baker* case there is no tomorrow.”

“Where is the appeal?”

“All the briefs are in. Everything is nice and tidy and waiting on the court to tell us when, and if, it wants oral argument. Probably early next year.”

“No chance of a decision before the election?”

“None whatsoever. It’s the most important case on the docket, but then every lawyer feels this way. As you know, the court works on its own schedule. No one can push it.”

They had iced coffee as they inspected the judge’s small vegetable garden. The temperature was a hundred degrees and Wes was ready to go. They finally shook hands on the front porch. As Wes drove away, he couldn’t help but worry about him. Judge Harrison was much more concerned about the McCarthy race than his own.

The hearing was on a motion to dismiss filed by Hinds County. The courtroom belonged to Chancellor Phil Shingleton. It was a small, busy, efficient courtroom with oak walls and the obligatory faded portraits of long-forgotten judges. There was no box for the jurors because jury trials did not occur in chancery court. Crowds were rare, but for this hearing every seat was taken.

Meyerchec and Spano, back from Chicago, sat with their radical lawyer at one table. At the other were two young women representing the county. Chancellor Shingleton called things to order, welcomed the crowd, noted the interest from the media, and looked at the file. Two courtroom artists worked on Meyerchec and

Spano. Everyone waited anxiously as Shingleton flipped through paperwork as if he'd never seen it. In fact, he'd read it many times and had already written his ruling.

"Just curious," he said without looking up. "Why did you file this thing in chancery court?"

The radical lawyer stood and said, "It's a matter of equity, Your Honor. And we knew we could expect a fair trial here." If it was intended as humor, it missed its mark.

The reason it was filed in chancery court was to get it dismissed as soon as possible. A hearing in circuit court would take even longer. A federal lawsuit would go off in the wrong direction.

"Proceed," Shingleton said.

The radical lawyer was soon railing against the county and the state and society in general. His words came in short, rapid bursts, much too loud for the small room and much too shrill to listen to for more than ten minutes. He went on and on. The laws of the state were backward and unfair and discriminated against his clients because they couldn't marry each other. Why shouldn't two mature and consenting gay adults who are in love and want all the responsibilities and obligations and commitments and duties of matrimony be allowed the same privileges and legal rights as two heterosexuals? He managed to ask this question at least eight different ways.

The reason, explained one of the young ladies for the county, is that the laws of the state do not permit it. Plain and simple. The state's constitution grants to the legislature the right to make laws regarding marriage, divorce, and so on, and no one else has this authority. If and when the legislature approves same-sex marriage, then Mr. Meyerchec and Mr. Spano will be free to pursue their desires.

"Do you expect the legislature to do this anytime soon?" Shingleton deadpanned.

"No," was the quick reply, and it was good for some light laughter.

The radical lawyer rebutted with the strenuous argument that the legislature, especially "our" legislature, passed laws every year that

are struck down by the courts. That is the role of the judiciary! After making this point loud and clear, he devised several ways to present it in slightly different formats.

After an hour, Shingleton was fed up. Without a recess, and glancing at his notes, he gave a ruling that was rather succinct. His job was to follow the laws of the state, and if the laws prohibited marriage between two men or two women, or two men and one woman, or whatever combination, anything other than one man and one woman, then he, as a chancellor, had no choice but to dismiss the case.

Outside the courthouse, with Meyerchec on one side and Spano on the other, the radical lawyer continued his screeching for the press. He was aggrieved. His clients were aggrieved, though it was noted by a few that both looked quite bored with it all.

They were appealing immediately to the Mississippi Supreme Court. That's where they were headed, and that's where they wanted to be. And with the shadowy firm of Troy-Hogan paying the bills from Boca Raton, that's exactly where they were going.

CHAPTER 23

During its first four months, the race between Sheila McCarthy and Ron Fisk had been markedly civil. Clete Coley had thrown his share of mud, but his general appearance and unruly personality made it difficult for voters to see him as a supreme court justice. Though he still received around 10 percent in Rinehart's polls, he was campaigning less and less. Nat Lester's poll gave him 5 percent, but that poll was not as detailed as Rinehart's.

After Labor Day, with the election two months away and the homestretch of the race at hand, Fisk's campaign took its first ugly step toward the gutter. Once on that course, it would not and could not turn back.

The tactic was one Barry Rinehart had perfected in other races. A mass mailing was sent to all registered voters from an outfit called Lawsuit Victims for Truth. It screamed the question "Why Are the Trial Lawyers Financing Sheila McCarthy?" The four-page diatribe that followed did not attempt to answer the question. Instead, it excoriated trial lawyers.

First, it used the family doctor, claiming that trial lawyers and the frivolous lawsuits they bring are responsible for many of the problems in our health-care system. Doctors, laboring under the fear of lawsuit abuse, are forced to perform expensive tests and diagnoses that drive up the cost of medical care. Doctors must pay exorbitant premiums for malpractice insurance to protect themselves from bogus lawsuits. In some states, doctors have been driven out, leaving their patients without care. One doctor (no residence given) was quoted as saying, "I couldn't afford the premiums, and I was tired of spending hours in depositions and trials. So I simply quit. I still worry about my patients." A hospital in West Virginia was forced to close after getting hit with an outrageous verdict. A greedy trial lawyer was at fault.

Next, it hit the checkbook. Rampant litigation costs the average household \$1,800 a year, according to one study. This expense is a direct result of higher insurance premiums on automobiles and homes, plus higher prices for a thousand household products whose makers are constantly being sued. Medications, both prescription and over-the-counter, are a perfect example. They would be 15 percent cheaper if the trial lawyers didn't hammer their manufacturers with massive class action cases.

Then it shocked the reader with a collection of some of the country's zaniest verdicts, a well-used and trusted list that always sparked outrage. Three million dollars against a fast-food chain for hot coffee that was spilled; \$110 million against a carmaker for a defective paint job; \$15 million against the owner of a swimming pool that was fenced and padlocked. The infuriating list went on and on. The world is going crazy and being led by devious trial lawyers.

After breathing fire for three pages, it finished with a bang. Five years earlier, Mississippi had been labeled by a pro-business group as a "judicial hellhole." Only four other states shared this distinction, and the entire process would have been overlooked but for the Commerce Council. It seized the news and splashed it around in newspaper ads. Now the issue was worthy of being used again. According to the Lawsuit Victims for Truth, the trial lawyers have so abused the court system in Mississippi that the state is now a dumping ground for all sorts of major lawsuits. Some of the plaintiffs live elsewhere. Many of the trial lawyers live elsewhere. They forum-shop until they find a friendly county with a friendly judge, and there they file their cases. Huge verdicts are the result. The state has earned a shady reputation, and because of this many businesses avoid Mississippi. Dozens of factories have packed up and left. Thousands of jobs are gone.

All thanks to the trial lawyers, who of course adore Sheila McCarthy and her pro-plaintiff leanings and will spend anything to keep her on the court.

The mailing ended with a plea for sanity. It never mentioned Ron Fisk.

An e-mail blast then sent the ad to sixty-five thousand addresses in the district. Within hours, it had been picked up by the trial lawyers and sent to all of the MTA's eight hundred members.

Nat Lester was thrilled with the ad. As campaign manager, he preferred broad-based support from many groups, but the reality was that the only major donors to McCarthy were the trial lawyers. He wanted them angry, spitting nails, frothing at the mouth, ready for an old-fashioned bare-knuckle brawl. So far, they had given just under \$600,000. Nat needed twice that, and the only way to get it was by throwing grenades.

He sent an e-mail to every trial lawyer, and in it he explained the urgent necessity of answering the propaganda as quickly as possible. Negative ads, both in print and on television, must be responded to immediately. Direct mail is expensive, but very effective. He estimated the cost of the Lawsuit Victims for Truth mailing at \$300,000 (actual cost: \$320,000). Since he planned to use direct mail more than once, he demanded an immediate infusion of \$500,000, and he insisted on commitments by return e-mail. His coded e-mail address would publish a running total of new contributions from trial lawyers, and until it reached the goal of \$500,000, the campaign would remain virtually hamstrung. His tactic bordered on extortion, but then he was still, at heart, a trial lawyer, and he knew the breed. The mailing jolted their blood pressure to near-lethal levels. They loved to fight anyway, and the commitments would pour in.

While he manipulated them, he met with Sheila and tried to calm her. She had never been attacked before in such a manner. She was upset, but also angry. The gloves were off, and Mr. Nathaniel Lester was relishing the fight. Within two hours, he had designed and written a response, met with the printer, and ordered the necessary supplies. Twenty-four hours after the Lawsuit Victims for Truth's plea was sent by e-mail, 330 trial lawyers had committed \$515,000.

Nat also went after the Trial Lawyers of America, several of whose members had made fortunes in Mississippi. He e-mailed the Lawsuit Victims for Truth's fulmination to fourteen thousand of its members.

Three days later, Sheila McCarthy counterpunched. Refusing to hide behind some silly group organized just to send propaganda, she (Nat) decided to send the correspondence from her own campaign. It was in the form of a letter, with a flattering photo of her at the top. She thanked each voter for his or her support, and quickly ran through her experience and qualifications. She claimed to have nothing but respect for her opponents, but neither had ever worn the black robe. Neither, frankly, had ever shown any interest in the judiciary.

Then she posed the question: "Why Is Big Business Financing Ron Fisk?" Because, she explained in detail, big business is currently in the business of buying seats on supreme courts all over the country. They target justices like herself, compassionate jurists who strive for the common ground and are sympathetic to the rights of workers, consumers, victims injured by the negligence of others, the poor, and the accused. The law's greatest responsibility is to protect the weakest members of our society. Rich people can usually take care of themselves.

Big business, through its myriad support groups and associations, is successfully coordinating a grand conspiracy to drastically change our court system. Why? To protect its own interests. How? By blocking the courthouse door; by limiting liability for companies that make defective products, for negligent doctors, for abusive nursing homes, for arrogant insurance companies. The sad list went on.

She finished with a folksy paragraph asking the voters not to be fooled by slick marketing. The typical campaign run by big business in these races gets very ugly. Mud is their favorite tool. The attack

ads would soon begin, and they would be relentless. Big business would spend millions to defeat her, but she had faith in the voters.

Barry Rinehart was impressed with the response. He was also delighted to see the trial lawyers rally so quickly and spend so much money. He wanted them to burn money. The high end of his projection was \$2 million for the McCarthy camp, with 90 percent from the trial lawyers.

His boy Fisk could easily double that.

His next ad, again by direct mail, was a sucker punch that would quickly dominate the rest of the campaign. He waited a week, time for the dust to settle from the first exchange of jabs.

The letter came straight from Ron Fisk himself, on his campaign letterhead, with a photo at the top of the handsome Fisk family. Its ominous headline announced: “Mississippi Supreme Court to Rule on Gay Marriage.”

After a warm greeting, Ron wasted no time in launching into the issue at hand. The case of *Meyerchec and Spano v. Hinds County* involved two gay men who wanted to get married, and it would be decided the following year by the supreme court. Ron Fisk—Christian, husband, father, lawyer—was adamantly opposed to same-sex marriages, and he would take this unshakable belief to the supreme court. He condemned such unions as abnormal, sinful, against the clear teachings of the Bible, and detrimental to society on many levels.

Halfway through the letter, he introduced to the fray the well-known voice of the Reverend David Wilfong, a national loudmouth with a huge radio following. Wilfong decried such efforts to pervert our laws and bend, yet again, to the desires of an immoral few. He denounced liberal judges who insert their own beliefs into their rulings. He called upon the decent and God-fearing people of Mississippi, “the heart and soul of the Bible Belt,” to embrace men like Ron Fisk and, in doing so, protect their state’s sacred laws.

The liberal-judge theme continued to the end of the letter. Fisk signed off with another promise to serve as a conservative, commonsense voice of the people.

Sheila McCarthy read the letter with Nat, and neither knew what the next step should be. Her name was never mentioned, but then it really wasn't necessary. Fisk certainly wasn't accusing Clete Coley of being a liberal.

"This is deadly," Nat said, exasperated. "He has claimed this issue as his own, and to take it back, or even to share it, you have to pulverize homosexuals worse than he does."

"I'm not doing that."

"I know you're not."

"It is so improper for a member of the court, or one who aspires to be, to state how he or she will decide a future case. It's horrible."

"This is just the beginning, dear."

They were in the cramped storage room that Nat called his office. The door was shut, no one was listening. A dozen volunteers were busy in the adjacent room. Phones rang constantly.

"I'm not sure we answer this," Nat said.

"Why not?"

"What are you going to say? 'Ron Fisk is being mean.' 'Ron Fisk is saying things he shouldn't.' You'll come off looking bitchy, which is okay for a male candidate, but not for a female."

"That's not fair."

"The only response is a denial of your support for same-sex marriages. You would have to take a position, which—"

"Which I'm not going to do. I'm not in favor of these marriages, but we need some type of civil union arrangement. It's a ridiculous debate, though, because the legislature is in charge of making laws. Not the court."

Nat was on his fourth wife. Sheila was looking for husband number two. "And besides," she said, "how could homosexuals

possibly screw up the sanctity of marriage any worse than heterosexuals?”

“Promise me you’ll never say that in public. Please.”

“You know I won’t.”

He rubbed his hands together, then ran his fingers through his long gray hair. Indecisiveness was not one of his shortcomings. “We have to make a decision, here and now,” he said. “We can’t waste time. The smartest route is to answer by direct mail.”

“What’s the cost?”

“We can scale back some. I’d say two hundred thousand.”

“Can we afford it?”

“As of today, I would say no. Let’s revisit it in ten days.”

“Agreed, but can’t we do an e-mail blast and at least respond?”

“I’ve already written it.”

The response was a two-paragraph message sent that day to forty-eight thousand e-mail addresses. Justice McCarthy issued a strong rebuke to Ron Fisk for pledging his vote on a case he was far away from hearing. Had he been a member of the court, he would have been chastised. Dignity demands that the justices keep matters confidential and refrain from any comment whatsoever about pending cases. In the one he mentioned, no briefs had been filed in the appeal. No arguments heard. Nothing was before the court as of this date. Without knowing the facts or the law, how could Mr. Fisk, or anyone else for that matter, possibly decide on a final ruling?

Sadly, it was just another example of Mr. Fisk’s woeful inexperience in judicial matters.

Clete Coley’s losses were piling up at the Lucky Jack, and he confided this to Marlin late one night in a saloon in Under-the-Hill. Marlin was passing through, checking on the candidate, who seemed to have forgotten about the race.

“I have a great idea,” Marlin said, warming up to the real reason for his visit. “There are fourteen casinos on the Gulf Coast, big,

beautiful, Vegas-style—”

“I’ve seen them.”

“Right. I know the guy who owns Pirate’s Cove. He’ll put you up three nights a week for the next month, penthouse suite, great view of the Gulf. Meals are on the house. You can play cards all night, and during the day you can do a bit of campaigning. Folks down there need to hear your message. Hell, that’s where the votes are. I can line up some audiences. You do the politicking. You’ve got a great speech and people love it.”

Clete was visibly taken with the idea. “Three nights a week, huh?”

“More if you want it. You gotta be tired of this place.”

“Only when I’m losing.”

“Do it, Clete. Look, the folks who put up the money would like to see more activity. They know it’s a long shot, but they are serious about their message.”

Clete admitted it was a great idea. He ordered more rum and began thinking of those beautiful new casinos down there.

CHAPTER 24

Mary Grace and Wes stepped off the elevator on the twenty-sixth floor of the tallest building in Mississippi, and into the plush reception suite of the state's largest law firm. She immediately noticed the wallpaper, the fine furniture, the flowers, things that had once mattered.

The well-dressed woman at the desk was sufficiently polite. An associate in the standard-issue navy suit and black shoes escorted them to a conference room, where a secretary asked if they wanted something to drink. No, they did not. The large windows looked down at the rest of Jackson. The dome of the capitol dominated the view. To its left was the Gartin building, and somewhere in there on someone's desk was the case of *Jeannette Baker v. Krane Chemical*.

The door opened and Alan York appeared with a big smile and warm handshake. He was in his late fifties, short and heavy and a bit sloppy—wrinkled shirt, no jacket, scuffed shoes—unusual for a partner in such a hidebound firm. The same associate was back, carrying two large expandable files. After greetings and small talk they took their places around the table.

The lawsuit the Paytons filed in April on behalf of the family of the deceased pulpwood cutter had sped through the early rounds of discovery. No trial date was set, and that possibility was at least a year away. Liability was clear—the truck driver who caused the accident had been speeding, at least fifteen miles per hour over the limit. Two eyewitnesses had been deposed and provided detailed and damning testimony about the speed and recklessness of the truck driver. In his deposition, the driver admitted to a long history of moving violations. Before taking to the road, he worked as a pipe fitter but had been fired for smoking pot on the job. Wes had found at least two old DUIs, and the driver thought there might be another one, but he couldn't remember.

In short, the case wouldn't get anywhere near a jury. It would be settled, and after four months of vigorous discovery Mr. Alan York was ready to begin the negotiations. According to him, his client, Littun Casualty, was anxious to close the file.

Wes began by describing the family, a thirty-three-year-old widow and mother with a high school education and no real job skills and three young children, the oldest being twelve. Needless to say, the loss was ruinous in every way.

As he talked, York took notes and kept glancing at Mary Grace. They had spoken on the phone but never met. Wes was handling the case, but York knew she was not there simply because she was pleasant to look at. One of his close friends was Frank Sully, the Hattiesburg lawyer hired by Krane Chemical to add bodies to the defense table. Sully had been pushed to the rear by Jared Kurtin and was still bitter about it. He had passed along to York many stories about the *Baker* trial, and it was Sully's opinion that the Payton tag team worked best when Mary Grace was chatting with the jury. She was tough on cross-examination, very quick on her feet, but her strength was connecting with people. Her closing argument was brilliant, powerful, and, obviously, very persuasive.

York had been defending insurance companies for thirty-one years. He won more than he lost, but there had been a few of those awful moments when juries failed to see the case his way and nailed him for big verdicts. It was part of the business. He had never, though, been in the neighborhood of a \$41 million award. It was now a legend in the state's legal circles. Add the drama of the Paytons risking everything, losing their home, office, cars, and borrowing heavily to sustain a four-month trial, and the legend kept growing. Their fate was well-known and much discussed at bar meetings and golf tournaments and cocktail parties. If the verdict stood, they would be primed to rake in huge fees. A reversal, and their survival was seriously in doubt.

As Wes went on, York couldn't help but admire them.

After a brief review of the liability, Wes summed up the damages, added a chunk for the carelessness of the trucking company, and said, "We think two million is a fair settlement."

“I bet you do,” York said, managing the customary defense lawyer reaction of shock and dismay. Eyebrows arched in disbelief. Head shaking slowly in bewilderment. He grabbed his face with his hand and squeezed his cheeks, frowning. His quick smile was long gone.

Wes and Mary Grace managed to convey apathy while their hearts were frozen.

“To get two million,” York said, studying his notes, “you have to factor in some element of punitive damages, and, frankly, my client is simply not willing to pay these.”

“Oh yes,” Mary Grace said coolly. “Your client will pay whatever the jury tells it to pay.” Such blustering was also part of the business. York had heard it a thousand times, but it did indeed sound more ominous coming from a woman who, during her last trial, extracted a huge punitive award.

“A trial is at least twelve months away,” York said as he looked at his associate for confirmation, as if anyone could project a trial date so far in the future. The associate dutifully confirmed what his boss had already said.

In other words, if this goes to trial, it will be months before you receive a dime in fees. It’s no secret that your little firm is drowning in debt and struggling to survive, and everyone knows that you need a big settlement, and quick.

“Your client can’t wait that long,” York said.

“We’ve given you a number, Alan,” Wes replied. “Do you have a counteroffer?”

York suddenly slapped his file shut, gave a forced grin, and said, “Look, this is really simple. Littun Casualty is very good at cutting its losses, and this case is a loser. My authority to settle is \$1 million. Not a penny more. I have a million bucks, and my client told me not to come back for more. One million dollars, take it or leave it.”

The referring lawyer would get half of the 30 percent contingency contract. The Paytons would get the other half. Fifteen percent was \$150,000, a dream.

They looked at each other, both frowning, both wanting to leap across the table and begin kissing Alan York. Then Wes shook his

head, and Mary Grace wrote something on a legal pad.

"We have to call our client," Wes said.

"Of course." York bolted from the room, his associate racing to keep up.

"Well," Wes said softly, as if the room might be bugged.

"I'm trying not to cry," she said.

"Don't cry. Don't laugh. Let's squeeze him a little."

When York was back, Wes said gravely, "We talked to Mrs. Nolan. Her bottom line is one point two million."

York exhaled as his shoulders drooped and his face sagged. "I don't have it, Wes," he said. "I'm being perfectly candid with you."

"You can always ask for more. If your client will pay a million, then they can kick in another \$200,000. At trial, this case is worth twice that."

"Littun is a tough bunch, Wes."

"One phone call. Give it a try. What's there to lose?"

York left again, and ten minutes later burst back into the room with a happy face. "You got it! Congratulations."

The shock of the settlement left them numb. Negotiations usually dragged on for weeks or months, with both sides bickering and posturing and playing little games. They had hoped to leave York's office with a general idea of where the settlement might be headed. Instead, they left in a daze and for fifteen minutes roamed the streets of downtown Jackson, saying little. For a moment they stopped in front of the Capitol Grill, a restaurant known more for its clientele than for its food. Lobbyists liked to be seen there, picking up tabs for fine meals with heavyweight politicians. Governors had always favored the place.

Why not splurge and eat with the big boys?

Instead, they ducked into a small deli two doors down and ordered iced tea. Neither had an appetite at the moment. Wes finally addressed the obvious. "Did we just earn \$180,000?"

“Uh-huh,” she said while sipping tea through a straw.

“I thought so.”

“A third goes for taxes,” she said.

“Are you trying to kill the party?”

“No, just being practical.”

On a white paper napkin, she wrote down the sum of \$180,000.

“Are we spending it already?” Wes asked.

“No, we’re dividing it. Sixty thousand for taxes?”

“Fifty.”

“Income, state and federal. Employee withholding, Social Security, unemployment, I don’t know what else but it’s at least a third.”

“Fifty-five,” he said, and she wrote down \$60,000.

“Bonuses?”

“What about a new car?” he asked.

“Nope. Bonuses, for all five employees. They have not had a raise in three years.”

“Five thousand each.”

She wrote down \$25,000, then said, “The bank.”

“A new car.”

“The bank? Half the fee is already gone.”

“Two hundred dollars.”

“Come on, Wes. We won’t have a life until the bank is off our backs.”

“I’ve tried to forget about the loan.”

“How much?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure you have a figure.”

“Fifty thousand for Huffy, and ten thousand for Sheila McCarthy. That leaves us with thirty-five thousand.” Which, at that moment, seemed like a fortune. They stared at the napkin, both recasting the numbers and rearranging the priorities, but neither willing to suggest a change. Mary Grace signed her name at the bottom, then Wes did likewise. She put the napkin in her purse.

“Can I at least get a new suit out of the deal?” he asked.

“Depends on what’s on sale. I guess we should call the office.”

“They’re sitting by the phone.”

Three hours later, the Paytons walked into their office, and the party started. The front door was locked, the phones were unplugged, the champagne began to flow. Sherman and Rusty, the law clerks, proposed lengthy toasts they had hurriedly put together. Tabby and Vicky, the receptionists, were tipsy after two glasses. Even Olivia, the ancient bookkeeper, kicked up her heels and was soon laughing at everything.

The money was spent, re-spent, overspent, until everyone was rich.

When the champagne was gone, the office closed and everyone left. The Paytons, their cheeks warm from the bubbly, went to their apartment, changed into casual clothes, then drove to the school to fetch Mack and Liza. They had earned a night of fun, though the children were too young to understand the settlement. It would never be mentioned.

Mack and Liza were expecting Ramona, and when they saw both parents in the school pickup line, a long day instantly became brighter. Wes explained that they simply got tired of working and decided to play. The first stop was Baskin-Robbins for ice cream. Next, they went to a shopping mall, where a shoe store attracted their attention. Each Payton picked out a pair, at 50 percent off, with Mack being the boldest with a pair of Marine combat boots. In the center of the mall was a four-screen cinema. They caught the 6:00 p.m. showing of the latest Harry Potter. Dinner was at a family pizzeria with an indoor playground and a rowdy atmosphere. They finally made it home around ten, where Ramona was watching television and enjoying the quiet. The kids handed her leftover pizza, and both talked at once about the movie. They promised to finish their homework in the morning. Mary Grace relented, and the entire family settled onto the sofa and watched a reality rescue show. Bedtime was pushed back to eleven.

When the apartment was quiet and the kids tucked in, Wes and Mary Grace lay on the sofa, heads on opposite ends, legs tangled together, minds drifting far away. For the past four years, as their finances had spiraled downward, with one loss after another, one humiliation following the last, fear had become a daily companion. Fear of losing the home, then the office, then the autos. Fear of not being able to provide for their children. Fear of a serious medical emergency that exceeded their insurance. Fear of losing the *Baker* trial. Fear of bankruptcy if the bank pushed too hard.

Since the verdict, the fear had become more of a nuisance than a constant threat. It was always there, but they had slowly gained control of it. For six straight months now, they had paid the bank \$2,000 a month, hard-earned moneys that were left over after all other bills and expenses. It barely covered the interest, and it reminded them of how insurmountable their debt was. But it was symbolic. They were digging out from the rubble and could see the light.

Now, for the first time in years, there was a cushion, a safety net, something to catch them if they fell even deeper. They would take their share of today's settlement and hide it, and when they were afraid again, they would be comforted by their buried treasure.

At ten the following morning, Wes dropped by the bank and found Huffy at his desk. He swore him to silence, then whispered the good news. Huffy almost hugged him. Mr. Prickhead was on his back from nine to five, demanding action.

"The money should be here in a couple of weeks," Wes said proudly. "I'll call as soon as it lands."

"Fifty grand, Wes?" Huffy repeated, as if his job had just been saved.

"You got it."

From there Wes drove to his office. Tabby handed him a phone message from Alan York. Just routine stuff, probably some details to

nail down.

But York's voice lacked its usual warmth. "Wes, there's a new wrinkle," he said slowly, as if searching for words.

"What's the matter?" Wes asked. A knot was already forming in his stomach.

"I don't know, Wes, I'm really frustrated, and confused. This has never happened to me, but, well, anyway, Littun Casualty has flipped on the settlement. It's off the table, all of it. They're yanking it. Some tough A-holes. I've been yelling at them all morning. They yell back. This firm has represented the company for eighteen years, never had a problem like this. But, as of one hour ago, they are looking for another firm. I've fired the client. I gave you my word, and now my client has hung me out to dry. I'm sorry, Wes. Don't know what else to say."

Wes pinched the bridge of his nose and tried not to groan. After a false start, he said, "Well, Alan, this is a shock."

"Damned right it is, but in all fairness it does no harm to the lawsuit. I'm just glad this didn't happen the day before the trial or something crazy like that. Some real bad boys up there."

"They won't be so tough at trial."

"Damned right, Wes. I hope you nail these guys for another huge verdict."

"We will."

"I'm sorry, Wes."

"It's not your fault, Alan. We'll survive and push for a trial."

"You do that."

"We'll talk later."

"Sure. Say, Wes, is your cell phone nearby?"

"It's right here."

"Here's my cell number. Hang up and call me back."

When both men were off the landlines, York said, "You didn't hear this from me, okay?"

"Okay."

"The chief in-house lawyer for Littun Casualty is a guy named Ed Larrimore. For twenty years he was a partner in a New York law firm called Bradley & Backstrom. His brother is also a partner at

that firm. Bradley & Backstrom does the blue-chip thing, and one of its clients is KDN, the oil exploration firm whose biggest shareholder is Carl Trudeau. That's the connection. I have never talked to Ed Larrimore, there's no reason to. But the supervising attorney I deal with whispered to me that a decision was made at the very top to stiff this settlement."

"A little retribution, huh?"

"Smells like it. It's nothing illegal or unethical. The insurance company decides not to settle and goes to trial. Happens every day. There's nothing you can do about it, except burn them at trial. Littun Casualty has assets of twenty billion, so they aren't worried about a jury in Pike County, Mississippi. My guess is they'll drag it out until you get to trial, then try to settle."

"I'm not sure what to say, Alan."

"I'm sorry this happened, Wes. I'm out of the picture now, and you didn't get this from me."

"Sure."

Wes stared at the wall for a long time, then mustered the energy to stand, walk, leave his office, and go look for his wife.

CHAPTER 25

Like clockwork, Ron Fisk kissed Doreen goodbye at the front door at six o'clock on a Wednesday morning, then handed his overnight bag and briefcase to Monte. Guy was waiting in the SUV. Both assistants waved to Doreen, then they sped away. It was the last Wednesday in September, week twenty-one of his campaign, and the twenty-first consecutive Wednesday that he had kissed his wife goodbye at 6:00 a.m. Tony Zachary could not have found a more disciplined candidate.

In the rear seat, Monte handed Ron his daily briefing. One of Tony's deputies in Jackson prepared it during the night and e-mailed it to Monte at exactly five each morning. Page 1 was the schedule. Page 2 was a summary of the three groups he would address that day, along with the names of the important people who would attend.

Page 3 had updates from his opponents' campaigns. It was all mainly gossip but still his favorite part of the briefing. Clete Coley was last seen addressing a small group of sheriffs' deputies in Hancock County, then retiring to the blackjack tables at Pirate's Cove. Today, McCarthy is expected to be at work and has no campaign events.

Page 4 was the financial summary. Contributions so far totaled \$1.7 million, with 75 percent coming from within the state. Expenditures of \$1.8 million. The deficit was of no concern. Tony Zachary knew the heavy money would arrive in October. McCarthy had received \$1.4 million, virtually all from trial lawyers. She had spent half of it. The prevailing thought in the Fisk camp was that the trial lawyers were tapped out.

They were at the airport. The King Air lifted off at 6:30, and at that moment Fisk was on the phone to Tony in Jackson. It was their first chat of the day. Everything was running smoothly. Fisk had

already reached the point of believing that all campaigns were so effortless. He was always prompt, fresh, prepared, rested, well financed, and ready to move on to the next event. He had little contact with the two dozen people under Tony's thumb who sweated the details.

Justice McCarthy's version of the daily briefing was a glass of fruit juice with Nat Lester at her Jackson headquarters. She aimed for 8:30 each morning, and was fairly prompt. By then, Nat had put in two hours and was yelling at people.

They had no interest in the whereabouts of her two opponents. They spent little time with poll numbers. Their data showed her running even with Fisk, and that was troubling enough. They quickly reviewed the latest fund-raising schemes and talked about potential donors.

"I may have a new problem," she said that morning.

"Only one?"

"Do you remember the Frankie Hightower case?"

"Not at this moment, no."

"State trooper was gunned down in Grenada County five years ago. He stopped a car for speeding. Inside the car were three black men and a black teenager, Frankie Hightower. Someone opened fire with an assault weapon, and the trooper got hit eight times. Left him in the middle of Highway 51."

"Let me guess. The court has reached a decision."

"The court is getting close. Six of my colleagues are ready to affirm the conviction."

"Let me guess. You would like to dissent."

"I'm going to dissent. The kid had inadequate counsel. His defense lawyer was some jackass with no experience and apparently very little intelligence. The trial was a joke. The other three thugs pled for life and pointed the finger at Hightower, who was sixteen years

old and sitting in the backseat, without a gun. Yes, I'm going to dissent."

Nat's sandals hit the floor and he began to pace. Arguing the merits of the case was a waste of time. Arguing the politics of it would take some skill. "Coley will go ballistic."

"I don't care about Coley. He's a clown."

"Clowns get votes."

"He's not a factor."

"Fisk will receive it as a wonderful gift from God. More proof that his campaign is divinely inspired. Manna from heaven. I can see the ads now."

"I'm dissenting, Nat. It's that simple."

"It's never that simple. Some of the voters might understand what you're doing and admire your courage. Perhaps three or four of them. The rest will see the Fisk ad with the smiling face of that handsome young state trooper next to the mug shot of Frankie whatever his name is."

"Hightower."

"Thank you. The ad will refer to liberal judges at least ten times, and it will probably show your face. Powerful stuff. You might as well quit now."

His words trailed off but were bitter nonetheless. For a long time they said nothing. Sheila broke the silence by saying, "That's not a bad idea. Quitting. I've caught myself reading the briefs and asking, 'What will the voters think if I rule this way or that?' I'm not a judge anymore, Nat, I'm a politician."

"You're a great judge, Sheila. One of the three we have left."

"It's all about politics now."

"You're not quitting. Have you written your dissent?"

"I'm working on it."

"Look, Sheila, the election is five weeks away. How slow can you write? Hell, the court is famous for taking its sweet time. Surely to God you can sit on this thing until after the election. What's five weeks? It's nothing. The murder was five years ago." He was stomping around, arms flailing.

"We do have a schedule."

“Bullshit. You can manipulate it.”

“For politics.”

“Damned right, Sheila. Give me a break here. We’re busting our asses for you and you act like you’re too good for the dirty work. This is a filthy business, okay?”

“Lower your voice.”

He lowered it several octaves but kept pacing. Three steps to one wall, then three steps to the other. “Your dissent is not going to change a damned thing. The court will run over you again 6 to 3, maybe even 7 to 2, perhaps even 8 to 1. The numbers don’t really matter. The conviction is affirmed, and Frankie Whoever will stay exactly where he is right now and where he’ll be ten years from now. Don’t be stupid, Sheila.”

She finished her fruit juice and did not respond.

“I don’t like that smirk,” Nat said. He pointed a long bony finger at her. “Listen to me. If you file a dissent before the election, I’m walking out the door.”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“I’m not threatening. I’m promising. You know ten different ways to sit on that case for another five weeks. Hell, you could bury it for six months.”

She stood and said, “I’m going to work.”

“I’m not kidding!” he yelled. “I’ll quit!”

She yanked open the door and said, “Go find us some money.”

Three days later, the skillfully coordinated avalanche began. Only a handful of people knew what was coming.

Ron Fisk himself did not comprehend the scope of his own saturation. He had performed for the cameras, changed into various outfits, worked his way through the scripts, dragged in his family and some friends, and he was aware of the budget and the media buys and the market shares of the various television stations in

south Mississippi. And, in a normal campaign, he would have worried about financing such expensive marketing.

But the machine that bore his name had many parts he knew nothing about.

The first ads were the soft ones—warm little vignettes to open the doors and let this fine young man into the homes. Ron as a Boy Scout, with the richly accented old voice of an actor playing the role of his scoutmaster in the background. “One of the finest Boy Scouts we ever had. He made it to Eagle in less than three years.” Ron in a robe at high school graduation, a star student. Ron with Doreen and the kids and his own voice saying, “Families are our greatest asset.” After thirty seconds, the ad signed off with the slogan, in a deep, heavenly voice, “Ron Fisk, a judge with our values.”

A second ad, a series of black-and-white still photos, began with Ron on the steps of his church, in a fine dark suit, chatting with his pastor, who narrated, “Ron Fisk was ordained as a deacon in this church twelve years ago.” Ron with his jacket off, teaching Sunday school. Ron holding his Bible as he makes a point to a group of teenagers under a shade tree. “Thank God for men like Ron Fisk.” Ron and Doreen greeting people at the church’s door. And the same farewell: “Ron Fisk, a judge with our values.”

There was not the slightest hint of conflict, nothing about the campaign, not a trace of mud, no indication of the savagery that would follow. Just a charming hello from an incredibly wholesome young deacon.

The ads blanketed south Mississippi, and central as well because Tony Zachary was paying the steep prices charged by the Jackson outlets.

September 30 was a crucial date on Barry Rinehart’s calendar. All contributions made in the month of October would not be reported until November 10, six days after the election. The flood of out-of-state money he was about to unleash would go undetected until it

was too late. The losers would scream, but that was all they could do.

On September 30, Rinehart and company kicked into high gear. They began with their A-list: tort-reform groups, right-wing religious organizations, business lobbyists, business PACs, and hundreds of conservative organizations ranging from the well-known American Rifle Association to the obscure Zero Future Tax, a small gang dedicated to abolishing the Internal Revenue Service. Eleven hundred and forty groups in all fifty states. Rinehart sent each a detailed memo and request for an immediate donation to the Fisk campaign in the amount of \$2,500, the maximum for an organized entity. From this collection, his goal was \$500,000.

For the individuals—\$5,000 maximum gift—Rinehart had a list of a thousand corporate executives and senior managers of companies in industries that attracted litigation from trial lawyers. Chief among these were insurance companies, and he would collect a million dollars from his contacts there. Carl Trudeau had given him the names of two hundred executives of companies controlled by the Trudeau Group, though no one from Krane Chemical would write a check. If the Fisk campaign took money from Krane, then a front-page story was likely. Fisk might feel compelled to recuse himself, a disaster Rinehart couldn't begin to contemplate.

He expected \$1 million from Carl's boys, though it would not go directly into the Fisk campaign. To keep their names away from nosy reporters, and to make sure no one ever knew of Mr. Trudeau's involvement, Rinehart routed their money into the bank accounts for Lawsuit Victims for Truth and Gunowners United Now (GUN).

His B-list contained a thousand names of donors with proven records of supporting pro-business candidates, though not at the \$5,000 level. He expected another \$500,000.

Three million dollars was his goal, and he was not at all concerned about reaching it.

CHAPTER 26

In the excitement of the moment, Huffy had made a dreadful mistake. The expectation of a meaningful payment, coupled with the constant pressure from Mr. Prickhead, had caused a lapse in judgment.

Not long after Wes stopped by with the promise of \$50,000, Huffy marched into the big office and proudly informed his boss that the Paytons' debt was about to be reduced. When he got the bad news two days later that it was not, he was too afraid to tell anyone.

After losing sleep for almost a week, he finally forced himself to confront the devil again. He stepped in front of the massive desk, swallowed hard, and said, "Some bad news, sir."

"Where's the money?" Mr. Kirkhead demanded.

"It's not going to happen, sir. Their settlement fell through."

Forgoing curse words, Mr. Prickhead said, "We're calling the loan. Do it now."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"We can't do that. They've been paying two thousand a month."

"Super. That doesn't even cover the interest. Call the loan. Now."

"But why?"

"Just a couple of small reasons, Huffy. Number one, it's been in default for at least a year. Number two, it's grossly under-collateralized. As a banker, certainly you can understand these small problems."

"But they're trying."

"Call the loan. Do it now, and if you don't, then you'll be either reassigned or dismissed."

"That's obscene."

"I don't care what you think." Then he relented a bit and said, "It's not my decision, Huffy. We have new ownership, and I have

been ordered to call the loan.”

“But why?”

Kirkhead picked up the phone and offered it. “You want to call the man in Dallas?”

“This will bankrupt them.”

“They’ve been bankrupt for a long time. Now they can make it official.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Talking to me, son?”

Huffy glared at the fat hairless head, then said, “Not really. More to that son of a bitch in Dallas.”

“We’ll keep that here, okay?”

Huffy returned to his office, slammed the door, and watched the walls while an hour passed. Prickhead would stop by soon for the follow-up.

Wes was in a deposition downtown. Mary Grace was at her desk and took the call.

She admired Huffy for his bravery in extending much more credit than anyone had thought possible, but the sound of his voice always rattled her. “Good morning, Tom,” she said pleasantly.

“It’s not a good morning, Mary Grace,” he began. “It’s a bad morning, an awful morning, one of the worst ever.”

A heavy pause. “I’m listening.”

“The bank, not the bank you’ve been dealing with but another bank now, one owned by some people I’ve met only once and never care to see again, has decided that it can no longer wait to be paid. The bank, not me, is calling the loan.”

Mary Grace emitted a strange guttural sound that could have passed for an expletive but really wasn’t a word at all. Her first thought was of her father. Other than the Paytons’ signatures, the only security for the loan was a two-hundred-acre tract of farmland her father had owned for many years. It was near Bowmore, and it

did not include the forty acres and family home. The bank would foreclose on the property.

"Any particular reason, Huffy?" she asked coolly.

"None whatsoever. The decision was not made in Hattiesburg. Second State sold out to the devil, if you will recall."

"This doesn't make sense."

"I agree."

"You'll force us into bankruptcy, and the bank will get nothing."

"Except for the farm."

"So you'll foreclose on the farm?"

"Someone will. I hope not me."

"Smart move, Huffy, because when they foreclose on the courthouse steps in Bowmore there might be a killing."

"Maybe they'll get ole Prickhead."

"Are you in your office?"

"Yes, with the door locked."

"Wes is downtown. He'll be there in fifteen minutes. Unlock the door."

"No."

Fifteen minutes later, Wes charged into Huffy's office, his cheeks red with anger, his hands ready to strangle. "Where's Prickhead?" he demanded.

Huffy jumped to his feet behind his desk and placed both hands in the air. "Be cool, Wes."

"Where's Prickhead?"

"Right now he's in his car, driving to an urgent meeting, one that suddenly materialized ten minutes ago. Sit down, Wes."

Wes took a deep breath, then slowly eased into a chair. Huffy watched him, then returned to his own chair. "It's not his fault, Wes," Huffy said. "Technically, the loan has been in default for almost two years. He could have done this months ago, but he didn't. I know you don't like him. I don't like him. His wife doesn't

like him. But he's been very patient. This was a decision made in the home office."

"Give me a name at the home office."

Huffy slid across a letter he'd received by fax. It was addressed to the Paytons, on New Vista Bank letterhead, and signed by a Mr. F. Patterson Duvall, vice president. "This arrived thirty minutes ago," Huffy said. "I don't know Mr. Duvall. I've called his office twice, but he's in a very important meeting, one that I'm sure will last until we stop calling. It's a waste of time, Wes."

The letter demanded payment in full of \$414,656.22, with daily interest kicking in at \$83.50. Pursuant to the terms of the loan agreement, the Paytons had forty-eight hours to pay, or collection and foreclosure proceedings would commence. Of course, the resulting attorneys' fees and court costs would also be tacked on to the amount due.

Wes read it slowly as he continued to cool down. He placed it back on the desk. "Mary Grace and I talk about this loan every day, Huffy. It's a part of our marriage. We talk about the kids, the office, the debt to the bank, what's for dinner. It's always there, and we've busted our asses to pay off all other obligations so we can bust our asses to pay off the bank. We came very close to giving you fifty thousand last week. We vowed to work ourselves ragged until this bank is out of our lives. Now this stunt. Now some moron in Dallas has decided he's tired of seeing this past-due loan on his daily rap sheet, and he wants to get rid of it. You know what, Huffy—"

"What?"

"The bank just screwed itself. We'll file for bankruptcy, and when you try to foreclose on my father-in-law's property, I'll put him in bankruptcy. And when we work our way out of bankruptcy, and we're back on our feet, guess who ain't getting paid."

"The moron in Dallas?"

"You got it. The bank gets nothing. It'll be wonderful. We can keep the \$400,000 when we earn it."

Late that afternoon, Wes and Mary Grace called a firm meeting in The Pit. Other than the humiliation of filing for bankruptcy, which seemed to bother no one, there was little to worry about. In fact, the bank's actions would give the firm some breathing room. The \$2,000 monthly payments would cease, and the cash could certainly be used elsewhere.

The concern, of course, was the land owned by Mr. Shelby, Mary Grace's father. Wes had a plan. He would find a friendly buyer who would appear at the foreclosure and write a check. Title would pass, and it would be held in "a handshake trust" until the Paytons could buy it back, hopefully within a year. Neither Wes nor Mary Grace could stomach the idea of asking her father to join them at the bankruptcy court.

Forty-eight hours passed with no payment. Sticking to its word, the bank filed suit. Its lawyer, a local gentleman the Paytons knew well, called ahead of time and apologized. He'd represented the bank for years and could not afford to lose it as a client. Mary Grace accepted his apology and gave him her blessing to sue them.

The next day the Paytons filed for bankruptcy, both individually and as Payton & Payton, Attorneys-at-Law. They listed combined assets of \$35,000—two old cars, furniture, office equipment—all of which was protected. They listed debts of \$420,000. The filing effectively stayed the lawsuit, and would eventually render it useless. The *Hattiesburg American* reported it on its second page the following day.

Carl Trudeau read about it online and laughed out loud. "Sue me again," he said with great satisfaction.

Within a week, three Hattiesburg law firms informed ole Prickhead that they were withdrawing their funds, closing their accounts, and moving their business down the street. There were at least eight other banks in town.

A wealthy trial lawyer named Jim McMay called Wes and offered assistance. The two had been friends for many years and had collaborated twice on product liability cases. McMay represented four Bowmore families in the Krane litigation, but had not pushed

the cases aggressively. Like the other trial lawyers suing Krane, he was waiting for the outcome of *Baker* and hoping to hit the jackpot if and when there was a settlement.

They met for breakfast at Nanny's, and over biscuits and country ham McMay readily agreed to rescue the two hundred acres at foreclosure and keep the title until the Paytons could buy it back. Farmland in Cancer County wasn't exactly selling at a premium, and Wes speculated that the Shelby property would fetch around \$100,000, the only money the bank would collect from its foolish maneuver.

CHAPTER 27

Sheila McCarthy was enduring the morning's torture on the treadmill when she hit the stop button and gawked at the television in disbelief. The ad ran at 7:29, smack in the middle of the local news. It began with the provocative sight of two well-dressed young men kissing passionately while a minister of some variety smiled behind them. A husky voice-over announced, "Same-sex marriages are sweeping the country. In places like Massachusetts, New York, and California, laws are being challenged. Advocates of gay and lesbian marriages are pushing hard to force their lifestyles on the rest of our society." A still photo of a wedding couple—male and female—at the altar was suddenly desecrated with a bold black X. "Liberal judges are sympathetic to the rights of same-sex marriages." The photo was replaced with a video of a group of happy lesbians waiting to tie the knot in a mass ceremony. "Our families are under attack from homosexual activists and the liberal judges who support them." Next was a quick video of a mob burning an American flag. The voice said, "Liberal judges have approved the burning of our flag." Then a quick shot of a magazine rack lined with copies of *Hustler*. "Liberal judges see nothing wrong with pornography." Then a photo of a smiling family, mother and father and four children. "Will liberal judges destroy our families?" the narrator inquired ominously, leaving little doubt that they would if given half a chance. The family photo was ripped apart into two jagged pieces. Suddenly the handsome but serious face of Ron Fisk appeared. He looked sincerely at the camera and said, "Not in Mississippi. One man. One woman. I'm Ron Fisk, candidate for the supreme court. And I approved this ad."

Dripping with sweat, her heart pounding even faster, Sheila sat on the floor and tried to think. The weatherman was prattling on, but

she didn't hear him. She lay down on her back, stretched out her arms and legs, and took deep breaths.

Gay marriage was a dead issue in Mississippi and would remain so forever. No one with an audience or a following had dared to suggest that the laws be changed to allow it. Every member of the state legislature could be expected to rail against it. Only one judge in the entire state—Phil Shingleton—had addressed it, and he had dismissed the Meyerchec/Spano lawsuit in record speed. The supreme court would probably deal with that case in a year or so, but Sheila expected a rather terse review followed by a quick 9–0 vote affirming Judge Shingleton.

How, exactly, had she now been cast as a liberal judge who supported gay marriage?

The room was spinning. At a commercial break, she tensed and waited for another assault, but there was nothing but the squawking of a car dealer and frantic urgings of a discount-furniture retailer.

Fifteen minutes later, though, the ad was back. She lifted her head and watched in disbelief as the same images followed the same voice.

Her phone was ringing. Caller ID told her not to answer. She showered and dressed in a hurry and at 8:30 walked into her headquarters with a wide smile and warm “Good morning.” The four volunteers were subdued. Three televisions were running three different programs. Nat was in his office yelling at someone on the phone. He slammed the phone down, waved her inside, then closed the door behind her.

“You’ve seen it?” he said.

“Twice,” she said softly. On the surface, she seemed unfazed. Everyone else was rattled, and it was important to at least try to appear calm.

“Total saturation,” he said. “Jackson, Gulf Coast, Hattiesburg, Laurel, every fifteen minutes on all stations. Plus radio.”

“What kind of juice do you have?”

“Carrot,” he said and opened his small refrigerator. “They’re burning money, which, of course, means they’re raking it in by the truckload. Typical ambush. Wait until October 1, then push the

button and start printing cash. They did it last year in Illinois and Alabama. Two years ago in Ohio and Texas.” He poured two cups as he spoke.

“Sit down and relax, Nat,” she said. He did not.

“Attack ads must be answered in kind,” he said. “And quickly.”

“I’m not sure this is an attack ad. He never mentions my name.”

“He doesn’t have to. How many liberal judges are running against Mr. Fisk?”

“None that I know of.”

“As of this morning, dear, you are now officially a liberal judge.”

“Really? I don’t feel any different.”

“We have to answer this, Sheila.”

“I’m not getting dragged into a mudslinging fight over gay marriage.”

Nat finally wiggled himself into his chair and shut up. He drank his juice, stared at the floor, and waited for his breathing to relax.

She took a sip of carrot juice, then said with a smile, “This is deadly, isn’t it?”

“The juice?”

“The ad.”

“Potentially, yes. But I’m working on something.” He reached into a pile of rubble next to his desk and pulled out a thin file. He opened it and lifted three sheets of paper clipped together. “Listen to this. Mr. Meyerchec and Mr. Spano leased an apartment on April 1 of this year. We have a copy of the lease. They waited thirty days, as required by law, then registered to vote. The next day, May 2, they applied for Mississippi driver’s licenses, took the exam, and passed. The Department of Public Safety issued licenses on May 4. A couple of months passed, during which there is no record of employment, business licenses, nothing official to indicate they were working here. Remember, they claim to be self-employed illustrators, whatever the hell that is.” He was riffling through the papers, checking facts here and there. “A survey of the illustrators who advertise various services in the yellow pages revealed that no one knows Meyerchec or Spano. Their apartment is in a big complex, lots of units, lots of neighbors, none of whom can

remember seeing them. In gay circles, not a single person who was contacted has ever met them.”

“Contacted by whom?”

“Hang on. Then they try to get a marriage license, and the rest of the story has been in the newspapers.”

“Contacted by whom?”

Nat arranged the papers in the file and closed it. “This is where it gets interesting. Last week I received a call from a young man who described himself as a gay law student here in Jackson. He gave me his name and the name of his partner, another law student. They’re not in the closet, but not exactly ready for the Gay Pride Parade. They were intrigued by the Meyerchec/Spano case, and when it exploded into a campaign issue, they, like a few other folks with brains, began to get suspicious. They know a lot of the gays here in town, and they began to ask about Meyerchec and Spano. No one knows them. In fact, the gay community was suspicious from the day the lawsuit was filed. Who are these guys? Where did they come from? The law students decided to find the answers. They’ve called the Meyerchec/Spano phone number five times a day, at different hours, and never gotten an answer. For thirty-six days now, they’ve made their calls. No answer. They’ve talked to the neighbors. Never a sighting. No one saw them move in. They’ve knocked on the door, peeked in the windows. The apartment is barely furnished, nothing on the walls. To make themselves real citizens, Meyerchec and Spano paid \$3,000 for a used Saab, titled in both names like a real married couple, then bought Mississippi car tags. The Saab is parked in front of their apartment and hasn’t moved in thirty-six days.”

“Where might this be going?” she asked.

“I’m getting there. Now, our two law students have found them, in Chicago, where Meyerchec owns a gay bar and Spano works as an interior designer. The students are willing, for a little cash, to fly to Chicago, spend a few days, hang out in the bar, infiltrate, gather information.”

“Information for what?”

“Information that, hopefully, will prove that they are not residents of this state; that their presence here was a sham; that

someone is using them to exploit the gay marriage issue; and maybe that they are not even a couple in Chicago. If we can prove that, then I'll go to the *Clarion-Ledger*, the *Biloxi Sun Herald*, and every other newspaper in the state and deliver the goods. We can't win a fight on this issue, dear, but we can damned sure fight back."

She drained her glass and shook her head in disbelief. "Do you think Fisk is this smart?"

"Fisk is a pawn, but, yes, his handlers are this smart. It's a cynical scheme, and it's brilliant. No one thinks about gay marriage here because it will never happen, then, suddenly, everybody's talking about it. Front-page news. Everybody's scared. Mothers are hiding their children. Politicians are blathering."

"But why use two gay men from Chicago?"

"I'm not sure you can find two gay men in Mississippi who want this kind of publicity. Plus, gays here who are committed to tolerance understand the backlash from the straight world. The worst thing they could do is exactly what Meyerchec and Spano have done."

"If Meyerchec and Spano are gay, why would they do something to hurt the cause?"

"Two reasons. First, they don't live here. Second, money. Someone's paying the bills—the apartment lease, the used car, the lawyer, and a few thousand bucks to Meyerchec and Spano for their time and trouble."

Sheila had heard enough. She glanced at her watch and said, "How much do they need?"

"Expense money—airfare, hotel, the basics. Two thousand."

"Do we have it?" she asked with a laugh.

"It's out of my pocket. We'll keep it off the books. I just want you to know what we're doing."

"You have my approval."

"And the Frankie Hightower dissent?"

"I'm hard at work. Should take me another two months."

"Now you're talking like a real supreme court justice."

Denny Ott received a left-handed invitation to the meeting when a fellow preacher mentioned it to him over coffee one morning at Babe's. Not every minister in town was invited. Two from the Methodist churches and the Presbyterian pastor were specifically excluded, but it appeared as if all others were welcome. There was no Episcopal church in Bowmore, and if the town had a single Catholic, he or she had yet to come forward.

It was held on a Thursday afternoon in the fellowship hall of a fundamentalist congregation called Harvest Tabernacle. The moderator was the church's pastor, a fiery young man who was generally known as Brother Ted. After a quick prayer, he welcomed his fellow ministers, sixteen in number, including three black ministers. He cast a wary eye at Denny Ott, but said nothing about his presence.

Brother Ted quickly got down to business. He had joined the Brotherhood Coalition, a newly formed collection of fundamentalist preachers throughout south Mississippi. It was their purpose to quietly and methodically do everything possible, within the Lord's will, to elect Ron Fisk and thus kill off any chance of same-sex marriages occurring in Mississippi. He ranted on about the evils of homosexuality and its growing acceptability in American society. He quoted the Bible when appropriate, his voice rising with indignation when necessary. He stressed the urgency of electing godly men to all public positions and promised that the Brotherhood would be a force for years to come.

Denny listened with a straight face but growing alarm. He'd had several conversations with the Paytons and knew the real issues behind the race. The manipulation and marketing of Fisk made him sick. He glanced at the other ministers and wondered how many funerals they had held for people killed by Krane Chemical. Cary County should be the last place to embrace the candidacy of someone like Ron Fisk.

Brother Ted grew sufficiently pious when he moved to the subject of Sheila McCarthy. She was a Catholic from the Coast, which in rural Christian circles meant she was a woman of loose morals. She

was divorced. She liked to party, and there were rumors of boyfriends. She was a hopeless liberal, opposed to the death penalty, and could not be trusted when faced with decisions dealing with gay marriage and illegal immigration and the like.

When he finished his sermon, someone suggested that perhaps churches should not become so involved in politics. This was met with general disapproval. Brother Ted jumped in with a brief lecture about the culture wars and the courage they should have to fight for God. It's time for Christians to get off the sidelines and charge into the arena. This led to a fervent discussion about the erosion of values. Blame was placed on television, Hollywood, the Internet. The list grew long and ugly.

What was their strategy? someone asked.

Organization! Church folk outnumbered the heathen in south Mississippi, and the troops must be mobilized. Campaign workers, door knockers, poll watchers. Spread the message from church to church, house to house. The election was only three weeks away. Their movement was spreading like wildfire.

After an hour, Denny Ott could take no more. He excused himself, drove to his office at the church, and called Mary Grace.

The MTA directors met in an emergency session two days after the Fisk campaign launched its waves of anti-gay-marriage ads. The mood was somber. The question was obvious: How did such an issue take center stage? And what could the McCarthy campaign do to counter the attack?

Nat Lester was present and gave a summary of their plans for the final three weeks. McCarthy had \$700,000 to fight with, much less than Fisk. Half of her budget was already committed to television ads that would begin running in twenty-four hours. The remainder was for direct mail and some last-minute radio and TV spots. After that, they were out of money. Small donations were coming from labor, conservationists, good-government groups, and a few of the

more moderate lobbying organizations, but 92 percent of McCarthy's funds were mailed in by trial lawyers.

Nat then summarized the latest poll. The race was a dead heat with the two front-runners at 30 percent, with the same number of voters still undecided. Coley remained around 10 percent. However, the poll was conducted the week before and did not reflect any shift due to the gay marriage ads. Because of those ads, Nat would begin polling over the weekend.

Not surprisingly, the trial lawyers had wild and varied opinions about what to do. All of their ideas were expensive, Nat continually reminded them. He listened to them argue. Some had sensible ideas, others were radical. Most assumed they knew more about campaigns than the others, and all of them took for granted that whatever course of action they finally agreed on would be immediately embraced by the McCarthy campaign.

Nat did not share with them some depressing gossip. A reporter from the Biloxi newspaper had called that morning with a few questions. He was exploring a story about the raging new issue of same-sex marriages. During the course of a ten-minute interview, he told Nat that the largest television station on the Coast had sold \$1 million in prime airtime to the Fisk campaign for the remaining three weeks. It was believed to be the largest sale ever in a political race.

One million dollars on the Coast meant at least that much for the rest of the markets.

The news was so distressing that Nat was debating whether to tell Sheila. At that moment, he was leaning toward keeping it to himself. And he certainly wouldn't share it with the trial lawyers. Such sums were so staggering that it might demoralize Sheila's base.

The MTA president, Bobby Neal, finally hammered out a plan, one that would cost little. He would send to their eight hundred members an urgent e-mail detailing the dire situation and begging for action. Each trial lawyer would be instructed to (1) make a list of at least ten clients who were willing and able to write a check for \$100, and (2) make another list of clients and friends who could be

motivated to campaign door-to-door and work the polls on Election Day. Grassroots support was critical.

As the meeting began to break up, Willy Benton stood at the far end of the table and got everyone's attention. He was holding a sheet of paper with small print front and back. "This is a promissory note on a line of credit at the Gulf Bank in Pascagoula," he announced, and more than one lawyer considered diving under the table. Benton was no small thinker, and he was known for drama. "Half a million dollars," he said slowly, the numbers booming around the room. "In favor of the campaign to reelect Sheila McCarthy. I've already signed it, and I'm going to pass it around this table. There are twelve of us here. It requires ten signatures to become effective. Each will be liable for fifty thousand."

Dead silence. Eyes were darting from face to face. Some had already contributed more than \$50,000, others much less. Some would spend \$50,000 on jet fuel next month, others were bickering with their creditors. Regardless of their bank balances at the moment, each and every one wanted to strangle the little bastard.

Benton handed the note to the unlucky stiff to his left, one without a jet. Fortunately, such moments in a career are rare. Sign it and you're a tough guy who can roll the dice. Pass it along unsigned and you might as well quit and go home and do real estate.

All twelve signed.

CHAPTER 28

The pervert's name was Darrel Sackett. When last seen, he was thirty-seven years old and housed in a county jail awaiting a new trial on charges of molesting small children. He certainly looked guilty: long sloping forehead, vapid bug eyes enlarged by thick glasses, splotchy stubble from a week's growth, a thick scar stuck to his chin—the type of face that would alarm any parent, or anyone else for that matter. A career pedophile, he was first arrested at age sixteen. Many other arrests followed, and he'd been convicted at least four times in four different states.

Sackett, with his frightening face and disgusting rap sheet, was introduced to the registered voters of south Mississippi in a snazzy direct mailing from another new organization, this one calling itself Victims Rising. The two-page letter was both a bio of a pathetic criminal and a summary of the miserable failures of the judicial system.

“Why Is This Man Free?” the letter screamed. Answer: Because Justice Sheila McCarthy overturned his conviction on sixteen counts of child molestation. Eight years earlier, a jury convicted Sackett, and the judge sentenced him to life without parole. His lawyer—one paid by taxpayers—appealed his case to the supreme court, and “there Darrel Sackett found the sympathetic embrace of Justice Sheila McCarthy.” McCarthy condemned the honest and hardworking detectives who extracted a full confession from Sackett. She chastised them for what she saw as their faulty search-and-seizure methods. She hammered the trial judge, who was highly respected and tough on crime, for admitting into evidence the confession and materials taken from Sackett's apartment. (The jury was visibly shaken when forced to view Sackett's stash of child porn, seized by the cops during a “valid” search.) She claimed distaste for the defendant, but begged off by saying that she had no

choice but to reverse his conviction and send his case back for a new trial.

Sackett was moved from the state prison back to the Lauderdale County jail, where he escaped one week later. He had not been heard from since. He was out there, “a free man,” no doubt continuing his violence against innocent children.

The last paragraph ended with the usual rant against liberal judges. The fine print gave the standard approval by Ron Fisk.

Certain relevant facts were conveniently omitted. First, the court voted 8 to 1 to reverse the Sackett conviction and send it back for a new trial. The actions of the police were so egregious that four other justices wrote concurring opinions that were even more scathing in their condemnation of the forced confession and warrantless, unconstitutional search. The lone dissenter, Justice Romano, was a misguided soul who had never voted to reverse a criminal conviction, and privately vowed that he would never do so.

Second, Sackett was dead. Four years earlier he’d been killed in a bar fight in Alaska. The news of his passing barely made it to Mississippi, and when his file was retired in Lauderdale County, not a single reporter noticed. Barry Rinehart’s exhaustive research discovered the truth, for what little it mattered.

The Fisk campaign was far beyond the truth now. The candidate was too busy to sweat the details, and he had placed his complete trust in Tony Zachary. The race had become a crusade, a calling of the highest order, and if facts were slightly bent or even ignored, then it was justified because of the importance of his candidacy. Besides, it was politics, a dirty game, and you could rest assured the other side wasn’t playing fair, either.

Barry Rinehart had never been shackled by the truth. His only concern was not getting caught in his lies. If a madman like Darrel Sackett was out there, on the loose, very much alive and doing his filthy deeds, then his story was more shocking. A dead Sackett was a pleasant thought, but Rinehart preferred the power of fear. And he knew that McCarthy couldn’t respond. She had reversed his conviction, plain and simple. Any effort to explain why would be futile in the world of thirty-second ads and snappy sound bites.

After the shock of the ad, she would try to erase Sackett from her mind.

After the shock, though, she had to at least revisit the case. She saw the ad online, at the Victims Rising Web site, after receiving a frantic call from Nat Lester. Paul, her clerk, found the reported case, and they read it in silence. She vaguely remembered it. In the eight years since, she had read a thousand briefs and written hundreds of opinions.

“You got it right,” Paul said when he finished.

“Yes, but why does it look so wrong now?” she said. She’d been hard at work, her desk covered with memos from half a dozen cases. She was stunned, bewildered.

He didn’t answer.

“I wonder what’s next,” she said, closing her eyes.

“Probably a death penalty case. And they’ll cherry-pick the facts again.”

“Thanks. Anything else?”

“Sure. There’s lots of material in these books. You’re a judge. Every time you make a decision someone loses. These guys don’t care about the truth, so they can make anything sound bad.”

“Please shut up.”

Her first ads began, and they lightened the mood somewhat. Nat chose to begin with a straightforward piece with Sheila in a black robe sitting at the bench, smiling earnestly at the camera. She talked about her experience—eight years as a trial judge in Harrison County, nine years on the supreme court. She hated to pat her own back, but twice in the past five years she had received the highest rating in the state bar’s annual review of all appellate judges. She

was not a liberal judge, nor a conservative one. She refused to be labeled. Her commitment was simply to follow the laws of Mississippi, not to make new ones. The best judges are those without agendas, without preconceived notions of how they might rule. The best judges are those with experience. Neither of her opponents had ever presided over a trial, or issued a ruling, or studied complicated briefs, or listened to oral arguments, or written a final opinion. Until now, neither of her opponents had shown the slightest interest in sitting as a judge. Yet they are asking the voters to jump-start their judicial careers at the very top. She finished by saying, without the smile, “I was appointed to this position by the governor nine years ago, then I was reelected by you, the people. I am a judge, not a politician, and I don’t have the money that some are spending to purchase this seat. I ask you, the voters, to help send the message that a seat on the Mississippi Supreme Court cannot be bought by big business. Thank you.”

Nat spent little money at the Jackson stations and much more on the Coast. McCarthy would never be able to saturate like Fisk. Nat speculated that Fisk and all those wealthy folks behind him were burning \$200,000 a week on the anti-gay-marriage ads alone.

Sheila’s first round was about half of that, and the response was lukewarm. The ad was called “uncreative” by her coordinator in Jackson County. A noisy trial lawyer, no doubt an expert in all things political, sent an angry e-mail in which he blasted Nat for such a soft approach. You gotta fight fire with fire and answer the attack ads with more of the same. He reminded Nat that his firm had contributed \$30,000 and might forgo any more if McCarthy didn’t take off the gloves.

Women seemed to like the ad. Men were more critical. After reading a few dozen e-mails, Nat realized he was wasting his time.

Barry Rinehart had been waiting impatiently for some television from the McCarthy strategists. When he finally saw her first ad, he

laughed out loud. What an old-fashioned, out-of-date, pathetically lame effort—judge in black robe, at a bench, thick law books as props, even a gavel for good measure. She looked sincere, but she was a judge, not a television presence. Her eyes moved as she read from the teleprompter. Her head was as rigid as a deer in headlights.

A weak response indeed, but it had to be answered. It had to be buried. Rinehart reached into his video library, his arsenal, and selected his next grenade.

Ten hours after McCarthy began running her ad, she was blown off the television by an attack ad that stunned even the most jaded political junkies. It began with the sharp crack of a rifle shot, then a black-and-white photo of Justice McCarthy, one from the court's official Web site. A powerful, barbed voice announced, "Justice Sheila McCarthy does not like hunters. Seven years ago she wrote, 'The hunters of this state have a poor record on safety.' " This quote was splashed across her face. The photo changed to one from a newspaper story with Sheila shaking hands at a rally. The voice continued, "And Justice Sheila McCarthy does not like gun owners. Five years ago she wrote, 'The ever vigilant gun lobby can always be expected to attack any statute that might in any way restrict the use of handguns in vulnerable areas. Regardless of how sensible a proposed statute might be, the gun lobby will descend upon it with a vengeance.' " This, too, was printed rapidly, word for word, across the screen. Then there was another blast, this one from a shotgun firing at a blue sky. Ron Fisk appeared, decked out like the real hunter he was. He lowered his shotgun and chatted with the voters for a few seconds. Memories of his grandfather, hunting in these woods as a child, love of nature, a vow to protect the sacred rights of hunters and gun owners. It ended with Ron walking along the edge of the woods, a pack of frisky dogs behind him.

Some small, quick print at the end of the ad gave credit to an organization called Gunowners United Now (GUN).

The truth: The first case mentioned in the ad involved the accidental shooting death of a deer hunter. His widow sued the man who shot him, a nasty trial ensued, and the jury in Calhoun County

awarded her \$600,000, the highest ever in that courtroom. The trial was as sordid as a divorce, with allegations of drinking and pot smoking and bad behavior. The two men were members of a hunting club and had been at deer camp for a week. During the trial, a contentious issue was safety, and several experts testified about gun laws and hunter education. Though the evidence was hotly disputed, it appeared, from the record, that the bulk of the testimony proved that the state's record on safety lagged behind others'.

In the second case, the City of Tupelo, in response to a schoolyard shooting that killed none but injured four, passed an ordinance banning the possession of a firearm within a hundred yards of any public school. Gun advocates sued, and the American Rifle Association wedged itself into the picture by filing a portentous and overblown friend-of-the-court brief. The court struck down the ordinance on Second Amendment grounds, but Sheila dissented. In doing so, she couldn't resist the temptation to take a swipe at the ARA.

Now the swipe was back. She watched Fisk's latest ad in her office, alone and with the sinking feeling that her chances were fading. On the stump, she had the time to explain her votes and point out the unfairness of taking her words out of context. But on television, she had thirty seconds. It was impossible, and the clever handlers of Ron Fisk knew it.

After a month at Pirate's Cove, Clete Coley had overstayed his welcome. The owner was fed up with giving away a penthouse suite, and he was fed up with feeding Coley's astounding appetite. The candidate was getting three meals a day, many of them sent to his room. At the blackjack tables, he drank rum like it was water and got hammered every night. He badgered the dealers, insulted the other players, and groped the cocktail waitresses. The casino

had pocketed about \$20,000 from Coley, but his expenses were at least that much.

Marlin found him at the bar early one evening, having a drink and limbering up for another long night at the tables. After small talk, Marlin cut to the chase. "We'd like for you to drop out of the race," he said. "And while you're leaving, endorse Ron Fisk."

Clete's eyes narrowed. Deep wrinkles tightened around his forehead. "Say what?"

"You heard me."

"I'm not so sure I did."

"We're asking you to withdraw and endorse Fisk. It's simple."

Coley gulped the rum without taking his eyes off Marlin. "Keep talking," he said.

"There's not much to say. You're a long shot, to put it mildly. You've done a good job of stirring things up, attacking McCarthy, but it's time to bail out and help elect Fisk."

"What if I don't like Fisk?"

"I'm sure he doesn't like you. It's immaterial. The party's over. You've had your jollies, gotten some headlines, met lots of interesting folks along the way, but you've made your last speech."

"The ballots have been printed. My name is on them."

"That means that a handful of your fans won't hear the news. Big deal."

Another long pull on the rum, and Coley said, "Okay, a hundred thousand to get in, how much to get out?"

"Fifty."

He shook his head and glanced at the blackjack tables in the distance. "That's not enough."

"I'm not here to negotiate. It's fifty thousand cash. Same suitcase as before, just not as heavy."

"Sorry. My figure is a hundred."

"I'll be here tomorrow, same time, same place." And with that, Marlin disappeared.

At nine the next morning, two FBI agents banged on the door to the penthouse suite. Eventually, Clete staggered to the door and demanded, "Who the hell is it?"

“FBI. Open up.”

Clete cracked the door and peered over the chain. Twins. Dark suits. Same barber. “What do you want?”

“We’d like to ask you some questions, and we prefer not to do it from this side of the door.”

Clete opened it and waved them in. He was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of NBA-style shorts that fell to his knees and sagged halfway down his ass. As he watched them sit at the small dining table, he racked his muddled brain for some recollection of which law he’d broken. Nothing recent sprang to mind, but then nothing would at this miserable time of the day. He maneuvered his cumbersome stomach—how much weight had he gained in the last month?—into a chair and glanced at their badges.

“Does the name Mick Runyun ring a bell?” one asked.

It did, but he wasn’t ready to admit anything. “Maybe.”

“Meth dealer. You represented him three years ago in federal court. Pled to ten years, cooperated with the government, real nice boy.”

“Oh, that Mick Runyun.”

“Yes, that one. Did he pay you a fee?”

“My records are at the office in Natchez.”

“Great. We have a warrant for them. Can we meet there tomorrow?”

“Love to.”

“Anyway, we’re betting that your records don’t tell us too much about the fees paid by Mr. Runyun. We have a real good source telling us that he paid you in cash, twenty thousand bucks, and that this was never reported.”

“Do tell.”

“And if this is true, then it’s a violation of RICO and a few other federal statutes.”

“Good ole RICO. You boys wouldn’t be in business without it.”

“What time tomorrow?”

“I was planning on campaigning tomorrow. The election is in two weeks.”

They looked at this bleary-eyed, wild-haired, hung-over beast and found it comical that he was a candidate for the supreme court.

“We’ll be at your office in Natchez at noon tomorrow. If you don’t show, then we’ll have a warrant for your arrest. That should impress the voters.”

They marched out of the room and slammed the door behind them.

Late that afternoon, Marlin appeared, as promised. He ordered coffee, which he didn’t touch. Clete ordered rum and soda and smelled as though it was not the first one of the day.

“Can we agree on fifty, Clete?” Marlin asked after a long spell of gazing at the cocktail waitresses scurrying about.

“I’m still thinking.”

“Were those two Fibbies nice to you this morning?”

Clete absorbed this without a flinch, without the slightest twitch to indicate his surprise. In fact, he wasn’t surprised at all. “Nice boys,” he said. “The way I figure it, Senator Rudd is meddling again. He wants Fisk to win because they’re from the same tribe. Of course we know that Rudd is the uncle of the U.S. attorney down here, a real imbecile who got the job only because of his connections. Damned sure couldn’t find a job anywhere else. Rudd leans on his nephew, who brings in the FBI to twist my arm. I drop out while singing the praises of Ron Fisk, and he squeaks out a great victory. He’s happy. Rudd’s happy. Big business is happy. Ain’t life grand?”

“You’re very close,” Marlin said. “And you also took a \$20,000 cash fee from a drug dealer and didn’t report it. Pretty stupid, but not the end of the world. Nothing that can’t be fixed by The Senator. You play along now, take your cash, bow out gracefully, and you’ll never hear from the Fibbies again. Case closed.”

Clete’s red eyes settled on Marlin’s blue ones. “You swear?”

“I swear. We shake hands now, you can forget the meeting at noon tomorrow in Natchez.”

“Where’s the money?”

“Outside, to the right. Same green Mustang.” Marlin gently laid his keys on the bar. Clete grabbed them and disappeared.

CHAPTER 29

With only fifteen days left before the election, Barry Rinehart was invited to dinner at the Vietnamese hole-in-the-wall on Bleecker Street. Mr. Trudeau wanted an update.

On the flight from Boca, Barry gloated over his latest poll. Fisk was sixteen points ahead, a lead that could not be lost. The gay marriage issue had bumped him four points. The GUN attacks on McCarthy added three more. Clete Coley's rather lame farewell added another three. The campaign itself was running smoothly. Ron Fisk was a workhorse who did exactly what Tony Zachary told him to do. There was plenty of money. Their television ads were hitting all markets with perfect regularity. The responses from their direct mail were nothing short of astonishing. The campaign had raised \$320,000 from small donors who were upset about gays and guns. McCarthy was running hard to catch up and falling further behind.

Mr. Trudeau looked lean and tanned, and he was thrilled with the latest summaries. The sixteen-point lead dominated the dinner conversation. Carl quizzed Rinehart relentlessly about the numbers. Could they be trusted? How were they arrived at? How did they compare with Barry's other races? What would it take to blow the lead? Had Barry ever seen such a big lead evaporate?

Barry all but guaranteed a win.

For the first three quarters of the year, Krane Chemical reported dismal sales and weak earnings. The company was racked with production problems in Texas and Indonesia. Three plants shut down for major, unscheduled repairs. A plant in Brazil closed for

undisclosed reasons, leaving its two thousand employees out of work. Huge orders were unfilled. Longtime customers left in frustration. The sales force could not get product. Competitors cut prices and poached business. Morale was down and there were rumors of major cutbacks and layoffs.

Behind the chaos, Carl Trudeau was skillfully pulling all the strings. He did nothing illegal, but cooking the books was an art he'd mastered many years ago. When one of his companies needed bad numbers, Carl could deliver them. During the year, Krane wrote off huge chunks of research and development, shifted unusually large sums of money into legal reserves, borrowed heavily on its credit lines, stifled sales by sabotaging production, bloated expenses, sold two profitable divisions, and managed to alienate many of its customers. Through it all, Carl coordinated enough leaks to float a printing press. Since the verdict, Krane had been on the radar of business reporters, and all bad news got plenty of ink. Of course, every story referred to the massive legal problems the company was facing. The possibility of bankruptcy had been mentioned several times, after careful plants by Carl.

The stock began the year at \$17.00. Nine months later, it was \$12.50. With the election just two weeks away, Carl was ready for one last assault on the battered common shares of Krane Chemical Corporation.

The phone call from Jared Kurtin seemed like a dream. Wes listened to the words and closed his eyes. It could not be true.

Kurtin explained that he had been instructed by his client to explore the possibilities of settling the Bowmore litigation. Krane Chemical was a mess, and until the lawsuits went away, it could not regain its focus and compete effectively. His proposal was to gather all the attorneys in one room at one time and start the process. It would be complicated because there were so many plaintiffs with so many issues. It would be difficult because there were so many

lawyers to control. He insisted that Wes and Mary Grace act as lead counsel for the plaintiffs' lawyers, but they could work out those details at the first meeting. Time was suddenly crucial. Kurtin had already reserved a convention room at a hotel in Hattiesburg, and he wanted the meeting to begin on Friday and run through the weekend, if necessary.

"Today is Tuesday," Wes said, gripping the phone with white knuckles.

"Yes, I know. As I said, my client is anxious to begin this process. It could take weeks or months to complete, but we're ready to sit down."

Wes was ready, too. He had a deposition set for Friday, something that was easily postponed. "What are the rules?" he asked.

Kurtin had the benefit of hours of planning. Wes was reacting out of shock and excitement. Plus, Kurtin had been around the block a few more times than Wes. He had negotiated mass settlements on several occasions. Wes could only dream of one.

"I'm sending a letter to all known plaintiffs' attorneys," Kurtin said. "Look over the list and see if I'm missing anyone. As you know, they're still popping up. All lawyers are invited, but the easiest way to screw up a settlement conference like this is to give the trial lawyers the microphones. You and Mary Grace will talk for the plaintiffs. I'll talk for Krane. The first challenge is to identify all persons who are making any sort of claim. Our records show about six hundred, and these range from dead bodies to nosebleeds. In my letters, I'm asking the lawyers to submit the names of clients, whether they have filed suit or not. Once we know who expects a piece of the pie, the next challenge will be to classify the claims. Unlike some mass tort settlements with ten thousand plaintiffs, this one will be manageable in that we can talk about individual claims. Our current numbers show 68 dead, 143 wounded and probably dying, and the rest with various afflictions that, in all probability, are not life threatening."

Kurtin ticked off the numbers like a war correspondent reporting from battle. Wes couldn't help but grimace, nor could he suppress another vile thought about Krane Chemical.

“Anyway, we’ll start the process of going through these numbers. The goal is to arrive at one figure, then compare it with the cash my client is willing to spend.”

“And what might that number be?” Wes asked with a desperate laugh.

“Not now, Wes, maybe later. I’m asking each lawyer to fill out a standardized form for each client. If we can get these back before Friday, we’ll have a head start. I’m bringing a full team, Wes. My litigators, support staff, experts, number crunchers, and I’ll even have a guy with some spine from Krane. Plus, of course, the usual crew from the insurance companies. You might want to reserve a large room for your support people.”

Reserve with what? Wes almost asked. Surely Kurtin knew about the bankruptcy.

“Good idea,” he said.

“And, Wes, my client is really concerned about secrecy. There is no reason for this to be publicized. If word gets out, then the plaintiffs and their lawyers and the whole town of Bowmore will get excited. What happens then if the negotiations go nowhere? Let’s keep a lid on this.”

“Sure.” How ridiculous. Kurtin was about to send his letter to no fewer than twenty law firms. Babe at the coffee shop in Bowmore would know about the settlement conference before she began serving lunch.

The following morning the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page story about Krane Chemical’s settlement overtures. An anonymous source who worked for the company confirmed the truth of the rumors. Experts chimed in with varying opinions, but it was generally regarded as a positive step for the company. Large settlements can be calculated. Liabilities can be contained. Wall Street understands hard numbers, and it hates unpredictability. There is a long history of battered companies shoring up their financial futures with

massive settlements that, while costly, were effective in cleaning up litigation.

Krane opened at \$12.75 and advanced \$2.75 in heavy trading.

By midafternoon Wednesday, the phones were ringing nonstop at Payton & Payton, and many other law firms as well. Word of a settlement was out there, on the street and flying around the Internet.

Denny Ott called and talked to Mary Grace. A group of Pine Grove residents had gathered at the church to offer prayers, exchange gossip, and wait for a miracle. It was like a vigil, he said. Not surprisingly, there were different versions of the truth. A settlement had already been negotiated, and money was on the way. No, the settlement would not take place on Friday, but there was no doubt that it would happen. No, there was no settlement at all, just a meeting of the lawyers. Mary Grace explained what was happening and asked Denny to pass along the truth. It quickly became apparent that either she or Wes would need to hustle over to the church and meet with their clients.

Babe's was packed with spirited coffee drinkers, all looking for the latest word. Would Krane be required to clean up its toxic dump? Someone claiming authority answered yes, that would be a condition of the settlement. How much would the death claims be worth? Someone else had heard the figure of \$5 million each. Arguments raged. Experts rose up and were soon shouted down.

F. Clyde Hardin walked over from his law office and immediately took center stage. His class action had been ridiculed by many of the locals who felt he was just riding the Paytons' coattails with a bunch of opportunistic clients. He and his good pal Sterling Bintz from Philadelphia were claiming almost three hundred "severely and permanently injured" members of their class action. Since its filing in January, it had gone nowhere. Now, however, F. Clyde had instantly gained stature. Any settlement had to include "his people." He would have a seat at the table on Friday, he explained to the silent crowd. He would be sitting there alongside Wes and Mary Grace Payton.

Jeannette Baker was behind the counter of a convenience store at the south edge of Bowmore when she received the call from Mary Grace. “Do not get excited,” her lawyer warned, rather sternly. “This could be a lengthy process, and the possibility of a settlement is remote.” Jeannette had questions but did not know where to begin. Mary Grace would be at the Pine Grove Church at 7:00 p.m. for a full discussion with all of her clients. Jeannette promised to be there.

With a \$41 million verdict attached to it, Jeannette Baker’s case would be the first one on the table.

The settlement news was too much for Bowmore to handle. In the small offices downtown the secretaries and Realtors and insurance agents talked of nothing else. The languid human commerce along Main Street stopped dead as friends and neighbors found it impossible to pass one another without comparing gossip. The clerks in the Cary County Courthouse collected rumors, amended them, embellished some, and reduced some, then passed them along. In the schools the teachers gathered in their coffee rooms and exchanged the latest news. Pine Grove wasn’t the only church where the faithful and the hopeful met for prayer and counseling. Many of the town’s pastors spent the afternoon on the phone listening to the victims of Krane Chemical.

A settlement would close the town’s ugliest chapter, and allow it to begin again. The infusion of money would compensate those who had suffered. The cash would be spent and re-spent and boost the dying economy. Krane would certainly be required to clean up its pollution, and once it was finally gone, perhaps the water would become safe again. Bowmore with clean water—a dream almost impossible to believe. The community could finally shake off the nickname Cancer County.

A settlement was a fast and final end to the nightmare. No one in the town wanted litigation that would be prolonged and ugly. No one wanted another trial like Jeannette Baker’s.

Nat Lester had been pestering newspaper editors and reporters for a month. He was furious at the misleading advertising that had drenched south Mississippi, and even angrier at the editors for not railing against it. He put together a report in which he took the Fisk ads—print, direct mail, radio, Internet, and television—and dissected them, pointing out every lie, half-truth, and manipulated word. He also estimated, based on direct mail media buys, the amount of cash that was pouring into the Fisk campaign. His figure was at least \$3 million, and he predicted that the vast majority was coming from out of state. There was no way to verify this until after the election. His report was e-mailed and sent overnight to every newspaper in the district, then followed up with aggressive phone calls. He updated it every day, then re-sent it and grew even more obnoxious on the phone. It finally paid off.

To his amazement, and great satisfaction, the three largest papers in the district informed him, separately and off the record of course, that they planned to run stinging editorials on the Fisk campaign in the upcoming Sunday editions.

And Nat's luck continued. The same-sex marriage issue caught the attention of the *New York Times*, and a reporter arrived in Jackson to poke around. His name was Gilbert, and he soon made his way to the McCarthy campaign office, where Nat gave him an earful, off the record. He also gave Gilbert the phone numbers of the two gay law students who were stalking Meyerchec and Spano.

Speaking off the record, they told Gilbert everything and showed him their file. They had spent four days in Chicago and learned a lot. They met Meyerchec in his bar near Evanston, told him they were new to the city and looking for friends. They spent hours in the place, got roaring drunk with the regulars, and never once heard anyone mention anything about a lawsuit in Mississippi. In the photos in the Jackson paper, Meyerchec had blond hair and funky eyeglasses. In Chicago, the hair was darker and there was no eyewear. His smiling face was in one of the group photos they had taken at the bar. As for Spano, they visited the design center where he worked as a consultant for lower-end home buyers. They

pretended to be new residents in an old building nearby, and they spent two hours with him. Noticing their accents, Spano at one point asked where they were from. When they answered Jackson, Mississippi, he had no reaction to the place.

“Ever been there?” one of them asked.

“I’ve passed through a couple of times,” Spano said. This, from a registered voter, a licensed driver, and a current appellant before the state’s supreme court. Though Spano was never seen at Meyerchec’s bar, it appeared as if the two men were indeed a couple. They shared the same address, a bungalow on Clark Street.

The law students had continued to call and visit the near empty apartment in Jackson, with no response. Forty-one days earlier, while knocking on the door, they stuck a piece of junk mail into a small gap near the doorknob. It was still there; the door had not been opened. The old Saab had not been moved. One tire was flat.

Gilbert became captivated by the story and pursued it doggedly. The attempt to get married in Mississippi smelled like a cynical ploy to thrust the same-sex marriage issue to the forefront of the McCarthy-Fisk race. And only McCarthy was getting hurt.

Gilbert badgered the radical lawyer who represented Meyerchec and Spano, but got nowhere. He dogged Tony Zachary for two days but couldn’t get a word. His phone calls to Ron Fisk and his campaign headquarters went unanswered. He spoke to both Meyerchec and Spano by phone, but was quickly cut off when he pressed them on their ties to Mississippi. He gathered a few choice quotes from Nat Lester, and he verified the facts dug up by the law students.

Gilbert finished his report and sent it in.

CHAPTER 30

The first fight was over the question of who would be allowed in the room. On the defense side, Jared Kurtin had full command of his battalion and there were no problems. The brawl was on the other side.

Sterling Bintz arrived early and loudly with an entourage that included young men who appeared to be lawyers and others who appeared to be leg breakers. He claimed to represent over half of the Bowmore victims, and therefore deserved a lead role in the negotiations. He spoke with a clipped nasal voice and in an accent quite foreign to south Mississippi, and he was instantly despised by everyone there. Wes settled him down, but only for a moment. F. Clyde Hardin watched from the safety of a corner, crunching a biscuit, enjoying the argument, and praying for a quick settlement. The IRS was now sending registered letters.

A national toxic tort star from Melbourne Beach, Florida, arrived with his support staff and joined in the debate. He, too, claimed to represent hundreds of injured people, and, since he was a veteran of mass tort settlement, he figured he should handle things from the plaintiffs' side.

The two class action lawyers were soon bickering over stolen clients.

There were seventeen other law firms jockeying for position. A few were reputable personal injury firms, but most were small-town car-wreck lawyers who had picked up a case or two while sniffing around Bowmore.

Tensions were high hours before the meeting began, and once the yelling started, there was the real possibility of a punch being thrown. When the voices were sharpest, Jared Kurtin calmly got their attention and announced that Wes and Mary Grace Payton would decide who sat where. If anyone had a problem with that, then he and his client and its insurance company would walk out the door with all the money. This calmed things down.

Then there was the issue of the press. At least three reporters were on hand to cover this “secret” meeting, and when asked to leave, they were quite reluctant. Fortunately, Kurtin had arranged for some armed security. The reporters were eventually escorted out of the hotel.

Kurtin had also suggested, and offered to pay for, a referee, a disinterested person well versed in litigation and settlements. Wes had agreed, and Kurtin found a retired federal judge in Fort Worth who worked part-time as a mediator. Judge Rosenthal quietly assumed control after the trial lawyers had settled down. It took him an hour to negotiate the seating. He would have the chair at the end of the long table. To his right, halfway down and in the center, would be Mr. Kurtin, flanked by his partners, associates, Frank Sully from Hattiesburg, two suits from Krane, and one from its liability insurance carrier. A total of eleven at the table for the defense, with another twenty packed behind them.

To his left, the Paytons sat in the center, opposite Jared Kurtin. They were flanked by Jim McMay, the Hattiesburg trial lawyer with four death cases out of Bowmore. McMay had made a fortune on the fen-phen diet pill litigation and had participated in several mass settlement conferences. He was joined by a lawyer from Gulfport who had similar experience. The other chairs were taken by Mississippi lawyers who had legitimate cases from Bowmore. The class action boys were shoved into the background. Sterling Bintz voiced his objection to his placement in the room, and Wes angrily told him to shut up. When the leg breakers reacted badly, Jared Kurtin announced that the class actions were the lowest priority on Krane’s list, and if he, Bintz, hoped to collect a dime, then he should keep quiet and stay out of the way.

“This ain’t Philadelphia,” Judge Rosenthal said. “Are those bodyguards or lawyers?”

“Both,” Bintz snapped back.

“Keep them under control.”

Bintz sat down, mumbling and cursing.

It was 10:00 a.m., and Wes was already exhausted. His wife, though, was ready to begin.

For three hours nonstop they shuffled papers. Judge Rosenthal directed traffic as client summaries were produced, copied next door, reviewed, then classified according to the judge’s arbitrary rating system: death was Class One, confirmed cancer was Class Two, all others were Class Three.

A stalemate occurred when Mary Grace suggested that Jeannette Baker be given first priority, and thus more money, because she had actually gone to trial. Why is her case worth more than the other death cases? a trial lawyer asked.

“Because she went to trial,” Mary Grace shot back with a hard gaze. In other words, Baker’s lawyers had the guts to take on Krane while the other lawyers chose to sit back and watch. In the months before the trial, the Paytons had approached at least five of the other trial lawyers present, including Jim McMay, and practically begged them for help. All declined.

“We will concede that the *Baker* case is worth more,” Jared Kurtin said. “Frankly, I’m unable to ignore a \$41 million verdict.” And for the first time in years, Mary Grace actually smiled at the man. She could have hugged him.

At one, they broke for a two-hour lunch. The Paytons and Jim McMay hid away in a corner of the hotel restaurant and tried to analyze the meeting so far. Going in, they were consumed with the question of Krane’s intent. Was it serious about a settlement? Or was it a stunt to push along the company’s agenda? The fact that the national business papers knew so much about the secret settlement

talks made the lawyers suspicious. But so far Mr. Kurtin had given every indication that he was a man on a mission. There had been no smiles from the Krane suits or the insurance boys, perhaps a sign that they were about to part with their money.

At 3:00 p.m. in New York, Carl Trudeau leaked the word that the negotiations were progressing nicely down in Mississippi. Krane was optimistic about a settlement.

Its stock closed the week at \$16.50, up \$4.00.

At 3:00 p.m. in Hattiesburg, the negotiators reassumed their positions, and Judge Rosenthal started the paper mill again. Three hours later, the initial accounting was complete. On the table were the claims of 704 people. Sixty-eight had died of cancer, and their families were blaming Krane. A hundred and forty-three were now suffering from cancer. The rest had a wide range of lesser illnesses and afflictions that were allegedly caused by the contaminated drinking water from the Bowmore pumping station.

Judge Rosenthal congratulated both sides on a hard and productive day, and adjourned the meeting until nine o'clock Saturday morning.

Wes and Mary Grace drove straight to the office and reported to the firm. Sherman had been in the negotiating room all day and shared his observations. They agreed that Jared Kurtin had returned to Hattiesburg with the goal of settling the Bowmore litigation and that his client seemed committed to that end. Wes cautioned that it was much too early to celebrate. They had managed only to identify the parties. The first dollar was nowhere near the table.

Mack and Liza begged them to go to the movies. Halfway through the eight o'clock show, Wes began to nod off. Mary Grace stared blankly at the screen, munching on popcorn and mentally crunching numbers related to medical expenses, pain and suffering, loss of companionship, loss of wages, loss of everything. She did not dare entertain thoughts of calculating attorneys' fees.

There were fewer suits and ties at the table Saturday morning. Even Judge Rosenthal looked quite casual in a black polo shirt under a sport coat. When the restless lawyers were in place and things were quiet, he said, with a great old voice that must have dominated many trials, "I suggest we start with the death cases and walk through them all."

No two death cases were the same from a settlement standpoint. Children were worth much less than adults because they have no record of earning power. Young fathers were worth more because of the loss of future wages. Some of the dead folks suffered for years, others went quickly. Everyone had a different figure for medical bills. Judge Rosenthal presented another scale, arbitrary but at least a starting point, in which each case would be rated based on its value. The highest cases would get a 5, and the cheapest (children) would get a 1. Time-out was called several times as the plaintiffs' lawyers haggled over this. When it was finally agreed upon, they began with Jeannette Baker. She was given a 10. The next case involved a fifty-four-year-old woman who worked part-time in a bakery and died after a three-year battle with leukemia. She was given a 3.

As they plowed through the list, each lawyer was allowed to present his particular case and plead for a higher rating. Through it all, there was no indication from Jared Kurtin of how much he was willing to pay for any of the death cases. Mary Grace watched him carefully when the other lawyers were talking. His face and actions revealed nothing but deep concentration.

At 2:30, they finished with Class One and moved to the longer list of those claimants who were still alive but battling cancer. Rating their cases was trickier. No one could know how long each would survive or how much each would suffer. No one could predict the likelihood of death. The lucky ones would live and become cancer-free. The discussion disintegrated into several heated arguments, and at times Judge Rosenthal was flustered and unable to suggest a

compromise. Late in the day, Jared Kurtin began to show signs of strain and frustration.

As 7:00 p.m. approached and the session was mercifully winding down, Sterling Bintz could not restrain himself. "I'm not sure how much longer I can sit here and watch this little exercise," he announced rudely as he approached the table at the far end, away from Judge Rosenthal. "I mean, I've been here for two days and I haven't been allowed to speak. Which, of course, means my clients have been ignored. Enough is enough. I represent a class action of over three hundred injured people, and you all seem determined to screw them."

Wes started a rebuke, but thought better of it. Let him ramble. They were about to adjourn anyway.

"My clients are not going to be ignored," he practically shouted, and everyone grew still. There was a hint of madness in his voice and certainly in his eyes, and perhaps it was best to let him rant a little. "My clients have suffered greatly, and are still suffering. And you people are not concerned with them. I can't hang around here forever. I'm due in San Francisco tomorrow afternoon for another settlement. I got eight thousand cases against Schmeltzer for their laxative pills. So, since everyone here seems quite content to chat about everything but money, let me tell you where I am."

He had their attention. Jared Kurtin and the money boys perked up and stiffened a bit. Mary Grace watched every wrinkle in Kurtin's face. If this nut was about to throw a figure on the table, she wanted her adversary's reaction.

"I'm not settling my cases for less than a hundred thousand each," Bintz said with a sneer. "Maybe more, depending on each client."

Kurtin's face was frozen, but then it usually was. One of his associates shook his head, another one smiled a silly smile of amusement. The two Krane executives frowned and shifted as they dismissed this as absurd.

As the notion of \$30 million floated around the room, Wes did the simple math. Bintz would probably take a third, throw a few crumbs at F. Clyde Hardin, then quickly move on to the next mass tort bonanza.

F. Clyde was cowering in a far corner, the same spot he'd occupied for many hours now. The paper cup in his hand was filled with orange juice, crushed ice, and four ounces of vodka. It was, after all, almost 7:00 p.m. on a Saturday. The math was so simple he could do it in his sleep. His cut was 5 percent of the total fees, or \$500,000 under the rather reasonable scheme being so boldly suggested by his co-counsel. Their arrangement also paid F. Clyde \$500 per client, and with three hundred clients he should have already received \$150,000. He had not. Bintz had passed along about a third of that, but seemed disinclined to discuss the rest. He was a very busy lawyer and hard to get on the phone. Surely, he would come through as promised.

F. Clyde gulped his drink as Bintz's declaration rattled around the room.

Bintz continued. "We're not taking peanuts and going home," he threatened. "At some point in these negotiations, and the sooner the better, I want my clients' cases on the table."

"Tomorrow morning at nine," Judge Rosenthal suddenly barked. "As for now, we are adjourned."

"**A** Pathetic Campaign" was the title of the lead editorial in Sunday's *Clarion-Ledger* out of Jackson. Using a page out of Nat Lester's report, the editors damned the Ron Fisk campaign for its sleazy advertising. They accused Fisk of taking millions from big business and using it to mislead the public. His ads were filled with half-truths and statements taken wholly out of context. Fear was his weapon—fear of homosexuals, fear of gun control, fear of sexual predators. He was condemned for labeling Sheila McCarthy a "liberal" when in fact her body of work, which the editors had studied, could only be considered quite moderate. They blasted Fisk for promising to vote this way or that on cases he had yet to review as a member of the court.

The editorial also decried the entire process. So much money was being raised and spent, by both candidates, that fair and unbiased decision making was in jeopardy. How could Sheila McCarthy, who had so far received over \$1.5 million from trial lawyers, be expected to ignore this money when those same lawyers appeared before the supreme court?

It finished with a call to abolish judicial elections and have the judges appointed based on merit by a nonpartisan panel.

The *Sun Herald* from Biloxi was even nastier. It accused the Fisk campaign of outright deceit and used the Darrel Sackett mailing as its prime example. Sackett was dead, not loose and on the prowl. He'd been dead for four years, something Nat Lester had learned with a couple of quick phone calls.

The *Hattiesburg American* challenged the Fisk campaign to retract its negative and misleading ads and to disclose, before Election Day, its contributions from big donors outside the state. It urged both candidates to clean up the race and honor the dignity of the supreme court.

On page 3 of section A of the *New York Times*, Gilbert's exposé ran with photos of Meyerchec and Spano, as well as Fisk and McCarthy. It covered the race in general, then focused on the gay marriage issue created and injected into the race by the two men from Illinois. Gilbert did a thorough job of accumulating evidence that the two men were longtime residents of Chicago and had virtually no ties to Mississippi. He did not speculate that they were being used by conservative political operatives to sabotage McCarthy. He didn't have to. The punch line was delivered in the final paragraph. Nat Lester was quoted as saying: "These guys are a couple of stooges being used by Ron Fisk and his backers to create an issue that does not exist. Their goal is to fire up the right-wing Christians and march them down to the polls."

Ron and Doreen Fisk were at the kitchen table, ignoring their early coffee, rereading the Jackson editorial, and fuming. The campaign had gone so smoothly. They were ahead in all the polls. Nine days to go and they could see the victory. Why, then, was Ron suddenly being described as “deceitful” and “dishonest” by the state’s largest newspaper? It was a painful, humiliating slap, one that they had no idea was coming. And it was certainly not deserved. They were honest, upstanding, clean-cut Christian people. Why this?

The phone rang and Ron grabbed it. Tony’s tired voice said, “Have you seen the Jackson paper?”

“Yes, we’re looking at it now.”

“Have you seen the one from Hattiesburg and the *Sun Herald*?”

“No. Why?”

“Do you read the *New York Times*?”

“No.”

“Check them out online. Call me in an hour.”

“Is it bad?”

“Yes.”

They read and fumed for another hour, then decided to skip church. Ron felt betrayed and embarrassed and was in no mood to leave the house. According to the latest numbers from his pollster in Atlanta, he had a comfortable lead. Now, though, he felt defeat was certain. No candidate could survive such a thrashing. He blamed the liberal press. He blamed Tony Zachary and those who controlled the campaign. And he blamed himself for being so naive. Why did he place so much trust in people he barely knew?

Doreen assured him it was not his fault. He had thrown himself so completely into the campaigning that he’d had little time to watch everything else. Any campaign is chaotic. No one can monitor the actions of all the workers and volunteers.

Ron unloaded on Tony during a lengthy and tense phone conversation. “You’ve embarrassed me,” Ron said. “You’ve humiliated me and my family to the point that I really don’t want to leave the house. I’m thinking about quitting.”

“You can’t quit, Ron, you have too much invested,” Tony replied, trying to control his panic and reassure his boy.

“That’s the problem, Tony. I’ve allowed you guys to generate too much cash, and you cannot handle it. Stop all television ads right now.”

“That’s impossible, Ron. They’re already in the pipeline.”

“So I’m not in control of my own campaign, is that what you’re telling me, Tony?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I’m not leaving the house, Tony. Pull all the ads right now. Stop everything, and I’m calling the editors of these newspapers. I’m admitting my mistakes.”

“Ron, come on.”

“I’m the boss, Tony, it’s my campaign.”

“Yes, and you’ve got the race won. Don’t screw it up with only nine days to go.”

“Did you know that Darrel Sackett was dead?”

“Well, I really can’t—”

“Answer the question, Tony. Did you know he was dead?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You knew he was dead and you deliberately ran a false ad, didn’t you?”

“No, I—”

“You’re fired, Tony. You’re fired and I quit.”

“Don’t overreact, Ron. Settle down.”

“You’re fired.”

“I’ll be down in an hour.”

“You do that, Tony. You get down here as quick as possible, and until then you’re fired.”

“I’m leaving now. Don’t do anything until I get there.”

“I’m calling the editors right now.”

“Don’t do that, Ron. Please. Wait until I get there.”

The lawyers had little time for newspapers on Sunday morning. By eight o'clock they were gathering at the hotel for what would surely be the most important day yet. There had been no indication from Jared Kurtin as to how long he might negotiate before heading back to Atlanta, but it was assumed that round one would be over on Sunday afternoon. Other than the \$30 million suggestion made by Sterling Bintz the evening before, there had been no talk of money. That had to change on Sunday. Wes and Mary Grace were determined to leave that day with a general idea of how much the Class One and Class Two cases were worth.

By 8:30 all the plaintiffs' lawyers were in place, most of them huddled in serious conversations, all of them ignoring Sterling Bintz, who in turn ignored them. His entourage was still intact. He was not speaking to the other class action lawyer from Melbourne Beach. Judge Rosenthal arrived at 8:45 and commented on the absence of everyone on the defense side. The trial lawyers finally noticed this. There was not a soul sitting opposite them. Wes punched in the number of Jared Kurtin's cell phone, but listened to his recording.

"We did agree on 9:00 a.m., didn't we?" asked Rosenthal, five minutes before the hour. It was unanimously agreed that nine was the magic hour. They waited, and time suddenly moved much slower.

At 9:02, Frank Sully, local counsel for Krane, walked into the room and said, somewhat sheepishly, almost in embarrassment, "My client has decided to recess these negotiations until further notice. I'm very sorry for the inconvenience."

"Where's Jared Kurtin?" Judge Rosenthal demanded.

"He's flying back to Atlanta right now."

"When did your client make this decision?"

"I don't know. I was informed about an hour ago. I'm very sorry, Judge. I apologize to everyone here."

The room seemed to tilt as one side sank under the weight of this sudden turn of events. Lawyers giddy in anticipation of finally slicing up the pie dropped their pens and pencils and gaped at one another in shock. Great gasps of air were discharged. Curses were

mumbled just loud enough to be heard. Shoulders sagged. They wanted to throw something at Sully, but he was just the local and they had learned a long time ago that he had no clout.

F. Clyde Hardin wiped sweat from his wet face and tried valiantly not to throw up.

There was a sudden rush to leave, to clear out. It was maddening to sit there and stare at the empty chairs, chairs once occupied by men who just might have made them rich. The trial lawyers quickly gathered stacks of papers, restuffed their briefcases, and offered brusque goodbyes.

Wes and Mary Grace said nothing as they drove to their apartment.

CHAPTER 31

Monday morning, the *Wall Street Journal* broke the news of the collapse of the settlement negotiations down in Hattiesburg. The story, on page 2, was written by a reporter with some very good sources inside Krane Chemical, one of whom blamed the plaintiffs' lawyers. "Their demands were just too unrealistic. We went in in good faith, and got nowhere." Another anonymous source said, "It's hopeless. Because of the verdict, every trial lawyer thinks his case is worth forty million bucks." Mr. Watts, Krane's CEO, said, "We are very disappointed. We wanted to get this litigation behind us and move on. Now our future is quite uncertain."

Carl Trudeau read the story online at 4:30 in the morning in his penthouse. He laughed and rubbed his hands together in anticipation of a very profitable week.

Wes called Jared Kurtin throughout the morning, but the great man was traveling and could not be reached. His cell phone was stuck on voice mail. His secretary eventually became rude, but then so was Wes. He and Mary Grace seriously doubted if the wild demands by Sterling Bintz had frightened Krane away. In relative terms, his suggestion of \$30 million would be a fraction of any workable settlement.

When the news finally arrived in Bowmore, it was received like another plague.

At McCarthy headquarters, Nat Lester had worked through the night and was still wired when Sheila arrived at 8:30, her usual time. He had e-mailed the *Times* story to every newspaper in the

district and was calling reporters and editors when she walked in with a well-rested smile and asked for a pineapple juice.

“We’ve got these clowns on the run!” he announced jubilantly. “Their dirty tricks have caught up with them.”

“Congratulations. It’s beautiful.”

“We’re sending the editorials and the *Times* story to every registered voter.”

“How much does that cost?”

“Who cares? With a week to go, we can’t pinch pennies. Are you ready?”

“I leave in an hour.”

The next seven days would take her to thirty-four stops in twenty counties, all made possible by the use of a King Air on loan from one trial lawyer and a small jet from another. The blitz had been coordinated by Nat and would take place with the help of schoolteachers, labor bosses, black leaders, and, of course, trial lawyers. She would not return to Jackson until after the election. While she was on the stump, her last round of television ads would flood the district.

By the time the votes were counted, her campaign would not have one dime. She was praying that it would not be in debt.

Ron Fisk finally left the house on Monday morning, but he did not make his usual trip to the office. Instead, he and Doreen drove to Jackson, to the offices of Judicial Vision for another long and stressful meeting with Tony Zachary. They had slugged their way through a four-hour ordeal on Sunday afternoon in the den of the Fisk home, and they had resolved little. Ron was suspending all campaign activities until he could repair his good name. He had fired Tony at least four times, but they were still talking.

Throughout the day and into Sunday night, Tedford in Atlanta had been polling furiously, and by late Monday morning there were some results. In spite of the barrage of condemnation, Ron Fisk was

still three points ahead of Sheila McCarthy. The gay marriage issue had captivated the voters, most of whom still favored the more conservative candidate.

Ron wasn't sure if he could believe anyone who worked for his campaign, but the new poll did lighten his mood somewhat. "You've got this thing won, Ron," Tony said again and again. "Don't blow it."

They finally reached an understanding, one that Ron insisted they sign as if they had negotiated a contract. First, Ron would stay in the race. Second, Tony would keep his job as campaign manager. Third, Ron would meet with the newspaper editors, admit his mistakes, and promise a clean race for the remaining eight days. Fourth, no campaign literature, ads, TV spots, direct mail, radio commercials, nothing would be used until it was first approved by Ron.

When they were pals again, they enjoyed a quick lunch at the Capitol Grill, then Ron and Doreen drove home. They were proud that they had held their ground, and anxious to resume the campaign. They could smell the victory.

Barry Rinehart arrived in Jackson at noon on Monday and established his base in the largest suite of a downtown hotel. He would not leave Mississippi until after the election.

He waited impatiently for Tony to arrive with the news that they still had a horse in the race. For a man who took great pride in staying cool regardless of the pressure, the past twenty-four hours had been nerve-racking. Barry had slept little. If Fisk quit, then Rinehart's career would be severely damaged, if not outright ruined.

Tony walked into the suite with a huge smile, and both men were able to laugh. They were soon reviewing their media buys and advertising plans. They had the cash to saturate the district with TV ads, and if Mr. Fisk wanted only positive ones, then so be it.

The market's reaction to the settlement news was swift and ugly. Krane opened at \$15.25 and by noon was trading at \$12.75. Carl Trudeau watched the fall gleefully, his net worth shrinking by the minute. To add to the fear and frenzy, he organized a meeting between the top Krane executives and the company's bankruptcy attorneys, then leaked this news to a reporter.

On Tuesday morning, the Business section of the *New York Times* ran a story in which an in-house lawyer for the company said, "We'll probably file for bankruptcy protection this week." For the first time in twenty years, the stock fell through the \$10.00 floor and traded around \$9.50.

At midday on Tuesday, Meyerchec and Spano arrived in Jackson by private jet. They were picked up by a car with a driver and taken to the office of their attorney, where they met a reporter with the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*. In a one-hour interview, they rebuked the story by Gilbert, reaffirmed their citizenship in their new state, and talked at length about the importance of their lawsuit now pending before the Mississippi Supreme Court. They held hands throughout the entire interview and posed for a photographer from the newspaper.

While this was happening, Barry Rinehart and Tony Zachary pored over the findings from their latest poll. Fisk's sixteen-point lead had been reduced to five, the most dramatic seventy-two-hour drop Barry had ever seen. But he was too seasoned to panic. Tony, however, was a nervous wreck.

They decided to reshuffle the television ads. They discarded the Darrel Sackett attack piece and one showing illegal aliens crossing the border. For the next three days, they would stick to gay marriage and the glory of guns. Over the weekend, they would shift to the comfort ads and leave the voters with warm and fuzzy feelings about Ron Fisk and his wholesomeness.

Meanwhile, the weary mail carriers in south Mississippi would deliver several tons of Fisk propaganda each day until the campaign

was mercifully over.

All to be done with Mr. Fisk's approval, of course.

Denny Ott finished his letter after several drafts and asked his wife to read it. When she approved, he took it to the post office. It read:

Dear Brother Ted:

I have listened to a recording of your sermon last Sunday, broadcast on radio station WBMR during your worship hour. I hesitate to call it a sermon. It was more along the lines of a stump speech. I'm sure your condemnation of homosexuals is standard fare from your pulpit, and I will not comment on it. However, your attack on liberal judges, nine days before the election, was nothing but a diatribe against Sheila McCarthy, who, of course, was never called by name. By attacking her, you obviously endorsed her opponent.

Such political speech is expressly forbidden by law, and specifically forbidden by Internal Revenue Service regulations. As a 501 (C) (3) nonprofit organization, Harvest Tabernacle cannot engage in political activity. To do so is to risk losing its nonprofit status, a catastrophic event for any church.

I have heard from good sources that other local pastors, all members of your Brotherhood Coalition, are involving themselves and their churches in this campaign. I'm sure this is part of a well-coordinated effort to help elect Ron Fisk, and I have no doubt that this Sunday you and the others will use the pulpit to urge your members to vote for him.

Mr. Fisk is being used by a conspiracy of big business interests to stack our supreme court with judges who will protect corporate wrongdoers by limiting their liability. Only the little folks will suffer—your people and mine.

Be warned that I will be watching and listening this Sunday. And I will not hesitate to notify the Internal Revenue Service if you continue your illegal activities.

Yours in Christ,

Denny Ott

At noon Thursday, the Payton law firm met for a quick lunch and final review of its last-minute campaigning. On a Sheetrock wall in The Pit, Sherman had arranged, in chronological order, the print ads used so far by Ron Fisk. There were six full-page solicitations from newspapers and five direct mailings. The collection was now being updated daily because the Fisk printing presses were working overtime.

It was an impressive, and quite depressing, lineup.

Using a street map of Hattiesburg and a list of registered voters, Sherman assigned neighborhoods near the university. Walking door-to-door, he would go with Tabby, Rusty with Vicky, Wes with Mary Grace. They had two thousand doors to cover during the next five days. Olivia agreed to stay behind and answer the phone. She was a bit too arthritic to hit the streets.

Other teams, many of them from the offices of local trial lawyers, would canvass the rest of Hattiesburg and its outlying suburbs. In addition to handing out McCarthy materials, most of these volunteers would distribute brochures for Judge Thomas Harrison.

The prospect of knocking on hundreds of doors was actually quite welcome, at least to Wes and Mary Grace. The mood at the office had been funereal since Monday. The settlement fiasco had drained their spirits. The constant chatter about Krane filing Chapter 11 frightened them. They were distracted and edgy, and both needed a few days off.

The final push was orchestrated by Nat Lester. Every precinct in all twenty-seven counties had someone assigned to it, and Nat had the cell phone number of every volunteer. He started calling them

Thursday afternoon, and he would hound them until late Monday night.

The letter from Brother Ted was hand delivered to Pine Grove Church. It read:

Dear Pastor Ott:

I'm touched by your concern, and I'm also delighted you have taken an interest in my sermons. Listen to them carefully, and one day you may come to know Jesus Christ as your personal savior. Until then, I will continue to pray for you and all those you are leading astray.

God built our house of worship fourteen years ago, then He paid off the mortgage. He led me to the pulpit there, and each week He speaks to His beloved flock through my words.

When preparing my sermons, I listen to no one but Him. He condemns homosexuality, those who practice it, and those who support it. It's in the Bible, which I suggest you spend more time reading.

And you can stop wasting your time worrying about me and my church. Surely, you have enough on your plate in Pine Grove.

I shall preach whatever I choose. Send in the federal government. With God on my side, I have nothing to fear.

Praise be to Him,

Brother Ted

CHAPTER 32

By noon Friday, Barry Rinehart had propped up his poll numbers to the point where he felt confident enough to call Mr. Trudeau. Fisk was seven points ahead and seemed to have regained momentum. Barry had no qualms about rounding the numbers up a bit to make the great man feel better. He'd been lying all week anyway. Mr. Trudeau would never know they had almost blown a sixteen-point lead.

"We're up by ten points," Barry said confidently from his hotel suite.

"Then it's over?"

"I know of no election in which the front-runner has dropped ten points over the last weekend. And, with all the money we're spending on media, I think we're gaining."

"Nice job, Barry," Carl said, and closed his phone.

As Wall Street waited for the news that Krane Chemical would file for bankruptcy, Carl Trudeau purchased five million shares of the company's stock in a private transaction. The seller was a fund manager who handled the retirement portfolio of the public employees of Minnesota. Carl had been stalking the stock for months, and the manager was finally convinced that Krane was hopeless. He dumped the stock for \$11 a share and considered himself lucky.

Carl then launched a plan to purchase another five million shares as soon as the market opened. His identity as the buyer would not be disclosed until he filed with the SEC ten days later.

By then, of course, the election would be over.

In the year since the verdict, he had secretly and methodically increased his stake in the company. Using offshore trusts, Panamanian banks, two dummy corporations based in Singapore, and the expert advice of a Swiss banker, the Trudeau Group now

owned 60 percent of Krane. The sudden grab for ten million more shares would raise Carl's ownership to 77 percent.

At 2:30 p.m. Friday, Krane issued a brief press release announcing that "a bankruptcy filing has been indefinitely postponed."

Barry Rinehart was not following the news on Wall Street. He had little interest in Krane Chemical and its financial dealings. There were at least three dozen important matters to monitor during the next seventy-two hours, and none could be overlooked. However, after five days in the hotel suite, he needed to move.

With Tony driving, they left Jackson and went to Hattiesburg, where Barry got a quick tour of the important sights: the Forrest County Circuit Court building, where the verdict started it all, the semi-abandoned shopping center that the Paytons called their office—Kenny's Karate on one side and a whiskey store on the other—and a couple of neighborhoods where Ron Fisk yard signs outnumbered Sheila McCarthy's two to one. They had dinner in a downtown restaurant called 206 Front Street and at 7:00 p.m. parked outside Reed Green Coliseum on the campus of Southern Miss. They sat in the car for thirty minutes and watched the crowd arrive, in vans and converted school buses and fancy coaches, each one with the name of its church painted boldly along the sides. They were from Purvis, Poplarville, Lumberton, Bowmore, Collins, Mount Olive, Brooklyn, and Sand Hill.

"Some of those towns are an hour from here," Tony said with satisfaction.

The worshippers poured into the parking lots around the coliseum and hurried inside. Many carried identical blue and white signs that said, "Save the Family."

"Where did you get the signs?" Tony asked.

"Vietnam."

"Vietnam?"

“Got ’em for a buck ten, fifty thousand total. The Chinese company wanted a buck thirty.”

“So nice to hear we’re saving money.”

At 7:30, Rinehart and Zachary entered the coliseum and hustled up to the nosebleed seats, as far away as possible from the excited mob below. A stage was set up at one end, with huge “Save the Family” banners hanging behind it. A well-known white gospel quartet (\$4,500 for the night, \$15,000 for the weekend) was warming up the crowd. The floor was covered with neat rows of folding chairs, thousands of them, all filled with folks in a joyous mood.

“What’s the seating capacity?” Barry asked.

“Eight thousand for basketball,” Tony said glancing around the arena. A few sections behind the stage were empty. “With the seats on the floor, I’d say we’re close to nine thousand.”

Barry seemed satisfied.

The master of ceremonies was a local preacher who quieted the crowd with a long prayer, toward the end of which many of his people began waving their hands upward, as if reaching for heaven. There was a fair amount of mumbling and whispering as they prayed fervently. Barry and Tony just watched, content in their prayerlessness.

The quartet fired them up with another song, then a black gospel group (\$500 for the night) rocked the place with a rowdy rendition of “Born to Worship.” The first speaker was Walter Utley, from the American Family Alliance in Washington, and when he assumed the podium, Tony recalled their first meeting ten months earlier when Ron Fisk made the rounds. It seemed like years ago. Utley was not a preacher, nor was he much of a speaker. He dulled the crowd with a frightening list of all the evils being proposed in Washington. He railed against the courts and politicians and a host of other bad people. When he finished, the crowd applauded and waved their signs.

More music. Another prayer. The star of the rally was David Wilfong, a Christian activist with a knack for wedging himself into every high-profile dispute involving God. Twenty million people

listened to his radio show every day. Many sent him money. Many bought his books and tapes. He was an educated, ordained minister with a fiery, frantic voice, and within five minutes he had the crowd jumping up in a standing ovation. He condemned immorality on every front, but he saved his heavy stuff for gays and lesbians who wanted to get married. The crowd could not sit still or remain quiet. It was their chance to verbally express their opposition, and to do so in a very public manner. After every third sentence, Wilfong had to wait for the applause to die down.

He was being paid \$50,000 for the weekend, money that had originated months earlier from somewhere in the mysterious depths of the Trudeau Group. But no human could trace it.

Twenty minutes into his performance, Wilfong stopped for a special introduction. When Ron and Doreen Fisk stepped onto the stage, the arena seemed to shake. Ron spoke for five minutes. He asked for their votes come Tuesday, and for their prayers. He and Doreen walked across the stage to a thunderous standing ovation. They waved and shook their fists in triumph, then walked to the other side of the stage as the mob stomped its feet.

Barry Rinehart managed to contain his amusement. Of all his creations, Ron Fisk was the most perfect.

Families were saved throughout south Mississippi the following day and into Sunday. Utley and Wilfong drew huge crowds, and of course the crowds adored Ron and Doreen Fisk.

Those who chose not to take a church bus to a rally were bombarded with relentless advertising on television. And the mailman was always close by, hauling to the besieged homes yet more campaign propaganda.

While publicly the campaign raced on in a numbing frenzy, a darker side came together over the weekend. Under Marlin's direction, a dozen operatives fanned out through the district and hooked up with old contacts. They visited rural supervisors on their

farms, and black preachers in their churches, and county ward bosses in their hunting cabins. Voter registration rolls were reviewed. Numbers were agreed upon. Sacks of cash changed hands. The tariff was \$25 per vote. Some called it “gas money,” as if it could be justified as a legitimate expense.

The operatives were working for Ron Fisk, though he would never know of their activities. Suspensions would be raised after the votes were counted, after Fisk received an astounding number of votes in black precincts, but Tony would assure him that it was simply a case of some wise people understanding the issues.

On November 4, two-thirds of those registered in the southern district cast their votes.

When the polls closed at 7:00 p.m., Sheila McCarthy drove straight to the Biloxi Riviera Casino, where her volunteers were preparing for a party. No reporters were allowed. The first results were somewhat satisfying. She carried Harrison County, her home, with 55 percent of the vote.

When Nat Lester saw this figure in Jackson, at the McCarthy headquarters, he knew they were dead. Fisk got almost half the votes in the most laid-back county in the district. It soon got much worse.

Ron and Doreen were eating pizza at the crowded campaign office in downtown Brookhaven. The Lincoln County votes were being tallied just down the street, and when the news came that his neighbors had turned out in big numbers and given him 75 percent of the vote, the party began. In Pike County, next door, Fisk received 64 percent.

When Sheila lost Hancock County on the Coast, her night was over, as was her career on the supreme court. In one ten-minute span, she then lost Forrest County (Hattiesburg), Jones County (Laurel), and Adams County (Natchez).

All precincts were in by 11:00 p.m. Ron Fisk won easily with 53 percent of the vote. Sheila McCarthy received 44 percent, and Clete Coley retained enough admirers to give him the remaining 3 percent. It was a solid thrashing, with Fisk losing only Harrison and Stone counties.

He even beat McCarthy in Cancer County, though not in the four precincts within the city limits of Bowmore. In the rural areas, though, where the Brotherhood ministers toiled in the fields, Ron Fisk took almost 80 percent of the vote.

Mary Grace wept when she saw the final numbers from Cary County: Fisk, 2,238; McCarthy, 1,870; Coley, 55.

The only good news was that Judge Thomas Harrison had survived, but barely.

The dust settled in the week that followed. In several interviews, Sheila McCarthy presented the face of a graceful loser. She did, however, say, "It will be interesting to see how much money Mr. Fisk raised and spent."

Justice Jimmy McElwayne was less gracious. In several articles, he was quoted as saying, "I'm not too keen to serve with a man who paid three million for a seat on the court."

When the reports were filed, though, three million looked rather cheap. The Fisk campaign reported total receipts of \$4.1 million, with a staggering \$2.9 million collected in the thirty-one days of October. Ninety-one percent of this money flooded in from out of state. The report did not list any contributions from or expenses paid to such groups as Lawsuit Victims for Truth, Victims Rising, and GUN. Ron Fisk signed the report, as required by law, but had many questions about the financing. He pressed Tony for answers about his fund-raising methods, and when the answers were vague, they exchanged heated words. Fisk accused him of hiding money and of taking advantage of his inexperience. Tony responded hotly that Fisk had been promised unlimited funds, and it wasn't fair to

complain after the fact. “You should be thanking me, not bitching about the money,” he yelled during a long, contentious meeting.

Soon, though, they would be attacked by reporters and forced to present a united front.

The McCarthy campaign raised \$1.9 million and spent every penny of it. The \$500,000 note produced by Willy Benton and signed by twelve of the MTA directors would take years to satisfy.

Once the final numbers were available, a storm erupted in the media. A team of investigative journalists with the *Clarion-Ledger* went after Tony Zachary, Judicial Vision, Ron Fisk, and many of the out-of-state donors who’d sent \$5,000 checks. The business groups and the trial lawyers exchanged heated words through the various newspaper stories. Editorials raged about the need for reform. The secretary of state pursued Lawsuit Victims for Truth, Victims Rising, and GUN for such details as the names of members and total amounts spent on advertising. But the inquiries were met with stiff resistance by Washington lawyers with wide experience in election issues.

Barry Rinehart watched it from the safety of his splendid office in Boca Raton. Such postgame antics were the rule, not the exception. The losers always squawked about the lack of fairness. In a couple of months, Justice Fisk would be on the big bench and most folks would forget the campaign that put him there.

Barry was moving on, negotiating with other clients. An appellate judge in Illinois had been ruling against the insurance industry for many years, and it was time to take him out. But they were haggling over Barry’s fees, which had jumped dramatically after the Fisk victory.

Of the \$8 million funneled through various routes by Carl Trudeau to Barry and his related “units,” almost \$7 million was still intact, still hidden.

Thank God for democracy, Barry said to himself many times a day. “Let the people vote!”

PART THREE

THE OPINION

CHAPTER 33

Ron Fisk was sworn in as associate justice of the Supreme Court of Mississippi during the first week of January. It was a short, quiet ceremony attended by Doreen and the three children, a few friends from Brookhaven, Tony Zachary, and the other eight members of the court and some of the staff. The chief justice, the most senior member, gave a short welcoming speech, then everybody had punch and cookies. Justice Jimmy McElwayne skipped the refreshments and returned to his office. He had not expected to like Ron Fisk, and so far he had not been disappointed. Fisk stumbled badly when he summarily fired Sheila's law clerks and secretary without the courtesy of first meeting them. He stumbled again when he showed up in early December and began pestering the chief justice to see the docket and have a look at some of the upcoming cases. At forty years of age, Fisk was by far the youngest member of the court, and his eager-beaver enthusiasm had already rankled some of his brethren.

Once sworn in, Fisk had the right to participate in every case not yet decided, regardless of how long the matter had been before the court. He plunged into the work and was soon putting in long hours. Ten days after arriving, he voted with a seven-member majority (including McElwayne) to reverse a zoning case out of DeSoto County, and he dissented with three others in a wetlands dispute in Pearl River County. He just voted, without comment.

In each case, every judge can write his own opinion, either concurring with the majority or dissenting from it. Ron was itching to write something, but he wisely kept quiet. It was best not to rush things.

The people of Mississippi got their first glimpse of the new, post-McCarthy court in late January. The case involved an eighty-year-old woman with Alzheimer's who was found under her nursing

home bed, naked and filthy. She was found there by her son, who went ballistic and eventually sued the nursing home on her behalf. Though accounts varied and records were incomplete, testimony at trial proved that the woman had been completely neglected for at least six hours. She had not been fed for nine. The nursing home was a low-end facility, one of many owned by a company from Florida, and its history of safety and sanitation violations was long and pathetic. The jury, in the rural county of Covington, awarded actual damages of \$250,000, though it was difficult to gauge the extent of the physical injuries. There were bruises on her forehead, but the poor lady had lost her mind a decade earlier. The interesting part of the case was the punitive award of \$2 million, a record for Covington County.

Justice Calligan had been assigned the case. He rounded up his other three votes and wrote an opinion that reversed the \$250,000 and sent it back for another trial. More proof was needed on the issue of damages. As for the punitive award, it “shocked the conscience of the court” and was reversed and rendered—thrown out once and for all. Judge McElwayne wrote an opinion in which he upheld the entire verdict. He went to great lengths to spell out the wretched history of the nursing home—lack of staff, untrained staff, unsanitary rooms and bed linens and towels, poisonous food, inadequate air-conditioning, overcrowded rooms, and so on. His opinion was joined by three others, so the old court was equally divided. The new man would be the swing vote.

Justice Fisk did not hesitate. He, too, found the medical proof inadequate, and claimed to be shocked by the punitive award. As an insurance defense lawyer, he had spent fourteen years fighting off the wild claims of punitive damages so carelessly thrown about by the plaintiffs’ bar. At least half the lawsuits he defended had included a bogus plea for an exorbitant sum of money because of the defendant’s “outrageous and reckless conduct.”

By a vote of 5–4, the court announced its new course and sent the case back to Covington County in much worse shape than when it left.

The elderly victim's son was a fifty-six-year-old cattle farmer. He was also a deacon in a country church a few miles outside the town of Mount Olive. He and his wife had been strong supporters of Ron Fisk because they viewed him as a godly man who shared their values and would protect their grandchildren.

Why would Mr. Fisk now rule in favor of some outlaw corporation from another state?

Each case accepted for review by the supreme court is assigned by the clerk to one of the nine judges, who have no control over the process. Each one knows that every ninth case will land on his or her desk. They work on three-judge panels for six weeks, then the little teams are reshuffled.

In almost all cases before the supreme court, the lawyers request an oral argument, but these are rarely granted. The panels listen to the lawyers in less than 5 percent of the appeals.

Because of the size of the verdict, the case of *Jeannette Baker v. Krane Chemical Corporation* was deemed important enough to allow the attorneys an audience with its three-judge panel. On February 7, they gathered—Jared Kurtin and his mob, and the entire firm of Payton & Payton.

The case had been assigned to Justice Albritton months earlier. Ron Fisk had no business in the courtroom that day and was not there. Tony Zachary stopped by out of curiosity, but sat in the back row and did not speak to anyone. He took notes and would call Barry Rinehart as soon as the hearing ended. A vice president for Krane also sat in the back row and took notes.

Each side was allowed twenty minutes, and a digital timer clicked off the seconds. Warnings were given by a clerk. Long-winded lawyers were not tolerated. Jared Kurtin went first and quickly cut to the heart of his client's appeal. Krane had always argued that there was no credible, reasonable medical link between the BCL and cartolyn found on its property and the cancers that afflicted so many

of Bowmore's residents. Krane would never concede that illegal dumping had occurred, but, hypothetically speaking, even if you assumed toxic wastes were emitted into the soil and found their way into the water, there was "no medically causal connection" between the chemicals and the cancers. Oh, there was lots of speculation all right. Look at the rate of cancer in Bowmore. Look at the cancer clusters. But cancer rates vary widely from region to region. And, most important, there are thousands of carcinogens in the air, food, beverages, household products, the list goes on and on. Who can say that the cancer that killed little Chad Baker came from the water, and not the air? How do you rule out the carcinogens found in the highly processed foods Ms. Baker admitted they had eaten for years? It's impossible.

Kurtin was on his game, and the three judges left him alone for ten minutes. Two were already with him. Justice Albritton was not, and he finally asked, "Mr. Kurtin, excuse me, but were there any other factories or plants in this general area that manufactured pesticides or insecticides?"

"Not to my knowledge, Your Honor."

"Does that mean something other than 'No'?"

"The answer is no, Your Honor. There were no other manufacturers in Cary County."

"Thank you. And with all of your experts did you find any other factory or plant where bichloronylene, cartolox, or aklar was processed and/or disposed of?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Thank you. And when you argue that other areas of the country have seen very high rates of cancer, you're not suggesting that any of these other places are fifteen times above the national average, are you?"

"No, I'm not suggesting that, but we do dispute the ratio of fifteen."

"Fine, then will you stipulate to a rate of cancer twelve times the national average?"

"I'm not sure—"

“That was what your expert said at trial, Mr. Kurtin. Bowmore’s rate is twelve times the national average.”

“Yes, I believe you are correct, Your Honor.”

“Thank you.”

There were no more interruptions, and Kurtin finished a few seconds after his buzzer.

Mary Grace looked spectacular. The boys might be limited by their black and navy suits, white shirts, dull ties, and black wing tips, the usual boring everyday getup, but the girls had no rules. Mary Grace wore a bright dress that fell just above the knees and a matching jacket with sleeves that stopped at the elbows. Black stiletto heels. Plenty of leg, though none visible to the three justices once she assumed the podium.

Picking up where Justice Albritton left off, she launched into an attack on Krane’s defense. For at least twenty years the company had illegally dumped tons of class-1 carcinogens into the ground. As a direct cause of this dumping, Bowmore’s drinking water was polluted with these same carcinogens, none of which were produced or dumped or even found in significant quantities anywhere else in the county. The people of Bowmore drank the water, the same way that each member of the panel had drunk water that very morning. “You shaved, brushed your teeth, showered, used the city’s water in your coffee or tea. You drank it at home and you drank it here at work. Did you question the water? Where did it come from? Is it safe? Did you for one second this morning ask yourself if your water contained carcinogens? Probably not. The people of Bowmore were no different.”

As a direct result of drinking the water, the people got sick. The town was hit with a wave of cancer never before seen in this country.

And, as always, this fine, upstanding New York corporation—and here she turned and waved a hand at Jared Kurtin—denied everything. Denied the dumping, the cover-up, denied the lying, even denied its own denials. And, most important, denied any causation between its carcinogens and the cancer. Instead, as we’ve heard here today, Krane Chemical blames it on the air, the sun, the

environment, even the peanut butter and sliced turkey Jeannette Baker used to feed her family. “The jury really loved that part of the trial,” she said to a hushed crowd. “Krane dumped tons of toxic chemicals into our ground and our water, but, hey, let’s blame it on Jif peanut butter.”

Maybe it was out of respect for the lady, or maybe it was their reluctance to interrupt such an impassioned plea, but, whatever the reason, the three judges said nothing.

Mary Grace finished with a quick lecture on the law. The law did not require them to prove that the BCL found in the tissue cells of Pete Baker came directly from the Krane facility. To do so would elevate the standard of proof to clear and convincing evidence. The law only required proof by a preponderance of the evidence, a lower standard.

When her time was up, she sat down next to her husband. The judges thanked the lawyers, then called the next case.

The midwinter meeting of the MTA was a somber affair. Attendance was up sharply. The trial lawyers were anxious, deeply concerned, even frightened. The new court had reversed the first two plaintiffs’ verdicts on its docket for the year. Could this be the beginning of some horrible streak? Was it time to panic, or was it already too late?

A lawyer from Georgia helped darken the mood with a summary of the sorry state of things in his state. The Supreme Court of Georgia also had nine members, eight of whom were loyal to big business and consistently rejected verdicts for injured or dead plaintiffs. Twenty-two of the last twenty-five verdicts had been reversed. As a result, insurance companies were no longer willing to settle, and why should they? They were not afraid of juries anymore, because they owned the supreme court. Once upon a time, most cases were settled before trial. For a trial lawyer, this meant a caseload that was manageable. Now nothing got settled, and the

plaintiff's lawyer had to take every case to trial. And even if he got a verdict, it wouldn't stand on appeal. The fallout is that lawyers are taking fewer cases and fewer injured folks with legitimate claims are being compensated. "The courthouse doors are closing rapidly," he said as he finished.

Though it was only 10:00 a.m., many in the crowd were looking for a bar.

The next speaker lightened the mood, if only a little. Former Justice Sheila McCarthy was introduced and greeted warmly. She thanked the trial lawyers for their unwavering support and hinted that she might not be finished with politics. She railed against those who had conspired to defeat her. And as she was winding down, she brought them to their feet when she announced that since she was now in private practice, she had paid her dues and was a proud member of the Mississippi Trial Advocates.

The Mississippi Supreme Court decides, on average, about 250 cases each year. Most are uncomplicated, fairly routine disputes. Some involve novel issues the court has never seen before. Virtually all are disposed of in an orderly, almost genteel fashion. Occasionally, though, one starts a war.

The case involved a large commercial grass cutter commonly known as a bush hog. The one in question was being pulled behind a John Deere tractor when it struck an abandoned manhole cover hidden in the weeds of a vacant lot. A four-inch piece of jagged steel was launched from the swirling blades of the bush hog. Once airborne, it traveled 238 feet before striking a six-year-old boy in the left temple. The boy's name was Aaron, and he was holding his mother's hand as they walked into a branch bank office in the town of Horn Lake. Aaron was grievously injured, almost died on several occasions, and in the four years since the accident had undergone eleven operations. His medical bills were well over the cap of

\$500,000 on the family's health insurance policy. Expenses for his future care were estimated at \$750,000.

Aaron's lawyers had determined that the bush hog was fifteen years old and not equipped with side rail guards, debris chains, or any other safety feature used by most of the industry for at least thirty years. They sued. A jury in DeSoto County awarded Aaron \$750,000. Afterward, the trial judge increased the award to include the medical expenses. He reasoned that if the jury found liability, then Aaron should be entitled to more damages.

The supreme court was faced with several options: (1) affirm the jury's award of \$750,000; (2) affirm the judge's increased award of \$1.3 million; (3) reverse on either liability or damages and send it back for a new trial; or (4) reverse and render and kill the lawsuit. Liability appeared to be clear, so the question was more about the money.

The case was assigned to Judge McElwayne. His preliminary memo agreed with the trial judge and pushed for the higher award. If given the chance, he would have advocated for even more money. There was nothing in either amount to compensate the child for the excruciating pain he had endured and would continue to face in the future. Nor was there any award for the loss of future earning capacity. The child, while actually holding hands with his mother, had been crippled for life by an inherently dangerous product that was carelessly manufactured.

Justice Romano from the central district saw it differently. He rarely saw a big verdict he couldn't attack, but this one proved to be a challenge. He decided that the bush hog was, in fact, reasonably designed and properly assembled at the factory, but in the intervening years its safety features and devices had been removed by its various owners. Indeed, the chain of ownership was not clear. Such is the nature of products like bush hogs. They are not clean, neat, safe products. Instead, they are designed to do one thing—cut down thick grass and brush through the use of a series of sharp blades rotating at high speeds. They are extremely dangerous products, but they are nonetheless efficient and necessary.

Justice McElwayne eventually picked up three votes. Justice Romano worked on his brethren for several weeks before getting his three. Once again, it would be decided by the new guy.

Justice Fisk wrestled with the case. He read the briefs shortly after being sworn in, and changed his mind from day to day. He found it easy to believe that the manufacturer could reasonably expect its product to be modified over time, especially in light of the violent nature of a bush hog. But the record wasn't entirely clear as to whether the manufacturer had complied with all federal regulations at the factory. Ron had great sympathy for the child, but would not allow his emotions to become a factor.

On the other hand, he had been elected on a platform of limiting liability. He had been attacked by trial lawyers and supported by the people they loved to sue.

The court was waiting; a decision was needed. Ron flip-flopped so many times he became hopelessly confused. When he finally cast his vote with Romano, he had no appetite and left the office early.

Justice McElwayne revised his opinion, and in a scathing dissent accused the majority of rewriting facts, changing legal standards, and circumventing the jury process, all in an effort to impose its own brand of tort reform. Several in the majority fired back (Ron did not), and when the opinion was finally published, it spoke more to the internal upheaval in the supreme court than to the plight of little Aaron.

Such nastiness among civilized jurists was extremely rare, but the bruised egos and hurt feelings only deepened the rift between the two sides. There was no middle ground, no room for compromise.

When a case involved a substantial verdict, the insurance companies could now relax.

CHAPTER 34

Justice McElwayne's bitter dissents continued into the spring. But after the sixth loss in a row, another 5–4 split, he lost some of his spunk. The case involved gross negligence on the part of an incompetent doctor, and when the court took away the verdict, McElwayne knew that his brethren had shifted so far to the right that they would never return.

An orthopedic surgeon in Jackson botched a routine surgery to repair a herniated disk. His patient was rendered a paraplegic, and eventually filed suit. The doctor had been sued five times previously, had lost his medical license in two other states, and had been treated on at least three occasions for addiction to painkillers. The jury awarded the paraplegic \$1.8 million for actual damages, then slapped the doctor and the hospital with \$5 million in punitive damages.

Justice Fisk, in his first written opinion for the majority, declared the actual damages to be excessive and the punitive award unconscionable. The decision sent the case back for a new trial on actual damages only. Forget punitive.

Justice McElwayne was apoplectic. His dissent bristled with vague allegations that special interests of the state now had more influence on the supreme court than did four of its own members. The final sentence of his initial draft was almost libelous: "The author of the majority opinion feigns shock at the amount of the punitive award. However, he should be rather comfortable with the sum of \$5 million. That was the price of the seat he now occupies." To get a laugh, he e-mailed a copy of the draft to Sheila McCarthy. She indeed laughed, then begged him to remove the last sentence. Eventually, he did.

McElwayne's dissent raged for four pages. Albritton concurred with another three. They wondered privately if they could find

happiness in writing useless dissents for the rest of their careers.

Their useless dissents were beautiful music to Barry Rinehart. He was carefully reading every decision out of Mississippi. His staff was analyzing the opinions, the pending cases, and the recent jury trials that might one day send a verdict to the high court. As always, Barry was watching closely.

Electing a friendly judge was indeed a victory, but it wasn't complete until the payoff. So far, Justice Fisk had a perfect voting record. *Baker v. Krane Chemical* was ripe for a decision.

On a flight to New York to see Mr. Trudeau, Barry decided that their boy needed some reassurance.

The dinner was at the University Club, on the top floor of Jackson's tallest building. It was a quiet event, almost secret, by invitation only and the invitations were not printed. A phone network had rounded up the eighty or so guests. The evening was in honor of Justice Ron Fisk. Doreen was there and had the high honor of sitting next to Senator Myers Rudd, who'd just flown in from Washington. Steak and lobster were served. The first speaker was the president of the state medical association, a dignified surgeon from Natchez who at times seemed near tears as he talked about the enormous sense of relief in the medical community. For years, the doctors had labored under the fear of litigation. They had paid enormous insurance premiums. They had been subjected to frivolous lawsuits. They had been abused in depositions and during trials. But now everything had changed. Because of the new direction of the supreme court, they could properly treat their patients without looking over their shoulders. He thanked Ron Fisk for his courage, his wisdom, and his

commitment to protecting the doctors and nurses and hospitals of the state of Mississippi.

Senator Rudd was on his third scotch, and the host knew from experience that the fourth one meant trouble. He called on The Senator to say a few words. Thirty minutes later, after fighting battles around the world and settling everything but the conflict in the Middle East, Rudd finally remembered why he was there. He never used notes, never planned a speech, never wasted time on forethought. His presence alone was enough to thrill everyone. Oh yes, Ron Fisk. He recounted their first meeting in Washington a year earlier. He called him “Ronny” at least three times. When he saw the host point at his watch, he finally sat down and demanded scotch number four.

The next speaker was the executive director of the Commerce Council, a veteran of many bruising battles with the trial lawyers. He spoke eloquently about the drastic change in the state’s economic development environment. Companies young and old were suddenly making bold plans, no longer afraid to take risks that might lead to litigation. Foreign firms were now interested in locating facilities in the state. Thank you, Ron Fisk.

Mississippi’s reputation as a judicial hellhole, as a dumping ground for thousands of frivolous lawsuits, as a haven for reckless trial lawyers, had changed almost overnight. Thank you, Ron Fisk.

Many firms were beginning to see the first signs of stabilized rates for liability insurance protection. Nothing definite yet, but things looked promising. Thank you, Ron Fisk.

After Justice Fisk had been showered with praise, almost to the point of embarrassment, he was asked to say a few words himself. He thanked everyone for their support during his campaign. He was pleased with his first three months on the court, and he was certain that the majority there would hold together on the issues of liability and damages. (Heavy applause.) His colleagues were bright and hardworking, and he claimed to be enamored with the intellectual challenge of the cases. He did not feel the least bit disadvantaged because of his inexperience.

On behalf of Doreen, he thanked them for a wonderful evening.

It was a Friday night, and they drove home to Brookhaven still floating on the accolades and admiration. The kids were asleep when they arrived at midnight.

Ron slept six hours and awoke in a panic over where to find a catcher. Baseball season was beginning. Tryouts were at 9:00 a.m. for the eleven- and twelve-year-olds. Josh, eleven, was moving up and would be one of the highest-ranked newcomers to the league. Because of his demanding job, Ron could not commit to a head coaching position. He could not make all the practices, but he was determined not to miss a single game. He would handle the pitchers and catchers. One of his former law partners would handle the rest and call himself the head coach. Another father would organize the practices.

It was the first Saturday in April, a chilly morning throughout the state. A nervous bunch of players and parents and especially coaches gathered at the city park for the beginning of the season. The nine- and ten-year-olds were sent to one field, the elevens and twelves to another. All players would be evaluated, then ranked, then placed in the draft.

The coaches met behind home plate to get organized. There was the usual nervous chatter and cheap shots and lighthearted insults. Most of them had coached in the same league the year before. Ron, back then, had been a popular coach, just another young father who would spend hours on the field from April to July. Now, though, he felt a bit elevated. He had put together a brilliant campaign and won an important political race with a record vote. That made him unique among his peers. There was, after all, only one supreme court justice in the town of Brookhaven. There was a certain detachment that he did not particularly like, though he wasn't sure if he disliked it, either.

They were already calling him "Judge."

Judge Fisk pulled a name out of the hat. His team was the Rockies.

The apartment was so cramped during the week they had to escape on Saturdays.

The Paytons coaxed Mack and Liza out of bed with the suggestion of breakfast at a nearby pancake house. Afterward, they left Hattiesburg and arrived in Bowmore before 10:00 a.m. Mrs. Shelby, Mary Grace's mother, had promised a long lunch under an oak tree—catfish followed by homemade ice cream. Mr. Shelby had the boat ready. He and Wes took the kids to a small lake where the crappie were biting.

Mary Grace and her mother sat on the porch for an hour, covering the usual topics, avoiding anything remotely related to the law. Family news, church gossip, weddings, and funerals, but they stayed away from cancer, which for years had dominated the chatter in Cary County.

Long before lunch, Mary Grace drove to town, to Pine Grove, where she met with Denny Ott. She passed along her latest thoughts on the new supreme court, a rather sad summary. Not for the first time she warned Denny that they would probably lose. He was preparing his people. He knew they would survive. They had lost everything else.

She drove two blocks and parked in the gravel driveway of Jeannette's trailer. They sat outside, under a shade tree, sipping bottled water and talking about men. Jeannette's current boyfriend was a fifty-five-year-old widower with a nice job and a nice home and little interest in her lawsuit—not that the lawsuit was attracting the attention it once commanded. The verdict was now seventeen months old. Not a dime had changed hands, and none was anticipated.

"We expect a ruling this month," Mary Grace said. "And it will be a miracle if we win."

"I'm praying for a miracle," Jeannette said, "but I'm ready for whatever happens. I just want it to be over."

After a long chat and a quick hug, Mary Grace left. She drove the streets of her hometown, past the high school and the homes of childhood friends, past the stores on Main Street, then into the countryside. She stopped at Treadway's Grocery, where she bought a soda and said hello to a lady she had known her entire life.

Driving back to her parents' home, she passed the Barrysville Volunteer Fire Department, a small metal building with an old pumper that the boys rolled out and washed on election days. The station also served as a precinct, where, five months earlier, 74 percent of the fine folks of Barrysville voted for God and guns and against gays and liberals. Barely five miles from the Bowmore town limits, Ron Fisk had convinced these people that he was their protector.

Perhaps he was. Perhaps his mere presence on the court was too intimidating for some.

The Meyerchec and Spano appeal was dismissed by the clerk for a lack of prosecution. They failed to file the required briefs, and after the usual warnings from the clerk their lawyer said they had no desire to go forward. They were not available for comment, and their lawyer did not return phone calls from reporters.

On the day of the dismissal, the supreme court reached a new low in its movement to drastically limit corporate exposure. A privately held pharmaceutical company called Bosk had made and widely marketed a strong painkiller called Rybadell. It proved to be horribly addictive, and within a few years Bosk was getting hammered with lawsuits. During one of the first trials, Bosk executives were caught lying. A U.S. attorney in Pennsylvania opened an investigation, and there were allegations that the company had known about Rybadell's addictive propensities but had tried to bury this information. The drug was extremely profitable.

A former Jackson cop named Dillman was injured in a motorcycle accident, and in the course of his recovery became addicted to Rybadell. He battled the addiction for two years, during which time his health and the rest of his life disintegrated. He was arrested twice for shoplifting. He eventually sued Bosk in the Circuit Court of Rankin County. The jury found the company liable and awarded Dillman \$275,000, the lowest Rybadell verdict in the country.

On appeal, the supreme court reversed, 5–4. The principal reason, set forth in the majority opinion by Justice Romano, was that Dillman should not be awarded damages because he was a drug addict.

In a rancorous dissent, Justice Albritton begged the majority to step forward and produce any scintilla of proof that the plaintiff was a drug addict “before his introduction to Rybadell.”

Three days after the decision, four Bosk executives pled guilty to withholding information from the Food and Drug Administration, and to lying to federal investigators.

CHAPTER 35

Krane Chemical's first-quarter earnings were much better than expected. In fact, they astounded the analysts, who had been expecting about \$1.25 per share on the high end. When Krane reported \$2.05 per share, the company and its amazing comeback attracted even more interest from financial publications.

All fourteen plants were running at full throttle. Prices had been cut to recapture market share. The sales force was working overtime to fill orders. Debt had been slashed. Most of the problems that had dogged the company throughout the preceding year were suddenly gone.

The stock had made a steady and impressive climb from single digits, and was trading around \$24 when the earnings news hit. It jumped to \$30. When last seen at that price, the stock was free-falling the day after the verdict in Hattiesburg.

The Trudeau Group now owned 80 percent of Krane, or around forty-eight million shares. Since the rumors of bankruptcy just before the election back in November, Mr. Trudeau's net worth had increased by \$800 million. And he was quite anxious to double that.

Before a final decision is handed down by the supreme court, the justices spend weeks reading one another's memos and preliminary opinions. They sometimes argue, privately. They lobby for votes to support their positions. They lean on their clerks for useful gossip from down the hall. Occasionally, there are deadlocks that take months to resolve.

The last thing Justice Fisk read late Friday afternoon was McElwayne's dissent in the case of *Jeannette Baker v. Krane Chemical*

Corporation. It was widely assumed to be a dissent with three others concurring. The majority opinion was written by Justice Calligan. Romano was working on a concurring opinion, and there was a chance that Albritton would write a dissent of his own. Though the details were not complete, there was little doubt that the final decision would be a 5–4 reversal of the verdict.

Fisk read the dissent, scoffed at it, and decided to concur with Calligan first thing Monday morning. Then Justice Fisk changed clothes and became Coach Fisk. It was time for a game.

The Rockies opened their season with a weekend jamboree in the delta town of Russburg, an hour northwest of Jackson. They would play one game on Friday night, at least two on Saturday, and maybe one on Sunday. The games were only four innings long, and every player was encouraged to pitch and play different positions. There were no trophies and no championships—just a loosely competitive round-robin to start the season. Thirty teams signed up in the eleven- and twelve-year-old division, including two others from Brookhaven.

The Rockies' first opponent was a team from the small town of Rolling Fork. The night was cool, the air clear, the sports complex filled with players and parents and the excitement of five games going at once.

Doreen was in Brookhaven with Clarissa and Zeke, who had a game at nine on Saturday morning.

In the first inning, Josh played second base, and when he came to bat, his father was coaching at third. When he struck out on four pitches, his father yelled encouragement and reminded him that he could not hit the ball if he kept the bat on his shoulder. In the second inning, Josh went to the mound and promptly struck out the first two batters he faced. The third hitter was a stocky twelve-year-old, the catcher, batting in the seven hole. He yanked the first pitch foul but very hard.

“Keep it low and away,” Ron yelled from the dugout.

The second pitch was not low and away. It was a fastball right down the middle of the plate, and the hitter ripped it hard. The ball shot off the barrel of the aluminum bat and left the plate much

faster than it had arrived. For a split second, Josh was frozen, and by the time he began to react, the ball was in his face. He jerked just slightly as the ball hit him square in the right temple. The ball then careened over the shortstop and rolled into left field.

Josh's eyes were open when his father reached him. He was lying in a heap at the base of the mound, stunned and groaning.

"Say something, Josh," Ron said as he gently touched the wound.

"Where's the ball?" Josh asked.

"Don't worry about it. Can you see me all right?"

"I think so." Tears were leaking from his eyes, and he clenched his teeth to keep from crying. The skin had been scraped, and there was a little blood in his hair. The swelling had already started.

"Get some ice," someone said.

"Call the EMTs."

The other coaches and umpires hovered around. The kid who hit the line drive stood nearby, ready to cry himself.

"Don't close your eyes," Ron said.

"Okay, okay," Josh said, still breathing rapidly.

"Who plays third base for the Braves?"

"Chipper."

"And center field?"

"Andruw."

"Attaboy."

After a few minutes, Josh sat up and the fans applauded. Then he stood and walked with his father's help to the dugout, where he stretched out on the bench. Ron, his heart still hammering away, gently placed a bag of ice on the knot on Josh's temple. The game slowly picked up again.

A medic arrived and examined Josh, who seemed perfectly responsive. He could see, hear, remember details, and even mentioned returning to the game. The medic said no, as did Coach Fisk. "Maybe tomorrow," Ron said, but only to comfort his son. Ron had a knot of his own, stuck firmly in his throat, and he was just beginning to calm down. He planned to take him home after the game.

“He looks fine,” the medic said. “But you might want to get him x-rayed.”

“Now?” Ron asked.

“No rush, but I’d do it tonight.”

By the end of the third inning, Josh was sitting up and joking with his teammates. Ron returned to the third-base coach’s box and was whispering to a runner when one of the Rockies yelled from the dugout, “Josh is throwing up!”

The umpires stopped the game again, and the coaches cleared the Rockies’ dugout. Josh was dizzy, sweating profusely, and violently nauseous. The medic was nearby, and within minutes a stretcher arrived with two emergency medical technicians. Ron held his son’s hand as they rolled him to the parking lot. “Don’t close your eyes,” Ron said over and over. And, “Talk to me, Josh.”

“My head hurts, Dad.”

“You’re okay. Just don’t close your eyes.”

They lifted the stretcher into the ambulance, locked it down, and allowed Ron to squat beside his son. Five minutes later, they wheeled him into the emergency room entrance at Henry County General Hospital. Josh was alert and had not vomited since leaving the ballpark.

A three-car smashup had occurred an hour earlier, and the emergency room was in a frenzy. The first doctor to examine Josh ordered a CT scan and explained to Ron that he would not be allowed to go farther into the hospital. “I think he’s fine,” the doctor said, and Ron found a chair in the cluttered waiting room. He called Doreen and managed to get through that difficult conversation. Time virtually stopped as the minutes dragged on.

The Rockies’ head coach, Ron’s former law partner, arrived in a rush and coaxed Ron outside. He had something to show him. From the backseat of his car he produced an aluminum bat. “This is it,” he said gravely. It was a Screamer, a popular bat manufactured by Win Rite Sporting Goods, one of a dozen to be found in any ballpark in the country.

“Look at this,” the coach said, rubbing the barrel where someone had tried to sand off part of the label. “It’s a minus seven, outlawed

years ago.”

Minus seven referred to the differential between the weight and the length of the bat. It was twenty-nine inches long but weighed only twenty-two ounces, much easier to swing without yielding any of the force upon contact with the ball. Current rules prohibited a differential greater than four. The bat was at least five years old.

Ron gawked at it as if it were a smoking gun. “How’d you get it?”

“I checked it when the kid came to the plate again. I showed it to the ump, who threw it out and went after the coach. I went after him, too, but, to be honest, he didn’t have a clue. He gave me the damned thing.”

More of the Rockies’ parents arrived, then some of the players. They huddled around a bench near the emergency exit and waited. An hour passed before the doctor returned to brief Ron.

“CT scan’s negative,” the doctor said. “I think he’s okay, just a mild concussion.”

“Thank God.”

“Where do you live?”

“Brookhaven.”

“You can take him home, but he needs to be very still for the next few days. No sports of any kind. If he experiences dizziness, headaches, double vision, blurred vision, dilated pupils, ringing in his ears, bad taste in his mouth, moodiness, or drowsiness, then you get him to your local doctor.”

Ron nodded and wanted to take notes.

“I’ll put all this in a discharge report, along with the CT scan.”

“Fine, sure.”

The doctor paused, looked at Ron a bit closer, then said, “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a judge, supreme court.”

The doctor smiled, offered a hand to shake. “I sent you a check last year. Thank you for what you’re doing down there.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

An hour later, ten minutes before midnight, they left Russburg. Josh sat in the front seat with an ice pack stuck to his head and listened to the Braves-Dodgers game on the radio. Ron glanced at

him every ten seconds, ready to pounce on the first warning sign. There were none, until they entered the outskirts of Brookhaven and Josh said, “Dad, my head hurts a little.”

“The nurse said a small headache is okay. But a bad one means trouble. On a scale of one to ten, where is it?”

“Three.”

“Okay, when it gets to five, I want to know.”

Doreen was waiting at the door with a dozen questions. She read the discharge summary at the kitchen table while Ron and Josh ate a sandwich. After two bites, Josh said he was not hungry. He’d been starving when they left Russburg. He was suddenly irritable, but it was hours past his bedtime. When Doreen began her version of a physical exam, he barked at her and went to use the bathroom.

“What do you think?” Ron asked.

“He appears to be fine,” she replied. “Just a little cranky and sleepy.”

They had a huge fight over the sleeping arrangements. Josh was eleven years old and wasn’t about to sleep with his mother. Ron explained to him, rather firmly, that on this particular night, and under these unusual circumstances, he would indeed go to sleep with his mother at his side. Ron would be napping in a chair next to the bed.

Under the steady gaze of both parents, he fell asleep quickly. Then Ron nodded off in the chair, and at some point around 3:30 a.m. Doreen finally closed her eyes.

She opened them an hour later when Josh screamed. He had vomited again, and his head was splitting. He was dizzy, incoherent, and crying and said everything looked blurry.

The family doctor was a close friend named Calvin Treet. Ron called him while Doreen ran next door to fetch a neighbor. In less than ten minutes, they were walking into the ER at the Brookhaven hospital. Ron was carrying Josh, and Doreen had the discharge papers and the CT scan. The ER physician did a quick exam, and everything was wrong—slow heart rate, unequal pupils, drowsiness. Dr. Treet arrived and took over while the ER physician examined the discharge summary.

“Who read the scan?” Treet asked.

“The doctor in Russburg,” Ron said.

“When?”

“About eight o’clock last night.”

“Eight hours ago?”

“Something like that.”

“It doesn’t show much,” he said. “Let’s do a scan here.”

The ER doctor and a nurse took Josh to an exam room. Treet said to the Fisks, “You need to wait out there. I’ll be right back.”

They sleepwalked to the ER waiting room, too numb and too terrified to say anything for a few moments. The room was empty but gave the impression of having survived a rough night—empty soda cans, newspapers on the floor, candy wrappers on the tables. How many others had sat here in a daze waiting for the doctors to appear and deliver bad news?

They held hands and prayed for a long time, silently at first, then back and forth in short soft sentences, and when the praying was over, they felt some relief. Doreen called home, talked to the neighbor who was babysitting, and promised to call again when they knew something.

When Calvin Treet walked into the room, they knew things were not going well. He sat down and faced them. “Josh has a fracture of the skull, according to our CT scan. The scan you brought from Russburg is not very helpful because it belongs to another patient.”

“What the hell!” Ron said.

“The doctor there looked at the wrong CT scan. The patient’s name is barely readable at the bottom, but it ain’t Josh Fisk.”

“This can’t be true,” Doreen said.

“It is, but we’ll worry about it later. Listen carefully; here’s where we are. The ball hit Josh right here,” he said, pointing to his right temple. “It’s the thinnest part of the skull, known as the temporal bone. The crack is called a linear fracture, and it’s about two inches long. Just inside the skull is a membrane that encases the brain, and feeding it is the middle meningeal artery. This artery goes through the bone, and when the bone was cracked, the artery was lacerated, causing blood to accumulate between the bone and the membrane.

This compressed the brain. The blood clot, known as an epidural hematoma, grew and increased the pressure inside the skull. The only treatment now is a craniotomy, which is a removal of the hematoma by opening the brain.”

“Oh, my God,” Doreen said and covered her eyes.

“Please listen,” Treet went on. “We need to get him to Jackson, to the trauma unit at University Medical Center. I suggest we call their air ambulance and get him there in a helicopter.”

The ER physician arrived in a hurry and said to Dr. Treet, “The patient is deteriorating. You need to take a look.”

As Dr. Treet started to walk away, Ron stood, grabbed his arm, and said, “Talk to me, Calvin. How serious is this?”

“It’s very serious, Ron. It could be life threatening.”

Josh was boarded onto the helicopter and whisked away. Doreen and Calvin Treet rode with him while Ron raced home, checked on Zeke and Clarissa, and threw a few necessities in an overnight bag. Then he sped north on Interstate 55, driving a hundred miles per hour and daring any cop to stop him. When he wasn’t pleabargaining with God, he was cursing the doctor in Russburg who studied the wrong CT scan. And occasionally, he turned around and glanced at the defectively designed and unreasonably dangerous product in the rear seat.

He had never liked aluminum bats.

CHAPTER 36

At ten minutes after eight on Saturday morning, some thirteen hours after being struck by the baseball, Josh underwent surgery at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson.

Ron and Doreen waited in the hospital's chapel with friends who were arriving from Brookhaven. Their pastor was with them. Back at St. Luke's, a prayer vigil was under way in the church's sanctuary. Ron's brother arrived at noon with Zeke and Clarissa, both as frightened and shell-shocked as their parents. Hours passed with no word from the surgeons. Dr. Treet disappeared from time to time to check on things, but seldom brought back any useful news. As some of their friends left, others came to replace them. Grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins arrived, and waited, and prayed, and then left to roam around the sprawling hospital.

Four hours after the Fisks last saw their son, the chief surgeon appeared and motioned for them to follow him. Dr. Treet joined the conversation as they walked down a hallway, away from the crowd. They stopped near a door to a restroom. Ron and Doreen clutched each other, bracing for the worst. The surgeon spoke in a grave and weary voice: "He has survived the surgery and is doing as well as can be expected. We removed a large hematoma compressing the brain. The pressure inside the skull has been reduced. But there was a lot of brain swelling, an extraordinary amount to be honest. There will likely be some permanent damage."

"Life" and "death" are easily understood, but "damage" conveys fears that are not readily defined.

"He's not going to die," Doreen said.

"As of right now, he's alive and his vital signs are good. He has a 90 percent chance of survival. The next seventy-two hours will be crucial."

"How much damage?" Ron asked, getting to the point.

“There’s no way to tell right now. Some of the damage might be reversible with time and therapy, but that’s really a conversation for another day. Right now, let’s just continue to pray that he improves over the next three days.”

Late Saturday night, Josh was in the ICU. Ron and Doreen were allowed to see him for ten minutes, though he was in a drug-induced coma. They didn’t manage to maintain their composure when they first saw him. His head was wrapped like a mummy, and a breathing tube ran from his mouth. He was hooked to a ventilator. Doreen was afraid to touch any part of his body, even his foot.

A sympathetic nurse agreed to move a chair to a spot outside his room and allow one parent to sit there throughout the night. Ron and Doreen sent their support team back to Brookhaven, then began alternating between the ICU and the waiting room. Sleep was out of the question, and they walked the halls until sunrise Sunday morning.

The doctors were pleased with Josh’s first night. After an early morning review, Ron and Doreen found a motel nearby. They showered and managed a quick nap before reassuming their positions at the hospital. The waiting rituals began again, as did the prayer vigils at home. The flow of visitors coming and going soon became an ordeal in itself. Ron and Doreen just wanted to be alone in the room with their son.

Late Sunday night, when Doreen was in the ICU and the crowd had left, Ron strolled the corridors of the hospital, stretching his legs and trying to stay awake. He found another waiting room, one for the families of noncritical patients. It was much more inviting, with nicer furniture and a wider selection of vending machines. Dinner was a diet soda and a bag of pretzels, and as he crunched on them mindlessly, a small boy walked by and seemed ready to touch his knee.

“Aaron,” his mother barked from across the room. “Come here.”

“He’s fine,” Ron said, smiling at the child, who quickly drifted away.

Aaron. The name brought back a memory. Aaron was the boy struck in the head by the piece of metal thrown by the bush hog. A brain injury, permanent disability, financial ruin for the family. The jury found the manufacturer liable. The trial had a clean record. At that moment, Justice Fisk could not remember why he had so easily voted with the majority in reversing the verdict.

Back then, barely two months ago, he had never felt the pain of a parent with a severely injured child. Or the fear of losing the child.

Now, in the middle of this nightmare, he remembered Aaron in a different way. When he read the medical summaries in the case, he had done so in the comfort of his office, far removed from reality. The kid was severely injured, which was a pity, but accidents happen in everyday life. Could the accident have been prevented? He thought so then, and he certainly thought so now.

Little Aaron was back, staring at the bag of pretzels. It was shaking.

“Aaron, leave that man alone,” the mother yelled.

Ron stared at the shaking pretzels.

The accident could have been prevented, and should have been. If the manufacturer had followed established regulations, then the bush hog would have been much safer. Why had he been so eager to protect its manufacturer?

The case was gone, forever dismissed by five supposedly wise men, none of whom had ever shown much sympathy for those who suffer. He had to wonder if the other four—Calligan, Romano, Bateman, and Ross—had ever roamed the tomb-like halls of a hospital at all hours of the day and night waiting for a child to live or die.

No, they had not. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be what they are today.

Sunday slowly yielded to Monday. Another week began, though it was far different from any one before. Ron and Doreen refused to leave the hospital for more than an hour or two. Josh was not responding well, and they were afraid that each visit to his bed might be their last glimpse of him alive. Friends brought clothes and food and newspapers, and they offered to sit and wait if the Fisks would like to go home for a few hours. But Ron and Doreen stood fast and plowed on with a fixed determination, zombielike in their belief that Josh would do better if they stayed close by. Tired and haggard, they lost patience with the parade of visitors from home and began to hide in various places around the hospital.

Ron called his office and told his secretary he had no idea when he might return. Doreen told her boss she was taking a leave of absence. When the boss explained, delicately, that their policies did not grant such leaves, she politely informed him it was time to change said policies. He agreed to do so immediately.

The hospital was fifteen minutes from the Gartin building, and early Tuesday Ron stopped by for a quick look at his desk. It had accumulated several new piles of paperwork. His chief clerk ran down the list of all pending cases, but Ron was distracted. "I'm thinking about a leave of absence. Run it by the chief," he instructed the clerk. "For thirty days, maybe sixty. I can't concentrate on this stuff right now."

"Sure, will do. You were planning to concur this morning on *Baker versus Krane*."

"It can wait. Everything can wait."

He managed to leave the building without seeing another member of the court.

Tuesday's edition of the *Clarion-Ledger* ran a story about Josh and his injury. Justice Fisk could not be reached for comment, but an unidentified source got most of the facts right. The doctors had removed a large blood clot that had been pressing on his brain. His

life was no longer in danger. It was too soon to speculate about long-term problems. There was no mention of the doctor who read the wrong CT scan.

However, the online chatter soon filled in the gaps. There was gossip about an illegal baseball bat involved in the accident, and speculation about severe brain damage, and an account from someone inside the Henry County General Hospital who claimed to know that the doctors there had screwed up. There were a couple of wild theories that Justice Fisk had undergone a dramatic conversion in his judicial philosophy. One rumor declared that he was about to resign.

Wes Payton watched it carefully from his office. His wife did not. She was working hard to distract herself with other cases, but Wes was consumed with the story about Josh. As the father of young children, he could not imagine the horror the Fisks were enduring. And he could not avoid wondering how the tragedy might affect the *Baker* case. He did not expect a sudden about-face by Ron Fisk, but the possibility was there.

They had only one prayer left, and that was for a miracle. Could this be it?

They waited. The decision was due any day now.

By early Tuesday afternoon, Josh was beginning to show signs of improvement. He was awake, alert, and following commands. He couldn't talk, because of the breathing tube, but he seemed fidgety, which was a good sign. The pressure on his brain had been reduced to almost normal levels. The doctors had explained several times that it would take days, maybe weeks to determine a long-term prognosis.

With Josh awake, the Fisks decided to spend the night at home. This was greatly encouraged by the doctors and nurses. Doreen's sister agreed to sit in the ICU, within fifteen feet of her nephew's bed.

They left Jackson, relieved to be away from the hospital and anxious to see Zeke and Clarissa. Their conversation was about home-cooked food, long showers, and their comfortable bed. They vowed to savor the next ten hours, because their ordeal was just beginning.

But it would be difficult to relax. On the outskirts of Jackson, Ron's cell phone rang. It was Justice Calligan, and he began the conversation with a long-winded inquiry into Josh's condition. He conveyed condolences from everyone at the court. He promised to stop by the hospital as soon as possible. Ron was thankful, but soon had the feeling there was a business angle to the call.

"Just a couple of matters, Ron," Calligan said, "and I know you're preoccupied right now."

"I am indeed."

"There's nothing terribly urgent here, except for two cases. It looks as though that Bowmore toxic case is split 4 to 4. No surprise there, I guess. I was hoping you would concur with me on this one."

"I thought Romano was writing, too."

"He is, and he's finished, as is Albritton. All opinions are ready, and we need your concurrence."

"Let me sleep on it."

"Fine. The other is that nursing home case out of Webster County. Another 4-4 split."

"That's a very ugly case," Ron said, almost in disgust. In yet another nursing home case, a patient was basically abandoned by the staff and eventually found unfed, lying in his own waste, covered in bedsores, unmedicated, and delirious. The company that owned the facility had reported huge profits, which came as a surprise to the jury when it was proven just how little was spent on patient care. Nursing home abuse was so rampant Ron was already sick of reading about it.

"Yes, it is. Very tragic," Calligan said, as if he were capable of sympathy.

"And I guess you want to reverse?"

"I don't see the liability, and the damages are exorbitant."

In the three and a half months Ron had been on the court, Justice Calligan had never managed to see liability in any death or injury case. He believed jurors were stupid and easily led astray by slick trial lawyers. And he believed that it was his solemn responsibility to correct every miscarriage of justice (plaintiff's verdict) from the comfort of his detached environment.

"Let me sleep on it," Ron said again. Doreen was becoming irritated with the phone call.

"Yes, always a good idea. If we could finish these two cases, Ron, then a short leave of absence might work."

A short leave of absence, or a long one for that matter, was solely within the discretion of each justice. Ron did not need Calligan to approve it. He thanked him anyway and hung up.

The Fisks' kitchen was filled with food from friends, mainly cakes and pies and casseroles. A buffet was arranged on one counter, and they ate with Zeke, Clarissa, two neighbors, and Doreen's parents. They slept six hours, then drove back to the hospital.

When they arrived, Josh was in the midst of a prolonged seizure, the second in the past hour. It passed and his vital signs improved, but it was a setback in his slow recovery. Thursday morning, he was alert again, but irritable, restless, unable to concentrate, unable to remember anything about the accident, and highly agitated. One of the doctors explained that his condition was symptomatic of post-concussion syndrome.

Thursday night, the Rockies' coach, Ron's former law partner, drove to Jackson for another visit. He and Ron had dinner in the hospital canteen, and over soup and salad he pulled out his notes. "I've done some research," the coach said. "Win Rite stopped making the lighter bats six years ago, probably in response to complaints about injuries. In fact, the entire industry went to minus four and nothing higher. Over the years, the aluminum alloys got lighter but also stronger. The barrel of the bat wall actually absorbs the ball upon contact, then launches it when the wall pops back into its original position. The result is a lighter bat, but also a much more dangerous one. Safety advocates have been bitching about these bats for a decade, and lots of studies have been done. In one

test, a pitching machine threw a fastball at 90 miles an hour, and the ball came off the bat at 120. Two fatalities on record, one in high school, one in college, but hundreds of injuries in all age-groups. So, Little League and some of the other youth organizations got together and banned anything above a minus four.

“But the problem is obvious. Win Rite and the other bat makers have a million of the old bats still out there, still being used, and we finally saw one in the game last Friday.”

“There was never a recall?” Ron asked.

“None whatsoever. And they know the damned things are dangerous. Their own tests prove it.”

Ron was nibbling on a saltine, certain of where this was going and unwilling to help it get there.

“The Rolling Fork team is probably liable, but it’s not worth the trouble. The City of Russburg could be held liable because the umpire, a city employee by the way, failed to check the equipment. And the big tuna is, of course, Win Rite. Assets of two billion. Tons of insurance coverage. Very good case of liability. Damages undetermined but substantial. All in all a strong case, except for one small problem. Our supreme court.”

“You sound like a trial lawyer.”

“They’re not always wrong. If you ask me, I say you should consider filing a product case.”

“I don’t recall asking you, and I can’t file a lawsuit. I’d be laughed out of the state.”

“What about the next kid, Ron? What about the next family that will go through the same nightmare? Litigation has cleaned up a lot of bad products and protected a lot of people.”

“There’s no way.”

“And why should you and the State of Mississippi get stuck with a million bucks in medical bills? Win Rite is worth billions. They made a lousy product; make them pay.”

“You are a trial lawyer.”

“No. I’m your former partner. We practiced together for fourteen years, and the Ron Fisk I remember had great respect for the law. Justice Fisk seems determined to change all of it.”

“Okay, okay. I’ve heard enough.”
“I’m sorry, Ron. I shouldn’t have—”
“It’s okay. Let’s go check on Josh.”

Tony Zachary returned to Jackson on Friday and heard the news about Josh Fisk. He went straight to the hospital and eventually found Ron napping on a waiting room sofa. They talked for an hour about the accident, about the surgery, and also about Tony’s fishing expedition down in Belize.

Tony was deeply concerned about young Josh. He certainly hoped the child would make a quick and complete recovery. But what he wanted to know, but couldn’t bring himself to ask, was, “When might you finish up with the *Krane* appeal?”

As soon as he was in his car, he called Barry Rinehart with the disturbing news.

A week after he arrived at the hospital, Josh was moved from the ICU to a private room, one that was immediately inundated with flowers, stuffed animals, cards from his fifth-grade classmates, balloons, and enough candy to feed an entire elementary school. A cot was arranged so that one of his parents could sleep next to his bed.

While the room at first gave the impression of a lighter mood, things turned gloomy almost immediately. The team of neurologists began extensive evaluations. There was no paralysis, but a definite decline in motor skills and coordination, along with severe memory loss and an inability to concentrate. Josh was easily distracted and slow to recognize objects. The tubes were gone, but his speech was noticeably slower. Some recovery was likely in the months to come, but there was a good chance of permanent damage.

The thick head bandages were replaced with much smaller ones. Josh was allowed to walk to the restroom, a heartbreaking sight as he shuffled awkwardly forward, one clumsy step after another. Ron helped him, and fought back tears.

His little baseball star had played his final game.

CHAPTER 37

Dr. Calvin Treet drove to Russburg and arranged a meeting with the ER physician who had read the wrong CT scan. After they examined the two scans, Josh's and the other patient's, they argued briefly before the doctor admitted that the emergency room that night had been chaotic and understaffed, and, yes, mistakes were made. The fact that he'd botched the treatment of the son of a supreme court justice was overwhelming. "Will the family file suit?" he asked, clearly shaken.

"I don't know, but you should notify your insurance company."

Treet took the file to Jackson and discussed it with Ron and Doreen. He walked them through standard CT scan procedure, then recounted his conversation with the ER doctor.

"What should've been done?" Doreen asked.

Treet knew the question was coming. He knew he would be asked by his friends to pass judgment on the performance of another doctor. He had decided days ago to be as honest as possible. "They should've brought him here immediately and removed the blood clot. It's brain surgery, but it's not a complicated procedure. Josh would have been home two days after surgery, completely healed with no damage whatsoever."

"This CT scan was taken at eight o'clock Friday night," Ron said. "You saw Josh in Brookhaven about nine hours later, right?"

"Something like that."

"So for nine hours the pressure continued to build inside his skull?"

"Yes."

"And the compression of the brain by the blood clot damages the brain?"

"Yes."

There was a long silence as they danced around the obvious conclusion. Ron finally asked, "Calvin, what would you do if it were your kid?"

"Sue the bastard. It's gross negligence."

"I can't sue, Calvin. I'd make a mockery out of myself."

After a game of squash, a shower, and a massage in the Senate gym, Myers Rudd ducked into a limo and suffered through the late afternoon traffic like everyone else. An hour later, he arrived at the general aviation terminal at Dulles, and there he boarded a Gulfstream 5, the newest in the fleet owned by Mr. Carl Trudeau. The Senator did not know who owned the jet, nor had he ever met Mr. Trudeau, which in most cultures would seem odd since Rudd had taken so much money from the man. But in Washington, money arrives through a myriad of strange and nebulous conduits. Often those taking it have only a vague idea of where it's coming from; often they have no clue. In most democracies, the transference of so much cash would be considered outright corruption, but in Washington the corruption has been legalized. Senator Rudd didn't know and didn't care that he was owned by other people. He had over \$11 million in the bank, money he could eventually keep if not forced to waste it on some frivolous campaign. In return for such an investment, Rudd had a perfect voting record on all matters dealing with pharmaceuticals, chemicals, oil, energy, insurance, banks, and on and on.

But he was a man of the people.

He traveled alone on this night. The two flight attendants served him cocktails, lobster, and wine, and the meal was hardly over when the Gulfstream began its descent into Jackson International. Another limo was waiting, and twenty minutes after landing, The Senator was dropped off at a side entrance of the University Medical Center. In a room on the third floor, he found Ron and Doreen staring blankly at a television while their son slept. "How's the

boy?” he asked with great warmth as they scrambled to get to their feet and look somewhat presentable. They were stunned to see the great man himself suddenly appearing from nowhere at 9:30 on a Tuesday night. Doreen couldn’t find her shoes.

They chatted softly about Josh and his progress. The Senator claimed to be in town on business, just passing through on his way back to Washington, but he’d heard the news and felt compelled to drop in for a quick hello. They were touched by his presence. In fact, they were rattled and found it hard to believe.

A nurse broke things up and declared it was time to turn off the lights. The Senator hugged Doreen, pecked her cheek, squeezed her hands, promised to do anything within his power to help, then left the room with Ron, who was startled to see no signs of an entourage hovering in the hallway. Not a single staffer, gofer, bodyguard, driver. No one.

The Senator had come to visit, all by himself. The gesture meant even more to Ron.

As they walked down the hall, Rudd offered the same quick “Howdy” and the same plastic grin to everyone they passed. These were his people, and he knew that they adored him. He was blathering on about some mundane fight in Congress, and Ron was trying to appear captivated while suddenly wishing the man would just wrap things up and leave. At the exit doors, Rudd wished him well, promised to pray for the family, and extended offers to help on any front.

As they shook hands, The Senator, almost as an afterthought, said, “By the way, Judge, it’d be nice to finish that *Krane* appeal.”

Ron’s hand went limp and his jaw dropped. He tried to think of a response. As he treaded water, The Senator gave his parting shot. “I know you’ll do the right thing. These verdicts are killing our state.”

Rudd grabbed his shoulder, blessed him with another plastic grin, then walked through the doors and disappeared.

Back in the limo, Rudd ordered the driver to the suburbs north of town. There he would spend the night with his Jackson mistress, then hustle back to D.C. on the Gulfstream early in the morning.

Ron lay on the cot and tried to settle himself in for another long night. Josh's sleep patterns had become so erratic that every night was a new adventure. When the nurse made the rounds at midnight, both father and son were wide awake. Doreen, thankfully, was at the motel, fast asleep thanks to little green pills the nurses were sneaking to them. Ron took another one, and the nurse gave Josh his own sedative.

In the awful darkness of the room, Ron grappled with the visit by Senator Rudd. Was it a simple matter of an arrogant politician stepping over the line to help a big donor? Rudd relentlessly took money from anyone who wanted to hand it out, legally, so it would be no surprise if he'd taken a bundle from Krane.

Or was it more complicated than that? Krane had not contributed one dime to the Fisk campaign. Ron had combed through the records after the election when he, too, had been shocked at the cash raised and spent. He had argued and fought with Tony Zachary about where the money came from. It's all right there in the reports, Tony said over and over. And Ron had studied the reports. His donors were corporate executives and doctors and defense lawyers and lobbying groups, all dedicated to limiting liability. He knew that when his campaign began.

He smelled a conspiracy, but fatigue finally engulfed him.

Somewhere in the deep murkiness of a chemical-induced sleep, Ron heard the steady clicking of something he couldn't identify. Click, click, click, click, the same sound over and over and very rapid. It was near him.

He reached through the darkness and felt Josh's bed, then he bolted to his feet. In the dim light from the bathroom, he could see his son in the grips of a grotesque seizure. His entire body was

shaking violently. His face contorted, his mouth open, his eyes wild. The clicking and rattling got louder. Ron pushed the button to call the nurses, then he grabbed Josh by the shoulders and tried to settle him. He was astounded at the ferocity of the attack. Two nurses swept in and took charge. A third was right behind them, then a doctor. There was little to be done except stick a depressor in Josh's mouth to prevent an injury to his tongue.

When Ron couldn't watch any longer, he backed away, into a corner, and looked at the surreal image of his badly damaged son lost in a crowd of helping hands while the bed still shook and rails still clicked. The seizure finally relented, and the nurses were soon washing his face with cool water and speaking in childlike voices. Ron eased from the room for another mindless hike through the corridors.

The seizures continued off and on for twenty-four hours, then abruptly stopped. By that time, Ron and Doreen were too weary and frazzled to do anything but stare at their son and pray that he remained still and calm. Other doctors arrived, all grim faced and uttering incomprehensible words among themselves. More tests were ordered, and Josh was taken away for hours, then brought back.

Days passed and blurred together. Time meant nothing.

On a Saturday morning, Ron sneaked into his office at the Gartin building. Both clerks were there, at his request. There were twelve cases to decide, and Ron had read their brief summaries and recommendations. The clerks had their own little docket prepared and were ready for the roll call.

A rape conviction from Rankin County. Affirmed, with a unanimous court.

An election dispute from Bolivar County. Affirmed, with seven others.

An extremely dull secured-transaction brouhaha from Panola County. Affirmed, with a unanimous court.

And so on. With Ron preoccupied and showing little interest in the work, the first ten cases were disposed of in twenty minutes.

“Baker versus Krane Chemical,” a clerk said.

“What’s the buzz?” Ron asked.

“Four–four split, with everybody throwing knives. Calligan and company are quite nervous about you. McElwayne and his side are curious. Everybody’s watching, waiting.”

“They think I’ve cracked up?”

“No one’s sure. They think you’re under a great deal of stress, and there’s speculation about some great cathartic flip-flop because of what’s happened.”

“Let ’em speculate. I’ll wait on *Baker* and that nursing home case.”

“Are you considering a vote to uphold the verdicts?” the other clerk asked.

Ron had already learned that most of the court’s gossip was created and spread by the network of clerks, all of them.

“I don’t know,” he said. Thirty minutes later, he was back at the hospital.

CHAPTER 38

Eight days later, on a rainy Sunday morning, Josh Fisk was loaded into an ambulance for the drive to Brookhaven. Once there, he would be placed in a room at the hospital five minutes from home. He would be watched closely for a week or so, then, hopefully, released.

Doreen rode with him in the ambulance.

Ron drove to the Gartin building and went to his office on the fourth floor. There was no sign of anyone there, which was precisely what he wanted. For the third or fourth time, he read Calligan's opinion reversing the verdict in *Baker v. Krane Chemical*, and though he had once agreed with it completely, he now had doubts. It could have been written by Jared Kurtin himself. Calligan found fault with virtually all of *Baker's* expert testimony. He criticized Judge Harrison for admitting most of it. His sharpest language condemned the expert who linked the carcinogenic by-products to the actual cancers, calling it "speculative at best." He imposed an impossible standard that would require clear proof that the toxins in the Bowmore water caused the cancers that killed Pete and Chad Baker. As always, he caterwauled at the sheer size of the shocking verdict, and blamed it on the undue passion created by Baker's attorneys that inflamed the jurors.

Ron read again the opinion by McElwayne, and it, too, sounded much different.

It was time to vote, to make his decision, and he simply had no stomach for it. He was tired of the case, tired of the pressure, tired of the anger at being used like a pawn by powerful forces he should have recognized. He was exhausted from Josh's ordeal and just wanted to go home. He had no confidence in his ability to do what was right, and he wasn't sure what that was anymore. He had prayed until he was tired of praying. He had tried to explain his

misgivings to Doreen, but she was as distracted and unstable as he was.

If he reversed the verdict, he would betray his true feelings. But his feelings were changing, were they not? How could he, as a detached jurist, suddenly swap sides because of his family's tragedy?

If he upheld the verdict, he would betray those who had elected him. Fifty-three percent of the people had voted for Ron Fisk because they believed in his platform. Or did they? Perhaps they had voted for him because he was so well marketed.

Would it be fair to all the Aarons out there for Ron to selfishly change his judicial philosophy because of his own son?

He hated these questions. They exhausted him even more. He paced around his office, more confused than ever, and he thought of leaving again. Just run, he told himself. But he was tired of running and pacing and talking to the walls.

He typed his opinion: "I concur and agree with Justice Calligan, but I do so with grave misgivings. This court, with my complicity and especially because of my presence, has rapidly become a blind protector of those who wish to severely restrict liability in all areas of personal injury law. It is a dangerous course."

In the nursing home case, he typed his second opinion: "I concur with Justice Albritton and uphold the verdict rendered in the Circuit Court of Webster County. The actions of the nursing home fall far short of the standard of care our laws require."

Then he typed a memo to the court that read: "For the next thirty days, I will be on a leave of absence from the court's business. I am needed at home."

The Supreme Court of Mississippi posts its rulings on its Web site each Thursday at noon.

And each Thursday at noon quite a few lawyers either sat before their computers in nervous anticipation or made sure someone did so for them. Jared Kurtin kept an associate on guard. Sterling Bintz

watched his smart phone at that precise hour, regardless of where in the world he happened to be. F. Clyde Hardin, still a caveman with technology, sat in the darkness of his locked office, drank his lunch, and waited. Every trial lawyer with a Bowmore case kept watch.

The anticipation was shared by a few nonlawyers as well. Tony Zachary and Barry Rinehart made it a point to be on the phone with each other when the opinions came down. Carl Trudeau counted the minutes each week. In lower and mid-Manhattan dozens of securities analysts monitored the Web site. Denny Ott had a sandwich with his wife in the office at the church. The parsonage next door did not have a computer.

And nowhere was the magical hour more dreaded and anticipated than within the shabby confines of Payton & Payton. The entire firm gathered in The Pit, at the always cluttered worktable, and had lunch as Sherman stared at his laptop. On the first Thursday in May, at 12:15, he announced, "Here it is." Food was shoved aside. The air grew thinner, and breathing became more difficult. Wes refused to look at Mary Grace, and she refused to look at him. Indeed, no one in the room made eye contact with anyone else.

"The opinion is written by Justice Arlon Calligan," Sherman continued. "I'll just skim along here. Five pages, ten pages, fifteen pages, let's see, a majority opinion that's twenty-one pages long, joined by Romano, Bateman, Ross, Fisk. Reversed and rendered. Final judgment entered for the defendant, Krane Chemical."

Sherman continued: "Romano concurs with four pages of his usual drivel. Fisk concurs briefly." A pause as he kept scrolling. "And then a twelve-page dissent by McElwayne with Albritton concurring. That's all I need to know. I won't read this piece of shit for at least a month." He stood and left the room.

"It's not exactly a surprise," Wes said. No one responded.

F. Clyde Hardin wept at his desk. This disaster had been looming for months, but it still crushed him. His one chance to strike it rich

was gone, and with it all of his dreams. He cursed Sterling Bintz and his harebrained class action. He cursed Ron Fisk and the other four clowns in his majority. He cursed the blind sheep in Cary County and throughout the rest of south Mississippi who had been hoodwinked into voting against Sheila McCarthy. He fixed another vodka, then cursed and drank and cursed and drank until he passed out with his head on his desk.

Seven doors down, Babe took a phone call and got the news. Her coffee shop was soon packed with the Main Street crowd looking for answers and gossip and support. For many, the news was incomprehensible. There would be no cleanup, no recovery, no compensation, no apologies. Krane Chemical was walking free and thumbing its nose at the town and its victims.

Denny Ott received a call from Mary Grace. She gave a quick summary and stressed that the litigation was over. They had no viable options. The only avenue left was an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, and they would, of course, file the obligatory paperwork. But there was no chance that the Court would agree to consider such a case. She and Wes would be down in a few days to meet with their clients.

Denny and his wife opened the fellowship hall, pulled out some cookies and bottled water, and waited for their people to arrive for consoling.

Late in the afternoon, Mary Grace walked into Wes's office and closed the door. She had two sheets of paper, and she handed one to him. It was a letter to their Bowmore clients. "Take a look," she said, and sat down to read it herself. It read:

Dear Client:

Today the Supreme Court of Mississippi ruled in favor of Krane Chemical. Jeannette Baker's appeal was reversed and rendered, which means that it cannot be retried or re-filed. We intend to ask the court for

a rehearing, which is customary, but also a waste of time. We will also appeal her case to the U.S. Supreme Court, but this, too, is a mere formality. That Court rarely considers state court cases such as this.

Today's ruling, and we will send you a full copy next week, makes it impossible to proceed with your case against Krane. The court applied a standard of proof that makes it impossible to pin liability on the company. And it's painfully obvious what would happen to another verdict when presented to the same court.

Words cannot express our disappointment and frustration. We have fought this battle for five years against enormous odds, and we have lost in many ways.

But our losses are nothing compared to yours. We will continue to think of you, pray for you, and talk to you whenever you need us. We have been honored by your trust. God bless you.

“Very nice,” Wes said. “Let’s get ’em in the mail.”

Krane Chemical roared to life in the afternoon’s trading. It gained \$4.75 a share and closed at \$38.50. Mr. Trudeau had now regained the billion he lost, and more was on the way.

He gathered Bobby Ratzlaff, Felix Bard, and two other confidants in his office for a little party. They sipped Cristal champagne, smoked Cuban cigars, and congratulated themselves on their stunning turnaround. They now considered Carl a true genius, a visionary. Even in the darkest days, he never wavered. His mantra had been “Buy the stock. Buy the stock.”

He reminded Bobby of his promise on the day of the verdict. Not one dime of his hard-earned profits would ever be handed over to those ignorant people and their slimy lawyers.

CHAPTER 39

The guests ranged from hard-core Wall Street types like Carl himself all the way down to Brianna's hair colorist and two semi-employed Broadway actors. There were bankers with their aging though nicely sculpted wives, and moguls with their superbly starved trophies. There were Trudeau Group executives who would rather have been anywhere else, and struggling painters from the MuAb crowd who were thrilled at the rare chance to mingle with the jet set. There were a few models, number 388 on the Forbes 400 list, a running back who played for the Jets, a reporter from the *Times* along with a photographer to record it all, and a reporter from the *Journal* who would report none of it but didn't want to miss the party. About a hundred guests, all in all a very rich crowd, but no one at the party had ever seen a yacht like the *Brianna*.

It was docked on the Hudson at the Chelsea Piers, and the only vessel larger at that moment was a moth-balled aircraft carrier a quarter of a mile to the north. In the rarefied world of obscenely expensive boating, the *Brianna* was classified as a mega-yacht, which was larger than a super-yacht but not in the same league as a giga-yacht. The latter, so far, had been the exclusive domain of a handful of software zillionaires, Saudi princes, and Russian oil thugs.

The invitation read: "Please join Mr. and Mrs. Carl Trudeau on the maiden voyage of their mega-yacht, *Brianna*, on Wednesday, May 26, at 6 p.m., at Pier 60."

It was 192 feet long, which ranked it number twenty-one on the list of the largest yachts registered in America. Carl paid \$60 million for it two weeks after Ron Fisk was elected, then spent another \$15 million on renovations, upgrades, and toys.

Now it was time to show it off, and to display one of the more dramatic comebacks in recent corporate history. The crew of

eighteen gave tours as the guests arrived and took their glasses of champagne. With four decks above water, the ship could comfortably accommodate thirty pampered friends for a month at sea, not that Carl ever intended to have that many people living so close to him. Those lucky enough to be chosen for an extended cruise would have access to a gym with a trainer, a spa with a masseuse, six Jacuzzis, and a chef on call around the clock. They would dine at one of four tables scattered throughout the boat, the smallest with ten seats and the largest with forty. When they felt like playing, there was scuba gear, clear-bottom kayaks, a thirty-foot catamaran, Jet Skis, and fishing gear, and, of course, no mega-yacht is complete without a helicopter. Other luxuries included a movie theater, four fireplaces, a sky lounge, heated tile floors in the bathrooms, a private pool for nude sunbathing, and miles of mahogany and brass and Italian marble. The Trudeaus' stateroom was larger than their bedroom back on land. And, in the formal dining room on the third level, Carl had finally found the permanent place for *Abused Imelda*.

Never again would she greet him in the foyer of his penthouse after a hard day at the office.

As a string quartet played on the main deck, the *Brianna* shoved off and turned south on the Hudson. It was dusk, a beautiful sunset, and the view of lower Manhattan from the river was breathtaking. The city shook with its frenetic energy, which was fascinating to watch from the deck of such a fine boat. The champagne and caviar also helped the view. Those on ferries and smaller vessels couldn't help but gawk as *Brianna* moved by, her twin 2,000-horsepower Caterpillar diesels churning a quiet wake.

A small army of black-tied waiters moved deftly about the decks, hauling drinks on silver trays and finger food too pretty to eat. Carl ignored most of his guests and spent his time with those he controlled, one way or another. Brianna was the perfect hostess, gliding from group to group, kissing all the men and all the women, making sure everyone got the chance to see her.

The captain circled wide so the guests could have a nice view of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, then turned north in the

direction of the Battery, at the southern tip of Manhattan. It was dark now, and the rows of skyscrapers lit up the financial district. Under the Brooklyn Bridge, under the Manhattan Bridge, under the Williamsburg Bridge, the *Brianna* sailed up the East River in all its majesty. The string quartet retired, and the best of Billy Joel boomed through the ship's elaborate sound system. Dancing erupted on the second-level deck. Someone got shoved into a pool. Others followed, and clothing soon became optional. It was the younger crowd.

As per Carl's instructions, the captain turned around at the United Nations building and increased speed, though it was not noticed. Carl, at that moment, was giving an interview in his sweeping office on the third deck.

At precisely 10:30, on schedule, the *Brianna* docked at Pier 60, and the guests began their slow departures. Mr. and Mrs. Trudeau saw them off, hugging, kissing, waving, wishing they would all hurry along now. A midnight dinner was waiting. Fourteen remained behind, seven lucky couples who would cruise south to Palm Beach for a few days. They changed into more casual clothing and met in the formal dining room for yet another drink while the chef finalized the first course.

Carl whispered to the first mate that it was now time to leave, and fifteen minutes later the *Brianna* pushed off again from Pier 60. While the guests were being charmed by his wife, he excused himself for a few minutes. He climbed the steps to the fourth level, and on a small elevated deck found his favorite spot on this fabulous new toy of his. It was an observation post, the ship's highest point above the water.

As the cool wind blew his hair, he gripped the brass railing and stared at the mammoth towers in the financial district. He caught a glimpse of his building, and his office, forty-five floors up.

Everything was up. Krane common stock was just under \$50 a share. Its earnings were through the roof. His net worth was over \$3 billion and rising steadily.

Some of those idiots out there had been laughing eighteen months earlier. Krane is finished. Trudeau is a fool. How can a man lose a

billion dollars in one day? they howled.

Where was their laughter now?

Where were all those experts now?

The great Carl Trudeau had outfoxed them again. He'd cleaned up the Bowmore mess and saved his company. He'd driven its stock into the ground, bought it cheap at a fire sale, and now owned virtually all of it. It was making him even richer.

He was destined to move up the Forbes 400 list, and as Carl sailed along the Hudson at the very top of his extraordinary ship, and gazed with smug satisfaction at the gleaming towers packed around Wall Street, he admitted to himself that nothing else mattered.

Now that he had three billion, he really wanted six.

TO PROFESSOR ROBERT C. KHAYAT

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am compelled to defend my native state, and do so with this flurry of disclaimers. All characters herein are purely fictional. Any similarity to a real person is coincidental. There is no Cary County, no town of Bowmore, no Krane Chemical, and no product such as pillamar 5. Bichloronylene, aklar, and cartolyx do not exist, as far as I know. The Mississippi Supreme Court has nine elected members, none of whom were used as models or inspiration for anyone mentioned or described in the preceding pages. None of the organizations, associations, groups, nonprofits, think tanks, churches, casinos, or corporations are real. I just made them up. Some of the towns and cities can be found on a map, others cannot. The campaign is a figment of my imagination. The lawsuit is borrowed from several actual cases. A few of the buildings really do exist, but I'm not altogether sure which ones.

In another life, I served as a member of the Mississippi House of Representatives, and in that capacity had a role in making laws. In this book, some of those laws have been amended, modified, ignored, and even outright butchered. Writing fiction sometimes requires this.

A few of the laws, especially those dealing with casino gambling, survive without tampering on my part.

Now that I have impugned my own work, I must say that there is a lot of truth in this story. As long as private money is allowed in judicial elections we will see competing interests fight for seats on the bench. The issues are fairly common. Most of the warring factions are adequately described. The tactics are all too familiar. The results are not far off the mark.

As always, I leaned on others for advice and expertise. Thanks to Mark Lee, Jim Craig, Neal Kassell, Bobby Moak, David Gernert,

Mike Ratliff, Ty, Bert Colley, and John Sherman. Stephen Rubin published this book, Doubleday's twentieth, and the gang there—John Fontana, Rebecca Holland, John Pitts, Kathy Trager, Alison Rich, and Suzanne Herz—again made it happen.

And thanks to Renee for her usual patience and abundance of editorial comments.

John Grisham
October 1, 2007



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One

The decision to bomb the office of the radical Jew lawyer was reached with relative ease. Only three people were involved in the process. The first was the man with the money. The second was a local operative who knew the territory. And the third was a young patriot and zealot with a talent for explosives and an astonishing knack for disappearing without a trail. After the bombing, he fled the country and hid in Northern Ireland for six years.

The lawyer's name was Marvin Kramer, a fourth-generation Mississippi Jew whose family had prospered as merchants in the Delta. He lived in an antebellum home in Greenville, a river town with a small but strong Jewish community, a pleasant place with a history of little racial discord. He practiced law because commerce bored him. Like most Jews of German descent, his family had assimilated nicely into the culture of the Deep South, and viewed themselves as nothing but typical Southerners who happened to have a different religion. Anti-Semitism rarely surfaced. For the most part, they blended with the rest of established society and went about their business.

Marvin was different. His father sent him up North to Brandeis in the late fifties. He spent four years there, then three years in law school at Columbia, and when he returned to Greenville in 1964 the civil rights movement had center stage in Mississippi. Marvin got in the thick of it. Less than a month after opening his little law office, he was arrested along with two of his Brandeis classmates for attempting to register black voters. His father was furious. His family was embarrassed, but Marvin couldn't have cared less. He received his first death threat at the age of twenty-five, and started carrying a gun. He bought a pistol for his wife, a Memphis girl, and

instructed their black maid to keep one in her purse. The Kramers had twin two-year-old sons.

The first civil rights lawsuit filed in 1965 by the law offices of Marvin B. Kramer and Associates (there were no associates yet) alleged a multitude of discriminatory voting practices by local officials. It made headlines around the state, and Marvin got his picture in the papers. He also got his name on a Klan list of Jews to harass. Here was a radical Jew lawyer with a beard and a bleeding heart, educated by Jews up North and now marching with and representing Negroes in the Mississippi Delta. It would not be tolerated.

Later, there were rumors of Lawyer Kramer using his own money to post bail for Freedom Riders and civil rights workers. He filed lawsuits attacking whites-only facilities. He paid for the reconstruction of a black church bombed by the Klan. He was actually seen welcoming Negroes into his home. He made speeches before Jewish groups up North and urged them to get involved in the struggle. He wrote sweeping letters to newspapers, few of which were printed. Lawyer Kramer was marching bravely toward his doom.

The presence of a nighttime guard patrolling benignly around the flower beds prevented an attack upon the Kramer home. Marvin had been paying the guard for two years. He was a former cop and he was heavily armed, and the Kramers let it be known to all of Greenville that they were protected by an expert marksman. Of course, the Klan knew about the guard, and the Klan knew to leave him alone. Thus, the decision was made to bomb Marvin Kramer's office, and not his home.

The actual planning of the operation took very little time, and this was principally because so few people were involved in it. The man with the money, a flamboyant redneck prophet named Jeremiah Dogan, was at the time the Imperial Wizard for the Klan in Mississippi. His predecessor had been loaded off to prison, and Jerry Dogan was having a wonderful time orchestrating the bombings. He was not stupid. In fact, the FBI later admitted Dogan was quite effective as a terrorist because he delegated the dirty work to small,

autonomous groups of hit men who worked completely independent of one another. The FBI had become expert at infiltrating the Klan with informants, and Dogan trusted no one but family and a handful of accomplices. He owned the largest used car lot in Meridian, Mississippi, and had made plenty of money on all sorts of shady deals. He sometimes preached in rural churches.

The second member of the team was a Klansman by the name of Sam Cayhall from Clanton, Mississippi, in Ford County, three hours north of Meridian and an hour south of Memphis. Cayhall was known to the FBI, but his connection to Dogan was not. The FBI considered him to be harmless because he lived in an area of the state with almost no Klan activity. A few crosses had been burned in Ford County recently, but no bombings, no killings. The FBI knew that Cayhall's father had been a Klansman, but on the whole the family appeared to be rather passive. Dogan's recruitment of Sam Cayhall was a brilliant move.

The bombing of Kramer's office began with a phone call on the night of April 17, 1967. Suspecting, with good reason, that his phones were tapped, Jeremiah Dogan waited until midnight and drove to a pay phone at a gas station south of Meridian. He also suspected he was being followed by the FBI, and he was correct. They watched him, but they had no idea where the call was going.

Sam Cayhall listened quietly on the other end, asked a question or two, then hung up. He returned to his bed, and told his wife nothing. She knew better than to ask. The next morning he left the house early and drove into the town of Clanton. He ate his daily breakfast at The Coffee Shop, then placed a call on a pay phone inside the Ford County Courthouse.

Two days later, on April 20, Cayhall left Clanton at dusk and drove two hours to Cleveland, Mississippi, a Delta college town an hour from Greenville. He waited for forty minutes in the parking lot of a busy shopping center, but saw no sign of a green Pontiac. He ate fried chicken in a cheap diner, then drove to Greenville to scout the law offices of Marvin B. Kramer and Associates. Cayhall had spent a day in Greenville two weeks earlier, and knew the city fairly well. He found Kramer's office, then drove by his stately home, then

found the synagogue again. Dogan said the synagogue might be next, but first they needed to hit the Jew lawyer. By eleven, Cayhall was back in Cleveland, and the green Pontiac was parked not at the shopping center but at a truck stop on Highway 61, a secondary site. He found the ignition key under the driver's floor mat, and took the car for a drive through the rich farm fields of the Delta. He turned onto a farm road and opened the trunk. In a cardboard box covered with newspapers, he found fifteen sticks of dynamite, three blasting caps, and a fuse. He drove into town and waited in an all-night café.

At precisely 2 a.m., the third member of the team walked into the crowded truck stop and sat across from Sam Cayhall. His name was Rollie Wedge, a young man of no more than twenty-two, but a trusted veteran of the civil rights war. He said he was from Louisiana, now lived somewhere in the mountains where no one could find him, and though he never boasted, he had told Sam Cayhall several times that he fully expected to be killed in the struggle for white supremacy. His father was a Klansman and a demolition contractor, and from him Rollie had learned how to use explosives.

Sam knew little about Rollie Wedge, and didn't believe much of what he said. He never asked Dogan where he found the kid.

They sipped coffee and made small talk for half an hour. Cayhall's cup shook occasionally from the jitters, but Rollie's was calm and steady. His eyes never blinked. They had done this together several times now, and Cayhall marveled at the coolness of one so young. He had reported to Jeremiah Dogan that the kid never got excited, not even when they neared their targets and he handled the dynamite.

Wedge's car was a rental from the Memphis airport. He retrieved a small bag from the backseat, locked the car, and left it at the truck stop. The green Pontiac with Cayhall behind the wheel left Cleveland and headed south on Highway 61. It was almost 3 a.m., and there was no traffic. A few miles south of the village of Shaw, Cayhall turned onto a dark, gravel road and stopped. Rollie instructed him to stay in the car while he inspected the explosives. Sam did as he was told. Rollie took his bag with him to the trunk

where he inventoried the dynamite, the blasting caps, and the fuse. He left his bag in the trunk, closed it, and told Sam to head to Greenville.

They drove by Kramer's office for the first time around 4 a.m. The street was deserted, and dark, and Rollie said something to the effect that this would be their easiest job yet.

"Too bad we can't bomb his house," Rollie said softly as they drove by the Kramer home.

"Yeah. Too bad," Sam said nervously. "But he's got a guard, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But the guard would be easy."

"Yeah, I guess. But he's got kids in there, you know."

"Kill 'em while they're young," Rollie said. "Little Jew bastards grow up to be big Jew bastards."

Cayhall parked the car in an alley behind Kramer's office. He turned off the ignition, and both men quietly opened the trunk, removed the box and the bag, and slid along a row of hedges leading to the rear door.

Sam Cayhall jimmied the rear door of the office and they were inside within seconds. Two weeks earlier, Sam had presented himself to the receptionist under the ruse of asking for directions, then asked to use the rest room. In the main hallway, between the rest room and what appeared to be Kramer's office, was a narrow closet filled with stacks of old files and other legal rubbish.

"Stay by the door and watch the alley," Wedge whispered coolly, and Sam did exactly as he was told. He preferred to serve as the watchman and avoid handling the explosives.

Rollie quickly sat the box on the floor in the closet, and wired the dynamite. It was a delicate exercise, and Sam's heart raced each time as he waited. His back was always to the explosives, just in case something went wrong.

They were in the office less than five minutes. Then they were back in the alley strolling nonchalantly to the green Pontiac. They were becoming invincible. It was all so easy. They had bombed a real estate office in Jackson because the realtor had sold a house to a black couple. A Jewish realtor. They had bombed a small

newspaper office because the editor had uttered something neutral on segregation. They had demolished a Jackson synagogue, the largest in the state.

They drove through the alley in the darkness, and as the green Pontiac entered a side street its headlights came on.

In each of the prior bombings, Wedge had used a fifteen-minute fuse, one simply lit with a match, very similar to a firecracker. And as part of the exercise, the team of bombers enjoyed cruising with the windows down at a point always on the outskirts of town just as the explosion ripped through the target. They had heard and felt each of the prior hits, at a nice distance, as they made their leisurely getaways.

But tonight would be different. Sam made a wrong turn somewhere, and suddenly they were stopped at a railroad crossing staring at flashing lights as a freighter clicked by in front of them. A rather long freight train. Sam checked his watch more than once. Rollie said nothing. The train passed, and Sam took another wrong turn. They were near the river, with a bridge in the distance, and the street was lined with run-down houses. Sam checked his watch again. The ground would shake in less than five minutes, and he preferred to be easing into the darkness of a lonely highway when that happened. Rollie fidgeted once as if he was becoming irritated with his driver, but he said nothing.

Another turn, another new street. Greenville was not that big a city, and if he kept turning Sam figured he could work his way back to a familiar street. The next wrong turn proved to be the last. Sam hit the brakes as soon as he realized he had turned the wrong way on a one-way street. And when he hit the brakes, the engine quit. He yanked the gearshift into park, and turned the ignition. The engine turned perfectly, but it just wouldn't start. Then, the smell of gasoline.

"Dammit!" Sam said through clenched teeth. "Dammit!"

Rollie sat low in his seat and stared through the window.

"Dammit! It's flooded!" He turned the key again, same result.

"Don't run the battery down," Rollie said slowly, calmly.

Sam was near panic. Though he was lost, he was reasonably sure they were not far from downtown. He breathed deeply, and studied the street. He glanced at his watch. There were no other cars in sight. All was quiet. It was the perfect setting for a bomb blast. He could see the fuse burning along the wooden floor. He could feel the jarring of the ground. He could hear the roar of ripping wood and sheetrock, brick and glass. Hell, Sam thought as he tried to calm himself, we might get hit with debris.

“You’d think Dogan would send a decent car,” he mumbled to himself. Rollie did not respond, just kept his gaze on something outside his window.

At least fifteen minutes had passed since they had left Kramer’s office, and it was time for the fireworks. Sam wiped rows of sweat from his forehead, and once again tried the ignition. Mercifully, the engine started. He grinned at Rollie, who seemed completely indifferent. He backed the car a few feet, then sped away. The first street looked familiar, and two blocks later they were on Main Street. “What kind of fuse did you use?” Sam finally asked, as they turned onto Highway 82, less than ten blocks from Kramer’s office.

Rollie shrugged as if it was his business and Sam shouldn’t ask. They slowed as they passed a parked police car, then gained speed on the edge of town. Within minutes, Greenville was behind them.

“What kind of fuse did you use?” Sam asked again with an edge to his voice.

“I tried something new,” Rollie answered without looking.

“What?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Rollie said, and Sam did a slow burn.

“A timing device?” he asked a few miles down the road.

“Something like that.”

They drove to Cleveland in complete silence. For a few miles, as the lights of Greenville slowly disappeared across the flat land, Sam

half-expected to see a fireball or hear a distant rumble. Nothing happened. Wedge even managed to catch a little nap.

The truck stop café was crowded when they arrived. As always, Rollie eased from his seat and closed the passenger door. “Until we meet again,” he said with a smile through the open window, then walked to his rental car. Sam watched him swagger away, and marveled once more at the coolness of Rollie Wedge.

It was by now a few minutes after five-thirty, and a hint of orange was peeking through the darkness to the east. Sam pulled the green Pontiac onto Highway 61, and headed south.

The horror of the Kramer bombing actually began about the time Rollie Wedge and Sam Cayhall parted ways in Cleveland. It started with the alarm clock on a nightstand not far from Ruth Kramer’s pillow. When it erupted at five-thirty, the usual hour, Ruth knew instantly that she was a very sick woman. She had a slight fever, a vicious pain in her temples, and she was quite nauseous. Marvin helped her to the bathroom not far away where she stayed for thirty minutes. A nasty flu bug had been circulating through Greenville for a month, and had now found its way into the Kramer home.

The maid woke the twins, Josh and John, now five years old, at six-thirty, and quickly had them bathed, dressed, and fed. Marvin thought it best to take them to nursery school as planned and get them out of the house and, he hoped, away from the virus. He called a doctor friend for a prescription, and left the maid twenty dollars to pick up the medication at the pharmacy in an hour. He said good-bye to Ruth, who was lying on the floor of the bathroom with a pillow under her head and an icepack over her face, and left the house with the boys.

Not all of his practice was devoted to civil rights litigation; there was not enough of that to survive on in Mississippi in 1967. He handled a few criminal cases and other generic civil matters: divorces, zoning, bankruptcy, real estate. And despite the fact that

his father barely spoke to him, and the rest of the Kramers barely uttered his name, Marvin spent a third of his time at the office working on family business. On this particular morning, he was scheduled to appear in court at 9 a.m. to argue a motion in a lawsuit involving his uncle's real estate.

The twins loved his law office. They were not due at nursery school until eight, so Marvin could work a little before delivering the boys and heading on to court. This happened perhaps once a month. In fact, hardly a day passed without one of the twins begging Marvin to take them to his office first and then to nursery school.

They arrived at the office around seven-thirty, and once inside, the twins went straight for the secretary's desk and the thick stack of typing paper, all waiting to be cut and copied and stapled and folded into envelopes. The office was a sprawling structure, built over time with additions here and there. The front door opened into a small foyer where the receptionist's desk sat almost under a stairway. Four chairs for waiting clients hugged the wall. Magazines were scattered under the chairs. To the right and left of the foyer were small offices for lawyers—Marvin now had three associates working for him. A hallway ran directly from the foyer through the center of the downstairs, so from the front door the rear of the building could be seen some eighty feet away. Marvin's office was the largest room downstairs, and it was the last door on the left, next to the cluttered closet. Just across the hall from the closet was Marvin's secretary's office. Her name was Helen, a shapely young woman Marvin had been dreaming about for eighteen months.

Upstairs on the second floor were the cramped offices of another lawyer and two secretaries. The third floor had no heat or air conditioning, and was used for storage.

He normally arrived at the office between seven-thirty and eight because he enjoyed a quiet hour before the rest of the firm arrived and the phone started ringing. As usual, he was the first to arrive on Friday, April 21.

He unlocked the front door, turned on the light switch, and stopped in the foyer. He lectured the twins about making a mess on

Helen's desk, but they were off down the hallway and didn't hear a word. Josh already had the scissors and John the stapler by the time Marvin stuck his head in for the first time and warned them. He smiled to himself, then went to his office where he was soon deep in research.

At about a quarter to eight, he would recall later from the hospital, Marvin climbed the stairs to the third floor to retrieve an old file which, he thought at the time, had some relevance to the case he was preparing. He mumbled something to himself as he bounced up the steps. As things evolved, the old file saved his life. The boys were laughing somewhere down the hall.

The blast shot upward and horizontally at several thousand feet per second. Fifteen sticks of dynamite in the center of a wooden framed building will reduce it to splinters and rubble in a matter of seconds. It took a full minute for the jagged slivers of wood and other debris to return to earth. The ground seemed to shake like a small earthquake, and, as witnesses would later describe, bits of glass sprinkled downtown Greenville for what seemed like an eternity.

Josh and John Kramer were less than fifteen feet from the epicenter of the blast, and fortunately never knew what hit them. They did not suffer. Their mangled bodies were found under eight feet of rubble by local firemen. Marvin Kramer was thrown first against the ceiling of the third floor, then, unconscious, fell along with the remnants of the roof into the smoking crater in the center of the building. He was found twenty minutes later and rushed to the hospital. Within three hours, both legs were amputated at the knees.

The time of the blast was exactly seven forty-six, and this in itself was somewhat fortunate. Helen, Marvin's secretary, was leaving the post office four blocks away and felt the blast. Another ten minutes, and she would have been inside making coffee. David Lukland, a young associate in the law firm, lived three blocks away, and had just locked his apartment door when he heard and felt the blast. Another ten minutes, and he would've been picking through his mail in his second-floor office.

A small fire was ignited in the office building next door, and though it was quickly contained it added greatly to the excitement. The smoke was heavy for a few moments, and this sent people scurrying.

There were two injuries to pedestrians. A three-foot section of a two-by-four landed on a sidewalk a hundred yards away, bounced once, then hit Mrs. Mildred Talton square in the face as she stepped away from her parked car and looked in the direction of the explosion. She received a broken nose and a nasty laceration, but recovered in due course.

The second injury was very minor but very significant. A stranger by the name of Sam Cayhall was walking slowly toward the Kramer office when the ground shook so hard he lost his footing and tripped on a street curb. As he struggled to his feet, he was hit once in the neck and once in the left cheek by flying glass. He ducked behind a tree as shards and pieces rained around him. He gaped at the devastation before him, then ran away.

Blood dripped from his cheek and puddled on his shirt. He was in shock and did not remember much of this later. Driving the same green Pontiac, he sped away from downtown, and would most likely have made it safely from Greenville for the second time had he been thinking and paying attention. Two cops in a patrol car were speeding into the business district to respond to the bombing call when they met a green Pontiac which, for some reason, refused to move to the shoulder and yield. The patrol car had sirens blaring, lights flashing, horns blowing, and cops cursing, but the green Pontiac just froze in its lane of traffic and wouldn't budge. The cops stopped, ran to it, yanked open the door, and found a man with blood all over him. Handcuffs were slapped around Sam's wrists. He was shoved roughly into the rear seat of the police car, and taken to jail. The Pontiac was impounded.

The bomb that killed the Kramer twins was the crudest of sorts. Fifteen sticks of dynamite wrapped tightly together with gray duct tape. But there was no fuse. Rollie Wedge had used instead a detonating device, a timer, a cheap windup alarm clock. He had removed the minute hand from the clock, and drilled a small hole between the numbers seven and eight. Into the small hole he had inserted a metal pin which, when touched by the sweeping hour hand, would complete the circuit and detonate the bomb. Rollie wanted more time than a fifteen-minute fuse could provide. Plus, he considered himself an expert and wanted to experiment with new devices.

Perhaps the hour hand was warped a bit. Perhaps the dial of the clock was not perfectly flat. Perhaps Rollie in his enthusiasm had wound it too tight, or not tight enough. Perhaps the metal pin was not flush with the dial. It was, after all, Rollie's first effort with a timer. Or perhaps the timing device worked precisely as planned.

But whatever the reason or whatever the excuse, the bombing campaign of Jeremiah Dogan and the Ku Klux Klan had now spilled Jewish blood in Mississippi. And, for all practical purposes, the campaign was over.

Two

Once the bodies were removed, the Greenville police sealed off the area around the ruins and kept the crowd away. Within hours, the premises were given to an FBI team from Jackson, and before dark a demolition unit was sifting through the rubble. Dozens of FBI agents solemnly began the tedious task of picking up every tiny piece, examining it, showing it to someone else, then packing it away to be fitted together on another day. An empty cotton warehouse on the edge of town was leased and became the repository for the Kramer rubble.

With time, the FBI would confirm what it initially assumed. Dynamite, a timer, and a few wires. Just a basic bomb hooked together by a hack lucky enough not to have killed himself.

Marvin Kramer was quickly flown to a fancier hospital in Memphis, and listed as critical but stable for three days. Ruth Kramer was hospitalized for shock, first in Greenville, then driven in an ambulance to the same hospital in Memphis. They shared a room, Mr. and Mrs. Kramer, and also shared a sufficient quantity of sedatives. Countless doctors and relatives stood vigil. Ruth was born and raised in Memphis, so there were plenty of friends to watch her.

As the dust was settling around Marvin's office, the neighbors, some of them storekeepers and others office clerks, swept glass from the sidewalks and whispered to one another as they watched the police and rescue people start the digging. A mighty rumor swept downtown Greenville that a suspect was already in custody. By noon on the day of the bombing, it was common knowledge among the clusters of onlookers that the man's name was Sam Cayhall,

from Clanton, Mississippi, that he was a member of the Klan, and that he was somehow injured in the attack. One report provided ghastly details of other Cayhall bombings with all sorts of gruesome injuries and disfigured corpses, all involving poor Negroes, though. Another report told of the brilliant heroics of the Greenville police in tracking down this madman within seconds of the blast. On the news at noon, the Greenville TV station confirmed what was already known, that the two little boys were dead, their father was severely injured, and that Sam Cayhall was in custody.

Sam Cayhall came within moments of being released on thirty dollars' bond. By the time he was rushed to the police station, he had regained his senses and had apologized sufficiently to the angry cops for not yielding as they wished. He was booked on a very minor charge, and sent to a holding room to be further processed and released. The two arresting officers sped away to inspect the blast.

A janitor who doubled as the jail medic approached Sam with a battered first aid kit, and washed the dried blood from his face. The bleeding had stopped. Sam repeated again that he'd been in a fight in a bar. Rough night. The medic left, and an hour later an assistant jailer appeared in the sliding window of the holding room with more papers. The charge was failure to yield to an emergency vehicle, the maximum fine was thirty dollars, and if Sam could post this sum in cash then he would be free to go as soon as the paperwork cleared and the car was released. Sam paced nervously around the room, glancing at his watch, softly rubbing the wound to his cheek.

He would be forced to disappear. There was a record of this arrest, and it wouldn't be long before these yokels put his name and the bombing together, and then, well, he needed to run away. He'd leave Mississippi, maybe team up with Rollie Wedge and leave for Brazil or some place. Dogan would give them the money. He'd call Dogan as soon as he left Greenville. His car was sitting at the truck stop in Cleveland. He would swap vehicles there, then head on to Memphis and catch a Greyhound bus.

That's what he would do. He was an idiot for returning to the scene, but, he thought, if he just kept his cool these clowns would release him.

Half an hour passed before the assistant jailer arrived with another form. Sam handed him thirty dollars cash, and received a receipt. He followed the man through a narrow hallway to the front desk of the jail where he was given a summons to appear in Greenville Municipal Court in two weeks. "Where's the car?" he asked as he folded the summons.

"They're bringing it. Just wait here."

Sam checked his watch and waited for fifteen minutes. Through a small window in a metal door he watched cars come and go in the parking lot in front of the jail. Two drunks were dragged to the desk by a husky cop. Sam fidgeted, and waited.

From somewhere behind him a new voice called slowly, "Mr. Cayhall." He turned and came face-to-face with a short man in a badly faded suit. A badge was waved under Sam's nose.

"I'm Detective Ivy, Greenville P.D. Need to ask you a few questions." Ivy waved at a row of wooden doors along a hallway, and Sam obediently followed.

From the moment he first sat across the dirty desk from Detective Ivy, Sam Cayhall had little to say. Ivy was in his early forties but gray and heavily wrinkled around the eyes. He lit an unfiltered Camel, offered one to Sam, then asked how his face got cut. Sam played with the cigarette but did not light it. He'd given up smoking years earlier, and though he felt the urge to start puffing at this critical moment, he just thumped it gently on the table. Without looking at Ivy, he said that maybe he'd been in a fight.

Ivy sort of grunted with a short smile as if he expected this type of reply, and Sam knew he was facing a pro. He was scared now, and his hands began shaking. Ivy, of course, noticed all this. Where was the fight? Who were you fighting with? When did it happen? Why

were you fighting here in Greenville when you live three hours away? Where did you get the car?

Sam said nothing. Ivy peppered him with questions, all unanswerable by Sam because the lies would lead to more lies and Ivy would have him tied in knots in seconds.

"I'd like to talk to an attorney," Sam finally said.

"That's just wonderful, Sam. I think that's exactly what you should do." Ivy lit another Camel and blew thick smoke at the ceiling.

"We had a little bomb blast this morning, Sam. Do you know that?" Ivy asked, his voice rising slightly in a mocking tone.

"No."

"Tragic. A local lawyer by the name of Kramer got his office blown to bits. Happened about two hours ago. Probably the work of Kluckers, you know. We don't have any Kluckers around here, but Mr. Kramer is a Jewish fellow. Let me guess—you know nothing about it, right?"

"That's right."

"Really, really sad, Sam. You see, Mr. Kramer had two little boys, Josh and John, and, as fate would have it, they were in the office with their daddy when the bomb went off."

Sam breathed deeply and looked at Ivy. Tell me the rest of it, his eyes said.

"And these two little boys, twins, five years old, just cute as can be, got blown to bits, Sam. Deader than hell, Sam."

Sam slowly lowered his head until his chin was an inch off his chest. He was beaten. Murder, two counts. Lawyers, trials, judges, juries, prison, everything hit at once and he closed his eyes.

"Their daddy might get lucky. He's at the hospital now in surgery. The little boys are at the funeral home. A real tragedy, Sam. Don't suppose you know anything about the bomb, do you, Sam?"

"No. I'd like to see a lawyer."

"Of course." Ivy slowly stood and left the room.

The piece of glass in Sam's face was extracted by a physician and sent to an FBI lab. The report contained no surprises—same glass as the front windows of the office building. The green Pontiac was quickly traced to Jeremiah Dogan in Meridian. A fifteen-minute fuse was found in the trunk. A deliveryman came forward and explained to the police that he had seen the car near Mr. Kramer's office around 4 a.m.

The FBI made sure the press immediately knew Mr. Sam Cayhall was a longtime member of the Klan, and that he was the prime suspect in several more bombings. The case was cracked, they felt, and they heaped accolades upon the Greenville police. J. Edgar Hoover himself issued a statement.

Two days after the bombing, the Kramer twins were laid to rest in a small cemetery. At the time, 146 Jews lived in Greenville, and with the exception of Marvin Kramer and six others, every one attended the service. And they were outnumbered two to one by reporters and photographers from all over the country.

Sam saw the pictures and read the stories in his tiny cell the next morning. The assistant jailer, Larry Jack Polk, was a simpleton who by now was a friend because, as he had whispered to Sam early on, he had cousins who were Klansmen and he'd always wanted to join but his wife wouldn't stand for it. He brought Sam fresh coffee and newspapers each morning. Larry Jack had already confessed his admiration for Sam's bombing skills.

Other than the few bare words needed to keep Larry Jack manipulated, Sam said virtually nothing. The day after the bombing he had been charged with two counts of capital murder, so the gas chamber scenario occupied his thoughts. He refused to say a word to Ivy and the other police; same for the FBI. The reporters asked, of course, but didn't make it past Larry Jack. Sam phoned his wife and told her to stay in Clanton with the doors locked. He sat alone in his cinder-block cell and began a diary.

If Rollie Wedge was to be discovered and linked to the bombing, then he would have to be found by the cops. Sam Cayhall had taken an oath as a Klansman, and to him the oath was sacred. He would never, never squeal on a Klansman. He fervently hoped Jeremiah Dogan felt the same about his oath.

Two days after the bombing, a shady lawyer with a swirling hairdo named Clovis Brazelton made his first appearance in Greenville. He was a secret member of the Klan, and had become quite notorious around Jackson representing all sorts of thugs. He wanted to run for governor, said his platform would stand for the preservation of the white race, that the FBI was satanic, that blacks should be protected but not mixed with whites, and so on. He was sent by Jeremiah Dogan to defend Sam Cayhall, and more importantly, to make sure Cayhall kept his mouth shut. The FBI was all over Dogan because of the green Pontiac, and he feared an indictment as a co-conspirator.

Co-conspirators, Clovis explained to his new client right off the bat, are just as guilty as the ones who actually pull the trigger. Sam listened, but said little. He had heard of Brazelton, and did not yet trust him.

“Look, Sam,” Clovis said as if explaining things to a first grader, “I know who planted the bomb. Dogan told me. If I count correctly, that makes four of us—me, you, Dogan, and Wedge. Now, at this point, Dogan is almost certain that Wedge will never be found. They haven’t talked, but the kid’s brilliant and he’s probably in another country by now. That leaves you and Dogan. Frankly, I expect Dogan to be charged anytime now. But the cops’ll have a hard time nailing him unless they can prove that ya’ll conspired to blow up the Jew’s office. And the only way they can prove this is if you tell them.”

“So I take the fall?” Sam asked.

“No. You just keep quiet about Dogan. Deny everything. We’ll fabricate a story about the car. Let me worry about that. I’ll get the trial moved to another county, maybe up in the hills or some place where they don’t have Jews. Get us an all-white jury, and I’ll hang it up so fast it’ll make heroes out of both of us. Just let me handle it.”

“You don’t think I’ll be convicted?”

“Hell no. Listen, Sam, take my word for it. We’ll get us a jury full of patriots, your kind of people, Sam. All white. All worried about their little children being forced to go to schools with little nigger kids. Good people, Sam. We’ll pick twelve of ’em, put ’em in the jury box, and explain to ’em how these stinkin’ Jews have encouraged all this civil rights nonsense. Trust me, Sam, it’ll be easy.” With that, Clovis leaned across the shaky table, patted Sam on the arm, and said, “Trust me, Sam, I’ve done it before.”

Later that day, Sam was handcuffed, surrounded by Greenville city policemen, and led to a waiting patrol car. Between the jail and the car, he had his picture taken by a small army of photographers. Another group of these assertive people were waiting at the courthouse when Sam arrived with his entourage.

He appeared before the municipal judge with his new lawyer, the Honorable Clovis Brazelton, who waived the preliminary hearing and performed a couple of other quiet and routine legal maneuvers. Twenty minutes after he’d left the jail, Sam was back. Clovis promised to return in a few days to start plotting strategy, then he wandered outside and performed admirably for the reporters.

It took a full month for the media frenzy to subside in Greenville. Both Sam Cayhall and Jeremiah Dogan were indicted for capital murder on May 5, 1967. The local district attorney proclaimed loudly that he would seek the death penalty. The name of Rollie Wedge was never mentioned. The police and FBI had no idea he existed.

Clovis, now representing both defendants, successfully argued for a change of venue, and on September 4, 1967, the trial began in Nettles County, two hundred miles from Greenville. It turned into a circus. The Klan set up camp on the front lawn of the courthouse and staged noisy rallies almost on the hour. They shipped in Klansmen from other states, even had a list of guest speakers. Sam

Cayhall and Jeremiah Dogan were seized as symbols of white supremacy, and their beloved names were called a thousand times by their hooded admirers.

The press watched and waited. The courtroom was filled with reporters and journalists, so the less fortunate were forced to wait under the shade trees on the front lawn. They watched the Klansmen and listened to the speeches, and the more they watched and photographed the longer the speeches became.

Inside the courtroom, things were going smoothly for Cayhall and Dogan. Brazelton worked his magic and seated twelve white patriots, as he preferred to call them, on the jury, then began poking rather significant holes in the prosecution's case. Most importantly, the evidence was circumstantial—no one actually saw Sam Cayhall plant the bomb. Clovis preached this loudly in his opening statement, and it found its mark. Cayhall was actually employed by Dogan, who'd sent him to Greenville on an errand, and he just happened to be near the Kramer building at a most unfortunate moment. Clovis almost cried when he thought of those two precious little boys.

The dynamite fuse in the trunk had probably been left there by its previous owner, a Mr. Carson Jenkins, a dirt contractor from Meridian. Mr. Carson Jenkins testified that he handled dynamite all the time in his line of work, and that he evidently had simply left the fuse in the trunk when he sold the car to Dogan. Mr. Carson Jenkins was a Sunday school teacher, a quiet, hardworking salt-of-the-earth little man who was completely believable. He was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan, but the FBI didn't know it. Clovis orchestrated this testimony without a flaw.

The fact that Cayhall's car had been left at the truck stop in Cleveland was never discovered by the police or FBI. During his first phone call from jail, he had instructed his wife to get his son, Eddie Cayhall, and drive to Cleveland immediately for the car. This was a significant piece of luck for the defense.

But the strongest argument presented by Clovis Brazelton was simply that no one could prove that his clients conspired to do

anything, and how in the world can you, the jurors of Nettles County, send these two men to their deaths?

After four days of trial, the jury retired to deliberate. Clovis guaranteed his clients an acquittal. The prosecution was almost certain of one. The Kluckers smelled victory, and increased the tempo on the front lawn.

There were no acquittals, and there were no convictions. Remarkably, two of the jurors boldly dug in their heels and pressed to convict. After a day and a half of deliberations, the jury reported to the judge that it was hopelessly deadlocked. A mistrial was declared, and Sam Cayhall went home for the first time in five months.

The retrial took place six months later in Wilson County, another rural area four hours from Greenville and a hundred miles from the site of the first trial. There were complaints of Klan harassment of prospective jurors in the first trial, so the judge, for reasons that were never made clear, changed venue to an area crawling with Kluckers and their sympathizers. The jury again was all-white and certainly non-Jewish. Clovis told the same stories with the same punch lines. Mr. Carson Jenkins told the same lies.

The prosecution changed strategy a bit, to no avail. The district attorney dropped the capital charges and pressed for a conviction for murder only. No death penalty, and the jury could, if it so chose, find Cayhall and Dogan guilty of manslaughter, a much lighter charge but a conviction nonetheless.

The second trial had something new. Marvin Kramer sat in a wheelchair by the front row and glared at the jurors for three days. Ruth had tried to watch the first trial, but went home to Greenville where she was hospitalized again for emotional problems. Marvin had been in and out of surgery since the bombing, and his doctors would not allow him to watch the show in Nettles County.

For the most part, the jurors could not stand to look at him. They kept their eyes away from the spectators, and, for jurors, paid remarkable attention to the witnesses. However, one young lady, Sharon Culpepper, mother of twin boys, could not help herself. She glanced at Marvin repeatedly, and many times their eyes locked. He pleaded with her for justice.

Sharon Culpepper was the only one of the twelve who initially voted to convict. For two days she was verbally abused and harangued by her peers. They called her names and made her cry, but she doggedly held on.

The second trial ended with a jury hung eleven to one. The judge declared a mistrial, and sent everybody home. Marvin Kramer returned to Greenville, then to Memphis for more surgery. Clovis Brazelton made a spectacle of himself with the press. The district attorney made no promises of a new trial. Sam Cayhall went quietly to Clanton with a solemn vow to avoid any more dealings with Jeremiah Dogan. And the Imperial Wizard himself made a triumphant return to Meridian where he boasted to his people that the battle for white supremacy had just begun, good had defeated evil, and on and on.

The name of Rollie Wedge had been uttered only once. During a lunch break in the second trial, Dogan whispered to Cayhall that a message had been received from the kid. The messenger was a stranger who spoke to Dogan's wife in a hallway outside the courtroom. And the message was quite clear and simple. Wedge was nearby, in the woods, watching the trial, and if Dogan or Cayhall mentioned his name, their homes and families would be bombed to hell and back.

Three

Ruth and Marvin Kramer separated in 1970. He was admitted to a mental hospital later that year, and committed suicide in 1971. Ruth returned to Memphis and lived with her parents. In spite of their problems, they had pressed hard for a third trial. In fact, the Jewish community in Greenville was highly agitated and vocal when it became apparent that the district attorney was tired of losing and had lost his enthusiasm for prosecuting Cayhall and Dogan.

Marvin was buried next to his sons. A new park was dedicated to the memory of Josh and John Kramer, and scholarships were established. With time, the tragedy of their deaths lost some of its horror. Years passed, and Greenville talked less and less about the bombing.

Despite pressure from the FBI, a third trial did not materialize. There was no new evidence. The judge would no doubt change venue again. A prosecution looked hopeless, but still the FBI did not quit.

With Cayhall unwilling and Wedge unavailable, Dogan's bombing campaign fizzled. He continued to wear his robe and make his speeches, and began to fancy himself as a major political force. Journalists up North were intrigued by his blatant race-baiting, and he was always willing to put on his hood and give outrageous interviews. He was mildly famous for a brief period, and he enjoyed it immensely.

But by the late 1970s, Jeremiah Dogan was just another thug with a robe in a rapidly declining organization. Blacks were voting. The public schools were desegregated. Racial barriers were being struck down by federal judges throughout the South. Civil rights had arrived in Mississippi, and the Klan had proven pitifully inept in

keeping Negroes where they belonged. Dogan couldn't draw flies to a cross-burning.

In 1979, two significant events occurred in the open but inactive Kramer bombing case. The first was the election of David McAllister as the district attorney in Greenville. At twenty-seven he became the youngest D.A. in the state's history. As a teenager he had stood in the crowd and watched the FBI pick through the rubble of Marvin Kramer's office. Shortly after his election, he vowed to bring the terrorists to justice.

The second event was the indictment of Jeremiah Dogan for income tax evasion. After years of successfully dodging the FBI, Dogan got sloppy and ran afoul of the IRS. The investigation took eight months and resulted in an indictment that ran for thirty pages. According to it, Dogan had failed to report over a hundred thousand dollars between 1974 and 1978. It contained eighty-six counts, and carried a maximum of twenty-eight years in prison.

Dogan was dead guilty, and his lawyer (not Clovis Brazelton) immediately began exploring the possibility of a plea bargain. Enter the FBI.

Through a series of heated and angry meetings with Dogan and his lawyer, a deal was offered by the government whereby Dogan would testify against Sam Cayhall in the Kramer case, and in return he would serve no time in jail for tax evasion. Zero days behind bars. Heavy probation and fines, but no jail. Dogan had not spoken to Cayhall in over ten years. Dogan was not active in the Klan anymore. There were lots of reasons to consider the deal, not the least of which was the issue of remaining a free man or spending a decade or so in prison.

To prod him along, the IRS attached all of his assets, and planned a nice little fire sale. And to help with his decision, David McAllister convinced a grand jury in Greenville to indict him and his pal Cayhall once again for the Kramer bombing.

Dogan caved in and jumped at the deal.

After twelve years of living quietly in Ford County, Sam Cayhall once again found himself indicted, arrested, and facing the certainty of a trial and the possibility of the gas chamber. He was forced to mortgage his house and small farm to hire a lawyer. Clovis Brazelton had gone on to bigger things, and Dogan was no longer an ally.

Much had changed in Mississippi since the first two trials. Blacks had registered to vote in record numbers, and these new voters had elected black officials. All-white juries were rare. The state had two black trial judges, two black sheriffs, and black lawyers could be spotted with their white brethren roaming the courthouse hallways. Officially, segregation was over. And many white Mississippians were beginning to look back and wonder what all the fuss was about. Why had there been such resistance to basic rights for all people? Though it had a long way to go, Mississippi was a far different place in 1980 than in 1967. And Sam Cayhall understood this.

He hired a skilled trial advocate from Memphis named Benjamin Keyes. Their first tactic was to move to dismiss the indictment on the grounds that it was unfair to try him again after such a delay. This proved to be a persuasive argument, and it took a decision by the Mississippi Supreme Court to settle the matter. By a vote of six to three, the court ruled that the prosecution could proceed.

And proceed it did. The third and final trial of Sam Cayhall began in February of 1981, in a chilly little courthouse in Lakehead County, a hill county in the northeastern corner of the state. Much could be said about the trial. There was a young district attorney, David McAllister, who performed brilliantly but had the obnoxious habit of spending all his spare time with the press. He was handsome and articulate and compassionate, and it became very clear that this trial had a purpose. Mr. McAllister had political ambitions on a grand scale.

There was a jury of eight whites and four blacks. There were the glass sample, the fuse, the FBI reports, and all the other photos and exhibits from the first two trials.

And then, there was the testimony of Jeremiah Dogan, who took the stand in a denim workshirt and with a humble countenance solemnly explained to the jury how he conspired with Sam Cayhall sitting over there to bomb the office of Mr. Kramer. Sam glared at him intensely and absorbed every word, but Dogan looked away. Sam's lawyer berated Dogan for half a day, and forced him to admit that he'd cut a deal with the government. But the damage was done.

It was of no benefit to the defense of Sam Cayhall to raise the issue of Rollie Wedge. Because to do so would be to admit that Sam in fact had been in Greenville with the bomb. Sam would be forced to admit that he was a co-conspirator, and under the law he would be just as guilty as the man who planted the dynamite. And to present this scenario to the jury, Sam would be forced to testify, something neither he nor his attorney wanted. Sam could not withstand a rigorous cross-examination, because Sam would be forced to tell one lie to cover the last.

And, at this point, no one would believe a sudden tale of a mysterious new terrorist who'd never been mentioned before, and who came and went without being seen. Sam knew the Rollie Wedge angle was futile, and he never mentioned the man's name to his own lawyer.

At the close of the trial, David McAllister stood before the jury in a packed courtroom and presented his closing argument. He talked of being a youngster in Greenville and having Jewish friends. He didn't know they were different. He knew some of the Kramers, fine folks who worked hard and gave back to the town. He also played with little black kids, and learned they made wonderful friends. He never understood why they went to one school and he went to another. He told a gripping story of feeling the earth shake on the morning of April 21, 1967, and running in the direction of downtown where smoke was drifting upward. For three hours, he stood behind the police barricades and waited. He saw the firemen scurry about when

they found Marvin Kramer. He saw them huddle in the debris when they found the boys. Tears dripped down his cheeks when the little bodies, covered in white sheets, were carried slowly to an ambulance.

It was a splendid performance, and when McAllister finished the courtroom was silent. Several of the jurors dabbed at their eyes.

On February 12, 1981, Sam Cayhall was convicted on two counts of capital murder and one count of attempted murder. Two days later, the same jury in the same courtroom returned with a sentencing verdict of death.

He was transported to the state penitentiary at Parchman to begin waiting for his appointment with the gas chamber. On February 19, 1981, he first set foot on death row.

Four

The law firm of Kravitz & Bane had almost three hundred lawyers peacefully coexisting under the same roof in Chicago. Two hundred and eighty-six to be exact, though it was difficult for anyone to keep score because at any given moment there were a dozen or so leaving for a multitude of reasons, and there were always two dozen or so shiny, fresh new recruits trained and polished and just itching for combat. And though it was huge, Kravitz & Bane had failed to play the expansion game as quickly as others, had failed to gobble up weaker firms in other cities, had been slow to raid clients from its competitors, and thus had to suffer the distinction of being only the third-largest firm in Chicago. It had offices in six cities, but, much to the embarrassment of the younger partners, there was no London address on the letterhead.

Though it had mellowed some, Kravitz & Bane was still known as a vicious litigation firm. It had tamer departments for real estate, tax, and antitrust, but its money was made in litigation. When the firm recruited it sought the brightest third-year students with the highest marks in mock trials and debate. It wanted young men (a token female here and there) who could be instantly trained in the slash-and-attack style perfected long ago by Kravitz & Bane litigators.

There was a nice though small unit for plaintiffs' personal injury work, good stuff from which they took 50 percent and allowed their clients the remainder. There was a sizable section for white-collar criminal defense, but the white-collar defendant needed a sizable net worth to strap on Kravitz & Bane. Then there were the two largest sections, one for commercial litigation and one for insurance defense. With the exception of the plaintiffs' work, and as a percentage of gross it was almost insignificant, the firm's money was

earned by billable hours. Two hundred bucks per hour for insurance work; more if the traffic could stand it. Three hundred bucks for criminal defense. Four hundred for a big bank. Even five hundred dollars an hour for a rich corporate client with lazy in-house lawyers who were asleep at the wheel.

Kravitz & Bane printed money by the hour and built a dynasty in Chicago. Its offices were fashionable but not plush. They filled the top floors of, fittingly, the third-tallest building downtown.

Like most large firms, it made so much money it felt obligated to establish a small pro bono section to fulfill its moral responsibility to society. It was quite proud of the fact that it had a full-time pro bono partner, an eccentric do-gooder named E. Garner Goodman, who had a spacious office with two secretaries on the sixty-first floor. He shared a paralegal with a litigation partner. The firm's gold-embossed brochure made much of the fact that its lawyers were encouraged to pursue pro bono projects. The brochure proclaimed that last year, 1989, Kravitz & Bane lawyers donated almost sixty thousand hours of their precious time to clients who couldn't pay. Housing project kids, death row inmates, illegal aliens, drug addicts, and, of course, the firm was deeply concerned with the plight of the homeless. The brochure even had a photograph of two young lawyers, jackets off, sleeves rolled up, ties loosened about the neck, sweat in the armpits, eyes filled with compassion, as they performed some menial chore in the midst of a group of minority children in what appeared to be an urban landfill. Lawyers saving society.

Adam Hall had one of the brochures in his thin file as he eased slowly along the hallway on floor sixty-one, headed in the general direction of the office of E. Garner Goodman. He nodded and spoke to another young lawyer, one he'd never seen before. At the firm Christmas party name tags were distributed at the door. Some of the partners barely knew each other. Some of the associates saw each other once or twice a year. He opened a door and entered a small room where a secretary stopped typing and almost smiled. He asked for Mr. Goodman, and she nodded properly to a row of chairs where he was to wait. He was five minutes early for a 10 a.m.

appointment, as if it mattered. This was pro bono now. Forget the clock. Forget billable hours. Forget performance bonuses. In defiance of the rest of the firm, Goodman allowed no clocks on his walls.

Adam flipped through his file. He chuckled at the brochure. He read again his own little résumé—college at Pepperdine, law school at Michigan, editor of the law review, case note on cruel and unusual punishment, comments on recent death penalty cases. A rather short résumé, but then he was only twenty-six. He'd been employed at Kravitz & Bane for all of nine months now.

He read and made notes from two lengthy U.S. Supreme Court decisions dealing with executions in California. He checked his watch, and read some more. The secretary eventually offered coffee, which he politely declined.

The office of E. Garner Goodman was a stunning study in disorganization. It was large but cramped, with sagging bookshelves on every wall and stacks of dusty files covering the floor. Little piles of papers of all sorts and sizes covered the desk in the center of the office. Refuse, rubbish, and lost letters covered the rug under the desk. If not for the closed wooden blinds, the large window could have provided a splendid view of Lake Michigan, but it was obvious Mr. Goodman spent no time at his window.

He was an old man with a neat gray beard and bushy gray hair. His white shirt was painfully starched. A green paisley bow tie, his trademark, was tied precisely under his chin. Adam entered the room and cautiously weaved around the piles of papers. Goodman did not stand but offered his hand with a cold greeting.

Adam handed the file to Goodman, and sat in the only empty chair in the room. He waited nervously while the file was studied, the beard was gently stroked, the bow tie was tinkered with.

“Why do you want to do pro bono work?” Goodman mumbled after a long silence. He did not look up from the file. Classical guitar

music drifted softly from recessed speakers in the ceiling.

Adam shifted uncomfortably. "Uh, different reasons."

"Let me guess. You want to serve humanity, give something back to your community, or, perhaps, you feel guilty because you spend so much time here in this sweatshop billing by the hour that you want to cleanse your soul, get your hands dirty, do some honest work, and help other people." Goodman's beady blue eyes darted at Adam from above the black-framed reading spectacles perched on the tip of his rather pointed nose. "Any of the above?"

"Not really."

Goodman continued scanning the file. "So you've been assigned to Emmitt Wycoff?" He was reading a letter from Wycoff, Adam's supervising partner.

"Yes sir."

"He's a fine lawyer. I don't particularly care for him, but he's got a great criminal mind, you know. Probably one of our top three white-collar boys. Pretty abrasive, though, don't you think?"

"He's okay."

"How long have you been under him?"

"Since I started. Nine months ago."

"So you've been here for nine months?"

"Yes sir."

"What do you think of it?" Goodman closed the file and stared at Adam. He slowly removed the reading glasses and stuck one stem in his mouth.

"I like it, so far. It's challenging."

"Of course. Why did you pick Kravitz & Bane? I mean, surely with your credentials you could've gone anywhere. Why here?"

"Criminal litigation. That's what I want, and this firm has a reputation."

"How many offers did you have? Come on, I'm just being curious."

"Several."

"And where were they?"

"D.C. mainly. One in Denver. I didn't interview with New York firms."

“How much money did we offer you?”

Adam shifted again. Goodman was, after all, a partner. Surely he knew what the firm was paying new associates. “Sixty or so. What are we paying you?”

This amused the old man, and he smiled for the first time. “They pay me four hundred thousand dollars a year to give away their time so they can pat themselves on the back and preach about lawyers and about social responsibility. Four hundred thousand, can you believe it?”

Adam had heard the rumors. “You’re not complaining, are you?”

“No. I’m the luckiest lawyer in town, Mr. Hall. I get paid a truckload of money for doing work I enjoy, and I punch no clock and don’t worry about billing. It’s a lawyer’s dream. That’s why I still bust my ass sixty hours a week. I’m almost seventy, you know.”

The legend around the firm was that Goodman, as a younger man, succumbed to the pressure and almost killed himself with liquor and pills. He dried out for a year while his wife took the kids and left him, then he convinced the partners he was worth saving. He just needed an office where life did not revolve around a clock.

“What kind of work are you doing for Emmitt Wycoff?” Goodman asked.

“Lot of research. Right now he’s defending a bunch of defense contractors, and that takes most of my time. I argued a motion in court last week.” Adam said this with a touch of pride. Rookies were usually kept chained to their desks for the first twelve months.

“A real motion?” Goodman asked, in awe.

“Yes sir.”

“In a real courtroom?”

“Yes sir.”

“Before a real judge?”

“You got it.”

“Who won?”

“Judge ruled for the prosecution, but it was close. I really tied him in knots.” Goodman smiled at this, but the game was quickly over. He opened the file again.

“Wycoff sends along a pretty strong letter of recommendation. That’s out of character for him.”

“He recognizes talent,” Adam said with a smile.

“I assume this is a rather significant request, Mr. Hall. Just what is it you have in mind?”

Adam stopped smiling and cleared his throat. He was suddenly nervous, and decided to recross his legs. “It’s, uh, well, it’s a death penalty case.”

“A death penalty case?” Goodman repeated.

“Yes sir.”

“Why?”

“I’m opposed to the death penalty.”

“Aren’t we all, Mr. Hall? I’ve written books about it. I’ve handled two dozen of these damned things. Why do you want to get involved?”

“I’ve read your books. I just want to help.”

Goodman closed the file again and leaned on his desk. Two pieces of paper slid off and fluttered to the floor. “You’re too young and you’re too green.”

“You might be surprised.”

“Look, Mr. Hall, this is not the same as counseling winos at a soup kitchen. This is life and death. This is high pressure stuff, son. It’s not a lot of fun.”

Adam nodded but said nothing. His eyes were locked onto Goodman’s, and he refused to blink. A phone rang somewhere in the distance, but they both ignored it.

“Any particular case, or do you have a new client for Kravitz & Bane?” Goodman asked.

“The Cayhall case,” Adam said slowly.

Goodman shook his head and tugged at the edges of his bow tie. “Sam Cayhall just fired us. The Fifth Circuit ruled last week that he does indeed have the right to terminate our representation.”

“I’ve read the opinion. I know what the Fifth Circuit said. The man needs a lawyer.”

“No he doesn’t. He’ll be dead in three months with or without one. Frankly, I’m relieved to have him out of my life.”

“He needs a lawyer,” Adam repeated.

“He’s representing himself, and he’s pretty damned good, to be perfectly honest. Types his own motions and briefs, handles his own research. I hear he’s been giving advice to some of his buddies on death row, just the white ones though.”

“I’ve studied his entire file.”

E. Garner Goodman twirled his spectacles slowly and thought about this. “That’s a half a ton of paper. Why’d you do it?”

“I’m intrigued by the case. I’ve watched it for years, read everything written about the man. You asked me earlier why I chose Kravitz & Bane. Well, the truth is that I wanted to work on the Cayhall case, and I think this firm has handled it pro bono for, what, eight years now?”

“Seven, but it seems like twenty. Mr. Cayhall is not the most pleasant man to deal with.”

“Understandable, isn’t it? I mean, he’s been in solitary for almost ten years.”

“Don’t lecture me about prison life, Mr. Hall. Have you ever seen the inside of a prison?”

“No.”

“Well I have. I’ve been to death row in six states. I’ve been cursed by Sam Cayhall when he was chained to his chair. He’s not a nice man. He’s an incorrigible racist who hates just about everybody, and he’d hate you if you met him.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re a lawyer, Mr. Hall. He hates lawyers worse than he hates blacks and Jews. He’s been facing death for almost ten years, and he’s convinced he’s the victim of a lawyer conspiracy. Hell, he tried to fire us for two years. This firm spent in excess of two million dollars in billable time trying to keep him alive, and he was more concerned with firing us. I lost count of the number of times he refused to meet with us after we traveled all the way to Parchman. He’s crazy, Mr. Hall. Find yourself another project. How about abused kids or something?”

“No thanks. My interest is in death penalty cases, and I’m somewhat obsessed with the story of Sam Cayhall.”

Goodman carefully returned the spectacles to the tip of his nose, then slowly swung his feet onto the corner of the desk. He folded his hands across the starched shirt. "Why, may I ask, are you so obsessed with Sam Cayhall?"

"Well, it's a fascinating case, don't you think? The Klan, the civil rights movement, the bombings, the tortured locale. The backdrop is such a rich period in American history. Seems ancient, but it was only twenty-five years ago. It's a riveting story."

A ceiling fan spun slowly above him. A minute passed.

Goodman lowered his feet to the floor and rested on his elbows. "Mr. Hall, I appreciate your interest in pro bono, and I assure you there's much to do. But you need to find another project. This is not a mock trial competition."

"And I'm not a law student."

"Sam Cayhall has effectively terminated our services, Mr. Hall. You don't seem to realize this."

"I want the chance to meet with him."

"For what?"

"I think I can convince him to allow me to represent him."

"Oh really."

Adam took a deep breath, then stood and walked deftly around the stacks of files to the window. Another deep breath. Goodman watched, and waited.

"I have a secret for you, Mr. Goodman. No one else knows but Emmitt Wycoff, and I was sort of forced to tell him. You must keep it confidential, okay?"

"I'm listening."

"Do I have your word?"

"Yes, you have my word," Goodman said slowly, biting a stem.

Adam peeked through a slit in the blinds and watched a sailboat on Lake Michigan. He spoke quietly. "I'm related to Sam Cayhall."

Goodman did not flinch. "I see. Related how?"

"He had a son, Eddie Cayhall. And Eddie Cayhall left Mississippi in disgrace after his father was arrested for the bombing. He fled to California, changed his name, and tried to forget his past. But he

was tormented by his family's legacy. He committed suicide shortly after his father was convicted in 1981."

Goodman now sat with his rear on the edge of his chair.

"Eddie Cayhall was my father."

Goodman hesitated slightly. "Sam Cayhall is your grandfather?"

"Yes. I didn't know it until I was almost seventeen. My aunt told me after we buried my father."

"Wow."

"You promised not to tell."

"Of course." Goodman moved his butt to the edge of his desk, and placed his feet in the chair. He stared at the blinds. "Does Sam know —"

"No. I was born in Ford County, Mississippi, a town called Clanton, not Memphis. I was always told I was born in Memphis. My name then was Alan Cayhall, but I didn't know this until much later. I was three years old when we left Mississippi, and my parents never talked about the place. My mother believes that there was no contact between Eddie and Sam from the day we left until she wrote him in prison and told him his son was dead. He did not write back."

"Damn, damn, damn," Goodman mumbled to himself.

"There's a lot to it, Mr. Goodman. It's a pretty sick family."

"Not your fault."

"According to my mother, Sam's father was an active Klansman, took part in lynchings and all that. So I come from pretty weak stock."

"Your father was different."

"My father killed himself. I'll spare you the details, but I found his body, and I cleaned up the mess before my mother and sister returned home."

"And you were seventeen?"

"Almost seventeen. It was 1981. Nine years ago. After my aunt, Eddie's sister, told me the truth, I became fascinated with the sordid history of Sam Cayhall. I've spent hours in libraries digging up old newspaper and magazine stories; there are quite a lot of materials. I've read the transcripts of all three trials. I've studied the appellate

decisions. In law school I began studying this firm's representation of Sam Cayhall. You and Wallace Tyner have done exemplary work."

"I'm glad you approve."

"I've read hundreds of books and thousands of articles on the Eighth Amendment and death penalty litigation. You've written four books, I believe. And a number of articles. I know I'm just a rookie, but my research is impeccable."

"And you think Sam will trust you as his lawyer?"

"I don't know. But he's my grandfather, like it or not, and I have to go see him."

"There's been no contact—"

"None. I was three when we left, and I certainly don't remember him. I've started a thousand times to write him, but it never happened. I can't tell you why."

"It's understandable."

"Nothing's understandable, Mr. Goodman. I do not understand how or why I'm standing here in this office at this moment. I always wanted to be a pilot, but I went to law school because I felt a vague calling to help society. Someone needed me, and I suppose I felt that someone was my demented grandfather. I had four job offers, and I picked this firm because it had the guts to represent him for free."

"You should've told someone up front about this, before we hired you."

"I know. But nobody asked if my grandfather was a client of this firm."

"You should've said something."

"They won't fire me, will they?"

"I doubt it. Where have you been for the past nine months?"

"Here, working ninety hours a week, sleeping on my desk, eating in the library, cramming for the bar exam, you know, the usual rookie boot camp you guys designed for us."

"Silly, isn't it?"

"I'm tough." Adam opened a slit in the blinds for a better view of the lake. Goodman watched him.

“Why don’t you open these blinds?” Adam asked. “It’s a great view.”

“I’ve seen it before.”

“I’d kill for a view like this. My little cubbyhole is a mile from any window.”

“Work hard, bill even harder, and one day this will all be yours.”

“Not me.”

“Leaving us, Mr. Hall?”

“Probably, eventually. But that’s another secret, okay? I plan to hit it hard for a couple of years, then move on. Maybe open my own office, one where life does not revolve around a clock. I want to do public interest work, you know, sort of like you.”

“So after nine months you’re already disillusioned with Kravitz & Bane.”

“No. But I can see it coming. I don’t want to spend my career representing wealthy crooks and wayward corporations.”

“Then you’re certainly in the wrong place.”

Adam left the window and walked to the edge of the desk. He looked down at Goodman. “I am in the wrong place, and I want a transfer. Wycoff will agree to send me to our little office in Memphis for the next few months so I can work on the Cayhall case. Sort of a leave of absence, with full pay of course.”

“Anything else?”

“That’s about it. It’ll work. I’m just a lowly rookie, expendable around here. No one will miss me. Hell, there are plenty of young cutthroats just eager to work eighteen hours a day and bill twenty.”

Goodman’s face relaxed, and a warm smile appeared. He shook his head as if this impressed him. “You planned this, didn’t you? I mean, you picked this firm because it represented Sam Cayhall, and because it has an office in Memphis.”

Adam nodded without a smile. “Things have worked out. I didn’t know how or when this moment would arrive, but, yes, I sort of planned it. Don’t ask me what happens next.”

“He’ll be dead in three months, if not sooner.”

“But I have to do something, Mr. Goodman. If the firm won’t allow me to handle the case, then I’ll probably resign and try it on

my own.”

Goodman shook his head and jumped to his feet. “Don’t do that, Mr. Hall. We’ll work something out. I’ll need to present this to Daniel Rosen, the managing partner. I think he’ll approve.”

“He has a horrible reputation.”

“Well deserved. But I can talk to him.”

“He’ll do it if you and Wycoff recommend it, won’t he?”

“Of course. Are you hungry?” Goodman was reaching for his jacket.

“A little.”

“Let’s go out for a sandwich.”

The lunch crowd at the corner deli had not arrived. The partner and the rookie took a small table in the front window overlooking the sidewalk. Traffic was slow and hundreds of pedestrians scurried along, just a few feet away. The waiter delivered a greasy Reuben for Goodman and a bowl of chicken soup for Adam.

“How many inmates are on death row in Mississippi?” Goodman asked.

“Forty-eight, as of last month. Twenty-five black, twenty-three white. The last execution was two years ago, Willie Parris. Sam Cayhall will probably be next, barring a small miracle.”

Goodman chewed quickly on a large bite. He wiped his mouth with the paper napkin. “A large miracle, I would say. There’s not much left to do legally.”

“There are the usual assortment of last ditch motions.”

“Let’s save the strategy talks for later. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been to Parchman.”

“No. Since I learned the truth, I’ve been tempted to return to Mississippi, but it hasn’t happened.”

“It’s a massive farm in the middle of the Mississippi Delta, not too far from Greenville, ironically. Something like seventeen thousand acres. Probably the hottest place in the world. It sits on Highway 49,

just like a little hamlet off to the west. Lots of buildings and houses. The front part is all administration, and it's not enclosed by fencing. There are about thirty different camps scattered around the farm, all fenced and secured. Each camp is completely separate. Some are miles apart. You drive past various camps, all enclosed by chain link and barbed wire, all with hundreds of prisoners hanging around, doing nothing. They wear different colors, depending on their classification. It seemed as if they were all young black kids, just loitering about, some playing basketball, some just sitting on the porches of the buildings. An occasional white face. You drive in your car, alone and very slowly, down a gravel road, past the camps and the barbed wire until you come to a seemingly innocuous little building with a flat roof. It has tall fences around it with guards watching from the towers. It's a fairly modern facility. It has an official name of some sort, but everyone refers to it simply as the Row."

"Sounds like a wonderful place."

"I thought it would be a dungeon, you know, dark and cold with water dripping from above. But it's just a little flat building out in the middle of a cotton field. Actually, it's not as bad as death rows in other states."

"I'd like to see the Row."

"You're not ready to see it. It's a horrible place filled with depressing people waiting to die. I was sixty years old before I saw it, and I didn't sleep for a week afterward." He took a sip of coffee. "I can't imagine how you'll feel when you go there. The Row is bad enough when you're representing a complete stranger."

"He is a complete stranger."

"How do you intend to tell him—"

"I don't know. I'll think of something. I'm sure it'll just happen."

Goodman shook his head. "This is bizarre."

"The whole family is bizarre."

"I remember now that Sam had two children, seems like one is a daughter. It's been a long time. Tyner did most of the work, you know."

“His daughter is my aunt, Lee Cayhall Booth, but she tries to forget her maiden name. She married into old Memphis money. Her husband owns a bank or two, and they tell no one about her father.”

“Where’s your mother?”

“Portland. She remarried a few years ago, and we talk about twice a year. Dysfunctional would be a mild term.”

“How’d you afford Pepperdine?”

“Life insurance. My father had trouble keeping a job, but he was wise enough to carry life insurance. The waiting period had expired years before he killed himself.”

“Sam never talked about his family.”

“And his family never talks about him. His wife, my grandmother, died a few years before he was convicted. I didn’t know this, of course. Most of my genealogical research has been extracted from my mother, who’s done a great job of forgetting the past. I don’t know how it works in normal families, Mr. Goodman, but my family seldom gets together, and when two or more of us happen to meet the last thing we discuss is the past. There are many dark secrets.”

Goodman was nibbling on a chip and listening closely. “You mentioned a sister.”

“Yes, I have a sister, Carmen. She’s twenty-three, a bright and beautiful girl, in graduate school at Berkeley. She was born in L.A., so she didn’t go through the name change like the rest of us. We keep in touch.”

“She knows?”

“Yes, she knows. My aunt Lee told me first, just after my father’s funeral, then, typically, my mother asked me to tell Carmen. She was only fourteen at the time. She’s never expressed any interest in Sam Cayhall. Frankly, the rest of the family wishes he would quietly just go away.”

“They’re about to get their wish.”

“But it won’t be quietly, will it, Mr. Goodman?”

“No. It never is. For one brief but terrible moment, Sam Cayhall will be the most talked about man in the country. We’ll see the same old footage from the bomb blast, and the trials with the Klan marching around the courthouses. The same old debate about the

death penalty will erupt. The press will descend upon Parchman. Then, they'll kill him, and two days later it'll all be forgotten. Happens every time."

Adam stirred his soup and carefully picked out a sliver of chicken. He examined it for a second, then returned it to the broth. He was not hungry. Goodman finished another chip, and touched the corners of his mouth with the napkin.

"I don't suppose, Mr. Hall, that you're thinking you can keep this quiet."

"I had given it some thought."

"Forget it."

"My mother begged me not to do it. My sister wouldn't discuss it. And my aunt in Memphis is rigid with the remote possibility that we'll all be identified as Cayhalls and forever ruined."

"The possibility is not remote. When the press finishes with you, they'll have old black-and-whites of you sitting on your granddaddy's knee. It'll make great print, Mr. Hall. Just think of it. The forgotten grandson charging in at the last moment, making a heroic effort to save his wretched old grandfather as the clock ticks down."

"I sort of like it myself."

"Not bad, really. It'll bring a lot of attention to our beloved little law firm."

"Which brings up another unpleasant issue."

"I don't think so. There are no cowards at Kravitz & Bane, Adam. We have survived and prospered in the rough and tumble world of Chicago law. We're known as the meanest bastards in town. We have the thickest skins. Don't worry about the firm."

"So you'll agree to it."

Goodman placed his napkin on the table and took another sip of coffee. "Oh, it's a wonderful idea, assuming your gramps will agree to it. If you can sign him up, or re-sign him I should say, then we're back in business. You'll be the front man. We can feed you what you need from up here. I'll always be in your shadow. It'll work. Then, they'll kill him and you'll never get over it. I've watched three of my

clients die, Mr. Hall, including one in Mississippi. You'll never be the same."

Adam nodded and smiled and looked at the pedestrians on the sidewalk.

Goodman continued. "We'll be around to support you when they kill him. You won't have to bear it alone."

"It's not hopeless, is it?"

"Almost. We'll talk strategy later. First, I'll meet with Daniel Rosen. He'll probably want a long conference with you. Second, you'll have to see Sam and have a little reunion, so to speak. That's the hard part. Third, if he agrees to it, then we'll get to work."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me, Adam. I doubt if we'll be on speaking terms when this is over."

"Thanks anyway."

Five

The meeting was organized quickly. E. Garner Goodman made the first phone call, and within an hour the necessary participants had been summoned. Within four hours they were present in a small, seldom used conference room next to Daniel Rosen's office. It was Rosen's turf, and this disturbed Adam more than a little.

By legend, Daniel Rosen was a monster, though two heart attacks had knocked off some of the edge and mellowed him a bit. For thirty years he had been a ruthless litigator, the meanest, nastiest, and without a doubt one of the most effective courtroom brawlers in Chicago. Before the heart attacks, he was known for his brutal work schedule—ninety-hour weeks, midnight orgies of work with clerks and paralegals digging and fetching. Several wives had left him. As many as four secretaries at a time labored furiously to keep pace. Daniel Rosen had been the heart and soul of Kravitz & Bane, but no longer. His doctor restricted him to fifty hours a week, in the office, and prohibited any trial work.

Now, Rosen, at the age of sixty-five and getting heavy, had been unanimously selected by his beloved colleagues to graze the gentler pastures of law office management. He had the responsibility of overseeing the rather cumbersome bureaucracy that ran Kravitz & Bane. It was an honor, the other partners had explained feebly when they bestowed it upon him.

So far the honor had been a disaster. Banished from the battlefield he desperately loved and needed, Rosen went about the business of managing the firm in a manner very similar to the preparation of an expensive lawsuit. He cross-examined secretaries and clerks over the most trivial of matters. He confronted other partners and harangued them for hours over vague issues of firm policy. Confined to the

prison of his office, he called for young associates to come visit him, then picked fights to gauge their mettle under pressure.

He deliberately took the seat directly across the small conference table from Adam, and held a thin file as if it possessed a deadly secret. E. Garner Goodman sat low in the seat next to Adam, twiddling his bow tie and scratching his beard. When he telephoned Rosen with Adam's request, and broke the news of Adam's lineage, Rosen had reacted with predictable foolishness.

Emmitt Wycoff stood at one end of the room with a matchbox-sized cellular phone stuck to his ear. He was almost fifty, looked much older, and lived each day in a fixed state of panic and telephones.

Rosen carefully opened the file in front of Adam and removed a yellow legal pad. "Why didn't you tell us about your grandfather when we interviewed you last year?" he began with clipped words and a fierce stare.

"Because you didn't ask me," Adam answered. Goodman had advised him the meeting might get rough, but he and Wycoff would prevail.

"Don't be a wise ass," Rosen growled.

"Come on, Daniel," Goodman said, and rolled his eyes at Wycoff who shook his head and glanced at the ceiling.

"You don't think, Mr. Hall, that you should've informed us that you were related to one of our clients? Certainly you believe we have a right to know this, don't you, Mr. Hall?" His mocking tone was one usually reserved for witnesses who were lying and trapped.

"You guys asked me about everything else," Adam replied, very much under control. "Remember the security check? The fingerprints? There was even talk of a polygraph."

"Yes, Mr. Hall, but you knew things we didn't. And your grandfather was a client of this firm when you applied for employment, and you damned sure should've told us." Rosen's voice was rich, and moved high and low with the dramatic flair of a fine actor. His eyes never left Adam.

"Not your typical grandfather," Adam said quietly.

“He’s still your grandfather, and you knew he was a client when you applied for a job here.”

“Then I apologize,” Adam said. “This firm has thousands of clients, all well heeled and paying through the nose for our services. I never dreamed one insignificant little pro bono case would cause any grief.”

“You’re deceitful, Mr. Hall. You deliberately selected this firm because it, at the time, represented your grandfather. And now, suddenly, here you are begging for the file. It puts us in an awkward position.”

“What awkward position?” Emmitt Wycoff asked, folding the phone and stuffing it in a pocket. “Look, Daniel, we’re talking about a man on death row. He needs a lawyer, dammit!”

“His own grandson?” Rosen asked.

“Who cares if it’s his own grandson? The man has one foot in the grave, and he needs a lawyer.”

“He fired us, remember?” Rosen shot back.

“Yeah, and he can always rehire us. It’s worth a try. Lighten up.”

“Listen, Emmitt, it’s my job to worry about the image of this firm, and the idea of sending one of our new associates down to Mississippi to have his ass kicked and his client executed does not appeal to me. Frankly, I think Mr. Hall should be terminated by Kravitz & Bane.”

“Oh wonderful, Daniel,” Wycoff said. “Typical hard-nose response to a delicate issue. Then who’ll represent Cayhall? Think about him for a moment. The man needs a lawyer! Adam may be his only chance.”

“God help him,” Rosen mumbled.

E. Garner Goodman decided to speak. He locked his hands together on the table and glared at Rosen. “The image of this firm? Do you honestly think we’re viewed as a bunch of underpaid social workers dedicated to helping people?”

“Or how about a bunch of nuns working in the projects?” Wycoff added helpfully, with a sneer.

“How could this possibly hurt the image of our firm?” Goodman asked.

The concept of retreat had never entered Rosen's mind. "Very simple, Garner. We do not send our rookies to death row. We may abuse them, try to kill them, expect them to work twenty hours a day, but we do not send them into battle until they are ready. You know how dense death penalty litigation is. Hell, you wrote the books. How can you expect Mr. Hall here to be effective?"

"I'll supervise everything he does," Goodman answered.

"He's really quite good," Wycoff added again. "He's memorized the entire file, you know, Daniel."

"It'll work," Goodman said. "Trust me, Daniel, I've been through enough of these things. I'll keep my finger on it."

"And I'll set aside a few hours to help," Wycoff added. "I'll even fly down if necessary."

Goodman jerked and stared at Wycoff. "You! Pro bono?"

"Sure. I have a conscience."

Adam ignored the banter and stared at Daniel Rosen. Go ahead and fire me, he wanted to say. Go ahead, Mr. Rosen, terminate me so I can go bury my grandfather, then get on with the rest of my life.

"And if he's executed?" Rosen asked in the direction of Goodman.

"We've lost them before, Daniel, you know that. Three, since I've run pro bono."

"What are his chances?"

"Quite slim. Right now he's holding on by virtue of a stay granted by the Fifth Circuit. The stay should be lifted any day now, and a new execution date will be set. Probably late summer."

"Not long then."

"Right. We've handled his appeals for seven years, and they've run their course."

"Of all the people on death row, how'd we come to represent this asshole?" Rosen demanded.

"It's a very long story, and at this moment it's completely irrelevant."

Rosen made what appeared to be serious notes on his legal pad. "You don't think for a moment you'll keep this quiet, do you?"

"Maybe."

“Maybe hell. Just before they kill him, they’ll make him a celebrity. The media will surround him like a pack of wolves. You’ll be discovered, Mr. Hall.”

“So?”

“So, it’ll make great copy, Mr. Hall. Can’t you see the headlines—LONG-LOST GRANDSON RETURNS TO SAVE GRAMPS.”

“Knock it off, Daniel,” Goodman said.

But he continued. “The press will eat it up, don’t you see, Mr. Hall? They’ll expose you and talk about how crazy your family is.”

“But we love the press, don’t we, Mr. Rosen?” Adam asked coolly. “We’re trial lawyers. Aren’t we supposed to perform for the cameras? You’ve never—”

“A very good point,” Goodman interrupted. “Daniel, perhaps you shouldn’t advise this young man to ignore the press. We can tell stories about some of your stunts.”

“Yes, please, Daniel, lecture the kid about everything else, but lay off the media crap,” Wycoff said with a nasty grin. “You wrote the book.”

For a brief moment, Rosen appeared to be embarrassed. Adam watched him closely.

“I rather like the scenario myself,” Goodman said, twirling his bow tie and studying the bookshelves behind Rosen. “There’s a lot to be said for it, actually. Could be great for us poor little pro bono folks. Think of it. This young lawyer down there fighting like crazy to save a rather famous death row killer. And he’s our lawyer—Kravitz & Bane. Sure there’ll be a ton of press, but what will it hurt?”

“It’s a wonderful idea, if you ask me,” Wycoff added just as his mini-phone buzzed somewhere deep in a pocket. He stuck it to his jaw and turned away from the meeting.

“What if he dies? Don’t we look bad?” Rosen asked Goodman.

“He’s supposed to die, okay? That’s why he’s on death row,” Goodman explained.

Wycoff stopped his mumbling and slid the phone into a pocket. “I gotta go,” he said, moving toward the door, nervous now, in a hurry. “Where are we?”

"I still don't like it," Rosen said.

"Daniel, Daniel, always a hard ass," Wycoff said as he stopped at the end of the table and leaned on it with both hands. "You know it's a good idea, you're just pissed because he didn't tell us up front."

"That's true. He deceived us, and now he's using us."

Adam took a deep breath and shook his head.

"Get a grip, Daniel. His interview was a year ago, in the past. It's gone, man. Forget about it. We have more pressing matters at hand. He's bright. He works very hard. Smooth on his feet. Meticulous research. We're lucky to have him. So his family's messed up. Surely we're not going to terminate every lawyer here with a dysfunctional family." Wycoff grinned at Adam. "Plus, all the secretaries think he's cute. I say we send him south for a few months, then get him back here as soon as possible. I need him. Gotta run." He disappeared and closed the door behind him.

The room was silent as Rosen scribbled on his pad, then gave it up and closed the file. Adam almost felt sorry for him. Here was this great warrior, the legendary Charlie Hustle of Chicago law, a great barrister who for thirty years swayed juries and terrified opponents and intimidated judges, now sitting here as a pencil pusher, trying desperately to agonize over the question of assigning a rookie to a pro bono project. Adam saw the humor, the irony, and the pity.

"I'll agree to it, Mr. Hall," Rosen said with much drama in his low voice, almost a whisper, as if terribly frustrated by all this. "But I promise you this: when the Cayhall matter is over, and you return to Chicago, I'll recommend your termination from Kravitz & Bane."

"Probably won't be necessary," Adam said quickly.

"You presented yourself to us under false pretenses," Rosen continued.

"I said I was sorry. Won't happen again."

"Plus, you're a smart ass."

"So are you, Mr. Rosen. Show me a trial lawyer who's not a smartass."

"Real cute. Enjoy the Cayhall case, Mr. Hall, because it'll be your last bit of work for this firm."

“You want me to enjoy an execution?”

“Relax, Daniel,” Goodman said softly. “Just relax. No one’s getting fired around here.”

Rosen pointed an angry finger at Goodman. “I swear I’ll recommend his termination.”

“Fine. All you can do is recommend, Daniel. I’ll take it to the committee, and we’ll just have a huge brawl. Okay?”

“I can’t wait,” Rosen snarled as he jumped to his feet. “I’ll start lobbying now. I’ll have my votes by the end of the week. Good day!” He stormed from the room and slammed the door.

They sat in silence next to each other, just staring across the table over the backs of the empty chairs to the rows of thick law books lined neatly on the wall, listening to the echo of the slamming door.

“Thanks,” Adam finally said.

“He’s not a bad guy, really,” Goodman said.

“Charming. A real prince.”

“I’ve known him a long time. He’s suffering now, really frustrated and depressed. We’re not sure what to do with him.”

“What about retirement?”

“It’s been considered, but no partner has ever been forced into retirement. For obvious reasons, it’s a precedent we’d like to avoid.”

“Is he serious about firing me?”

“Don’t worry, Adam. It won’t happen. I promise. You were wrong in not disclosing it, but it’s a minor sin. And a perfectly understandable one. You’re young, scared, naive, and you want to help. Don’t worry about Rosen. I doubt if he’ll be in this position three months from now.”

“Deep down, I think he adores me.”

“It’s quite obvious.”

Adam took a deep breath and walked around the table. Goodman uncapped his pen and began making notes. “There’s not much time, Adam,” he said.

“I know.”

“When can you leave?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll pack tonight. It’s a ten-hour drive.”

“The file weighs a hundred pounds. It’s down in printing right now. I’ll ship it tomorrow.”

“Tell me about our office in Memphis.”

“I talked to them about an hour ago. Managing partner is Baker Cooley, and he’s expecting you. They’ll have a small office and a secretary for you, and they’ll help if they can. They’re not much when it comes to litigation.”

“How many lawyers?”

“Twelve. It’s a little boutique firm we swallowed ten years ago, and no one remembers exactly why. Good boys, though. Good lawyers. It’s the remnants of an old firm that prospered with the cotton and grain traders down there, and I think that’s the connection to Chicago. Anyway, it looks nice on the letterhead. Have you been to Memphis?”

“I was born there, remember?”

“Oh yes.”

“I’ve been once. I visited my aunt there a few years ago.”

“It’s an old river town, pretty laid back. You’ll enjoy it.”

Adam sat across the table from Goodman. “How can I possibly enjoy the next few months?”

“Good point. You should go to the Row as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll be there the day after tomorrow.”

“Good. I’ll call the warden. His name is Phillip Naifeh, Lebanese oddly enough. There are quite a few of them in the Mississippi Delta. Anyway, he’s an old friend, and I’ll tell him you’re coming.”

“The warden is your friend?”

“Yes. We go back several years, to Maynard Tole, a nasty little boy who was my first casualty in this war. He was executed in 1986, I believe, and the warden and I became friends. He’s opposed to the death penalty, if you can believe it.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“He hates executions. You’re about to learn something, Adam—the death penalty may be very popular in our country, but the people who are forced to impose it are not supporters. You’re about to meet these people: the guards who get close to the inmates; the administrators who must plan for an efficient killing; the prison

employees who rehearse for a month beforehand. It's a strange little corner of the world, and a very depressing one."

"I can't wait."

"I'll talk to the warden, and get permission for the visit. They'll usually give you a couple of hours. Of course, it may take five minutes if Sam doesn't want a lawyer."

"He'll talk to me, don't you think?"

"I believe so. I cannot imagine how the man will react, but he'll talk. It may take a couple of visits to sign him up, but you can do it."

"When did you last see him?"

"Couple of years ago. Wallace Tyner and I went down. You'll need to touch base with Tyner. He was the point man on this case for the past six years."

Adam nodded and moved to the next thought. He'd been picking Tyner's brain for the past nine months.

"What do we file first?"

"We'll talk about it later. Tyner and I are meeting early in the morning to review the case. Everything's on hold, though, until we hear from you. We can't move if we don't represent him."

Adam was thinking of the newspaper photos, the black and whites from 1967 when Sam was arrested, and the magazine photos, in color, from the third trial in 1981, and the footage he'd pieced together into a thirty-minute video about Sam Cayhall. "What does he look like?"

Goodman left his pen on the table and fiddled with his bow tie. "Average height. Thin—but then you seldom see a fat one on the Row—nerves and lean food. He chain-smokes, which is common because there's not much else to do, and they're dying anyway. Some weird brand, Montclair, I believe, in a blue pack. His hair is gray and oily, as I recall. These guys don't get a shower every day. Sort of long in the back, but that was two years ago. He hasn't lost much of it. Gray beard. He's fairly wrinkled, but then he's pushing seventy. Plus, the heavy smoking. You'll notice the white guys on the Row look worse than the black ones. They're confined for twenty-three hours a day, so they sort of bleach out. Real pale, fair,

almost sickly-looking. Sam has blue eyes, nice features. I suspect that at one time Sam Cayhall was a handsome fellow.”

“After my father died, and I learned the truth about Sam, I had a lot of questions for my mother. She didn’t have many answers, but she did tell me once that there was little physical resemblance between Sam and my father.”

“Nor between you and Sam, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“He hasn’t seen you since you were a toddler, Adam. He will not recognize you. It won’t be that easy. You’ll have to tell him.”

Adam stared blankly at the table. “You’re right. What will he say?”

“Beats me. I expect he’ll be too shocked to say much. But he’s a very intelligent man, not educated, but well read and articulate. He’ll think of something to say. It may take a few minutes.”

“You sound as if you almost like him.”

“I don’t. He’s a horrible racist and bigot, and he’s shown no remorse for his actions.”

“You’re convinced he’s guilty.”

Goodman grunted and smiled to himself, then thought of a response. Three trials had been held to determine the guilt or innocence of Sam Cayhall. For nine years now the case had been batted around the appellate courts and reviewed by many judges. Countless newspaper and magazine articles had investigated the bombing and those behind it. “The jury thought so. I guess that’s all that matters.”

“But what about you? What do you think?”

“You’ve read the file, Adam. You’ve researched the case for a long time. There’s no doubt Sam took part in the bombing.”

“But?”

“There are a lot of buts. There always are.”

“He had no history of handling explosives.”

“True. But he was a Klan terrorist, and they were bombing like hell. Sam gets arrested, and the bombing stops.”

“But in one of the bombings before Kramer, a witness claims he saw two people in the green Pontiac.”

“True. But the witness was not allowed to testify at trial. And the witness had just left a bar at three in the morning.”

“But another witness, a truck driver, claims he saw Sam and another man talking in a coffee shop in Cleveland a few hours before the Kramer bombing.”

“True. But the truck driver said nothing for three years, and was not allowed to testify at the last trial. Too remote.”

“So who was Sam’s accomplice?”

“I doubt if we’ll ever know. Keep in mind, Adam, this is a man who went to trial three times, yet never testified. He said virtually nothing to the police, very little to his defense lawyers, not a word to his juries, and he’s told us nothing new in the past seven years.”

“Do you think he acted alone?”

“No. He had help. Sam’s carrying dark secrets, Adam. He’ll never tell. He took an oath as a Klansman, and he has this really warped, romantic notion of a sacred vow he can never violate. His father was a Klansman too, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t remind me.”

“Sorry. Anyway, it’s too late in the game to fish around for new evidence. If he in fact had an accomplice, he should’ve talked long ago. Maybe he should’ve talked to the FBI. Maybe he should’ve cut a deal with the district attorney. I don’t know, but when you’re indicted on two counts of capital murder and facing death, you start talking. You talk, Adam. You save your ass and let your buddy worry about his.”

“And if there was no accomplice?”

“There was.” Goodman took his pen and wrote a name on a piece of paper. He slid it across the table to Adam, who looked at it and said, “Wyn Lettner. The name is familiar.”

“Lettner was the FBI agent in charge of the Kramer case. He’s now retired and living on a trout river in the Ozarks. He loves to tell war stories about the Klan and the civil rights days in Mississippi.”

“And he’ll talk to me?”

“Oh sure. He’s a big beer drinker, and he gets about half loaded and tells these incredible stories. He won’t divulge anything

confidential, but he knows more about the Kramer bombing than anyone. I've always suspected he knows more than he's told."

Adam folded the paper and placed it in his pocket. He glanced at his watch. It was almost 6 p.m. "I need to run. I have to pack and all."

"I'll ship the file down tomorrow. You need to call me as soon as you talk to Sam."

"I will. Can I say something?"

"Sure."

"On behalf of my family, such as it is—my mother who refuses to discuss Sam; my sister who only whispers his name; my aunt in Memphis who has disowned the name Cayhall—and on behalf of my late father, I would like to say thanks to you and to this firm for what you've done. I admire you greatly."

"You're welcome. And I admire you. Now get your ass down to Mississippi."

Six

The apartment was a one-bedroom loft somewhere above the third floor of a turn-of-the-century warehouse just off the Loop, in a section of downtown known for crime but said to be safe until dark. The warehouse had been purchased in the mid-eighties by an S&L swinger who spent a bundle sanitizing and modernizing. He chopped it into sixty units, hired a slick realtor, and marketed it as yuppie starter condos. He made money as the place filled overnight with eager young bankers and brokers.

Adam hated the place. He had three weeks left on a six-month lease, but there was no place to go. He would be forced to renew for another six months because Kravitz & Bane expected eighteen hours a day, and there'd been no time to search for another apartment.

Nor had there been much time to purchase furniture, evidently. A fine leather sofa without arms of any kind sat alone on the wooden floor and faced an ancient brick wall. Two bean bags—yellow and blue—were nearby in the unlikely event a crowd materialized. To the left was a tiny kitchen area with a snack bar and three wicker stools, and to the right of the sofa was the bedroom with the unmade bed and clothes on the floor. Seven hundred square feet, for thirteen hundred bucks a month. Adam's salary, as a blue chip prospect nine months earlier, had begun at sixty thousand a year, and was now at sixty-two. From his gross pay of slightly over five thousand a month, fifteen hundred was withheld for state and federal income taxes. Another six hundred never reached his fingers but went instead into a Kravitz & Bane retirement fund guaranteed to relieve the pressure at age fifty-five, if they didn't kill him first. After rent, utilities, four hundred a month for a leased Saab, and incidentals such as frozen food and some nice clothes, Adam found himself with about seven hundred dollars to play with. Some of this

remainder was spent on women, but the ones he knew were also fresh from college with new jobs and new credit cards and generally insistent on paying their own way. This was fine with Adam. Thanks to his father's faith in life insurance, he had no student loans. Even though there were things he wanted to buy, he doggedly plowed five hundred a month into mutual funds. With no immediate prospect of a wife and family, his goal was to work hard, save hard, and retire at forty.

Against the brick wall was an aluminum table with a television on it. Adam sat on the sofa, nude except for boxer shorts, holding the remote control. But for the colorless radiation from the screen, the loft was dark. It was after midnight. The video was one he'd pieced together over the years—The Adventures of a Klan Bomber, he called it. It started with a brief news report filed by a local crew in Jackson, Mississippi, on March 3, 1967, the morning after a synagogue was leveled by a bomb blast. It was the fourth known attack against Jewish targets in the past two months, the reporter said as a backhoe roared behind her with a bucket full of debris. The FBI had few clues, she said, and even fewer words for the press. The Klan's campaign of terror continues, she declared gravely, and signed off.

The Kramer bombing was next, and the story started with sirens screaming and police pushing people away from the scene. A local reporter and his cameraman were on the spot quickly enough to capture the initial bedlam. People were seen running to the remains of Marvin's office. A heavy cloud of gray dust hung above the small oak trees on the front lawn. The trees were battered and leafless, but standing. The cloud was still and showed no signs of dissipating. Off camera, voices yelled about a fire, and the camera rocked along and stopped in front of the building next door where thick smoke poured from a damaged wall. The reporter, breathless and panting into the microphone, jabbered incoherently about the entire shocking scene. He pointed over here, then over there as the camera jerked in belated response. The police pushed him away, but he was too excited to care. Glorious pandemonium had erupted in the sleepy town of Greenville, and this was his grand moment.

Thirty minutes later, from a different angle, his voice was somewhat calmer as he described the frantic removal of Marvin Kramer from the rubble. The police extended their barricades and inched the crowd backward as the fire and rescue people lifted his body and worked the stretcher through the wreckage. The camera followed the ambulance as it sped away. Then, an hour later and from still another angle, the reporter was quite composed and somber as the two stretchers with the covered little bodies were delicately handled by the firemen.

The video cut from the footage of the bombing scene to the front of the jail, and for the first time there was a glimpse of Sam Cayhall. He was handcuffed and ushered quickly into a waiting car.

As always, Adam pushed a button and replayed the brief scene with the shot of Sam. It was 1967, twenty-three years ago. Sam was forty-six years old. His hair was dark and cut close, the fashion of the times. There was a small bandage under his left eye, away from the camera. He walked quickly, stride for stride with the deputies because people were watching and taking pictures and yelling questions. He turned only once to their voices, and, as always, Adam froze the tape and stared for the millionth time into the face of his grandfather. The picture was black and white and not clear, but their eyes always met.

Nineteen sixty-seven. If Sam was forty-six, then Eddie was twenty-four, and Adam was almost three. He was known as Alan then. Alan Cayhall, soon to be a resident of a distant state where a judge would sign a decree giving him a new name. He had often watched this video and wondered where he was at the precise moment the Kramer boys were killed: 7:46 a.m., April 21, 1967. His family lived at that time in a small house in the town of Clanton, and he was probably still asleep not far from his mother's watch. He was almost three, and the Kramer twins were only five.

The video continued with more quick shots of Sam being led to and from various cars, jails, and courthouses. He was always handcuffed, and he developed the habit of staring at the ground just a few feet in front of him. His face bore no expression. He never looked at the reporters, never acknowledged their inquiries, never

said a word. He moved quickly, darting out of doors and into waiting cars.

The spectacle of his first two trials was amply recorded by daily television news reports. Over the years, Adam had been able to retrieve most of the footage, and had carefully edited the material. There was the loud and blustering face of Clovis Brazelton, Sam's lawyer, holding forth for the press at every opportunity. But the clips of Brazelton had been edited quite heavily, with time. Adam despised the man. There were clear, sweeping shots of the courthouse lawns, with the crowds of silent onlookers, and the heavily armed state police, and the robed Klansmen with their coneheads and sinister masks. There were brief glimpses of Sam, always in a hurry, always shielding himself from the cameras by ducking along behind a beefy deputy. After the second trial and the second hung jury, Marvin Kramer stopped his wheelchair on the sidewalk in front of the Wilson County Courthouse, and with tears in his eyes bitterly condemned Sam Cayhall and the Ku Klux Klan and the hidebound justice system in Mississippi. As the cameras rolled, a pitiful incident unfolded. Marvin suddenly spotted two Klansmen in white robes not far away, and began screaming at them. One of them yelled back, but his reply was lost in the heat of the moment. Adam had tried everything to retrieve the Klansman's words from the air, but with no luck. The reply would be forever unintelligible. A couple of years earlier, while in law school at Michigan, Adam had found one of the local reporters who was standing there at the moment, holding a microphone not far from Marvin's face. According to the reporter, the reply from across the lawn had something to do with their desire to blow off the rest of Marvin's limbs. Something this crude and cruel appeared to be true because Marvin went berserk. He screamed obscenities at the Kluckers, who were easing away, and he spun the metal wheels of his chair, lunging in their direction. He was yelling and cursing and crying. His wife and a few friends tried to restrain him, but he broke free, his hands furiously working the wheels. He rolled about twenty feet, with his wife in chase, with the cameras recording it all, until the sidewalk ended and the grass began. The wheelchair flipped,

and Marvin sprawled onto the lawn. The quilt around his amputated legs flung free as he rolled hard next to a tree. His wife and friends were on him immediately, and for a moment or two he disappeared into a small huddle on the ground. But he could still be heard. As the camera backed away and shot quickly at the two Klansmen, one doubled over with laughter and one frozen in place, an odd wailing erupted from the small crowd on the ground. Marvin was moaning, but in the shrill, high-pitched howl of a wounded madman. It was a sick sound, and after a few miserable seconds of it the video cut to the next scene.

Adam had tears in his eyes the first time he watched Marvin roll on the ground, howling and groaning, and though the images and sounds still tightened his throat, he had stopped crying long ago. This video was his creation. No one had seen it but him. And he'd watched it so many times that tears were no longer possible.

Technology improved immensely from 1968 to 1981, and the footage from Sam's third and last trial was much sharper and clearer. It was February of 1981, in a pretty little town with a busy square and a quaint courthouse of red brick. The air was bitterly cold, and perhaps this kept away the crowds of onlookers and demonstrators. One report from the first day of the trial had a brief shot of three behooded Klansmen huddled around a portable heater, rubbing their hands and looking more like Mardi Gras revelers than serious hoodlums. They were watched by a dozen or so state troopers, all in blue jackets.

Because the civil rights movement was viewed by this time as more of a historical event than a continuing struggle, the third trial of Sam Cayhall attracted more media than the first two. Here was an admitted Klansman, a real live terrorist from the distant era of Freedom Riders and church bombings. Here was a relic from those infamous days who'd been tracked down and was now being hauled to justice. The analogy to Nazi war criminals was made more than once.

Sam was not in custody during his last trial. He was a free man, and his freedom made it even more difficult to catch him on camera. There were quick shots of him darting into various doors of

the courthouse. Sam had aged gracefully in the thirteen years since trial number two. The hair was still short and neat, but half gray now. He appeared a bit heavier, but fit. He moved deftly along sidewalks and in and out of automobiles as the media gave chase. One camera caught him as he stepped from a side door of the courthouse, and Adam stopped the tape just as Sam stared directly into the camera.

Much of the footage of the third and final trial centered around a cocky young prosecutor named David McAllister, a handsome man who wore dark suits and a quick smile with perfect teeth. There was little doubt that David McAllister held grand political ambitions. He had the looks, the hair, the chin, the rich voice, the smooth words, the ability to attract cameras.

In 1989, eight short years after the trial, David McAllister was elected governor of the State of Mississippi. To no one's surprise, the widest planks in his platform had been more jails, longer sentences, and an unwavering affinity for the death penalty. Adam despised him too, but he knew that in a matter of weeks, maybe days, he would be sitting in the governor's office in Jackson, Mississippi, begging for a pardon.

The video ended with Sam, in handcuffs once again, being led from the courthouse after the jury condemned him to death. His face was expressionless. His lawyer appeared to be in shock and uttered a few unremarkable comments. The reporter signed off with the news that Sam would be transported to death row in a matter of days.

Adam pushed the rewind button and stared at the blank screen. Behind the armless sofa were three cardboard boxes which contained the rest of the story: the bulky transcripts of all three trials, which Adam had purchased while at Pepperdine; copies of the briefs and motions and other documents from the appellate warfare that had been raging since Sam's conviction; a thick and carefully indexed binder with neat copies of hundreds of newspaper and magazine stories about Sam's adventures as a Klansman; death penalty materials and research; notes from law school. He knew more about his grandfather than anyone alive.

Yet, Adam knew he had not scratched the surface. He pushed another button, and watched the video again.

Seven

The funeral for Eddie Cayhall occurred less than a month after Sam was sentenced to die. It was held in a small chapel in Santa Monica, and attended by few friends and even fewer family members. Adam sat on a front pew between his mother and sister. They held hands and stared at the closed casket just inches away. As always, his mother was stiff and stoic. Her eyes watered occasionally, and she was forced to dab them with a tissue. She and Eddie had separated and reconciled so many times the children had lost track of whose clothes were where. Though their marriage had never been violent, it had been lived in a continual state of divorce—threats of divorce, plans for divorce, solemn chats with the kids about divorce, negotiations for divorce, filings for divorce, retreat from divorce, vows to avoid divorce. During the third trial of Sam Cayhall, Adam's mother quietly moved her possessions back into their small house, and stayed with Eddie as much as possible. Eddie stopped going to work, and withdrew once again into his dark little world. Adam quizzed his mother, but she explained in a few short words that Dad was simply having another "bad time." The curtains were drawn; the shades were pulled; the lights were unplugged; the voices were lowered; the television was turned off as the family endured another of Eddie's bad times.

Three weeks after the verdict he was dead. He shot himself in Adam's bedroom, on a day when he knew Adam would be the first one home. He left a note on the floor with instructions for Adam to hurry and clean up the mess before the girls got home. Another note was found in the kitchen.

Carmen was fourteen at the time, three years younger than Adam. She had been conceived in Mississippi, but born in California after her parents' hasty migration westward. By the time she was born,

Eddie had legally transformed his little family from Cayhalls to Halls. Alan had become Adam. They lived in East L.A., in a three-room apartment with dirty sheets on the windows. Adam remembered the sheets with the holes in them. It was the first of many temporary residences.

Next to Carmen on the front pew was a mysterious woman known as Aunt Lee. She had just been introduced to Adam and Carmen as Eddie's sister, his only sibling. As children they were taught not to ask questions about family, but occasionally Lee's name would surface. She lived in Memphis, had at one point married into a wealthy Memphis family, had a child, and had nothing to do with Eddie because of some ancient feud. The kids, Adam especially, had longed to meet a relative, and since Aunt Lee was the only one ever mentioned they fantasized about her. They wanted to meet her, but Eddie always refused because she was not a nice person, he said. But their mother whispered that Lee was indeed a good person, and that one day she would take them to Memphis to meet her.

Lee, instead, made the trip to California, and together they buried Eddie Hall. She stayed for two weeks after the funeral, and became acquainted with her niece and nephew. They loved her because she was pretty and cool, wore blue jeans and tee shirts, and walked barefoot on the beach. She took them shopping, and to the movies, and they went for long walks by the shore of the ocean. She made all sorts of excuses for not visiting sooner. She wanted to, she promised, but Eddie wouldn't allow it. He didn't want to see her because they had fought in the past.

And it was Aunt Lee who sat with Adam on the end of a pier, watching the sun sink into the Pacific, and finally talked of her father, Sam Cayhall. As the waves rocked gently beneath them, Lee explained to young Adam that he had a brief prior life as a toddler in a small town in Mississippi. She held his hand and at times patted his knee while she unveiled the forlorn history of their family. She laid out the barest details of Sam's Klan activities, and of the Kramer bombing, and of the trials that eventually sent him to death row in Mississippi. There were gaps in her oral history large enough to fill libraries, but she covered the high spots with a great deal of finesse.

For an insecure sixteen-year-old who'd just lost his father, Adam took the whole thing rather well. He asked a few questions as a cool wind found the coast and they huddled together, but for the most part he just listened, not in shock or anger, but with enormous fascination. This awful tale was oddly satisfying. There was a family out there! Perhaps he wasn't so abnormal after all. Perhaps there were aunts and uncles and cousins with lives to share and stories to tell. Perhaps there were old homes built by real ancestors, and land and farms upon which they settled. He had a history after all.

But Lee was wise and quick enough to recognize this interest. She explained that the Cayhalls were a strange and secret breed who kept to themselves and shunned outsiders. They were not friendly and warm people who gathered for Christmas and reunited on the Fourth of July. She lived just an hour away from Clanton, yet never saw them.

The visits to the pier at dusk became a ritual for the next week. They would stop at the market and buy a sack of red grapes, then spit seeds into the ocean until well past dark. Lee told stories of her childhood in Mississippi with her little brother Eddie. They lived on a small farm fifteen minutes from Clanton, with ponds to fish in and ponies to ride. Sam was a decent father; not overbearing but certainly not affectionate. Her mother was a weak woman who disliked Sam but doted on her children. She lost a baby, a newborn, when Lee was six and Eddie was almost four, and she stayed in her bedroom for almost a year. Sam hired a black woman to care for Eddie and Lee. Her mother died of cancer, and it was the last time the Cayhalls gathered. Eddie sneaked into town for the funeral, but tried to avoid everyone. Three years later Sam was arrested for the last time and convicted.

Lee had little to say about her own life. She left home in a hurry at the age of eighteen, the week after high school graduation, and went straight to Nashville to get famous as a recording artist. Somehow she met Phelps Booth, a graduate student at Vanderbilt whose family owned banks. They were eventually married and settled into what appeared to be a miserable existence in Memphis.

They had one son, Walt, who evidently was quite rebellious and now lived in Amsterdam. These were the only details.

Adam couldn't tell if Lee had transformed herself into something other than a Cayhall, but he suspected she had. Who could blame her?

Lee left as quietly as she had come. Without a hug or a farewell, she eased from their home before dawn, and was gone. She called two days later and talked to Adam and Carmen. She encouraged them to write, which they eagerly did, but the calls and letters from her became further apart. The promise of a new relationship slowly faded. Their mother made excuses. She said Lee was a good person, but she was nonetheless a Cayhall, and thus given to a certain amount of gloom and weirdness. Adam was crushed.

The summer after his graduation from Pepperdine, Adam and a friend drove across the country to Key West. They stopped in Memphis and spent two nights with Aunt Lee. She lived alone in a spacious, modern condo on a bluff overlooking the river, and they sat for hours on the patio, just the three of them, eating homemade pizza, drinking beer, watching barges, and talking about almost everything. Family was never mentioned. Adam was excited about law school, and Lee was full of questions about his future. She was vibrant and fun and talkative, the perfect hostess and aunt. When they hugged good-bye, her eyes watered and she begged him to come again.

Adam and his friend avoided Mississippi. They drove eastward instead, through Tennessee and the Smoky Mountains. At one point, according to Adam's calculations, they were within a hundred miles of Parchman and death row and Sam Cayhall. That was four years ago, in the summer of 1986, and he already had collected a large box full of materials about his grandfather. His video was almost complete.

Their conversation on the phone last night had been brief. Adam said he would be living in Memphis for a few months, and would like to see her. Lee invited him to her condo, the same one on the bluff, where she had four bedrooms and a part-time maid. He would live with her, she insisted. Then he said he would be working in the Memphis office, working on Sam's case as a matter of fact. There was silence on the other end, then a weak offer to come on down anyway and they would talk about it.

Adam pushed her doorbell at a few minutes after nine, and glanced at his black Saab convertible. The development was nothing but a single row of twenty units, all stacked tightly together with red-tiled roofs. A broad brick wall with heavy iron grating along the top protected those inside from the dangers of downtown Memphis. An armed guard worked the only gate. If not for the view of the river on the other side, the condos would be virtually worthless.

Lee opened the door and they pecked each other on the cheeks. "Welcome," she said, looking at the parking lot, then locking the door behind him. "Are you tired?"

"Not really. It's a ten-hour drive but it took me twelve. I was not in a hurry."

"Are you hungry?"

"No. I stopped a few hours ago." He followed her into the den where they faced each other and tried to think of something appropriate to say. She was almost fifty, and had aged a lot in the past four years. The hair was now an equal mixture of gray and brunette, and much longer. She pulled it tightly into a ponytail. Her soft blue eyes were red and worried, and surrounded by more wrinkles. She wore an oversized cotton button-down and faded jeans. Lee was still cool.

"It's good to see you," she said with a nice smile.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Let's sit on the patio." She took his hand and led him through the glass doors onto a wooden deck where baskets of ferns and bougainvillea hung from wooden beams. The river was below them. They sat in white wicker rockers. "How's Carmen?" she asked as she poured iced tea from a ceramic pitcher.

“Fine. Still in grad school at Berkeley. We talk once a week. She’s dating a guy pretty serious.”

“What’s she studying now? I forget.”

“Psychology. Wants to get her doctorate, then maybe teach.” The tea was strong on lemon and short on sugar. Adam sipped it slowly. The air was still muggy and hot. “It’s almost ten o’clock,” he said. “Why is it so hot?”

“Welcome to Memphis, dear. We’ll roast through September.”

“I couldn’t stand it.”

“You get used to it. Sort of. We drink lots of tea and stay inside. How’s your mother?”

“Still in Portland. Now married to a man who made a fortune in timber. I’ve met him once. He’s probably sixty-five, but could pass for seventy. She’s forty-seven and looks forty. A beautiful couple. They jet here and there, St. Barts, southern France, Milan, all the places where the rich need to be seen. She’s very happy. Her kids are grown. Eddie’s dead. Her past is tucked neatly away. And she has plenty of money. Her life is very much in order.”

“You’re too harsh.”

“I’m too easy. She really doesn’t want me around because I’m a painful link to my father and his pathetic family.”

“Your mother loves you, Adam.”

“Boy that’s good to hear. How do you know so much?”

“I just know.”

“Didn’t realize you and Mom were so close.”

“We’re not. Settle down, Adam. Take it easy.”

“I’m sorry. I’m wired, that’s all. I need a stronger drink.”

“Relax. Let’s have some fun while you’re here.”

“It’s not a fun visit, Aunt Lee.”

“Just call me Lee, okay.”

“Okay. I’m going to see Sam tomorrow.”

She carefully placed her glass on the table, then stood and left the patio. She returned with a bottle of Jack Daniel’s, and poured a generous shot into both glasses. She took a long drink and stared at the river in the distance. “Why?” she finally asked.

“Why not? Because he’s my grandfather. Because he’s about to die. Because I’m a lawyer and he needs help.”

“He doesn’t even know you.”

“He will tomorrow.”

“So you’ll tell him?”

“Yes, of course I’m going to tell him. Can you believe it? I’m actually going to tell a deep, dark, nasty Cayhall secret. What about that?”

Lee held her glass with both hands and slowly shook her head. “He’ll die,” she mumbled without looking at Adam.

“Not yet. But it’s nice to know you’re concerned.”

“I am concerned.”

“Oh really. When did you last see him?”

“Don’t start this, Adam. You don’t understand.”

“Fine. Fair enough. Explain it to me then. I’m listening. I want to understand.”

“Can’t we talk about something else, dear? I’m not ready for this.”

“No.”

“We can talk about this later, I promise. I’m just not ready for it right now. I thought we’d just gossip and laugh for a while.”

“I’m sorry, Lee. I’m sick of gossip and secrets. I have no past because my father conveniently erased it. I want to know about it, Lee. I want to know how bad it really is.”

“It’s awful,” she whispered, almost to herself.

“Okay. I’m a big boy now. I can handle it. My father checked out on me before he had to face it, so I’m afraid there’s no one but you.”

“Give me some time.”

“There is no time. I’ll be face-to-face with him tomorrow.” Adam took a long drink and wiped his lips with his sleeve. “Twenty-three years ago, Newsweek said Sam’s father was also a Klansman. Was he?”

“Yes. My grandfather.”

“And several uncles and cousins as well.”

“The whole damned bunch.”

“Newsweek also said that it was common knowledge in Ford County that Sam Cayhall shot and killed a black man in the early

fifties, and was never arrested for it. Never served a day in jail. Is this true?"

"Why does it matter now, Adam? That was years before you were born."

"So it really happened?"

"Yes, it happened."

"And you knew about it?"

"I saw it."

"You saw it!" Adam closed his eyes in disbelief. He breathed heavily and sunk lower into the rocker. The horn from a tugboat caught his attention, and he followed it downriver until it passed under a bridge. The bourbon was beginning to soothe.

"Let's talk about something else," Lee said softly.

"Even when I was a little kid," he said, still watching the river, "I loved history. I was fascinated by the way people lived years ago—the pioneers, the wagon trains, the gold rush, cowboys and Indians, the settling of the West. There was a kid in the fourth grade who claimed his great-great-grandfather had robbed trains and buried the money in Mexico. He wanted to form a gang and run away to find the money. We knew he was lying, but it was great fun playing along. I often wondered about my ancestors, and I remember being puzzled because I didn't seem to have any."

"What would Eddie say?"

"He told me they were all dead; said more time is wasted on family history than anything else. Every time I asked questions about my family, Mother would pull me aside and tell me to stop because it might upset him and he might go off into one of his dark moods and stay in his bedroom for a month. I spent most of my childhood walking on eggshells around my father. As I grew older, I began to realize he was a very strange man, very unhappy, but I never dreamed he would kill himself."

She rattled her ice and took the last sip. "There's a lot to it, Adam."

"So when will you tell me?"

Lee gently took the pitcher and refilled their glasses. Adam poured bourbon into both. Several minutes passed as they sipped

and watched the traffic on Riverside Drive.

"Have you been to death row?" he finally asked, still staring at the lights along the river.

"No," she said, barely audible.

"He's been there for almost ten years, and you've never gone to see him?"

"I wrote him a letter once, shortly after his last trial. Six months later he wrote me back and told me not to come. Said he didn't want me to see him on death row. I wrote him two more letters, neither of which he answered."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I'm carrying a lot of guilt, Adam, and it's not easy to talk about. Just give me some time."

"I may be in Memphis for a while."

"I want you to stay here. We'll need each other." She hesitated and stirred the drink with an index finger. "I mean, he is going to die, isn't he?"

"It's likely."

"When?"

"Two or three months. His appeals are virtually exhausted. There's not much left."

"Then why are you getting involved?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because we have a fighting chance. I'll work my tail off for the next few months and pray for a miracle."

"I'll be praying too," she said as she took another sip.

"Can we talk about something?" he asked, suddenly looking at her.

"Sure."

"Do you live here alone? I mean, it's a fair question if I'm going to be staying here."

"I live alone. My husband lives in our house in the country."

"Does he live alone? Just curious."

"Sometimes. He likes young girls, early twenties, usually employees at his banks. I'm expected to call before I go to the house. And he's expected to call before he comes here."

"That's nice and convenient. Who negotiated that agreement?"

“We just sort of worked it out over time. We haven’t lived together in fifteen years.”

“Some marriage.”

“It works quite well, actually. I take his money, and I ask no questions about his private life. We do the required little social numbers together, and he’s happy.”

“Are you happy?”

“Most of the time.”

“If he cheats, why don’t you sue for divorce and clean him out. I’ll represent you.”

“A divorce wouldn’t work. Phelps comes from a very proper, stiff old family of miserably rich people. Old Memphis society. Some of these families have intermarried for decades. In fact, Phelps was expected to marry a fifth cousin, but instead he fell under my charms. His family was viciously opposed to it, and a divorce now would be a painful admission that his family was right. Plus, these people are proud bluebloods, and a nasty divorce would humiliate them. I love the independence of taking his money and living as I choose.”

“Did you ever love him?”

“Of course. We were madly in love when we married. We eloped, by the way. It was 1963, and the idea of a large wedding with his family of aristocrats and my family of rednecks was not appealing. His mother would not speak to me, and my father was burning crosses. At that time, Phelps did not know my father was a Klansman, and of course I desperately wanted to keep it quiet.”

“Did he find out?”

“As soon as Daddy was arrested for the bombing, I told him. He in turn told his father, and the word was spread slowly and carefully through the Booth family. These people are quite proficient at keeping secrets. It’s the only thing they have in common with us Cayhalls.”

“So only a few know you’re Sam’s daughter?”

“Very few. I’d like to keep it that way.”

“You’re ashamed of—”

“Hell yes I’m ashamed of my father! Who wouldn’t be?” Her words were suddenly sharp and bitter. “I hope you don’t have some romanticized image of this poor old man suffering on death row, about to be unjustly crucified for his sins.”

“I don’t think he should die.”

“Neither do I. But he’s damned sure killed enough people—the Kramer twins, their father, your father, and God knows who else. He should stay in prison for the rest of his life.”

“You have no sympathy for him?”

“Occasionally. If I’m having a good day and the sun is shining, then I might think of him and remember a small pleasant event from my childhood. But those moments are very rare, Adam. He has caused much misery in my life and in the lives of those around him. He taught us to hate everybody. He was mean to our mother. His whole damned family is mean.”

“So let’s just kill him then.”

“I didn’t say that, Adam, and you’re being unfair. I think about him all the time. I pray for him every day. I’ve asked these walls a million times why and how my father became such a horrible person. Why can’t he be some nice old man right now sitting on the front porch with a pipe and a cane, maybe a little bourbon in a glass, for his stomach, of course? Why did my father have to be a Klansman who killed innocent children and ruined his own family?”

“Maybe he didn’t intend to kill them.”

“They’re dead, aren’t they? The jury said he did it. They were blown to bits and buried side by side in the same neat little grave. Who cares if he intended to kill them? He was there, Adam.”

“It could be very important.”

Lee jumped to her feet and grabbed his hand. “Come here,” she insisted. They stepped a few feet to the edge of the patio. She pointed to the Memphis skyline several blocks away. “You see that flat building facing the river there. The nearest to us. Just over there, three or four blocks away.”

“Yes,” he answered slowly.

“The top floor is the fifteenth, okay. Now, from the right, count down six levels. Do you follow?”

“Yes,” Adam nodded and counted obediently. The building was a showy high-rise.

“Now, count four windows to the left. There’s a light on. Do you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Guess who lives there.”

“How would I know?”

“Ruth Kramer.”

“Ruth Kramer! The mother?”

“That’s her.”

“Do you know her?”

“We met once, by accident. She knew I was Lee Booth, wife of the infamous Phelps Booth, but that was all. It was a glitzy fundraiser for the ballet or something. I’ve always avoided her if possible.”

“This must be a small town.”

“It can be tiny. If you could ask her about Sam, what would she say?”

Adam stared at the lights in the distance. “I don’t know. I’ve read that she’s still bitter.”

“Bitter? She lost her entire family. She’s never remarried. Do you think she cares if my father intended to kill her children? Of course not. She just knows they’re dead, Adam, dead for twenty-three years now. She knows they were killed by a bomb planted by my father, and if he’d been home with his family instead of riding around at night with his idiot buddies, little Josh and John would not be dead. They instead would be twenty-eight years old, probably very well educated and married with perhaps a baby or two for Ruth and Marvin to play with. She doesn’t care who the bomb was intended for, Adam, only that it was placed there and it exploded. Her babies are dead. That’s all that matters.”

Lee stepped backward and sat in her rocker. She rattled her ice again and took a drink. “Don’t get me wrong, Adam. I’m opposed to the death penalty. I’m probably the only fifty-year-old white woman in the country whose father is on death row. It’s barbaric, immoral, discriminatory, cruel, uncivilized—I subscribe to all the above. But

don't forget the victims, okay. They have the right to want retribution. They've earned it."

"Does Ruth Kramer want retribution?"

"By all accounts, yes. She doesn't say much to the press anymore, but she's active with victims groups. Years ago she was quoted as saying she would be in the witness room when Sam Cayhall was executed."

"Not exactly a forgiving spirit."

"I don't recall my father asking for forgiveness."

Adam turned and sat on the ledge with his back to the river. He glanced at the buildings downtown, then studied his feet. Lee took another long drink.

"Well, Aunt Lee, what are we going to do?"

"Please drop the Aunt."

"Okay, Lee. I'm here. I'm not leaving. I'll visit Sam tomorrow, and when I leave I intend to be his lawyer."

"Do you intend to keep it quiet?"

"The fact that I'm really a Cayhall? I don't plan to tell anyone, but I'll be surprised if it's a secret much longer. When it comes to death row inmates, Sam's a famous one. The press will start some serious digging pretty soon."

Lee folded her feet under her and stared at the river. "Will it harm you?" she asked softly.

"Of course not. I'm a lawyer. Lawyers defend child molesters and assassins and drug dealers and rapists and terrorists. We are not popular people. How can I be harmed by the fact that he's my grandfather?"

"Your firm knows?"

"I told them yesterday. They were not exactly delighted, but they came around. I hid it from them, actually, when they hired me, and I was wrong to do so. But I think things are okay."

"What if he says no?"

"Then we'll be safe, won't we? No one will ever know, and you'll be protected. I'll go back to Chicago and wait for CNN to cover the carnival of the execution. And I'm sure I'll drive down one cool day in the fall and put some flowers on his grave, probably look at the

tombstone and ask myself again why he did it and how he became such a lowlife and why was I born into such a wretched family, you know, the questions we've been asking for many years. I'll invite you to come with me. It'll be sort of a little family reunion, you know, just us Cayhalls slithering through the cemetery with a cheap bouquet of flowers and thick sunglasses so no one will discover us."

"Stop it," she said, and Adam saw the tears. They were flowing and were almost to her chin when she wiped them with her fingers.

"I'm sorry," he said, then turned to watch another barge inch north through the shadows of the river. "I'm sorry, Lee."

Eight

So after twenty-three years, he was finally returning to the state of his birth. He didn't particularly feel welcome, and though he wasn't particularly afraid of anything he drove a cautious fifty-five and refused to pass anyone. The road narrowed and sunk onto the flat plain of the Mississippi Delta, and for a mile Adam watched as a levee snaked its way to the right and finally disappeared. He eased through the hamlet of Walls, the first town of any size along 61, and followed the traffic south.

Through his considerable research, he knew that this highway had for decades served as the principal conduit for hundreds of thousands of poor Delta blacks journeying north to Memphis and St. Louis and Chicago and Detroit, places where they sought jobs and decent housing. It was in these towns and farms, these ramshackle shotgun houses and dusty country stores and colorful juke joints along Highway 61 where the blues was born and spread northward. The music found a home in Memphis where it was blended with gospel and country, and together they spawned rock and roll. He listened to an old Muddy Waters cassette as he entered the infamous county of Tunica, said to be the poorest in the nation.

The music did little to calm him. He had refused breakfast at Lee's, said he wasn't hungry but in fact had a knot in his stomach. The knot grew with each mile.

Just north of the town of Tunica, the fields grew vast and ran to the horizon in all directions. The soybeans and cotton were knee high. A small army of green and red tractors with plows behind them crisscrossed the endless neat rows of leafy foliage. Though it was not yet nine o'clock, the weather was already hot and sticky. The ground was dry, and clouds of dust smoldered behind each plow. An occasional crop duster dropped from nowhere and

acrobatically skimmed the tops of the fields, then soared upward. Traffic was heavy and slow, and sometimes forced almost to a standstill as a monstrous John Deere of some variety inched along as if the highway were deserted.

Adam was patient. He was not expected until ten, and it wouldn't matter if he arrived late.

At Clarksdale, he left Highway 61 and headed southeast on 49, through the tiny settlements of Mattson and Dublin and Tutwiler, through more soybean fields. He passed cotton gins, now idle but waiting for the harvest. He passed clusters of impoverished row houses and dirty mobile homes, all for some reason situated close to the highway. He passed an occasional fine home, always at a distance, always sitting majestically under heavy oaks and elms, and usually with a fenced swimming pool to one side. There was no doubt who owned these fields.

A road sign declared the state penitentiary to be five miles ahead, and Adam instinctively slowed his car. A moment later, he ran up on a large tractor pattering casually down the road, and instead of passing he chose to follow. The operator, an old white man with a dirty cap, motioned for him to come around. Adam waved, and stayed behind the plow at twenty miles per hour. There was no other traffic in sight. A random dirt clod flung from a rear tractor tire, and landed just inches in front of the Saab. He slowed a bit more. The operator twisted in his seat, and again waved for Adam to come around. His mouth moved and his face was angry, as if this were his highway and he didn't appreciate idiots following his tractor. Adam smiled and waved again, but stayed behind him.

Minutes later, he saw the prison. There were no tall chain-link fences along the road. There were no lines of glistening razor wire to prevent escape. There were no watchtowers with armed guards. There were no gangs of inmates howling at the passersby. Instead, Adam saw an entrance to the right and the words MISSISSIPPI STATE PENITENTIARY spanning from an arch above it. Next to the entrance were several buildings, all facing the highway and apparently unguarded.

Adam waved once again at the tractor operator, then eased from the highway. He took a deep breath, and studied the entrance. A female in uniform stepped from a guardhouse under the arch, and stared at him. Adam drove slowly to her, and lowered his window.

“Mornin’,” she said. She had a gun on her hip and a clipboard in her hand. Another guard watched from inside. “What can we do for you?”

“I’m a lawyer, here to see a client on death row,” Adam said weakly, very much aware of his shrill and nervous voice. Just calm down, he told himself.

“We ain’t got nobody on death row, sir.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Ain’t no such place as death row. We got a bunch of ’em in the Maximum Security Unit, that’s MSU for short, but you can look all over this place and you won’t find no death row.”

“Okay.”

“Name?” she said, studying the clipboard.

“Adam Hall.”

“And your client?”

“Sam Cayhall.” He half-expected some sort of response to this, but the guard didn’t care. She flipped a sheet, and said, “Stay right here.”

The entrance became a driveway with shade trees and small buildings on each side. This wasn’t a prison—this was a pleasant little street in a small town where any minute now a group of kids would appear on bicycles and roller skates. To the right was a quaint structure with a front porch and flower beds. A sign said this was the Visitors Center, as if souvenirs and lemonade were on sale for eager tourists. A white pickup with three young blacks in it and Mississippi Department of Corrections stenciled on the door passed by without slowing a bit.

Adam caught a glimpse of the guard standing behind his car. She was writing something on the clipboard as she approached his window. “Where’bouts in Illinois?” she asked.

“Chicago.”

“Got any cameras, guns, or tape recorders?”

“No.”

She reached inside and placed a card on his dash. Then she returned to her clipboard, and said, “Got a note here that you’re supposed to see Lucas Mann.”

“Who’s that?”

“He’s the prison attorney.”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to see him.”

She held a piece of paper three feet from his face. “Says so right here. Take the third left, just up there, then wind around to the back of that red brick building.” She was pointing.

“What does he want?”

She snorted and shrugged at the same time, and walked to the guardhouse shaking her head. Dumbass lawyers.

Adam gently pressed the accelerator and eased by the Visitors Center and down the shaded drive. On both sides were neat white frame houses where, he learned later, prison guards and other employees lived with their families. He followed her instructions and parked in front of an aging brick building. Two trustees in blue prison pants with white stripes down the legs swept the front steps. Adam avoided eye contact and went inside.

He found the unmarked office of Lucas Mann with little trouble. A secretary smiled at him, and opened another door to a large office where Mr. Mann was standing behind his desk and talking on the phone.

“Just have a seat,” the secretary whispered as she closed the door behind him. Mann smiled and waved awkwardly as he listened to the phone. Adam sat his briefcase in a chair and stood behind it. The office was large and clean. Two long windows faced the highway and provided plenty of light. On the wall to the left was a large framed photo of a familiar face, a handsome young man with an earnest smile and strong chin. It was David McAllister, governor of the State of Mississippi. Adam suspected identical photos were hung in every state government office, and also plastered in every hallway, closet, and toilet under the state’s domain.

Lucas Mann stretched the phone cord and walked to a window, his back to the desk and Adam. He certainly didn’t appear to be a

lawyer. He was in his mid-fifties with flowing dark gray hair which he somehow pulled and kept situated on the back of his neck. His dress was the hippest of fraternity chic—severely starched khaki workshirt with two pockets and a mixed salad tie, still tied but hanging loose; top button unbuttoned to reveal a gray cotton tee shirt; brown chinos, likewise starched to the crunch with a perfect one-inch cuff falling just enough to allow a peek at white socks; loafers shined immaculately. It was obvious Lucas knew how to dress, and also obvious he was engaged in a different practice of law. If he'd had a small earring in his left lobe, he would have been the perfect aging hippie who in his later years was yielding to conformity.

The office was neatly furnished with government hand-me-downs: a worn wooden desk that seemed impeccably organized; three metal chairs with vinyl cushions; a row of mismatched file cabinets along one wall. Adam stood behind a chair and tried to calm himself. Could this meeting be required of all visiting attorneys? Surely not. There were five thousand inmates in Parchman. Garner Goodman had not mentioned a visit with Lucas Mann.

The name was vaguely familiar. Somewhere deep in one of his boxes of court files and newspaper clippings he had seen the name of Lucas Mann, and he desperately tried to remember if he was a good guy or a bad one. What exactly was his role in death penalty litigation? Adam knew for certain that the enemy was the state's Attorney General, but he couldn't fit Lucas into the scenario.

Mann suddenly hung up the phone and shoved a hand at Adam. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Hall. Please have a seat," he said softly in a pleasant drawl as he waved at a chair. "Thanks for stopping by."

Adam took a seat. "Sure. A pleasure to meet you," he replied nervously. "What's up?"

"A couple of things. First, I just wanted to meet you and say hello. I've been the attorney here for twelve years. I do most of the civil litigation that this place spews forth, you know, all kinds of crazy litigation filed by our guests—prisoners' rights, damage suits, that kind of stuff. We get sued every day, it seems. By statute, I also play

a small role in the death cases, and I understand you're here to visit Sam."

"That's correct."

"Has he hired you?"

"Not exactly."

"I didn't think so. This presents a small problem. You see, you're not supposed to visit an inmate unless you actually represent him, and I know that Sam has successfully terminated Kravitz & Bane."

"So I can't see him?" Adam asked, almost with a trace of relief.

"You're not supposed to. I had a long talk yesterday with Garner Goodman. He and I go back a few years to the Maynard Tole execution. Are you familiar with that one?"

"Vaguely."

"Nineteen eighty-six. It was my second execution," he said as if he'd personally pulled the switch. He sat on the edge of his desk and looked down at Adam. The starch crackled gently in his chinos. His right leg swung from the desk. "I've had four, you know. Sam could be the fifth. Anyway, Garner represented Maynard Tole, and we got to know each other. He's a fine gentleman and fierce advocate."

"Thanks," Adam said because he could think of nothing else.

"I hate them, personally."

"You're opposed to the death penalty?"

"Most of the time. I go through stages, actually. Every time we kill someone here I think the whole world's gone crazy. Then, invariably, I'll review one of these cases and remember how brutal and horrible some of these crimes were. My first execution was Teddy Doyle Meeks, a drifter who raped, mutilated, and killed a little boy. There was not much sadness here when he was gassed. But, hey, listen, I could tell war stories forever. Maybe we'll have time for it later, okay?"

"Sure," Adam said without commitment. He could not envision a moment when he wanted to hear stories about violent murderers and their executions.

"I told Garner that I didn't think you should be permitted to visit Sam. He listened for a while, then he explained, rather vaguely I must say, that perhaps yours was a special situation, and that you

should be allowed at least one visit. He wouldn't say what was so special about it, know what I mean?" Lucas rubbed his chin when he said this as if he had almost solved the puzzle. "Our policy is rather strict, especially for MSU. But the warden will do whatever I ask." He said this very slowly, and the words hung in the air.

"I, uh, really need to see him," Adam said, his voice almost cracking.

"Well, he needs a lawyer. Frankly, I'm glad you're here. We've never executed one unless his lawyer was present. There's all sorts of legal maneuvering up to the very last minute, and I'll just feel better if Sam has a lawyer." He walked around the desk and took a seat on the other side. He opened a file and studied a piece of paper. Adam waited and tried to breathe normally.

"We do a fair amount of background on our death inmates," Lucas said, still looking at the file. The statement had the tone of a solemn warning. "Especially when the appeals have run and the execution is looming. Do you know anything about Sam's family?"

The knot suddenly felt like a basketball in Adam's stomach. He managed to shrug and shake his head at the same time, as if to say he knew nothing.

"Do you plan to talk to Sam's family?"

Again, no response, just the same inept shrug of the shoulders, very heavy shoulders at this moment.

"I mean, normally, in these cases, there's quite a lot of contact with the condemned man's family as the execution gets closer. You'll probably want to contact these folks. Sam has a daughter in Memphis, a Mrs. Lee Booth. I have an address, if you want it." Lucas watched him suspiciously. Adam could not move. "Don't suppose you know her, do you?"

Adam shook his head, but said nothing.

"Sam had one son, Eddie Cayhall, but the poor guy committed suicide in 1981. Lived in California. Eddie left two children, a son born in Clanton, Mississippi, on May 12, 1964, which, oddly enough, is your birthday, according to my Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory. Says you were born in Memphis on the same day. Eddie

also left a daughter who was born in California. These are Sam's grandchildren. I'll try and contact them, if you—"

"Eddie Cayhall was my father," Adam blurted out, and he took a deep breath. He sank lower in the chair and stared at the top of the desk. His heart pounded furiously, but at least he was breathing again. His shoulders were suddenly lighter. He even managed a very small smile.

Mann's face was expressionless. He thought for a long minute, then said with a hint of satisfaction, "I sort of figured that." He immediately started flipping papers as if the file possessed many other surprises. "Sam's been a very lonely man on death row, and I've often wondered about his family. He gets some mail, but almost none from his family. Virtually no visitors, not that he wants any. But it's a bit unusual for such a noted inmate to be ignored by his family. Especially a white one. I don't pry, you understand."

"Of course not."

Lucas ignored this. "We have to make preparations for the execution, Mr. Hall. For example, we have to know what to do with the body. Funeral arrangements and all. That's where the family comes in. After I talked to Garner yesterday, I asked some of our people in Jackson to track down the family. It was really quite easy. They also checked your paperwork, and immediately discovered that the State of Tennessee has no record of the birth of Adam Hall on May 12, 1964. One thing sort of led to another. It wasn't difficult."

"I'm not hiding anymore."

"When did you learn about Sam?"

"Nine years ago. My aunt, Lee Booth, told me after we buried my father."

"Have you had any contact with Sam?"

"No."

Lucas closed the file and reclined in his squeaky chair. "So Sam has no idea who you are or why you're here?"

"That's right."

"Wow," he whistled at the ceiling.

Adam relaxed a bit and sat up in his chair. The cat was now out of the bag, and had it not been for Lee and her fears of being discovered he would have felt completely at ease. “How long can I see him today?” he asked.

“Well, Mr. Hall—”

“Just call me Adam, okay.”

“Sure, Adam, we really have two sets of rules for the Row.”

“Excuse me, but I was told by a guard at the gate that there was no death row.”

“Not officially. You’ll never hear the guards or other personnel refer to it as anything but Maximum Security or MSU or Unit 17. Anyway, when a man’s time is about up on the Row we relax the rules quite a bit. Normally, a visit with the lawyer is limited to an hour a day, but in Sam’s case you can have all the time you need. I suspect you’ll have a lot to talk about.”

“So there’s no time limit?”

“No. You can stay all day if you like. We try to make things easy in the last days. You can come and go as you please as long as there’s no security risk. I’ve been to death row in five other states, and, believe me, we treat them the best. Hell, in Louisiana they take the poor guy out of his unit and place him in what’s called the Death House for three days before they kill him. Talk about cruel. We don’t do that. Sam will be treated special until the big day.”

“The big day?”

“Yeah. It’s four weeks from today, you know? August 8.” Lucas reached for some papers on the corner of his desk, then handed them to Adam. “This came down this morning. The Fifth Circuit lifted the stay late yesterday afternoon. The Mississippi Supreme Court just set a new execution date for August 8.”

Adam held the papers without looking at them. “Four weeks,” he said, stunned.

“Afraid so. I took a copy of it to Sam about an hour ago, so he’s in a foul mood.”

“Four weeks,” Adam repeated, almost to himself. He glanced at the court’s opinion. The case was styled State of Mississippi v. Sam

Cayhall. "I guess I'd better go see him, don't you think?" he said without thinking.

"Yeah. Look, Adam, I'm not one of the bad guys, okay?" Lucas slowly eased to his feet and walked to the edge of his desk where he gently placed his rear. He folded his arms and looked down at Adam. "I'm just doing my job, okay. I'll be involved because I have to watch this place and make sure things are done legally, by the book. I won't enjoy it, but it'll get crazy and quite stressful, and everybody will be ringing my phone—the warden, his assistants, the Attorney General's office, the governor, you, and a hundred others. So I'll be in the middle of it, though I don't want to. It's the most unpleasant thing about this job. I just want you to realize that I'm here if you need me, okay? I'll always be fair and truthful with you."

"You're assuming Sam will allow me to represent him."

"Yes. I'm assuming this."

"What are the chances of the execution taking place in four weeks?"

"Fifty-fifty. You never know what the courts will do at the last minute. We'll start preparing in a week or so. We have a rather long checklist of things to do to get ready for it."

"Sort of a blueprint for death."

"Something like that. Don't think we enjoy it."

"I guess everybody here is just doing their job, right?"

"It's the law of this state. If our society wants to kill criminals, then someone has to do it."

Adam placed the court opinion in his briefcase and stood in front of Lucas. "Thanks, I guess, for the hospitality."

"Don't mention it. After you visit with Sam, I'll need to know what happened."

"I'll send you a copy of our representation agreement, if he signs it."

"That's all I need."

They shook hands and Adam headed for the door.

"One other thing," Lucas said. "When they bring Sam into the visiting room, ask the guards to remove the handcuffs. I'll make sure

they do. It'll mean a lot to Sam."

"Thanks."

"Good luck."

Nine

The temperature had risen at least ten degrees when Adam left the building and walked past the same two trustees sweeping the same dirt in the same languid motions. He stopped on the front steps, and for a moment watched a gang of inmates gather litter along the highway less than a hundred yards away. An armed guard on a horse in a ditch watched them. Traffic zipped along without slowing. Adam wondered what manner of criminals were these who were allowed to work outside the fences and so close to a highway. No one seemed to care about it but him.

He walked the short distance to his car, and was sweating by the time he opened the door and started the engine. He followed the drive through the parking lot behind Mann's office, then turned left onto the main prison road. Again, he was passing neat little white homes with flowers and trees in the front yard. What a civilized little community. An arrow on a road sign pointed left to Unit 17. He turned, very slowly, and within seconds was on a dirt road that led quickly to some serious fencing and razor wire.

The Row at Parchman had been built in 1954, and officially labeled the Maximum Security Unit, or simply MSU. An obligatory plaque on a wall inside listed the date, the name of the governor then, the names of various important and long-forgotten officials who were instrumental in its construction, and, of course, the names of the architect and contractor. It was state of the art for that period—a single-story flat roof building of red brick stretching in two long rectangles from the center.

Adam parked in the dirt lot between two other cars and stared at it. No bars were visible from the outside. No guards patrolled around it. If not for the fences and barbed wire, it could almost pass for an elementary school in the suburbs. Inside a caged yard at the

end of one wing, a solitary inmate dribbled a basketball on a grassless court and flipped it against a crooked backboard.

The fence in front of Adam was at least twelve feet high, and crowned at the top with thick strands of barbed wire and a menacing roll of shiny razor wire. It ran straight and true to the corner where it joined a watchtower where guards looked down. The fence encompassed the Row on all four sides with remarkable symmetry, and in each corner an identical tower stood high above with a glass-enclosed guard station at the top. Just beyond the fence the crops started and seemed to run forever. The Row was literally in the middle of a cotton field.

Adam stepped from his car, felt suddenly claustrophobic, and squeezed the handle of his thin briefcase as he glared through the chain link at the hot, flat little building where they killed people. He slowly removed his jacket, and noticed his shirt was already spotted and sticking to his chest. The knot in his stomach had returned with a vengeance. His first few steps toward the guard station were slow and awkward, primarily because his legs were unsteady and his knees were shivering. His fancy tasseled loafers were dusty by the time he stopped under the watchtower and looked up. A red bucket, the type one might use to wash a car, was being lowered on a rope by an earnest woman in a uniform. "Put your keys in the bucket," she explained efficiently, leaning over the railing. The barbed wire on the top of the fence was five feet below her.

Adam quickly did as she instructed. He carefully laid his keys in the bucket where they joined a dozen other key rings. She jerked it back and he watched it rise for a few seconds, then stop. She tied the rope somehow, and the little red bucket hung innocently in the air. A nice breeze would have moved it gently, but at the moment, in this stifling vacuum, there was scarcely enough air to breathe. The winds had died years ago.

The guard was finished with him. Someone somewhere pushed a button or pulled a lever, Adam had no idea who did it, but a humming noise kicked in, and the first of two bulky, chain-link gates began to slide a few feet so he could enter. He walked fifteen feet along the dirt drive, then stopped as the first gate closed behind

him. He was in the process of learning the first basic rule of prison security—every protected entrance has either two locked doors or gates.

When the first gate stopped behind him and locked itself into place, the second one dutifully snatched itself free and rolled along the fence. As this was happening, a very stocky guard with arms as big as Adam's legs appeared at the main door of the unit and began to amble along the brick path to the entrance. He had a hard belly and a thick neck, and he sort of waited for Adam as Adam waited for the gates to secure everything.

He eased forward an enormous black hand, and said, "Sergeant Packer." Adam shook it and immediately noticed the shiny black cowboy boots on Sergeant Packer's feet.

"Adam Hall," he said, trying to manage the hand.

"Here to see Sam," Packer stated as a fact.

"Yes sir," Adam said, wondering if everyone here referred to him simply as Sam.

"Your first visit here?" They began a slow walk toward the front of the building.

"Yeah," Adam said, looking at the open windows along the nearest tier. "Are all death row inmates here?" he asked.

"Yep. Got forty-seven as of today. Lost one last week."

They were almost to the main door. "Lost one?"

"Yeah. The Big Court reversed. Had to move him in with the general population. I have to frisk you." They were at the door, and Adam glanced around nervously to see just exactly where it was that Packer wished to conduct the frisk.

"Just spread your legs a little," Packer said, already taking the briefcase and placing it on the concrete. The fancy tasseled loafers were now stuck in place. Though he was dizzy and momentarily without the use of all his faculties, Adam could not at this horrible moment remember anyone ever asking him to spread his legs, even just a little.

But Packer was a pro. He patted expertly around the socks, moved up quite delicately to the knees, which were more than a little wobbly, then around the waist in no time flat. Adam's first frisk was

mercifully finished just seconds after it started when Sergeant Packer made a rather cursory pass under both arms as if Adam might be wearing a shoulder harness with a small pistol inside it. Packer deftly stuck his massive right hand into the briefcase, then handed it back to Adam. "Not a good day to see Sam," he said.

"So I've heard," Adam replied, slinging his jacket once again over his shoulder. He faced the iron door as if it was now time to enter the Row.

"This way," Packer mumbled as he stepped down onto the grass and headed around the corner. Adam obediently followed along yet another little red-brick trail until they came to a plain, nondescript door with weeds growing beside it. The door was not marked or labeled.

"What's this?" Adam asked. He vaguely recalled Goodman's description of this place, but at the moment all details were fuzzy.

"Conference room." Packer produced a key and unlocked the door. Adam glanced around before he entered and tried to gather his bearings. The door was next to the central section of the unit, and it occurred to Adam that perhaps the guards and their administrators didn't want the lawyers underfoot and poking around. Thus, the outside entrance.

He took a deep breath and stepped inside. There were no other lawyers visiting their clients, and this was particularly comforting to Adam. This meeting could become tumultuous and perhaps emotional, and he preferred to do it in private. At least for the moment the room was empty. It was large enough for several lawyers to visit and counsel, probably thirty feet long and twelve feet wide with a concrete floor and bright fluorescent lighting. The wall on the far end was red brick with three windows high at the top, just like the exterior of the unit's tiers. It was immediately obvious that the conference room had been added as an afterthought.

The air conditioner, a small window unit, was snarling angrily and producing much less than it should. The room was divided neatly by a solid wall of brick and metal; the lawyers had their side and the clients had theirs. The partition was made of brick for the

first three feet, then a small counter provided the lawyers a place to sit their mandatory legal pads and take their pages of mandatory notes. A bright green screen of thick metal grating sat solidly on the counter and ran up to the ceiling.

Adam walked slowly to the end of the room, sidestepping a varied assortment of chairs—green and gray government throwaways, folding types, narrow cafeteria seats.

“I’m gonna lock this door,” Packer said as he stepped outside. “We’ll get Sam.” The door slammed, and Adam was alone. He quickly picked out a place at the end of the room just in case another lawyer arrived, at which time the other lawyer would undoubtedly take a position far to the other end and they could plot strategy with some measure of privacy. He pulled a chair to the wooden counter, placed his jacket on another chair, removed his legal pad, unscrewed his pen, and began chewing his fingernails. He tried to stop the chewing, but he couldn’t. His stomach flipped violently, and his heels twitched out of control. He looked through the screen and studied the inmates’ portion of the room—the same wooden counter, the same array of old chairs. In the center of the screen before him was a slit, four inches by ten, and it would be through this little hole that he would come face-to-face with Sam Cayhall.

He waited nervously, telling himself to be calm, take it easy, relax, he could handle this. He scribbled something on the legal pad, but honestly couldn’t read it. He rolled up his sleeves. He looked around the room for hidden microphones and cameras, but the place was so simple and modest he couldn’t imagine anyone trying to eavesdrop. If Sergeant Packer was any indication, the staff was laid-back, almost indifferent.

He studied the empty chairs on both sides of the screen, and wondered how many desperate people, in the last hours of their lives, had met here with their attorneys and listened for words of hope. How many urgent pleas had passed through this screen as the clock ticked steadily away? How many lawyers had sat where he was now sitting and told their clients that there was nothing left to do, that the execution would proceed? It was a somber thought, and

it calmed Adam quite a bit. He was not the first to be here, and he would not be the last. He was a lawyer, well trained, blessed with a quick mind, and arriving here with the formidable resources of Kravitz & Bane behind him. He could do his job. His legs slowly became still, and he quit chewing his fingernails.

A door bolt clicked, and he jumped through his skin. It opened slowly, and a young white guard stepped into the inmates' side. Behind him, in a bright red jumpsuit, hands cuffed behind, was Sam Cayhall. He glowered around the room, squinting through the screen, until his eyes focused on Adam. A guard pulled at his elbow and led him to a spot directly across from the lawyer. He was thin, pale, and six inches shorter than both guards, but they seemed to give him plenty of room.

"Who are you?" he hissed at Adam, who at the moment had a fingernail between his teeth.

One guard pulled a chair behind Sam, and the other guard sat him in it. He stared at Adam. The guards backed away, and were about to leave when Adam said, "Could you remove the handcuffs, please?"

"No sir. We can't."

Adam swallowed hard. "Just take them off, okay. We're gonna be here for a while," he said, mustering a degree of forcefulness. The guards looked at each other as if this request had never been heard. A key was quickly produced, and the handcuffs were removed.

Sam was not impressed. He glared at Adam through the opening in the screen as the guards made their noisy departure. The door slammed, and the deadbolt clicked.

They were alone, the Cayhall version of a family reunion. The air conditioner rattled and spewed, and for a long minute it made the only sounds. Though he tried valiantly, Adam was unable to look Sam in the eyes for more than two seconds. He busied himself with important note taking on the legal pad, and as he numbered each line he could feel the heat of Sam's stare.

Finally, Adam stuck a business card through the opening. "My name is Adam Hall. I'm a lawyer with Kravitz & Bane. Chicago and Memphis."

Sam patiently took the card and examined it front and back. Adam watched every move. His fingers were wrinkled and stained brown with cigarette smoke. His face was pallid, the only color coming from the salt and pepper stubble of five days' growth. His hair was long, gray, and oily, and slicked back severely. Adam decided quickly that he looked nothing like the frozen images from the video. Nor did he resemble the last known photos of himself, those from the 1981 trial. He was quite an old man now, with pasty delicate skin and layers of tiny wrinkles around his eyes. Deep burrows of age and misery cut through his forehead. The only attractive feature was the set of piercing, indigo eyes that lifted themselves from the card. "You Jew boys never quit, do you?" he said in a pleasant, even tone. There was no hint of anger.

"I'm not Jewish," Adam said, successfully returning the stare.

"Then how can you work for Kravitz & Bane?" he asked as he set the card aside. His words were soft, slow, and delivered with the patience of a man who'd spent nine and a half years alone in a six-by-nine cell.

"We're an equal opportunity employer."

"That's nice. All proper and legal, I presume. In full compliance with all civil rights decisions and federal do-gooder laws."

"Of course."

"How many partners are in Kravitz & Bane now?"

Adam shrugged. The number varied from year to year. "Around a hundred and fifty."

"A hundred and fifty partners. And how many are women?"

Adam hesitated as he tried to count. "I really don't know. Probably a dozen."

"A dozen," Sam repeated, barely moving his lips. His hands were folded and still, and his eyes did not blink. "So, less than ten percent of your partners are women. How many nigger partners do you have?"

"Could we refer to them as blacks?"

"Oh sure, but of course that too is an antiquated term. They now want to be called African-Americans. Surely you're politically correct enough to know this."

Adam nodded but said nothing.

“How many African-American partners do you have?”

“Four, I believe.”

“Less than three percent. My, my. Kravitz & Bane, that great bastion of civil justice and liberal political action, does, in fact, discriminate against African-Americans and Female-Americans. I just don’t know what to say.”

Adam scratched something illegible on his pad. He could argue, of course, that almost a third of the associates were female and that the firm made diligent efforts to sign the top black law students. He could explain how they had been sued for reverse discrimination by two white males whose job offers disappeared at the last moment.

“How many Jewish-American partners do you have? Eighty percent?”

“I don’t know. It really doesn’t matter to me.”

“Well, it certainly matters to me. I was always embarrassed to be represented by such blatant bigots.”

“A lot of people would find it appropriate.”

Sam carefully reached into the only visible pocket of his jumpsuit, and removed a blue pack of Montclairs and a disposable lighter. The jumpsuit was unbuttoned halfway down the chest, and a thick matting of gray hair showed through the gap. The fabric was a very light cotton. Adam could not imagine life in this place with no air conditioning.

He lit the cigarette and exhaled toward the ceiling. “I thought I was through with you people.”

“They didn’t send me down here. I volunteered.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. You need a lawyer, and—”

“Why are you so nervous?”

Adam jerked his fingernails from his teeth and stopped tapping his feet. “I’m not nervous.”

“Sure you are. I’ve seen lots of lawyers around this place, and I’ve never seen one as nervous as you. What’s the matter, kid? You afraid I’m coming through the screen after you?”

Adam grunted and tried to smile. "Don't be silly. I'm not nervous."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"You look twenty-two. When did you finish law school?"

"Last year."

"Just great. The Jewish bastards have sent a greenhorn to save me. I've known for a long time that they secretly wanted me dead, now this proves it. I killed some Jews, now they want to kill me. I was right all along."

"You admit you killed the Kramer kids?"

"What the hell kind of question is that? The jury said I did. For nine years, the appeals courts have said the jury was right. That's all that matters. Who the hell are you asking me questions like that?"

"You need a lawyer, Mr. Cayhall. I'm here to help."

"I need a lot of things, boy, but I damned sure don't need an eager little tenderfoot like you to give me advice. You're dangerous, son, and you're too ignorant to know it." Again, the words came deliberately and without emotion. He held the cigarette between the index and middle finger of his right hand, and casually flipped ashes in an organized pile in a plastic bowl. His eyes blinked occasionally. His face showed neither feeling nor sentiment.

Adam took meaningless notes, then tried again to stare through the slit into Sam's eyes. "Look, Mr. Cayhall, I'm a lawyer, and I have a strong moral conviction against the death penalty. I am well educated, well trained, well read on Eighth Amendment issues, and I can be of assistance to you. That's why I'm here. Free of charge."

"Free of charge," Sam repeated. "How generous. Do you realize, son, that I get at least three offers a week now from lawyers who want to represent me for free? Big lawyers. Famous lawyers. Rich lawyers. Some real slimy snakes. They're all perfectly willing to sit where you're now sitting, file all the last minute motions and appeals, do the interviews, chase the cameras, hold my hand in the last hours, watch them gas me, then do yet another press conference, then sign a book deal, a movie deal, maybe a television mini-series deal about the life and times of Sam Cayhall, a real Klan

murderer. You see, son, I'm famous, and what I did is now legendary. And since they're about to kill me, then I'm about to become even more famous. Thus, the lawyers want me. I'm worth a lot of money. A sick country, right."

Adam was shaking his head. "I don't want any of that, I promise. I'll put it in writing. I'll sign a complete confidentiality agreement."

Sam chuckled. "Right, and who's going to enforce it after I'm gone?"

"Your family," Adam said.

"Forget my family," Sam said firmly.

"My motives are pure, Mr. Cayhall. My firm has represented you for seven years, so I know almost everything about your file. I've also done quite a lot of research into your background."

"Join the club. I've had my underwear examined by a hundred half-ass reporters. There are many people who know much about me, it seems, and all this combined knowledge is of absolutely no benefit to me right now. I have four weeks. Do you know this?"

"I have a copy of the opinion."

"Four weeks, and they gas me."

"So let's get to work. You have my word that I will never talk to the press unless you authorize it, that I'll never repeat anything you tell me, and that I will not sign any book or movie deal. I swear it."

Sam lit another cigarette and stared at something on the counter. He gently rubbed his right temple with his right thumb, the cigarette just inches from his hair. For a long time the only sound was the gurgling of the overworked window unit. Sam smoked and contemplated. Adam doodled on his pad and was quite proud that his feet were motionless and his stomach was not aching. The silence was awkward, and he figured, correctly, that Sam could sit and smoke and think in utter silence for days.

"Are you familiar with Barroni?" Sam asked quietly.

"Barroni?"

"Yes, Barroni. Came down last week from the Ninth Circuit. California case."

Adam racked his brain for a trace of Barroni. "I might have seen it."

“You might have seen it? You’re well trained, well read, etc., and you might have seen Barroni? What kind of half-ass lawyer are you?”

“I’m not a half-ass lawyer.”

“Right, right. What about Texas v. Eekes? Surely you’ve read that one?”

“When did it come down?”

“Within six weeks.”

“What court?”

“Fifth Circuit.”

“Eighth Amendment?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sam grunted in genuine disgust. “Do you think I’d spend my time reading freedom of speech cases? This is my ass sitting over here, boy, these are my wrists and ankles that will be strapped down. This is my nose the poison will hit.”

“No. I don’t remember Eekes.”

“What do you read?”

“All the important cases.”

“Have you read Barefoot?”

“Of course.”

“Tell me about Barefoot.”

“What is this, a pop quiz?”

“This is whatever I want it to be. Where was Barefoot from?” Sam asked.

“I don’t remember. But the full name was Barefoot v. Estelle, a landmark case in 1983 in which the Supreme Court held that death row inmates cannot hold back valid claims on appeal so they can save them for later. More or less.”

“My, my, you have read it. Does it ever strike you as odd how the same court can change its mind whenever it wants to? Think about it. For two centuries the U.S. Supreme Court allowed legal executions. Said they were constitutional, covered nicely by the Eighth Amendment. Then, in 1972 the U.S. Supreme Court read the same, unchanged Constitution and outlawed the death penalty. Then, in 1976 the U.S. Supreme Court said executions were in fact constitutional after all. Same bunch of turkeys wearing the same

black robes in the same building in Washington. Now, the U.S. Supreme Court is changing the rules again with the same Constitution. The Reagan boys are tired of reading too many appeals, so they declare certain avenues to be closed. Seems odd to me.”

“Seems odd to a lot of people.”

“What about Dulaney?” Sam asked, taking a long drag. There was little or no ventilation in the room and a cloud was forming above them.

“Where’s it from?”

“Louisiana. Surely you’ve read it.”

“I’m sure I have. In fact, I’ve probably read more cases than you, but I don’t always bother to memorize them unless I plan to use them.”

“Use them where?”

“Motions and appeals.”

“So you’ve handled death cases before. How many?”

“This is the first.”

“Why am I not comforted by this? Those Jewish-American lawyers at Kravitz & Bane sent you down here to experiment on me, right? Get yourself a little hands-on training so you can stick it on your résumé.”

“I told you—they didn’t send me down here.”

“How about Garner Goodman? Is he still alive?”

“Yes. He’s your age.”

“Then he doesn’t have long, does he? And Tyner?”

“Mr. Tyner’s doing well. I’ll tell him you asked.”

“Oh please do. Tell him I really miss him, both of them, actually. Hell, it took me almost two years to fire them.”

“They worked their butts off for you.”

“Tell them to send me a bill.” Sam chuckled to himself, his first smile of the meeting. He methodically stubbed out the cigarette in the bowl, and lit another. “Fact is, Mr. Hall, I hate lawyers.”

“That’s the American way.”

“Lawyers chased me, indicted me, prosecuted me, persecuted me, screwed me, then sent me to this place. Since I’ve been here, they’ve

hounded me, screwed me some more, lied to me, and now they're back in the form of you, a rookie zealot without a clue of how to find the damned courthouse."

"You might be surprised."

"It'll be a helluva surprise, son, if you know your ass from a hole in the ground. You'll be the first clown from Kravitz & Bane to possess such information."

"They've kept you out of the gas chamber for the past seven years."

"And I'm supposed to be thankful? There are fifteen residents of the Row with more seniority than me. Why should I be next? I've been here for nine and a half years. Treemont's been here for fourteen years. Of course, he's an African-American and that always helps. They have more rights, you know. It's much harder to execute one of them because whatever they did was someone else's fault."

"That's not true."

"How the hell do you know what's true? A year ago you were still in school, still wearing faded blue jeans all day long, still drinking beer at happy hours with your idealistic little buddies. You haven't lived, son. Don't tell me what's true."

"So you're in favor of swift executions for African-Americans?"

"Not a bad idea, really. In fact, most of these punks deserve the gas."

"I'm sure that's a minority opinion on death row."

"You could say that."

"And you, of course, are different and don't belong here."

"No, I don't belong here. I'm a political prisoner, sent here by an egomaniac who used me for his own political purposes."

"Can we discuss your guilt or innocence?"

"No. But I didn't do what the jury said I did."

"So you had an accomplice? Someone else planted the bomb?"

Sam rubbed the deep burrows in his forehead with his middle finger, as if he was flipping the bird. But he wasn't. He was suddenly in a deep and prolonged trance. The conference room was much cooler than his cell. The conversation was aimless, but at least it was conversation with someone other than a guard or the invisible

inmate next door. He would take his time, make it last as long as possible.

Adam studied his notes and pondered what to say next. They had been chatting for twenty minutes, sparring really, with no clear direction. He was determined to confront their family's history before he left. He just didn't know how to do it.

Minutes passed. Neither looked at the other. Sam lit another Montclair.

"Why do you smoke so much?" Adam finally said.

"I'd rather die of lung cancer. It's a common desire on death row."

"How many packs a day?"

"Three or four."

Another minute passed. Sam slowly finished the cigarette, and kindly asked, "Where'd you go to school?"

"Law school at Michigan. Undergrad at Pepperdine."

"Where's that?"

"California."

"Is that where you grew up?"

"Yeah."

"How many states have the death penalty?"

"Thirty-eight. Most of them don't use it, though. It seems to be popular only in the Deep South, Texas, Florida, and California."

"You know our esteemed legislature has changed the law here. Now we can die by lethal injection. It's more humane. Ain't that nice? Doesn't apply to me, though, since my conviction was years ago. I'll get to sniff the gas."

"Maybe not."

"You're twenty-six?"

"Yeah."

"Born in 1964."

"That's right."

Sam removed another cigarette from the pack and tapped the filter on the counter. "Where?"

"Memphis," Adam replied without looking at him.

"You don't understand, son. This state needs an execution, and I happen to be the nearest victim. Louisiana, Texas, and Florida are

killing them like flies, and the law-abiding people of this state can't understand why our little chamber is not being used. The more violent crime we have, the more people beg for executions. Makes 'em feel better, like the system is working hard to eliminate murderers. The politicians openly campaign with promises of more prisons and tougher sentences and more executions. That's why those clowns in Jackson voted for lethal injection. It's supposed to be more humane, less objectionable, thus easier to implement. You follow?"

Adam nodded his head slightly.

"It's time for an execution, and my number is up. That's why they're pushing like hell. You can't stop it."

"We can certainly try. I want the opportunity."

Sam finally lit the cigarette. He inhaled deeply, then whistled the smoke through a small opening in his lips. He leaned forward slightly on his elbows and peered through the hole in the screen. "What part of California are you from?"

"Southern. L.A." Adam glanced at the piercing eyes, then looked away.

"Your family still there?"

A wicked pain shot through Adam's chest, and for a second his heart froze. Sam puffed his cigarette and never blinked.

"My father's dead," he said with a shaky voice, and sank a few inches in his chair.

A long minute passed as Sam sat poised on the edge of his seat. Finally, he said, "And your mother?"

"She lives in Portland. Remarried."

"Where's your sister?" he asked.

Adam closed his eyes and dropped his head. "She's in college," he mumbled.

"I believe her name is Carmen, right?" Sam asked softly.

Adam nodded. "How'd you know?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Sam backed away from the screen and sank into the folding metal chair. He dropped his current cigarette on the floor without looking

at it. "Why did you come here?" he asked, his voice much firmer and tougher.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"The voice. You sound like your father. Why'd you come here?"

"Eddie sent me."

Their eyes met briefly, then Sam looked away. He slowly leaned forward and planted both elbows on both knees. His gaze was fixed on something on the floor. He grew perfectly still.

Then he placed his right hand over his eyes.

Ten

Phillip Naifeh was sixty-three years old, and nineteen months away from retirement. Nineteen months and four days. He had served as superintendent of the State Department of Corrections for twenty-seven years, and in doing so had survived six governors, an army of state legislators, a thousand prisoners' lawsuits, countless intrusions by the federal courts, and more executions than he cared to remember.

The warden, as he preferred to be called (although the title was officially nonexistent under the terminology of the Mississippi Code), was a full-blooded Lebanese whose parents had immigrated in the twenties and settled in the Delta. They had prospered with a small grocery store in Clarksdale where his mother had become somewhat famous for her homemade Lebanese desserts. He was educated in the public schools, went off to college, returned to the state, and, for reasons long forgotten, had become involved in criminal justice.

He hated the death penalty. He understood society's yearning for it, and long ago he had memorized all the sterile reasons for its necessity. It was a deterrent. It removed killers. It was the ultimate punishment. It was biblical. It satisfied the public's need for retribution. It relieved the anguish of the victim's family. If pressed, he could make these arguments as persuasively as any prosecutor. He actually believed one or two of them.

But the burden of the actual killing was his, and he despised this horrible aspect of his job. It was Phillip Naifeh who walked with the condemned man from his cell to the Isolation Room, as it was called, to suffer the last hour before death. It was Phillip Naifeh who led him next door to the Chamber Room, and supervised the strapping of the legs, arms, and head. "Any last words?" he had

uttered twenty-two times in twenty-seven years. It was left to him to tell the guards to lock the chamber door, and it was left to him to nod to the executioner to pull the levers to mix the deadly gas. He had actually watched the faces of the first two as they died, then decided it was best to watch the faces of the witnesses in the small room behind the chamber. He had to select the witnesses. He had to do a hundred things listed in a manual of how to legally kill death row inmates, including the pronouncing of death, the removal of the body from the chamber, the spraying of it to remove the gas from the clothing, and on and on.

He had once testified before a legislative committee in Jackson, and given his opinions about the death penalty. He had a better idea, he had explained to deaf ears, and his plan would keep condemned killers in the Maximum Security Unit in solitary confinement where they couldn't kill, couldn't escape, and would never be eligible for parole. They would eventually die on death row, but not at the hands of the state.

This testimony made headlines and almost got him fired.

Nineteen months and four days, he thought to himself, as he gently ran his fingers through his thick gray hair and slowly read the latest opinion from the Fifth Circuit. Lucas Mann sat across the desk and waited.

"Four weeks," Naifeh said, putting the opinion aside. "How many appeals are left?" he asked in a gentle drawl.

"The usual assortment of last ditch efforts," Mann replied.

"When did this come down?"

"Early this morning. Sam will appeal it to the Supreme Court, where it will probably be ignored. This should take a week or so."

"What's your opinion, counselor?"

"The meritorious issues have all been presented at this point. I'd give it a fifty percent chance of happening in four weeks."

"That's a lot."

"Something tells me this one might go off."

In the interminable workings of death penalty roulette, a 50 percent chance was close to a certainty. The process would have to be started. The manual would have to be consulted. After years of

endless appeals and delays, the last four weeks would be over in the blink of an eye.

“Have you talked to Sam?” the warden asked.

“Briefly. I took him a copy of the opinion this morning.”

“Garner Goodman called me yesterday, said they were sending down one of their young associates to talk to Sam. Did you take care of it?”

“I talked to Garner, and I talked to the associate. His name is Adam Hall, and he’s meeting with Sam as we speak. Should be interesting. Sam’s his grandfather.”

“His what!”

“You heard me. Sam Cayhall is Adam Hall’s paternal grandfather. We were doing a routine background on Adam Hall yesterday, and noticed a few gray spots. I called the FBI in Jackson, and within two hours they had plenty of circumstantial evidence. I confronted him this morning, and he confessed. I don’t think he’s trying to hide it.”

“But he has a different name.”

“It’s a long story. They haven’t seen each other since Adam was a toddler. His father fled the state after Sam was arrested for the bombing. Moved out West, changed names, drifted around, in and out of work, sounds like a real loser. Killed himself in 1981. Anyway, Adam here goes to college and makes perfect grades. Goes to law school at Michigan, a Top Ten school, and is the editor of the law review. Takes a job with our pals at Kravitz & Bane, and he shows up this morning for the reunion with his grandfather.”

Naifeh now raked both hands through his hair and shook his head. “How wonderful. As if we needed more publicity, more idiotic reporters asking more asinine questions.”

“They’re meeting now. I am assuming Sam will agree to allow the kid to represent him. I certainly hope so. We’ve never executed an inmate without a lawyer.”

“We should do some lawyers without the inmates,” Naifeh said with a forced smile. His hatred for lawyers was legendary, and Lucas didn’t mind. He understood. He had once estimated that Phillip Naifeh had been named as a defendant in more lawsuits than

anyone else in the history of the state. He had earned the right to hate lawyers.

"I retire in nineteen months," he said, as if Lucas had never heard this. "Who's next after Sam?"

Lucas thought a minute and tried to catalog the voluminous appeals of forty-seven inmates. "No one, really. The Pizza Man came close four months ago, but he got his stay. It'll probably expire in a year or so, but there are other problems with his case. I can't see another execution for a couple of years."

"The Pizza Man? Forgive me."

"Malcolm Friar. Killed three pizza delivery boys in a week. At trial he claimed robbery was not the motive, said he was just hungry."

Naifeh raised both hands and nodded. "Okay, okay, I remember. He's the nearest after Sam?"

"Probably. It's hard to say."

"I know." Naifeh gently pushed away from his desk and walked to a window. His shoes were somewhere under the desk. He thrust his hands in his pockets, pressed his toes into the carpet, and thought deeply for a while. He had been hospitalized after the last execution, a mild heart flutter as his doctor preferred to call it. He'd spent a week in a hospital bed watching his little flutter on a monitor, and promised his wife he would never suffer through another execution. If he could somehow survive Sam, then he could retire at full pension.

He turned and stared at his friend Lucas Mann. "I'm not doing this one, Lucas. I'm passing the buck to another man, one of my subordinates, a younger man, a good man, a man who can be trusted, a man who's never seen one of these shows, a man who's just itching to get blood on his hands."

"Not Nugent."

"That's the man. Retired Colonel George Nugent, my trusted assistant."

"He's a nut."

"Yes, but he's our nut, Lucas. He's a fanatic for details, discipline, organization, hell, he's the perfect choice. I'll give him the manual,

tell him what I want, and he'll do a marvelous job of killing Sam Cayhall. He'll be perfect."

George Nugent was an assistant superintendent at Parchman. He had made a name for himself by implementing a most successful boot camp for first offenders. It was a brutal, six-week ordeal in which Nugent strutted and swaggered around in black boots, cursing like a drill instructor and threatening gang rape for the slightest infraction. The first offenders rarely came back to Parchman.

"Nugent's crazy, Phillip. It's a matter of time before he hurts someone."

"Right! Now you understand. We're going to let him hurt Sam, just the way it should be done. By the book. Heaven knows how much Nugent loves a book to go by. He's the perfect choice, Lucas. It'll be a flawless execution."

It really mattered little to Lucas Mann. He shrugged, and said, "You're the boss."

"Thanks," Naifeh said. "Just watch Nugent, okay. I'll watch him on this end, and you watch the legal stuff. We'll get through it."

"This will be the biggest one yet," Lucas said.

"I know. I'll have to pace myself. I'm an old man."

Lucas gathered his file from the desk and headed for the door. "I'll call you after the kid leaves. He's supposed to check in with me before he goes."

"I'd like to meet him," Naifeh said.

"He's a nice kid."

"Some family, huh."

The nice kid and his condemned grandfather had spent fifteen minutes in silence, the only sound in the room the uneasy rattling of the overworked AC unit. At one point, Adam had walked to the wall and waved his hand before the dusty vents. There was a trace of cool air. He leaned on the counter with his arms folded and stared

at the door, as far away from Sam as possible. He was leaning and staring when the door opened and the head of Sergeant Packer appeared. Just checking to see if things were okay, he said, glancing first at Adam then down the room and through the screen at Sam, who was leaning forward in his chair with a hand over his face.

"We're fine," Adam said without conviction.

"Good, good," Packer said and hurriedly closed the door. It locked, and Adam slowly made his way back to his chair. He pulled it close to the screen and rested on his elbows. Sam ignored him for a minute or two, then wiped his eyes with a sleeve and sat up. They looked at each other.

"We need to talk," Adam said quietly.

Sam nodded but said nothing. He wiped his eyes again, this time with the other sleeve. He removed a cigarette and put it between his lips. His hand shook as he flicked the lighter. He puffed quickly.

"So you're really Alan," he said in a low, husky voice.

"At one time, I guess. I didn't know it until my father died."

"You were born in 1964."

"Correct."

"My first grandson."

Adam nodded and glanced away.

"You disappeared in 1967."

"Something like that. I don't remember it, you know. My earliest memories are from California."

"I heard Eddie went to California, and that there was another child. Someone told me later her name was Carmen. I would hear bits and pieces over the years, knew y'all were somewhere in Southern California, but he did a good job of disappearing."

"We moved around a lot when I was a kid. I think he had trouble keeping a job."

"You didn't know about me?"

"No. The family was never mentioned. I found out about it after his funeral."

"Who told you?"

"Lee."

Sam closed his eyes tightly for a moment, then puffed again.
“How is she?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Why’d you go to work for Kravitz & Bane?”

“It’s a good firm.”

“Did you know they represented me?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve been planning this?”

“For about five years.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.”

“You must have a reason.”

“The reason is obvious. You’re my grandfather, okay. Like it or not, you’re who you are and I’m who I am. And I’m here now, so what are we going to do about it?”

“I think you should leave.”

“I’m not leaving, Sam. I’ve been preparing for this a long time.”

“Preparing for what?”

“You need legal representation. You need help. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m beyond help. They’re determined to gas me, okay, for lots of reasons. You don’t need to get involved in it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, it’s hopeless. You’re gonna get hurt if you bust your ass and you’re unsuccessful. Second, your true identity will be revealed. It’ll be very embarrassing. Life for you will be much better if you remain Adam Hall.”

“I am Adam Hall, and I don’t plan to change it. I’m also your grandson, and we can’t change that, can we? So what’s the big deal?”

“It’ll be embarrassing for your family. Eddie did a great job of protecting you. Don’t blow it.”

“My cover’s already blown. My firm knows it. I told Lucas Mann, and—”

“That jerk’ll tell everybody. Don’t trust him for a minute.”

“Look, Sam, you don’t understand. I don’t care if he tells. I don’t care if the world knows that I’m your grandson. I’m tired of these dirty little family secrets. I’m a big boy now, I can think for myself. Plus, I’m a lawyer, and my skin is getting thick. I can handle it.”

Sam relaxed a bit in his chair and looked at the floor with a pleasant little smirk, the kind grown men often give to little boys who are acting bigger than their years. He grunted at something and very slowly nodded his head. “You just don’t understand, kid,” he said again, now in the measured, patient tone.

“So explain it to me,” Adam said.

“It would take forever.”

“We have four weeks. You can do a lot of talking in four weeks.”

“Just exactly what is it that you want to hear?”

Adam leaned even closer on his elbows, pen and pad ready. His eyes were inches from the slit in the screen. “First, I want to talk about the case—appeals, strategies, the trials, the bombing, who was with you that night—”

“No one was with me that night.”

“We can talk about it later.”

“We’re talking about it now. I was alone, do you hear me?”

“Okay. Second, I want to know about my family.”

“Why?”

“Why not? Why keep it buried? I want to know about your father and his father, and your brothers and cousins. I may dislike these people when it’s all over, but I have the right to know about them. I’ve been deprived of this information all of my life, and I want to know.”

“It’s nothing remarkable.”

“Oh really. Well, Sam, I think it’s pretty remarkable that you’ve made it here to death row. This is a pretty exclusive society. Throw in the fact that you’re white, middle class, almost seventy years old, and it becomes even more remarkable. I want to know how and why you got here. What made you do those things? How many Klansmen were in my family? And why? How many other people were killed along the way?”

“And you think I’ll just spill my guts with all this?”

“Yeah, I think so. You’ll come around. I’m your grandson, Sam, the only living, breathing relative who gives a damn about you anymore. You’ll talk, Sam. You’ll talk to me.”

“Well, since I’ll be so talkative what else will we discuss?”

“Eddie.”

Sam took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “You don’t want much, do you?” he said softly. Adam scribbled something meaningless on his pad.

It was now time for the ritual of another cigarette, and Sam performed it with even more patience and care. Another blast of blue smoke joined the fog well above their heads. His hands were steady again. “When we get finished with Eddie, who do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. That should keep us busy for four weeks.”

“When do we talk about you?”

“Anytime.” Adam reached into his briefcase and removed a thin file. He slid a sheet of paper and a pen through the opening. “This is an agreement for legal representation. Sign at the bottom.”

Without touching it, Sam read it from a distance. “So I sign up again with Kravitz & Bane.”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean, sort of? Says right here I agree to let those Jews represent me again. It took me forever to fire them, and, hell, I wasn’t even paying them.”

“The agreement is with me, Sam, okay. You’ll never see those guys unless you want to.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Fine. I happen to work for the firm, and so the agreement must be with the firm. It’s easy.”

“Ah, the optimism of youth. Everything’s easy. Here I sit less than a hundred feet from the gas chamber, clock ticking away on the wall over there, getting louder and louder, and everything’s easy.”

“Just sign the damned paper, Sam.”

“And then what?”

“And then we go to work. Legally, I can’t do anything for you until we have that agreement. You sign it, we go to work.”

“And what’s the first bit of work you’d like to do?”

“Walk through the Kramer bombing, very slowly, step by step.”

“It’s been done a thousand times.”

“We’ll do it again. I have a thick notebook full of questions.”

“They’ve all been asked.”

“Yeah, Sam, but they haven’t been answered, have they?”

Sam stuck the filter between his lips.

“And they haven’t been asked by me, have they?”

“You think I’m lying.”

“Are you?”

“No.”

“But you haven’t told the whole story, have you?”

“What difference does it make, counselor? You’ve read Bateman.”

“Yeah, I’ve memorized Bateman, and there are a number of soft spots in it.”

“Typical lawyer.”

“If there’s new evidence, then there are ways to present it. All we’re doing, Sam, is trying to create enough confusion to make some judge somewhere give it a second thought. Then a third thought. Then he grants a stay so he can learn more.”

“I know how the game is played, son.”

“Adam, okay, it’s Adam.”

“Yeah, and just call me Gramps. I suppose you plan to appeal to the governor.”

“Yes.”

Sam inched forward in his chair and moved close to the screen. With the index finger of his right hand, he began pointing at a spot somewhere in the center of Adam’s nose. His face was suddenly harsh, his eyes narrow. “You listen to me, Adam,” he growled, finger pointing back and forth. “If I sign this piece of paper, you are never to talk to that bastard. Never. Do you understand?”

Adam watched the finger but said nothing.

Sam decided to continue. “He is a bogus son of a bitch. He is vile, sleazy, thoroughly corrupt, and completely able to mask it all with a pretty smile and a clean haircut. He is the only reason I’m sitting

here on death row. If you contact him in any way, then you're finished as my lawyer."

"So I'm your lawyer."

The finger dropped and Sam relaxed a bit. "Oh, I may give you a shot, let you practice on me. You know, Adam, the legal profession is really screwed up. If I was a free man, just trying to make a living, minding my own business, paying my taxes, obeying the laws and such, then I couldn't find a lawyer who'd take the time to spit on me unless I had money. But here I am, a convicted killer, condemned to die, not a penny to my name, and I've got lawyers all over the country begging to represent me. Big, rich lawyers with long names preceded with initials and followed by numerals, famous lawyers with their own jets and television shows. Can you explain this?"

"Of course not. Nor do I care about it."

"It's a sick profession you've gotten yourself in."

"Most lawyers are honest and hardworking."

"Sure. And most of my pals here on death row would be ministers and missionaries if they hadn't been wrongly convicted."

"The governor might be our last chance."

"Then they might as well gas me now. That pompous ass'll probably want to witness my execution, then he'll hold a press conference and replay every detail for the world. He's a spineless little worm who's made it this far because of me. And if he can milk me for a few more sound bites, then he'll do it. Stay away from him."

"We can discuss it later."

"We're discussing it now, I believe. You'll give me your word before I sign this paper."

"Any more conditions?"

"Yeah. I want something added here so that if I decide to fire you again, then you and your firm won't fight me. That should be easy."

"Let me see it."

The agreement was passed through the slit again, and Adam printed a neat paragraph at the bottom. He handed it back to Sam, who read it slowly and laid it on the counter.

"You didn't sign it," Adam said.

"I'm still thinking."

"Can I ask some questions while you're thinking?"

"You can ask them."

"Where did you learn to handle explosives?"

"Here and there."

"There were at least five bombings before Kramer, all with the same type, all very basic—dynamite, caps, fuses. Kramer, of course, was different because a timing device was used. Who taught you how to make bombs?"

"Have you ever lit a firecracker?"

"Sure."

"Same principle. A match to the fuse, run like crazy, and boom."

"The timing device is a bit more complicated. Who taught you how to wire one?"

"My mother. When do you plan to return here?"

"Tomorrow."

"Good. Here's what we'll do. I need some time to think about this. I don't want to talk right now, and I damned sure don't want to answer a bunch of questions. Let me look over this document, make some changes, and we'll meet again tomorrow."

"That's wasting time."

"I've wasted almost ten years here. What's another day?"

"They may not allow me to return if I don't officially represent you. This visit is a favor."

"A great bunch of guys, aren't they? Tell them you're my lawyer for the next twenty-four hours. They'll let you in."

"We have a lot of ground to cover, Sam. I'd like to get started."

"I need to think, okay. When you spend over nine years alone in a cell, you become real good at thinking and analyzing. But you can't do it fast, understand? It takes longer to sort things out and place them in order. I'm sort of spinnin' right now, you know. You've hit me kinda hard."

"Okay."

"I'll be better tomorrow. We can talk then. I promise."

"Sure." Adam placed the cap on his pen and stuck it in his pocket. He slid the file into the briefcase, and relaxed in his seat. "I'll be

staying in Memphis for the next couple of months.”

“Memphis? I thought you lived in Chicago.”

“We have a small office in Memphis. I’ll be working out of there. The number’s on the card. Feel free to call anytime.”

“What happens when this thing is over?”

“I don’t know. I may go back to Chicago.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Is Carmen?”

“No.”

“What’s she like?”

Adam folded his hands behind his head and examined the thin fog above them. “She’s very smart. Very pretty. Looks a lot like her mother.”

“Evelyn was a beautiful girl.”

“She’s still beautiful.”

“I always thought Eddie was lucky to get her. I didn’t like her family, though.”

And she certainly didn’t like Eddie’s, Adam thought to himself. Sam’s chin dropped almost to his chest. He rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This family business will take some work, won’t it?” he said without looking.

“Yep.”

“I may not be able to talk about some things.”

“Yes you will. You owe it to me, Sam. And you owe it to yourself.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, and you wouldn’t want to know all of it.”

“Try me. I’m sick of secrets.”

“Why do you want to know so much?”

“So I can try and make some sense of it.”

“That’ll be a waste of time.”

“I’ll have to decide that, won’t I?”

Sam placed his hands on his knees, and slowly stood. He took a deep breath and looked down at Adam through the screen. “I’d like to go now.”

Their eyes met through the narrow diamonds in the partition.
“Sure,” Adam said. “Can I bring you anything?”
“No. Just come back.”
“I promise.”

Eleven

Packer closed the door and locked it, and together they stepped from the narrow shadow outside the conference room into the blinding midday sun. Adam closed his eyes and stopped for a second, then fished through his pockets in a desperate search for sunglasses. Packer waited patiently, his eyes sensibly covered with a pair of thick imitation Ray-Bans, his face shielded by the wide brim of an official Parchman cap. The air was suffocating and almost visible. Sweat immediately covered Adam's arms and face as he finally found the sunglasses in his briefcase and put them on. He squinted and grimaced, and once able to actually see, he followed Packer along the brick trail and baked grass in front of the unit.

"Sam okay?" Packer asked. His hands were in his pockets and he was in no hurry.

"I guess."

"You hungry?"

"No," Adam replied as he glanced at his watch. It was almost one o'clock. He wasn't sure if Packer was offering prison food or something else, but he was taking no chances.

"Too bad. Today's Wednesday, and that means turnip greens and corn bread. Mighty good."

"Thanks." Adam was certain that somewhere deep in his genes he was supposed to crave turnip greens and corn bread. Today's menu should make his mouth drool and his stomach yearn. But he considered himself a Californian, and to his knowledge had never seen turnip greens. "Maybe next week," he said, hardly believing he was being offered lunch on the Row.

They were at the first of the double gates. As it opened, Packer, without removing his hands from his pockets, said, "When you coming back?"

“Tomorrow.”

“That soon?”

“Yeah. I’m going to be around for a while.”

“Well, nice to meet you.” He grinned broadly and walked away.

As Adam walked through the second gate, the red bucket began its descent. It stopped three feet from the ground, and he rattled through the selection at the bottom until he found his keys. He never looked up at the guard.

A white mini-van with official markings on the door and along the sides was waiting by Adam’s car. The driver’s window came down, and Lucas Mann leaned out. “Are you in a hurry?”

Adam glanced at his watch again. “Not really.”

“Good. Hop in. I need to talk to you. We’ll take a quick tour of the place.”

Adam didn’t want a quick tour of the place, but he was planning to stop by Mann’s office anyway. He opened the passenger’s door and threw his coat and briefcase on a rear seat. Thankfully, the air was at full throttle. Lucas, cool and still impeccably starched, looked odd sitting behind the wheel of a mini-van. He eased away from MSU and headed for the main drive.

“How’d it go?” he asked. Adam tried to recall Sam’s exact description of Lucas Mann. Something to the effect that he could not be trusted.

“Okay, I guess,” he replied, carefully vague.

“Are you going to represent him?”

“I think so. He wants to dwell on it tonight. And he wants to see me tomorrow.”

“No problem, but you need to sign him up tomorrow. We need some type of written authorization from him.”

“I’ll get it tomorrow. Where are we going?” They turned left and headed away from the front of the prison. They passed the last of the neat white houses with shade trees and flower beds, and now they were driving through fields of cotton and beans that stretched forever.

“Nowhere in particular. Just thought you might want to see some of our farm. We need to cover a few things.”

“I’m listening.”

“The decision of the Fifth Circuit hit the wire at mid-morning, and we’ve already had at least three phone calls from reporters. They smell blood, of course, and they want to know if this might be the end for Sam. I know some of these people, dealt with them before on other executions. A few are nice guys, most are obnoxious jerks. But anyway, they’re all asking about Sam and whether or not he has a lawyer. Will he represent himself to the very end? You know, that kind of crap.”

In a field to the right was a large group of inmates in white pants and without shirts. They were working the rows and sweating profusely, their backs and chests drenched and glistening under the scorching sun. A guard on a horse watched them with a rifle. “What are these guys doing?” Adam asked.

“Chopping cotton.”

“Are they required to?”

“No. All volunteers. It’s either that or sit in a cell all day.”

“They wear white. Sam wears red. I saw a gang by the highway in blue.”

“It’s part of the classification system. White means these guys are low risk.”

“What were their crimes?”

“Everything. Drugs, murder, repeat offenders, you name it. But they’ve behaved since they’ve been here, so they wear white and they’re allowed to work.”

The mini-van turned at an intersection, and the fences and razor wire returned. To the left was a series of modern barracks built on two levels and branching in all directions from a central hub. If not for the barbed wire and guard towers, the unit could pass for a badly designed college dormitory. “What’s that?” Adam asked, pointing.

“Unit 30.”

“How many units are there?”

“I’m not sure. We keep building and tearing down. Around thirty.”

“It looks new.”

“Oh yes. We’ve been in trouble with the federal courts for almost twenty years, so we’ve been doing lots of building. It’s no secret that the real superintendent of this place has been a federal judge.”

“Can the reporters wait until tomorrow? I need to see what Sam has on his mind. I’d hate to talk to them now, and then things go badly tomorrow.”

“I think I can put them off a day. But they won’t wait long.”

They passed the last guard tower and Unit 30 disappeared. They drove at least two miles before the gleaming razor wire of another compound peeked above the fields.

“I talked to the warden this morning, after you got here,” Lucas said. “He said he’d like to meet you. You’ll like him. He hates executions, you know. He was hoping to retire in a couple of years without going through another, but now it looks doubtful.”

“Let me guess. He’s just doing his job, right?”

“We’re all doing our jobs here.”

“That’s my point. I get the impression that everybody here wants to pat me on the back and speak to me in sad voices about what’s about to happen to poor old Sam. Nobody wants to kill him, but you’re all just doing your jobs.”

“There are plenty of people who want Sam dead.”

“Who?”

“The governor and the Attorney General. I’m sure you’re familiar with the governor, but the AG is the one you’d better watch. He, of course, wants to be governor one day. For some reason we’ve elected in this state a whole crop of these young, terribly ambitious politicians who just can’t seem to sit still.”

“His name’s Roxburgh, right?”

“That’s him. He loves cameras, and I expect a press conference from him this afternoon. If he holds true to form, he’ll take full credit for the victory in the Fifth Circuit, and promise a diligent effort to execute Sam in four weeks. His office handles these things, you know. And then it wouldn’t surprise me if the governor himself doesn’t appear on the evening news with a comment or two. My point is this, Adam—there will be enormous pressure from above to

make sure there are no more stays. They want Sam dead for their own political gain. They'll milk it for all they can get."

Adam watched the next camp as they drove by. On a concrete slab between two buildings, a game of basketball was in full force with at least a dozen players on each side. All were black. Next to the court, a row of barbells was being pumped and jerked around by some heavy lifters. Adam noticed a few whites.

Lucas turned onto another road. "There's another reason," he continued. "Louisiana is killing them right and left. Texas has executed six already this year. Florida, five. We haven't had an execution in over two years. We're dragging our feet, some people say. It's time to show these other states that we're just as serious about good government as they are. Just last week in Jackson a legislative committee held hearings on the issue. There were all sorts of angry statements by our leaders about the endless delays in these matters. Not surprisingly, it was decided that the federal courts are to blame. There's lots of pressure to kill somebody. And Sam happens to be next."

"Who's after Sam?"

"Nobody, really. It could be two years before we get this close again. The buzzards are circling."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm not the enemy, okay? I'm the attorney for the prison, not the State of Mississippi. And you've never been here before. I thought you'd want to know these things."

"Thanks," Adam said. Though the information was unsolicited, it was certainly useful.

"I'll help in any way I can."

The roofs of buildings could be seen on the horizon. "Is that the front of the prison?" Adam asked.

"Yes."

"I'd like to leave now."

The Memphis office of Kravitz & Bane occupied two floors of a building called Brinkley Plaza, a 1920s edifice on the corner of Main and Monroe in downtown. Main Street was also known as the Mid-America Mall. Cars and trucks had been banished when the city attempted to revitalize its downtown and converted asphalt into tiles, fountains, and decorative trees. Only pedestrian traffic was permitted on the Mall.

The building itself had been revitalized and renewed tastefully. Its main lobby was marble and bronze. The K&B offices were large and richly decorated with antiques and oak-paneled walls and Persian rugs.

Adam was escorted by an attractive young secretary to the corner office of Baker Cooley, the managing partner. They introduced themselves, shook hands, and admired the secretary as she left the room and closed the door. Cooley leered a bit too long and seemed to hold his breath until the door was completely closed and the glimpse was over.

“Welcome south,” Cooley said, finally exhaling and sitting in his posh burgundy leather swivel chair.

“Thanks. I guess you’ve talked to Garner Goodman.”

“Yesterday. Twice. He gave me the score. We’ve got a nice little conference room at the end of this hall with a phone, computer, plenty of room. It’s yours for the, uh, duration.”

Adam nodded and glanced around the office. Cooley was in his early fifties, a neat man with an organized desk and a clean room. His words and hands were quick, and he bore the gray hair and dark circles of a frazzled accountant. “What kind of work goes on here?” Adam asked.

“Not much litigation, and certainly no criminal work,” he answered quickly as if criminals were not allowed to set their dirty feet on the thick carpeting and fancy rugs of this establishment. Adam remembered Goodman’s description of the Memphis branch—a boutique firm of twelve good lawyers whose acquisition years earlier by Kravitz & Bane was now a mystery. But the additional address looked nice on the letterhead.

“Mostly corporate stuff,” Cooley continued. “We represent some old banks, and we do a lot of bond work for local governmental units.”

Exhilarating work, Adam thought.

“The firm itself dates back a hundred and forty years, the oldest in Memphis, by the way. Been around since the Civil War. It split up and spun off a few times, then merged with the big boys in Chicago.”

Cooley delivered this brief chronicle with pride, as if the pedigree had a damned thing to do with practicing law in 1990.

“How many lawyers?” Adam asked, trying to fill in the gaps of a conversation that had started slow and was going nowhere.

“A dozen. Eleven paralegals. Nine clerks. Seventeen secretaries. Miscellaneous support staff of ten. Not a bad operation for this part of the country. Nothing like Chicago, though.”

You’re right about that, Adam thought. “I’m looking forward to visiting here. I hope I won’t be in the way.”

“Not at all. I’m afraid we won’t be much help, though. We’re the corporate types, you know, office practitioners, lots of paperwork and all. I haven’t seen a courtroom in twenty years.”

“I’ll be fine. Mr. Goodman and those guys up there will help me.”

Cooley jumped to his feet and rubbed his hands as if he wasn’t sure what else to do with them. “Well, uh, Darlene will be your secretary. She’s actually in a pool, but I’ve sort of assigned her to you. She’ll give you a key, give you the scoop on parking, security, phones, copiers, the works. All state of the art. Really good stuff. If you need a paralegal, just let me know. We’ll steal one from one of the other guys, and—”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Thanks.”

“Well, then, let’s go look at your office.”

Adam followed Cooley down the quiet and empty hallway, and smiled to himself as he thought of the offices in Chicago. There the halls were always filled with harried lawyers and busy secretaries. Phones rang incessantly, and copiers and faxes and intercoms beeped and buzzed and gave the place the atmosphere of an arcade. It was a madhouse for ten hours a day. Solitude was found only in

the alcoves of the libraries, or maybe in the corners of the building where the partners worked.

This place was as quiet as a funeral parlor. Cooley pushed open a door and flipped on a switch. "How's this?" he asked, waving his arm in a broad circle. The room was more than adequate, a long narrow office with a beautiful polished table in the center and five chairs on each side. At one end, a makeshift workplace with a phone, computer, and executive's chair had been arranged. Adam walked along the table, glancing at the bookshelves filled with neat but unused law books. He peeked through the curtains of the window. "Nice view," he said, looking three floors below at the pigeons and people on the Mall.

"Hope it's adequate," Cooley said.

"It's very nice. It'll work just fine. I'll keep to myself and stay out of your way."

"Nonsense. If you need anything, just give me a call." Cooley was walking slowly toward Adam. "There is one thing, though," he said with his eyebrows suddenly serious.

Adam faced him. "What is it?"

"Got a call a couple of hours ago from a reporter here in Memphis. Don't know the guy, but he said he's been following the Cayhall case for years. Wanted to know if our firm was still handling the case, you know. I suggested he contact the boys in Chicago. We, of course, have nothing to do with it." He pulled a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Adam. It had a name and a phone number.

"I'll take care of it," Adam said.

Cooley took a step closer and crossed his arms on his chest. "Look, Adam, we're not trial lawyers, you know. We do the corporate work. Money's great. We're very low key, and we avoid publicity, you know."

Adam nodded slowly but said nothing.

"We've never touched a criminal case, certainly nothing as huge as this."

"You don't want any of the dirt to rub off on you, right?"

"I didn't say that. Not at all. No. It's just that things are different down here. This is not Chicago. Our biggest clients happen to be some rather staid and proper old bankers, been with us for years, and, well, we're just concerned about our image. You know what I mean?"

"No."

"Sure you do. We don't deal with criminals, and, well, we're very sensitive about the image we project here in Memphis."

"You don't deal with criminals?"

"Never."

"But you represent big banks?"

"Come on, Adam. You know where I'm coming from. This area of our practice is changing rapidly. Deregulation, mergers, failures, a real dynamic sector of the law. Competition is fierce among the big law firms, and we don't want to lose clients. Hell, everybody wants banks."

"And you don't want your clients tainted by mine?"

"Look, Adam, you're from Chicago. Let's keep this matter where it belongs, okay? It's a Chicago case, handled by you guys up there. Memphis has nothing to do with it, okay?"

"This office is part of Kravitz & Bane."

"Yeah, and this office has nothing to gain by being connected to scum like Sam Cayhall."

"Sam Cayhall is my grandfather."

"Shit!" Cooley's knees buckled and his arms dropped from his chest. "You're lying!"

Adam took a step toward him. "I'm not lying, and if you object to my presence here, then you need to call Chicago."

"This is awful," Cooley said as he retreated and headed for the door.

"Call Chicago."

"I might do that," he said, almost to himself, as he opened the door and disappeared, mumbling something else.

Welcome to Memphis, Adam said as he sat in his new chair and stared at the blank computer screen. He placed the scrap of paper on the table and looked at the name and phone number. A sharp

hunger pain hit, and he realized he hadn't eaten in hours. It was almost four. He was suddenly weak and tired and hungry.

He gently placed both feet on the table next to the phone, and closed his eyes. The day was a blur, from the anxiety of driving to Parchman and seeing the front gate of the prison, from the unexpected meeting with Lucas Mann, to the horror of stepping onto the Row, to the fear of confronting Sam. And now the warden wanted to meet him, the press wanted to inquire, the Memphis branch of his firm wanted it all hushed up. All this, in less than eight hours.

What could he expect tomorrow?

They sat next to each other on the deep cushioned sofa with a bowl of microwave popcorn between them. Their bare feet were on the coffee table amid a half dozen empty cartons of Chinese food and two bottles of wine. They peered over their toes and watched the television. Adam held the remote control. The room was dark. He slowly ate popcorn.

Lee hadn't moved in a long time. Her eyes were wet, but she said nothing. The video started for the second time.

Adam pushed the Pause button as Sam first appeared, in handcuffs, being rushed from the jail to a hearing. "Where were you when you heard he was arrested?" he asked without looking at her.

"Here in Memphis," she said quietly but with a strong voice. "We had been married for a few years. I was at home. Phelps called and said there had been a bombing in Greenville, at least two people were dead. Might be the Klan. He told me to watch the news at noon, but I was afraid to. A few hours later, my mother called and told me they had arrested Daddy for the bombing. She said he was in jail in Greenville."

"How'd you react?"

"I don't know. Stunned. Scared. Eddie got on the phone and told me that he and Mother had been instructed by Sam to sneak over to

Cleveland and retrieve his car. I remember Eddie kept saying that he'd finally done it, he'd finally done it. He'd killed someone else. Eddie was crying and I started crying, and I remember it was horrible."

"They got the car."

"Yeah. No one ever knew it. It never came out during any of the trials. We were scared the cops would find out about it, and make Eddie and my mother testify. But it never happened."

"Where was I?"

"Let me see. You guys lived in a little white house in Clanton, and I'm sure you were there with Evelyn. I don't think she was working at the time. But I'm not sure."

"What kind of work was my father doing?"

"I don't remember. At one time he worked as a manager in an auto parts store in Clanton, but he was always changing jobs."

The video continued with clips of Sam being escorted to and from the jail and the courthouse, then there was the report that he had been formally indicted for the murders. He paused it. "Did any one of you visit Sam in jail?"

"No. Not while he was in Greenville. His bond was very high, a half a million dollars, I think."

"It was a half a million."

"And at first the family tried to raise the money to bail him out. Mother, of course, wanted me to convince Phelps to write a check. Phelps, of course, said no. He wanted no part of it. We fought bitterly, but I couldn't really blame him. Daddy stayed in jail. I remember one of his brothers trying to borrow against some land, but it didn't work. Eddie didn't want to go to jail to see him, and Mother wasn't able. I'm not sure Sam wanted us there."

"When did we leave Clanton?"

Lee leaned forward and took her wineglass from the table. She sipped and thought for a moment. "He'd been in jail about a month, I believe. I drove down one day to see Mother, and she told me Eddie was talking about leaving. I didn't believe it. She said he was embarrassed and humiliated and couldn't face people around town. He'd just lost his job and he wouldn't leave the house. I called him

and talked to Evelyn. Eddie wouldn't get on the phone. She said he was depressed and disgraced and all that, and I remember telling her that we all felt that way. I asked her if they were leaving, and she distinctly said no. About a week later, Mother called again and said you guys had packed and left in the middle of the night. The landlord was calling and wanting rent, and no one had seen Eddie. The house was empty."

"I wish I remembered some of this."

"You were only three, Adam. The last time I saw you you were playing by the garage of the little white house. You were so cute and sweet."

"Gee thanks."

"Several weeks passed, then one day Eddie called me and told me to tell Mother that you guys were in Texas and doing okay."

"Texas?"

"Yeah. Evelyn told me much later that y'all sort of drifted westward. She was pregnant and anxious to settle down some place. He called again and said y'all were in California. That was the last call for many years."

"Years?"

"Yeah. I tried to convince him to come home, but he was adamant. Swore he'd never return, and I guess he meant it."

"Where were my mother's parents?"

"I don't know. They were not from Ford County. Seems like they lived in Georgia, maybe Florida."

"I've never met them."

He pushed the button again and the video continued. The first trial started in Nettles County. The camera panned the courthouse lawn with the group of Klansmen and rows of policemen and swarms of onlookers.

"This is incredible," Lee said.

He stopped it again. "Did you go to the trial?"

"Once. I sneaked in the courthouse and listened to the closing arguments. He forbade us to watch any of his three trials. Mother was not able. Her blood pressure was out of control, and she was taking lots of medication. She was practically bedridden."

“Did Sam know you were there?”

“No. I sat in the back of the courtroom with a scarf over my head. He never saw me.”

“What was Phelps doing?”

“Hiding in his office, tending to his business, praying no one would find out Sam Cayhall was his father-in-law. Our first separation occurred not long after this trial.”

“What do you remember from the trial, from the courtroom?”

“I remember thinking that Sam got himself a good jury, his kind of people. I don’t know how his lawyer did it, but they picked twelve of the biggest rednecks they could find. I watched the jurors react to the prosecutor, and I watched them listen carefully to Sam’s lawyer.”

“Clovis Brazelton.”

“He was quite an orator, and they hung on every word. I was shocked when the jury couldn’t agree on a verdict and a mistrial was declared. I was convinced he would be acquitted. I think he was shocked too.”

The video continued with reactions to the mistrial, with generous comments from Clovis Brazelton, with another shot of Sam leaving the courthouse. Then the second trial began with its similarities to the first. “How long have you worked on this?” she asked.

“Seven years. I was a freshman at Pepperdine when the idea hit. It’s been a challenge.” He fast-forwarded through the pathetic scene of Marvin Kramer spilling from his wheelchair after the second trial, and stopped with the smiling face of a local anchorwoman as she chattered on about the opening of the third trial of the legendary Sam Cayhall. It was 1981 now.

“Sam was a free man for thirteen years,” Adam said. “What did he do?”

“He kept to himself, farmed a little, tried to make ends meet. He never talked to me about the bombing or any of his Klan activities, but he enjoyed the attention in Clanton. He was somewhat of a local legend down there, and he was sort of smug about it. Mother’s health declined, and he stayed at home and took care of her.”

“He never thought about leaving?”

“Not seriously. He was convinced his legal problems were over. He’d had two trials, and walked away from both of them. No jury in Mississippi was going to convict a Klansman in the late sixties. He thought he was invincible. He stayed close to Clanton, avoided the Klan, and lived a peaceful life. I thought he’d spend his golden years growing tomatoes and fishing for bream.”

“Did he ever ask about my father?”

She finished her wine and placed the glass on the table. It had never occurred to Lee that she would one day be asked to recall in detail so much of this sad little history. She had worked so hard to forget it. “I remember during the first year he was back home, he would occasionally ask me if I’d heard from my brother. Of course, I hadn’t. We knew you guys were somewhere in California, and we hoped you were okay. Sam’s a very proud and stubborn person, Adam. He would never consider chasing you guys down and begging Eddie to come home. If Eddie was ashamed of his family, then Sam felt like he should stay in California.” She paused and sunk lower into the sofa. “Mother was diagnosed with cancer in 1973, and I hired a private investigator to find Eddie. He worked for six months, charged me a bunch of money, and found nothing.”

“I was nine years old, fourth grade, that was in Salem, Oregon.”

“Yeah. Evelyn told me later that you guys spent time in Oregon.”

“We moved all the time. Every year was a different school until I was in the eighth grade. Then we settled in Santa Monica.”

“You were elusive. Eddie must’ve hired a good lawyer, because any trace of Cayhall was eliminated. The investigator even used some people out there, but nothing.”

“When did she die?”

“Nineteen seventy-seven. We were actually sitting in the front of the church, about to start the funeral, when Eddie slid in a side door and sat behind me. Don’t ask how he knew about Mother’s death. He simply appeared in Clanton then disappeared again. Never said a word to Sam. Drove a rental car so no one could check his plates. I drove to Memphis the next day, and there he was, waiting in my driveway. We drank coffee for two hours and talked about everything. He had school pictures of you and Carmen, everything

was just wonderful in sunny Southern California. Good job, nice house in the suburbs, Evelyn was selling real estate. The American dream. Said he would never return to Mississippi, not even for Sam's funeral. After swearing me to secrecy, he told me about the new names, and he gave me his phone number. Not his address, just his phone number. Any breach of secrecy, he threatened, and he would simply disappear again. He told me not to call him, though, unless it was an emergency. I told him I wanted to see you and Carmen, and he said that it might happen, one day. At times he was the same old Eddie, and at times he was another person. We hugged and waved good-bye, and I never saw him again."

Adam flipped the remote and the video moved. The clear, modern images of the third and final trial moved by quickly, and there was Sam, suddenly thirteen years older, with a new lawyer as they darted through a side door of the Lakehead County Courthouse. "Did you go to the third trial?"

"No. He told me to stay away."

Adam paused the video. "At what point did Sam realize they were coming after him again?"

"It's hard to say. There was a small story in the Memphis paper one day about this new district attorney in Greenville who wanted to reopen the Kramer case. It was not a big story, just a couple of paragraphs in the middle of the paper. I remember reading it with horror. I read it ten times and stared at it for an hour. After all these years, the name Sam Cayhall was once again in the paper. I couldn't believe it. I called him, and, of course, he had read it too. He said not to worry. About two weeks later there was another story, a little larger this time, with David McAllister's face in the middle of it. I called Daddy, he said everything was okay. That's how it got started. Rather quietly, then it just steamrolled. The Kramer family supported the idea, then the NAACP got involved. One day it became obvious that McAllister was determined to push for a new trial, and that it was not going to go away. Sam was sickened by it, and he was scared, but he tried to act brave. He'd won twice he said, he could do it again."

"Did you call Eddie?"

“Yeah. Once it was obvious there would be a new indictment, I called him and broke the news. He didn’t say much, didn’t say much at all. It was a brief conversation, and I promised to keep him posted. I don’t think he took it very well. It wasn’t long before it became a national story, and I’m sure Eddie followed it in the media.”

They watched the remaining segments of the third trial in silence. McAllister’s toothsome face was everywhere, and more than once Adam wished he’d done a bit more editing. Sam was led away for the last time in handcuffs, and the screen went blank.

“Has anyone else seen this?” Lee asked.

“No. You’re the first.”

“How did you collect it all?”

“It took time, a little money, a lot of effort.”

“It’s incredible.”

“When I was a junior in high school, we had this goofy teacher of political science. He allowed us to haul in newspapers and magazines and debate the issues of the day. Someone brought a front page story from the L.A. Times about the upcoming trial of Sam Cayhall in Mississippi. We kicked it around pretty good, then we watched it closely as it took place. Everyone, including myself, was quite pleased when he was found guilty. But there was a huge debate over the death penalty. A few weeks later, my father was dead and you finally told me the truth. I was horrified that my friends would find out.”

“Did they?”

“Of course not. I’m a Cayhall, a master at keeping secrets.”

“It won’t be a secret much longer.”

“No, it won’t.”

There was a long pause as they stared at the blank screen. Adam finally pushed the power button and the television went off. He tossed the remote control on the table. “I’m sorry, Lee, if this will embarrass you. I mean it. I wish there was some way to avoid it.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I know. And you can’t explain it, right? Are you afraid of Phelps and his family?”

"I despise Phelps and his family."

"But you enjoy their money."

"I've earned their money, okay? I've put up with him for twenty-seven years."

"Are you afraid your little clubs will ostracize you? That they'll kick you out of the country clubs?"

"Stop it, Adam."

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's been a weird day. I'm coming out of the closet, Lee. I'm confronting my past, and I guess I expect everyone to be as bold. I'm sorry."

"What does he look like?"

"A very old man. Lots of wrinkles and pale skin. He's too old to be locked up in a cage."

"I remember talking to him a few days before his last trial. I asked him why he didn't just run away, vanish into the night and hide in some place like South America. And you know what?"

"What?"

"He said he thought about it. Mother had been dead for several years. Eddie was gone. He had read books about Mengele and Eichmann and other Nazi war criminals who disappeared in South America. He even mentioned São Paulo, said it was a city of twenty million and filled with refugees of all sorts. He had a friend, another Klansman I think, who could fix the paperwork and help him hide. He gave it a lot of thought."

"I wish he had. Maybe my father would still be with us."

"Two days before he went to Parchman, I saw him in the jail in Greenville. It was our last visit. I asked him why he hadn't run. He said he never dreamed he would get the death penalty. I couldn't believe that for years he'd been a free man and could've easily run away. It was a big mistake, he said, not running. A mistake that would cost him his life."

Adam placed the popcorn bowl on the table, and slowly leaned toward her. His head rested on her shoulder. She took his hand. "I'm sorry you're in the middle of this," she whispered.

"He looked so pitiful sitting there in a red death row jumpsuit."

Twelve

Clyde Packer poured a generous serving of a strong brew into a cup with his name on it, and began filling out the morning's paperwork. He had worked the Row for twenty-one years, the last seven as the Shift Commander. For eight hours each morning, he would be one of four Tier Sergeants, in charge of fourteen condemned men, two guards, and two trustees. He completed his forms and checked a clipboard. There was a note to call the warden. Another note said that F. M. Dempsey was low on heart pills and wanted to see the doctor. They all wanted to see the doctor. He sipped the steaming coffee as he left the office for his morning inspection. He checked the uniforms of two guards at the front door and told the young white one to get a haircut.

MSU was not a bad place to work. As a general rule, death row inmates were quiet and well behaved. They spent twenty-three hours a day alone in their cells, separated from each other and thus unable to instigate trouble. They spent sixteen hours a day sleeping. They were fed in their cells. They were allowed an hour of outdoor recreation per day, their "hour out" as they called it, and they could have this time alone if they chose. Everyone had either a television or a radio, or both, and after breakfast the four tiers came to life with music and news and soap operas and quiet conversations through the bars. The inmates could not see their neighbors next door, but they conversed with little trouble. Arguments erupted occasionally over the volume of someone's music, but these little spats were quickly settled by the guards. The inmates had certain rights, and then they had certain privileges. The removal of a television or a radio was devastating.

The Row bred an odd camaraderie among those sentenced there. Half were white, half were black, and all had been convicted of

brutal killings. But there was little concern about past deeds and criminal records, and generally no real interest in skin color. Out in the general prison population, gangs of all varieties did an effective job of classifying inmates, usually on the basis of race. On the Row, however, a man was judged by the way he handled his confinement. Whether they liked each other or not, they were all locked together in this tiny corner of the world, all waiting to die. It was a ragtag little fraternity of misfits, drifters, outright thugs, and cold-blooded killers.

And the death of one could mean the death of all. The news of Sam's new death sentence was whispered along the tiers and through the bars. When it made the noon news yesterday, the Row became noticeably quieter. Every inmate suddenly wanted to talk to his lawyer. There was a renewed interest in all matters legal, and Packer had noticed several of them plowing through their court files with televisions off and radios down.

He eased through a heavy door, took a long drink, and walked slowly and quietly along Tier A. Fourteen identical cells, six feet wide and nine feet deep, faced the hallway. The front of each cell was a wall of iron bars, so that at no time did an inmate have complete privacy. Anything he happened to be doing—sleeping, using the toilet—was subject to observation by the guards.

They were all in bed as Packer slowed in front of each little room and looked for a head under the sheets. The cell lights were off and the tier was dark. The hall man, an inmate with special privileges, would wake them, or rack-'em-up, at five. Breakfast would be served at six—eggs, toast, jam, sometimes bacon, coffee, and fruit juice. In a few minutes the Row would slowly come to life as forty-seven men shook off their sleep and resumed the interminable process of dying. It happened slowly, one day at a time, as another miserable sunrise brought another blanket of heat into their private little pockets of hell. And it happened quickly, as it had the day before, when a court somewhere rejected a plea or a motion or an appeal and said that an execution must happen soon.

Packer sipped coffee and counted heads and shuffled quietly along through his morning ritual. Generally, MSU ran smoothly

when routines were unbroken and schedules were followed. There were lots of rules in the manual, but they were fair and easy to follow. Everyone knew them. But an execution had its own handbook with a different policy and fluctuating guidelines that generally upset the tranquility of the Row. Packer had great respect for Phillip Naifeh, but damned if he didn't rewrite the book before and after each execution. There was great pressure to do it all properly and constitutionally and compassionately. No two killings had been the same.

Packer hated executions. He believed in the death penalty because he was a religious man, and when God said an eye for an eye, then God meant it. He preferred, however, that they be carried out somewhere else by other people. Fortunately, they had been so rare in Mississippi that his job proceeded smoothly with little interference. He'd been through fifteen in twenty-one years, but only four since 1982.

He spoke quietly to a guard at the end of the tier. The sun was beginning to peek through the open windows above the tier walkway. The day would be hot and suffocating. It would also be much quieter. There would be fewer complaints about the food, fewer demands to see the doctor, a scattering of gripes about this and that, but on the whole they would be a docile and preoccupied group. It had been at least a year and maybe longer since a stay had been withdrawn this close to an execution. Packer smiled to himself as he searched for a head under the sheets. This day would indeed be a quiet one.

During the first few months of Sam's career on the Row, Packer had ignored him. The official handbook prohibited anything other than necessary contact with inmates, and Packer had found Sam an easy person to leave alone. He was a Klansman. He hated blacks. He said little. He was bitter and surly, at least in the early days. But the routine of doing nothing for eight hours a day gradually softens the edges, and with time they reached a level of communication that consisted of a handful of short words and grunts. After nine and a half years of seeing each other every day, Sam could on occasion actually grin at Packer.

There were two types of killers on the Row, Packer had decided after years of study. There were the cold-blooded killers who would do it again if given the chance, and there were those who simply made mistakes and would never dream of shedding more blood. Those in the first group should be gassed quickly. Those in the second group caused great discomfort for Packer because their executions served no purpose. Society would not suffer or even notice if these men were released from prison. Sam was a solid member of the second group. He could be returned to his home where he would soon die a lonesome death. No, Packer did not want Sam Cayhall executed.

He shuffled back along Tier A, sipping his coffee and looking at the dark cells. His tier was the nearest to the Isolation Room, which was next door to the Chamber Room. Sam was in number six on Tier A, literally less than ninety feet from the gas chamber. He had requested a move a few years back because of some silly squabble with Cecil Duff, then his next-door neighbor.

Sam was now sitting in the dark on the edge of his bed. Packer stopped, walked to the bars. "Mornin', Sam," he said softly.

"Mornin'," Sam replied, squinting at Packer. Sam then stood in the center of his room and faced the door. He was wearing a dingy white tee shirt and baggy boxer shorts, the usual attire for inmates on the Row because it was so hot. The rules required the bright red coveralls to be worn outside the cell, but inside they wore as little as possible.

"It's gonna be a hot one," Packer said, the usual early morning greeting.

"Wait till August," Sam said, the standard reply to the usual early morning greeting.

"You okay?" Packer asked.

"Never felt better."

"Your lawyer said he was coming back today."

"Yeah. That's what he said. I guess I need lots of lawyers, huh, Packer?"

"Sure looks that way." Packer took a sip of coffee and glanced down the tier. The windows behind him were to the south, and a

trickle of sunlight was making its way through. “See you later, Sam,” he said and eased away. He checked the remaining cells and found all his boys. The doors clicked behind him as he left Tier A and returned to the front.

The one light in the cell was above the stainless steel sink—made of stainless steel so it couldn’t be chipped and then used as a weapon or suicide device. Under the sink was a stainless steel toilet. Sam turned on his light and brushed his teeth. It was almost five-thirty. Sleep had been difficult.

He lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of his bed, studying his feet and staring at the painted concrete floor that somehow retained heat in the summer and cold in the winter. His only shoes, a pair of rubber shower shoes which he loathed, were under the bed. He owned one pair of wool socks, which he slept in during the winter. His remaining assets consisted of a black and white television, a radio, a typewriter, six tee shirts with holes, five pairs of plain white boxer shorts, a toothbrush, comb, nail clippers, an oscillating fan, and a twelve-month wall calendar. His most valuable asset was a collection of law books he had gathered and memorized over the years. They were also placed neatly on the cheap wooden shelves across from his bunk. In a cardboard box on the floor between the shelves and the door was an accumulation of bulky files, the chronological legal history of *State of Mississippi v. Sam Cayhall*. It, too, had been committed to memory.

His balance sheet was lean and short, and other than the death warrant there were no liabilities. The poverty had bothered him at first, but those concerns were dispelled years ago. Family legend held that his great-grandfather had been a wealthy man with acreage and slaves, but no modern Cayhall was worth much. He had known condemned men who had agonized over their wills as if their heirs would brawl over their old televisions and dirty magazines. He was considering preparing his own Last Will and Testament and

leaving his wool socks and dirty underwear to the State of Mississippi, or perhaps the NAACP.

To his right was J. B. Gullitt, an illiterate white kid who'd raped and killed a homecoming queen. Three years earlier, Gullitt had come within days of execution before Sam intervened with a crafty motion. Sam pointed out several unresolved issues, and explained to the Fifth Circuit that Gullitt had no lawyer. A stay was immediately granted, and Gullitt became a friend for life.

To his left was Hank Henshaw, the reputed leader of a long-forgotten band of thugs known as the Redneck Mafia. Hank and his motley gang had hijacked an eighteen-wheeler one night, planning only to steal its cargo. The driver produced a gun, and was killed in the ensuing shootout. Hank's family was paying good lawyers, and thus he was not expected to die for many years.

The three neighbors referred to their little section of MSU as Rhodesia.

Sam flipped the cigarette into the toilet and reclined on his bed. The day before the Kramer bombing he had stopped at Eddie's house in Clanton, he couldn't remember why except that he did deliver some fresh spinach from his garden, and he had played with little Alan, now Adam, for a few minutes in the front yard. It was April, and warm, he remembered, and his grandson was barefoot. He remembered the chubby little feet with a Band-Aid around one toe. He had cut it on a rock, Alan had explained with great pride. The kid loved Band-Aids, always had one on a finger or a knee. Evelyn held the spinach and shook her head as he proudly showed his grandfather a whole box of assorted adhesives.

That was the last time he had seen Alan. The bombing took place the next day, and Sam spent the next ten months in jail. By the time the second trial was over and he was released, Eddie and his family were gone. He had too much pride to give chase. There had been rumors and gossip of their whereabouts. Lee said they were in California, but she couldn't find them. Years later, she talked to Eddie and learned of the second child, a girl named Carmen.

There were voices at the end of the tier. Then the flush of a toilet, then a radio. Death row was creaking to life. Sam combed his oily

hair, lit another Montclair, and studied the calendar on the wall. Today was July 12. He had twenty-seven days.

He sat on the edge of his bed and studied his feet some more. J. B. Gullitt turned on his television to catch the news, and as Sam puffed and scratched his ankles he listened to the NBC affiliate in Jackson. After the rundown of local shootings, robberies, and killings, the anchorman delivered the hot news that an execution was materializing up at Parchman. The Fifth Circuit, he reported eagerly, had lifted the stay for Sam Cayhall, Parchman's most famous inmate, and the date was now set for August 8. Authorities believe that Cayhall's appeals have been exhausted, the voice said, and the execution could take place.

Sam turned on his television. As usual, the audio preceded the picture by a good ten seconds, and he listened as the Attorney General himself predicted justice for Mr. Cayhall, after all these many years. A grainy face formed on the screen, with words spewing forth, and then there was Roxburgh smiling and frowning at the same time, deep in thought as he relished for the cameras the scenario of finally hauling Mr. Cayhall into the gas chamber. Back to the anchorperson, a local kid with a peach fuzz mustache, who wrapped up the story by blitzing through Sam's horrible crime while over his shoulder in the background was a crude illustration of a Klansman in a mask and pointed hood. A gun, a burning cross, and the letters KKK finished the depiction. The kid repeated the date, August 8, as if his viewers should circle their calendars and plan to take the day off. Then they were on to the weather.

He turned off the television, and walked to the bars.

"Did you hear it, Sam?" Gullitt called out from next door.

"Yep."

"It's gonna get crazy, man."

"Yep."

"Look on the bright side, man."

"What's that?"

"You've only got four weeks of it." Gullitt chuckled as he hit this punch line, but he didn't laugh long. Sam pulled some papers from the file and sat on the edge of his bed. There were no chairs in the

cell. He read through Adam's agreement of representation, a two-page document with a page and a half of language. On all margins, Sam had made neat, precise notes with a pencil. And he had added paragraphs on the backs of the sheets. Another idea hit him, and he found room to add it. With a cigarette in his right fingers, he held the document with his left and read it again. And again.

Finally, Sam reached to his shelves and carefully took down his ancient Royal portable typewriter. He balanced it perfectly on his knees. He inserted a sheet of paper, and began typing.

At ten minutes after six, the doors on the north end of Tier A clicked and opened, and two guards entered the hallway. One pushed a cart with fourteen trays stacked neatly in slots. They stopped at cell number one, and slid the metal tray through a narrow opening in the door. The occupant of number one was a skinny Cuban who was waiting at the bars, shirtless in his drooping briefs. He grabbed the tray like a starving refugee, and without a word took it to the edge of his bed.

This morning's menu was two scrambled eggs, four pieces of toasted white bread, a fat slice of bacon, two scrawny containers of grape jelly, a small bottle of prepackaged orange juice, and a large Styrofoam cup of coffee. The food was warm and filling, and had the distinction of being approved by the federal courts.

They moved to the next cell where the inmate was waiting. They were always waiting, always standing by the door like hungry dogs.

"You're eleven minutes late," the inmate said quietly as he took his tray. The guards did not look at him.

"Sue us," one said.

"I've got my rights."

"Your rights are a pain in the ass."

"Don't talk to me that way. I'll sue you for it. You're abusive."

The guards rolled away to the next door with no further response. Just part of the daily ritual.

Sam was not waiting at the door. He was busy at work in his little law office when breakfast arrived.

"I figured you'd be typing," a guard said as they stopped in front of number six. Sam slowly placed the typewriter on the bed.

"Love letters," he said as he stood.

"Well, whatever you're typing, Sam, you'd better hurry. The cook's already talking about your last meal."

"Tell him I want microwave pizza. He'll probably screw that up. Maybe I'll just go for hot dogs and beans." Sam took his tray through the opening.

"It's your call, Sam. Last guy wanted steak and shrimp. Can you imagine? Steak and shrimp around this place."

"Did he get it?"

"No. He lost his appetite and they filled him full of Valium instead."

"Not a bad way to go."

"Quiet!" J. B. Gullitt yelled from the next cell. The guards eased the cart a few feet down the tier and stopped in front of J.B., who was gripping the bars with both hands. They kept their distance.

"Well, well, aren't we frisky this morning?" one said.

"Why can't you assholes just serve the food in silence? I mean, do you think we want to wake up each morning and start the day by listening to your cute little comments? Just give me the food, man."

"Gee, J.B. We're awful sorry. We just figured you guys were lonely."

"You figured wrong." J.B. took his tray and turned away.

"Touchy, touchy," a guard said as they moved away in the direction of someone else to torment.

Sam sat his food on the bed and mixed a packet of sugar in his coffee. His daily routine did not include scrambled eggs and bacon. He would save the toast and jelly and eat it throughout the morning. He would carefully sip the coffee, rationing it until ten o'clock, his hour of exercise and sunshine.

He balanced the typewriter on his knees, and began pecking away.

Thirteen

Sam's version of the law was finished by nine-thirty. He was proud of it, one of his better efforts in recent months. He munched on a piece of toast as he proofed the document for the last time. The typing was neat but outdated, the result of an ancient machine. The language was effusive and repetitive, flowery and filled with words never uttered by humble laymen. Sam was almost fluent in legalese and could hold his own with any lawyer.

A door at the end of the hallway banged open, then shut. Heavy footsteps clicked along properly, and Packer appeared. "Your lawyer's here, Sam," he said, removing a set of handcuffs from his belt.

Sam stood and pulled up his boxer shorts. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine-thirty. What difference does it make?"

"I'm supposed to get my hour out at ten."

"You wanna go outside, or you wanna see your lawyer?"

Sam thought about this as he slipped into his red jumpsuit and slid his feet into his rubber sandals. Dressing was a swift procedure on death row. "Can I make it up later?"

"We'll see."

"I want my hour out, you know."

"I know, Sam. Let's go."

"It's real important to me."

"I know, Sam. It's real important to everyone. We'll try and make it up later, okay?"

Sam combed his hair with great deliberation, then rinsed his hands with cold water. Packer waited patiently. He wanted to say something to J. B. Gullitt, something about the mood he was in this morning, but Gullitt was already asleep again. Most of them were asleep. The average inmate on death row made it through breakfast

and an hour or so of television before stretching out for the morning nap. Though his study was by no means scientific, Packer estimated they slept fifteen to sixteen hours a day. And they could sleep in the heat, the sweat, the cold, and amid the noise of loud televisions and radios.

The noise was much lower this morning. The fans hummed and whined, but there was no yelling back and forth.

Sam approached the bars, turned his back to Packer, and extended both hands through the narrow slot in the door. Packer applied the handcuffs, and Sam walked to his bed and picked up the document. Packer nodded to a guard at the end of the hall, and Sam's door opened electronically. Then it closed.

Leg chains were optional in these situations, and with a younger prisoner, perhaps one with an attitude and a bit more stamina, Packer probably would have used them. But this was just Sam. He was an old man. How far could he run? How much damage could he do with his feet?

Packer gently placed his hand around Sam's skinny bicep and led him along the hall. They stopped at the tier door, a row of more bars, waited for it to open and close, and left Tier A. Another guard followed behind as they came to an iron door which Packer unlocked with a key from his belt. They walked through it, and there was Adam sitting alone on the other side of the green grating.

Packer removed the handcuffs and left the room.

Adam read it slowly the first time. During the second reading he took a few notes and was amused at some of the language. He'd seen worse work from trained lawyers. And he'd seen much better work. Sam was suffering the same affliction that hit most first-year law students. He used six words when one would suffice. His Latin was dreadful. Entire paragraphs were useless. But, on the whole, not bad for a non-lawyer.

The two-page agreement was now four, typed neatly with perfect margins and only two typos and one misspelled word.

“You do pretty good work,” Adam said as he placed the document on the counter. Sam puffed a cigarette and stared at him through the opening. “It’s basically the same agreement I handed you yesterday.”

“It’s basically a helluva lot different,” Sam said, correcting him.

Adam glanced at his notes, then said, “You seem to be concerned about five areas. The governor, books, movies, termination, and who gets to witness the execution.”

“I’m concerned about a lot of things. Those happen to be non-negotiable.”

“I promised yesterday I would have nothing to do with books and movies.”

“Good. Moving right along.”

“The termination language is fine. You want the right to terminate my representation, and that of Kravitz & Bane, at any time and for any reason, without a fight.”

“It took me a long time to fire those Jewish bastards last time. I don’t want to go through it again.”

“That’s reasonable.”

“I don’t care whether you think it’s reasonable, okay? It’s in the agreement, and it’s non-negotiable.”

“Fair enough. And you want to deal with no one but me.”

“That’s correct. No one at Kravitz & Bane touches my file. That place is crawling with Jews, and they don’t get involved, okay? Same for niggers and women.”

“Look, Sam, can we lay off the slurs? How about we refer to them as blacks?”

“Ooops. Sorry. How about we do the right thing and call them African-Americans and Jewish-Americans and Female-Americans? You and I’ll be Irish-Americans, and also White-Male-Americans. If you need help from your firm, try to stick with German-Americans or Italian-Americans. Since you’re in Chicago, maybe use a few Polish-Americans. Gee, that’ll be nice, won’t it? We’ll be real proper and multicultural and politically correct, won’t we?”

“Whatever.”

“I feel better already.”

Adam made a check mark by his notes. “I’ll agree to it.”

“Damned right you will, if you want an agreement. Just keep the minorities out of my life.”

“You’re assuming they’re anxious to jump in.”

“I’m not assuming anything. I have four weeks to live, and I’d rather spend my time with people I trust.”

Adam read again a paragraph on page three of Sam’s draft. The language gave Sam the sole authority to select two witnesses at his execution. “I don’t understand this clause about the witnesses,” Adam said.

“It’s very simple. If we get to that point, there will be about fifteen witnesses. Since I’m the guest of honor, I get to select two. The statute, once you’ve had a chance to review it, lists a few who must be present. The warden, a Lebanese-American by the way, has some discretion in picking the rest. They usually conduct a lottery with the press to choose which of the vultures are allowed to gawk at it.”

“Then why do you want this clause?”

“Because the lawyer is always one of the two chosen by the gassee. That’s me.”

“And you don’t want me to witness the execution?”

“That’s correct.”

“You’re assuming I’ll want to witness it.”

“I’m not assuming anything. It’s just a fact that the lawyers can’t wait to see their poor clients gassed once it becomes inevitable. Then they can’t wait to get in front of the cameras and cry and carry on and rail against injustice.”

“And you think I’ll do that?”

“No. I don’t think you’ll do that.”

“Then, why this clause?”

Sam leaned forward with his elbows on the counter. His nose was an inch from the screen. “Because you will not witness the execution, okay?”

“It’s a deal,” he said casually, and flipped to another page. “We’re not going to get that far, Sam.”

“Atta boy. That’s what I want to hear.”

“Of course, we may need the governor.”

Sam snorted in disgust and relaxed in his chair. He crossed his right leg on his left knee, and glared at Adam. “The agreement is very plain.”

Indeed it was. Almost an entire page was dedicated to a venomous attack on David McAllister. Sam forgot about the law and used words like scurrilous and egotistical and narcissistic and mentioned more than once the insatiable appetite for publicity.

“So you have a problem with the governor,” Adam said.

Sam snorted.

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Sam.”

“I really don’t care what you think.”

“The governor could save your life.”

“Oh really. He’s the only reason I’m here, on death row, waiting to die, in the gas chamber. Why in hell would he want to save my life?”

“I didn’t say he wanted to. I said that he could. Let’s keep our options open.”

Sam smirked for a long minute as he lit a cigarette. He blinked and rolled his eyes as if this kid was the dumbest human he’d encountered in decades. Then he leaned forward on his left elbow and pointed at Adam with a crooked right finger. “If you think David McAllister will grant me a last minute pardon, then you’re a fool. But let me tell you what he will do. He’ll use you, and me, to suck out all the publicity imaginable. He’ll invite you to his office at the state capitol, and before you get there he’ll tip off the media. He’ll listen with remarkable sincerity. He’ll profess grave reservations about whether I should die. He’ll schedule another meeting, closer to the execution. And after you leave, he’ll hold a couple of interviews and divulge everything you’ve just told him. He’ll rehash the Kramer bombing. He’ll talk about civil rights and all that radical nigger crap. He’ll probably even cry. The closer I get to the gas chamber, the bigger the media circus will become. He’ll try

every way in the world to get in the middle of it. He'll meet with you every day, if we allow it. He'll take us to the wire."

"He can do this without us."

"And he will. Mark my word, Adam. An hour before I die, he'll hold a press conference somewhere—probably here, maybe at the governor's mansion—and he'll stand there in the glare of a hundred cameras and deny me clemency. And the bastard will have tears in his eyes."

"It won't hurt to talk to him."

"Fine. Go talk to him. And after you do, I'll invoke paragraph two and your ass'll go back to Chicago."

"He might like me. We could be friends."

"Oh, he'll love you. You're Sam's grandson. What a great story! More reporters, more cameras, more journalists, more interviews. He'd love to make your acquaintance so he can string you along. Hell, you might get him reelected."

Adam flipped another page, made some more notes, and stalled for a while in an effort to move away from the governor. "Where'd you learn to write like this?" he asked.

"Same place you did. I was taught by the same learned souls who provided your instruction. Dead judges. Honorable justices. Windy lawyers. Tedious professors. I've read the same garbage you've read."

"Not bad," Adam said, scanning another paragraph.

"I'm delighted you think so."

"I understand you have quite a little practice here."

"Practice. What's a practice? Why do lawyers practice? Why can't they just work like everyone else? Do plumbers practice? Do truck drivers practice? No, they simply work. But not lawyers. Hell no. They're special, and they practice. With all their damned practicing you'd think they'd know what the hell they were doing. You'd think they'd eventually become good at something."

"Do you like anyone?"

"That's an idiotic question."

"Why is it idiotic?"

“Because you’re sitting on that side of the wall. And you can walk out that door and drive away. And tonight you can have dinner in a nice restaurant and sleep in a soft bed. Life’s a bit different on this side. I’m treated like an animal. I have a cage. I have a death sentence which allows the State of Mississippi to kill me in four weeks, and so yes, son, it’s hard to be loving and compassionate. It’s hard to like people these days. That’s why your question is foolish.”

“Are you saying you were loving and compassionate before you arrived here?”

Sam stared through the opening and puffed on the cigarette. “Another stupid question.”

“Why?”

“It’s irrelevant, counselor. You’re a lawyer, not a shrink.”

“I’m your grandson. Therefore, I’m allowed to ask questions about your past.”

“Ask them. They might not be answered.”

“Why not?”

“The past is gone, son. It’s history. We can’t undo what’s been done. Nor can we explain it all.”

“But I don’t have a past.”

“Then you are indeed a lucky person.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Look, if you expect me to fill in the gaps, then I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong person.”

“Okay. Who else should I talk to?”

“I don’t know. It’s not important.”

“Maybe it’s important to me.”

“Well, to be honest, I’m not too concerned about you right now. Believe it or not, I’m much more worried about me. Me and my future. Me and my neck. There’s a big clock ticking somewhere, ticking rather loudly, wouldn’t you say? For some strange reason, don’t ask me why, but I can hear the damned thing and it makes me real anxious. I find it very difficult to worry about the problems of others.”

“Why did you become a Klansman?”

“Because my father was in the Klan.”

“Why did he become a Klansman?”

“Because his father was in the Klan.”

“Great. Three generations.”

“Four, I think. Colonel Jacob Cayhall fought with Nathan Bedford Forrest in the war, and family legend has it that he was one of the early members of the Klan. He was my great-grandfather.”

“You’re proud of this?”

“Is that a question?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not a matter of pride.” Sam nodded at the counter. “Are you going to sign that agreement?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it.”

Adam signed at the bottom of the back page and handed it to Sam. “You’re asking questions that are very confidential. As my lawyer, you cannot breathe a word.”

“I understand the relationship.”

Sam signed his name next to Adam’s, then studied the signatures. “When did you become a Hall?”

“A month before my fourth birthday. It was a family affair. We were all converted at the same time. Of course, I don’t remember.”

“Why did he stick with Hall? Why not make a clean break and go with Miller or Green or something?”

“Is that a question?”

“No.”

“He was running, Sam. And he was burning bridges as he went. I guess four generations was enough for him.”

Sam placed the contract in a chair beside him, and methodically lit another cigarette. He exhaled at the ceiling and stared at Adam. “Look, Adam,” he said slowly, his voice suddenly much softer. “Let’s lay off the family stuff for a while, okay. Maybe we’ll get around to it later. Right now I need to know what’s about to happen to me. What are my chances, you know? Stuff like that. How do you stop the clock? What do you file next?”

“Depends on several things, Sam. Depends on how much you tell me about the bombing.”

"I don't follow."

"If there are new facts, then we present them. There are ways, believe me. We'll find a judge who'll listen."

"What kind of new facts?"

Adam flipped to a clean page on his pad, and scribbled the date in the margin. "Who delivered the green Pontiac to Cleveland on the night before the bombing?"

"I don't know. One of Dogan's men."

"You don't know his name?"

"No."

"Come on, Sam."

"I swear. I don't know who did it. I never saw the man. The car was delivered to a parking lot. I found it. I was supposed to leave it where I found it. I never saw the man who delivered it."

"Why wasn't he discovered during the trials?"

"How am I supposed to know? He was just a minor accomplice, I guess. They were after me. Why bother with a gopher? I don't know."

"Kramer was bombing number six, right?"

"I think so." Sam leaned forward again with his face almost touching the screen. His voice was low, his words carefully chosen as if someone might be listening somewhere.

"You think so?"

"It was a long time ago, okay." He closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "Yeah, number six."

"The FBI said it was number six."

"Then that settles it. They're always right."

"Was the same green Pontiac used in one or all of the prior bombings?"

"Yes. In a couple, as I remember. We used more than one car."

"All supplied by Dogan?"

"Yes. He was a car dealer."

"I know. Did the same man deliver the Pontiac for the prior bombings?"

"I never saw or met anyone delivering the cars for the bombings. Dogan didn't work that way. He was extremely careful, and his

plans were detailed. I don't know this for a fact, but I'm certain that the man delivering the cars didn't have a clue as to who I was."

"Did the cars come with the dynamite?"

"Yes. Always. Dogan had enough guns and explosives for a small war. Feds never found his arsenal either."

"Where'd you learn about explosives?"

"KKK boot camp and the basic training manual."

"Probably hereditary, wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't."

"I'm serious. How'd you learn to detonate explosives?"

"It's very basic and simple. Any fool could pick it up in thirty minutes."

"Then with a bit of practice you're an expert."

"Practice helps. It's not much more difficult than lighting a firecracker. You strike a match, any match will do, and you place it at the end of a long fuse until the fuse lights. Then you run like hell. If you're lucky, it won't blow up for about fifteen minutes."

"And this is something that is just sort of absorbed by all Klansmen?"

"Most of the ones I knew could handle it."

"Do you still know any Klansmen?"

"No. They've abandoned me."

Adam watched his face carefully. The fierce blue eyes were steady. The wrinkles didn't move. There was no emotion, no feeling or sorrow or anger. Sam returned the stare without blinking.

Adam returned to his notepad. "On March 2, 1967, the Hirsch Temple in Jackson was bombed. Did you do it?"

"Get right to the point, don't you?"

"It's an easy question."

Sam twisted the filter between his lips and thought for a second. "Why is it important?"

"Just answer the damned question," Adam snapped. "It's too late to play games."

"I've never been asked that question before."

"Well I guess today's your big day. A simple yes or no will do."

"Yes."

“Did you use the green Pontiac?”

“I think so.”

“Who was with you?”

“What makes you think someone was with me?”

“Because a witness said he saw a green Pontiac speed by a few minutes before the explosion. And he said two people were in the car. He even made a tentative identification of you as the driver.”

“Ah, yes. Our little friend Bascar. I read about him in the newspapers.”

“He was near the corner of Fortification and State streets when you and your pal rushed by.”

“Of course he was. And he’d just left a bar at three in the morning, drunk as a goat, and stupid as hell to begin with. Bascar, as I’m sure you know, never made it near a courtroom, never placed his hand on a Bible and swore to tell the truth, never faced a cross-examination, never came forward until after I was under arrest in Greenville and half the world had seen pictures of the green Pontiac. His tentative identification occurred only after my face had been plastered all over the papers.”

“So he’s lying?”

“No, he’s probably just ignorant. Keep in mind, Adam, that I was never charged with that bombing. Bascar was never put under pressure. He never gave sworn testimony. His story was revealed, I believe, when a reporter with a Memphis newspaper dug through the honky-tonks and whorehouses long enough to find someone like Bascar.”

“Let’s try it this way. Did you or did you not have someone with you when you bombed the Hirsch Temple synagogue on March 2, 1967?”

Sam’s gaze fell a few inches below the opening, then to the counter, then to the floor. He pushed away slightly from the partition and relaxed in his chair. Predictably, the blue package of Montclairs was produced from the front pocket, and he took forever selecting one, then thumping it on the filter, then inserting it just so between his moist lips. The striking of the match was another brief

ceremony, but one that was finally accomplished and a fresh fog of smoke lifted toward the ceiling.

Adam watched and waited until it was obvious no quick answer was forthcoming. The delay in itself was an admission. He tapped his pen nervously on the legal pad. He took quick breaths and noticed an increase in his heartbeat. His empty stomach was suddenly jittery. Could this be the break? If there had been an accomplice, then perhaps they had worked as a team and perhaps Sam had not actually planted the dynamite that killed the Kramers. Perhaps this fact could be presented to a sympathetic judge somewhere who would listen and grant a stay. Perhaps. Maybe. Could it be?

“No,” Sam said ever so softly but firmly as he looked at Adam through the opening.

“I don’t believe you.”

“There was no accomplice.”

“I don’t believe you, Sam.”

Sam shrugged casually as if he couldn’t care less. He crossed his legs and wrapped his fingers around a knee.

Adam took a deep breath, scribbled something routinely as if he’d been expecting this, and flipped to a clean page. “What time did you arrive in Cleveland on the night of April 20, 1967?”

“Which time?”

“The first time.”

“I left Clanton around six. Drove two hours to Cleveland. So I got there around eight.”

“Where’d you go?”

“To a shopping center.”

“Why’d you go there?”

“To get the car.”

“The green Pontiac?”

“Yes. But it wasn’t there. So I drove to Greenville to look around a bit.”

“Had you been there before?”

“Yes. A couple of weeks earlier, I had scouted the place. I even went in the Jew’s office to get a good look.”

“That was pretty stupid, wasn’t it? I mean, his secretary identified you at trial as the man who came in asking for directions and wanting to use the rest room.”

“Very stupid. But then, I wasn’t supposed to get caught. She was never supposed to see my face again.” He bit the filter and sucked hard. “A very bad move. Of course, it’s awfully easy to sit here now and second-guess everything.”

“How long did you stay in Greenville?”

“An hour or so. Then I drove back to Cleveland to get the car. Dogan always had detailed plans with several alternates. The car was parked in spot B, near a truck stop.”

“Where were the keys?”

“Under the mat.”

“What did you do?”

“Took it for a drive. Drove out of town, out through some cotton fields. I found a lonely spot and parked the car. I popped the trunk to check the dynamite.”

“How many sticks?”

“Fifteen, I believe. I was using between twelve and twenty, depending on the building. Twenty for the synagogue because it was new and modern and built with concrete and stone. But the Jew’s office was an old wooden structure, and I knew fifteen would level it.”

“What else was in the trunk?”

“The usual. A cardboard box of dynamite. Two blasting caps. A fifteen-minute fuse.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“What about the timing device? The detonator?”

“Oh yeah. I forgot about that. It was in another, smaller box.”

“Describe it for me.”

“Why? You’ve read the trial transcripts. The FBI expert did a wonderful job of reconstructing my little bomb. You’ve read this, haven’t you?”

“Many times.”

“And you’ve seen the photos they used at trial. The ones of the fragments and pieces of the timer. You’ve seen all this, haven’t you?”

“I’ve seen it. Where did Dogan get the clock?”

“I never asked. You could buy one in any drugstore. It was just a cheap, windup alarm clock. Nothing fancy.”

“Was this your first job with a timing device?”

“You know it was. The other bombs were detonated by fuses. Why are you asking me these questions?”

“Because I want to hear your answers. I’ve read everything, but I want to hear it from you. Why did you want to delay the Kramer bomb?”

“Because I was tired of lighting fuses and running like hell. I wanted a longer break between planting the bomb and feeling it go off.”

“What time did you plant it?”

“Around 4 a.m.”

“What time was it supposed to go off?”

“Around five.”

“What went wrong?”

“It didn’t go off at five. It went off a few minutes before eight, and there were people in the building by then, and some of these people got killed. And that’s why I’m sitting here in a red monkey suit wondering what the gas’ll smell like.”

“Dogan testified that the selection of Marvin Kramer as a target was a joint effort between the both of you; that Kramer had been on a Klan hit list for two years; that the use of a timing device was something you suggested as a way to kill Kramer because his routine was predictable; that you acted alone.”

Sam listened patiently and puffed on his cigarette. His eyes narrowed to tiny slits and he nodded at the floor. Then he almost smiled. “Well, I’m afraid Dogan went crazy, didn’t he? Feds hounded him for years, and he finally caved in. He was not a strong man, you know.” He took a deep breath and looked at Adam. “But some of it’s true. Not much, but some.”

“Did you intend to kill him?”

“No. We weren’t killing people. Just blowing up buildings.”

“What about the Pinder home in Vicksburg? Was that one of yours?”

Sam nodded slowly.

“The bomb went off at four in the morning while the entire Pinder family was sound asleep. Six people. Miraculously, only one minor injury.”

“It wasn’t a miracle. The bomb was placed in the garage. If I’d wanted to kill anyone, I’d have put it by a bedroom window.”

“Half the house collapsed.”

“Yeah, and I could’ve used a clock and wiped out a bunch of Jews as they ate their bagels or whatever.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“As I said, we weren’t trying to kill people.”

“What were you trying to do?”

“Intimidate. Retaliate. Keep the damned Jews from financing the civil rights movement. We were trying to keep the Africans where they belonged—in their own schools and churches and neighborhoods and rest rooms, away from our women and children. Jews like Marvin Kramer were promoting an interracial society and stirring up the Africans. Son of a bitch needed to be kept in line.”

“You guys really showed him, didn’t you?”

“He got what he deserved. I’m sorry about the little boys.”

“Your compassion is overwhelming.”

“Listen, Adam, and listen good. I did not intend to hurt anyone. The bomb was set to go off at 5 a.m., three hours before he usually arrived for work. The only reason his kids were there was because his wife had the flu.”

“But you feel no remorse because Marvin lost both legs?”

“Not really.”

“No remorse because he killed himself?”

“He pulled the trigger, not me.”

“You’re a sick man, Sam.”

“Yeah, and I’m about to get a lot sicker when I sniff the gas.”

Adam shook his head in disgust, but held his tongue. They could argue later about race and hatred; not that he, at this moment, expected to make any progress with Sam on these topics. But he was determined to try. Now, however, they needed to discuss facts.

“After you inspected the dynamite, what did you do?”

“Drove back to the truck stop. Drank coffee.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I was thirsty.”

“Very funny, Sam. Just try and answer the questions.”

“I was waiting.”

“For what?”

“I needed to kill a couple of hours. By then it was around midnight, and I wanted to spend as little time in Greenville as possible. So, I killed time in Cleveland.”

“Did you talk to anyone in the café?”

“No.”

“Was it crowded?”

“I really don’t remember.”

“Did you sit alone?”

“Yes.”

“At a table?”

“Yes.” Sam managed a slight grin because he knew what was coming.

“A truck driver by the name of Tommy Farris said he saw a man who greatly resembled you in the truck stop that night, and that this man drank coffee for a long time with a younger man.”

“I never met Mr. Farris, but I believe he had a lapse of memory for three years. Not a word to anyone, as I recall, until another reporter flushed him out and he got his name in the paper. It’s amazing how these mystery witnesses pop up years after the trials.”

“Why didn’t Farris testify in your last trial?”

“Don’t ask me. I suppose it was because he had nothing to say. The fact that I drank coffee alone or with someone seven hours before the bombing was hardly relevant. Plus, the coffee drinking took place in Cleveland, and had nothing to do with whether or not I committed the crime.”

“So Farris was lying?”

“I don’t know what Farris was doing. Don’t really care. I was alone. That’s all that matters.”

“What time did you leave Cleveland?”

“Around three, I think.”

“And you drove straight to Greenville?”

“Yes. And I drove by the Kramers’ house, saw the guard sitting on the porch, drove by his office, killed some more time, and around four or so I parked behind his office, slipped through the rear door, planted the bomb in a closet in the hallway, walked back to my car, and drove away.”

“What time did you leave Greenville?”

“I had planned to leave after the bomb went off. But, as you know, it was several months before I actually made it out of town.”

“Where did you go when you left Kramer’s office?”

“I found a little coffee shop on the highway, a half mile or so from Kramer’s office.”

“Why’d you go there?”

“To drink coffee.”

“What time was it?”

“I don’t know. Around four-thirty or so.”

“Was it crowded?”

“A handful of people. Just your run-of-the-mill all-night diner with a fat cook in a dirty tee shirt and a waitress who smacked her chewing gum.”

“Did you talk to anybody?”

“I spoke to the waitress when I ordered my coffee. Maybe I had a doughnut.”

“And you were having a nice cup of coffee, just minding your own business, waiting for the bomb to go off.”

“Yeah. I always liked to hear the bombs go off and watch the people react.”

“So you’d done this before?”

“A couple of times. In February of that year I bombed the real estate office in Jackson—Jews had sold a house to some niggers in a white section—and I had just sat down in a diner not three blocks

away when the bomb went off. I was using a fuse then, so I had to hustle away and park real fast and find a table. The girl had just sat my coffee down when the ground shook and everybody froze. I really liked that. It was four in the morning and the place was packed with truckers and deliverymen, even had a few cops over in a corner, and of course they ran to their cars and sped away with lights blazing. My table shook so hard that coffee spilled from my cup.”

“And that gave you a real thrill?”

“Yes, it did. But the other jobs were too risky. I didn’t have the time to find a café or diner, so I just sort of rode around for a few minutes waiting for the fun. I’d check my watch closely, so I always knew about when it would hit. If I was in the car, I liked to be on the edge of town, you know.” Sam paused and took a long puff from his cigarette. His words were slow and careful. His eyes danced a bit as he talked about his adventures, but his words were measured. “I did watch the Pinder bombing,” he added.

“And how’d you do that?”

“They lived in a big house in the suburbs, lots of trees, sort of in a valley. I parked on the side of a hill about a mile away, and I was sitting under a tree when it went off.”

“How peaceful.”

“It really was. Full moon, cool night. I had a great view of the street, and I could see almost all of the roof. It was so calm and peaceful, everyone was asleep, then, boom, blew that roof to hell and back.”

“What was Mr. Pinder’s sin?”

“Just overall general Jewishness. Loved niggers. Always embraced the radical Africans when they came down from the North and agitated everybody. He loved to march and boycott with the Africans. We suspected he was financing a lot of their activities.”

Adam made notes and tried to absorb all of this. It was hard to digest because it was almost impossible to believe. Perhaps the death penalty was not such a bad idea after all. “Back to Greenville. Where was this coffee shop located?”

“Don’t remember.”

“What was it called?”

“It was twenty-three years ago. And it was not the kind of place you’d want to remember.”

“Was it on Highway 82?”

“I think so. What are you gonna do? Spend your time digging for the fat cook and the tacky waitress? Are you doubting my story?”

“Yes. I’m doubting your story.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t tell me where you learned to make a bomb with a timing detonator.”

“In the garage behind my house.”

“In Clanton?”

“Out from Clanton. It’s not that difficult.”

“Who taught you?”

“I taught myself. I had a drawing, a little booklet with diagrams and such. Steps one, two, three. It was no big deal.”

“How many times did you practice with such a device before Kramer?”

“Once.”

“Where? When?”

“In the woods not far from my house. I took two sticks of dynamite and the necessary paraphernalia, and I went to a little creek bed deep in the woods. It worked perfectly.”

“Of course. And you did all this study and research in your garage?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Your own little laboratory.”

“Call it whatever you want.”

“Well, the FBI conducted a thorough search of your house, garage, and premises while you were in custody. They didn’t find a trace of evidence of explosives.”

“Maybe they’re stupid. Maybe I was real careful and didn’t leave a trail.”

“Or maybe the bomb was planted by someone with experience in explosives.”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“How long did you stay in the coffee shop in Greenville?”

“A helluva long time. Five o’clock came and went. Then it was almost six. I left a few minutes before six and drove by Kramer’s office. The place looked fine. Some of the early risers were out and about, and I didn’t want to be seen. I crossed the river and drove to Lake Village, Arkansas, then returned to Greenville. It was seven by then, sun was up and people were moving around. No explosion. I parked the car on a side street, and walked around for a while. The damned thing wouldn’t go off. I couldn’t go in after it, you know. I walked and walked, listening hard, hoping the ground would shake. Nothing happened.”

“Did you see Marvin Kramer and his sons go into the building?”

“No. I turned a corner and saw his car parked, and I thought dammit! I went blank. I couldn’t think. But then I thought, what the hell, he’s just a Jew and he’s done many evil things. Then, I thought about secretaries and other people who might work in there, so I walked around the block again. I remember looking at my watch when it was twenty minutes before eight, and I had this thought that maybe I should make an anonymous phone call to the office and tell Kramer that there was a bomb in the closet. And if he didn’t believe me, then he could go look at it, then he could haul ass.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t have a dime. I’d left all my change as a tip for the waitress, and I didn’t want to walk into a store and ask for change. I have to tell you I was real nervous. My hands were shaking, and I didn’t want to act suspicious in front of anybody. I was a stranger, right? That was my bomb in there, right? I was in a small town where everybody knows everyone, and they damned sure remember strangers when there’s a crime. I remember walking down the sidewalk, just across the street from Kramer’s, and in front of a barbershop there was a newspaper rack, and this man was fumbling in his pocket for change. I almost asked him for a dime so I could make a quick call, but I was too nervous.”

“Why were you nervous, Sam? You just said you didn’t care if Kramer got hurt. This was your sixth bombing, right?”

“Yeah, but the others were easy. Light the fuse, hit the door, and wait a few minutes. I kept thinking about that cute little secretary in Kramer’s office, the one who’d shown me to the rest room. The same one who later testified at trial. And I kept thinking about the other people who worked in his office because when I went in that day I saw people everywhere. It was almost eight o’clock, and I knew the place opened in a few minutes. I knew a lot of people were about to get killed. My mind stopped working. I remember standing beside a phone booth a block away, staring at my watch, then staring at the phone, telling myself that I had to make the call. I finally stepped inside and looked up the number, but by the time I closed the book I’d forgotten it. So I looked it up again, and I started to dial when I remembered I didn’t have a dime. So I made up my mind to go into the barbershop to get some change. My legs were heavy and I was sweatin’ like hell. I walked to the barbershop, and I stopped at the plate glass window and looked in. It was packed. They were lined up against the wall, talking and reading papers, and there was a row of chairs, all filled with men talking at the same time. I remember a couple of them looked at me, then one or two more began to stare, so I walked away.”

“Where did you go?”

“I’m not sure. There was an office next door to Kramer’s, and I remember seeing a car park in front of it. I thought maybe it was a secretary or someone about to go into Kramer’s, and I think I was walking toward the car when the bomb went off.”

“So you were across the street?”

“I think so. I remember rocking on my hands and knees in the street as glass and debris fell all around me. But I don’t remember much after that.”

There was a slight knock on the door from the outside, then Sergeant Packer appeared with a large Styrofoam cup, a paper napkin, a stir stick, and creamer. “Thought you might need a little coffee. Sorry to butt in.” He placed the cup and accessories on the counter.

“Thanks,” Adam said.

Packer quickly turned and headed for the door.

“I’ll take two sugars, one cream,” Sam said from the other side.

“Yes sir,” Packer snapped without slowing. He was gone.

“Good service around here,” Adam said.

“Wonderful, just wonderful.”

Fourteen

Sam, of course, was not served coffee. He knew this immediately, but Adam did not. And so after waiting a few minutes, Sam said, "Drink it." He himself lit another cigarette, and paced around a bit behind his chair while Adam stirred the sugar with the plastic stick. It was almost eleven, and Sam had missed his hour out, and he had no confidence that Packer would find the time to make it up. He paced and squatted a few times, performed a half dozen deep bends, knees cracking and joints popping as he rose and sank unsteadily. During the first few months of his first year on the Row, he had grown quite disciplined with his exercise. At one point, he was doing a hundred push-ups and a hundred sit-ups in his cell each day, every day. His weight fell to a perfect one hundred and sixty pounds as the low-fat diet took its course. His stomach was flat and hard. He had never been so healthy.

Not long afterward, however, came the realization that the Row would be his final home, and that the state would one day kill him here. What's the benefit of good health and tight biceps when one is locked up twenty-three hours a day waiting to die? The exercise slowly stopped. The smoking intensified. Among his comrades, Sam was considered a lucky man, primarily because he had outside money. A younger brother, Donnie, lived in North Carolina and once a month shipped to Sam a cardboard box packed neatly with ten cartons of Montclair cigarettes. Sam averaged between three and four packs a day. He wanted to kill himself before the state got around to it. And he preferred to go by way of some protracted illness or affliction, some disease that would require expensive treatment which the State of Mississippi would be constitutionally bound to provide.

It looked as though he would lose the race.

The federal judge who had assumed control of Parchman through a prisoners' rights suit had issued sweeping orders overhauling fundamental correction procedures. He had carefully defined the rights of prisoners. And he had set forth minor details, such as the square footage of each cell on the Row and the amount of money each inmate could possess. Twenty dollars was the maximum. It was referred to as "dust," and it always came from the outside. Death row inmates were not allowed to work and earn money. The lucky ones received a few dollars a month from relatives and friends. They could spend it in a canteen located in the middle of MSU. Soft drinks were known as "bottle-ups." Candy and snacks were "zu-zus" and "wham-whams." Real cigarettes in packages were "tight-legs" and "ready-rolls."

The majority of the inmates received nothing from the outside. They traded, swapped, and bartered, and gathered enough coins to purchase loose leaf tobacco which they rolled into thin papers and smoked slowly. Sam was indeed a lucky man.

He took his seat and lit another one.

"Why didn't you testify at trial?" his lawyer asked through the screen.

"Which trial?"

"Good point. The first two trials."

"Didn't need to. Brazelton picked good juries, all white, good sympathetic people who understood things. I knew I wouldn't be convicted by those people. There was no need to testify."

"And the last trial?"

"That's a little more complicated. Keyes and I discussed it many times. He at first thought it might help, because I could explain to the jury what my intentions were. Nobody was supposed to get hurt, etc. The bomb was supposed to go off at 5 a.m. But we knew the cross-examination would be brutal. The judge had already ruled that the other bombings could be discussed to show certain things. I would be forced to admit that I did in fact plant the bomb, all fifteen sticks, which of course was more than enough to kill people."

"So why didn't you testify?"

“Dogan. That lying bastard told the jury that our plan was to kill the Jew. He was a very effective witness. I mean, think about it, here was the former Imperial Wizard of the Mississippi Klan testifying for the prosecution against one of his own men. It was stout stuff. The jury ate it up.”

“Why did Dogan lie?”

“Jerry Dogan went crazy, Adam. I mean, really crazy. The Feds pursued him for fifteen years—bugged his phones, followed his wife around town, harassed his kinfolks, threatened his children, knocked on his door at all hours of the night. His life was miserable. Someone was always watching and listening. Then, he got sloppy, and the IRS stepped in. They, along with the FBI, told him he was looking at thirty years. Dogan cracked under the pressure. After my trial, I heard he was sent away for a while. You know, to an institution. He got some treatment, returned home, and died not long after.”

“Dogan’s dead?”

Sam froze in mid-puff. Smoke leaked from his mouth and curled upward past his nose and in front of his eyes, which at the moment were staring in disbelief through the opening and into those of his grandson. “You don’t know about Dogan?” he asked.

Adam’s memory blitzed through the countless articles and stories which he’d collected and indexed. He shook his head. “No. What happened to Dogan?”

“I thought you knew everything,” Sam said. “Thought you’d memorized everything about me.”

“I know a lot about you, Sam. I really don’t care about Jeremiah Dogan.”

“He burned in a house fire. He and his wife. They were asleep one night when a gas line somehow began leaking propane. Neighbors said it was like a bomb going off.”

“When did this happen?”

“Exactly one year to the day after he testified against me.”

Adam tried to write this down, but his pen wouldn’t move. He studied Sam’s face for a clue. “Exactly a year?”

“Yep.”

“That’s a nice coincidence.”

“I was in here, of course, but I heard bits and pieces of it. Cops ruled it accidental. In fact, I think there was a lawsuit against the propane company.”

“So, you don’t think he was murdered?”

“Sure I think he was murdered.”

“Okay. Who did it?”

“In fact, the FBI came here and asked me some questions. Can you believe it? The Feds poking their noses around here. A couple of kids from up North. Just couldn’t wait to visit death row and flash their badges and meet a real live Klan terrorist. They were so damned scared they were afraid of their shadows. They asked me stupid questions for an hour, then left. Never heard from anybody again.”

“Who would murder Dogan?”

Sam bit the filter and extracted the last mouthful of smoke from the cigarette. He stubbed it in the ashtray while exhaling through the screen. Adam waved at the smoke with exaggerated motions, but Sam ignored him. “Lots of people,” he mumbled.

Adam made a note in the margin to talk about Dogan later. He would do the research first, then spring it again in some future conversation.

“Just for the sake of argument,” he said, still writing, “it seems as though you should’ve testified to counter Dogan.”

“I almost did,” Sam said with a trace of regret. “The last night of the trial, me and Keyes and his associate, I forget her name, stayed up until midnight discussing whether or not I should take the stand. But think about it, Adam. I would’ve been forced to admit that I planted the bomb, that it had a timing device set to go off later, that I had been involved in other bombings, and that I was across the street from the building when it blew. Plus, the prosecution had clearly proven that Marvin Kramer was a target. I mean, hell, they played those FBI phone tapes to the jury. You should’ve heard it. They rigged up these huge speakers in the courtroom, and they set the tape player on a table in front of the jury like it was some kind of a live bomb. And there was Dogan on the phone to Wayne

Graves, his voice was scratchy but very audible, talking about bombing Marvin Kramer for this and for that, and bragging about how he would send his Group, as he called me, to Greenville to take care of matters. The voices on that tape sounded like ghosts from hell, and the jury hung on every word. Very effective. And, then, of course, there was Dogan's own testimony. I would've looked ridiculous at that moment trying to testify and convince the jury that I really wasn't a bad guy. McAllister would've eaten me alive. So we decided I shouldn't take the stand. Looking back, it was a bad move. I should've talked."

"But on the advice of your attorney you didn't?"

"Look, Adam, if you're thinking about attacking Keyes on the grounds of ineffective assistance of counsel, then forget it. I paid Keyes good money, mortgaged everything I had, and he did a good job. A long time ago Goodman and Tyner considered going after Keyes, but they found nothing wrong with his representation. Forget it."

The Cayhall file at Kravitz & Bane had at least two inches of research and memos on the issue of Benjamin Keyes' representation. Ineffective assistance of trial counsel was a standard argument in death penalty appeals, but it had not been used in Sam's case. Goodman and Tyner had discussed it at length, bouncing long memos back and forth between their offices on the sixty-first and sixty-sixth floors in Chicago. The final memo declared that Keyes had done such a good job at trial that there was nothing to attack.

The file also included a three-page letter from Sam expressly forbidding any attack on Keyes. He would not sign any petition doing so, he promised.

The last memo, however, had been written seven years earlier at a time when death was a distant possibility. Things were different now. Issues had to be resurrected or even fabricated. It was time to grasp at straws.

"Where is Keyes now?" Adam asked.

"Last I heard he took a job in Washington. He wrote me about five years ago, said he wasn't practicing anymore. He took it pretty hard when we lost. I don't think either one of us expected it."

“You didn’t expect to be convicted?”

“Not really. I had already beaten it twice, you know. And my jury the third time had eight whites, or Anglo-Americans I should say. As bad as the trial went, I don’t think I ever really believed they’d convict me.”

“What about Keyes?”

“Oh, he was worried. We damned sure didn’t take it lightly. We spent months preparing for the trial. He neglected his other clients, even his family, for weeks while we were getting ready. McAllister was popping off in the papers every day, it seemed, and the more he talked the more we worked. They released the list of potential jurors, four hundred of them, and we spent days investigating those people. His pretrial preparation was impeccable. We were not naive.”

“Lee told me you considered disappearing.”

“Oh, she did.”

“Yeah, she told me last night.”

He tapped the next cigarette on the counter, and admired it for a moment as if it might be his last. “Yeah, I thought about it. Almost thirteen years passed before McAllister came after me. I was a free man, hell I was forty-seven years old when the second trial ended and I returned home. Forty-seven years old, and I had been cleared by two juries, and all this was behind me. I was happy. Life was normal. I farmed and ran a sawmill, drank coffee in town and voted in every election. The Feds watched me for a few months, but I guess they became convinced I’d given up bombing. From time to time, a pesky reporter or journalist would show up in Clanton and ask questions, but nobody spoke to them. They were always from up North, dumb as hell, rude and ignorant, and they never stayed long. One came to the house one day, and wouldn’t leave. Instead of getting the shotgun, I just turned the dogs loose on him and they chewed his ass up. Never came back.” He chuckled to himself and lit the cigarette. “Not in my wildest dreams did I envision this. If I’d had the slightest inkling, the faintest clue that this might happen to me, then I would have been gone years ago. I was completely free, you understand, no restrictions. I would’ve gone to South America,

changed my name, disappeared two or three times, then settled in some place like São Paulo or Rio.”

“Like Mengele.”

“Something like that. They never caught him, you know. They never caught a bunch of those guys. I’d be living right now in a nice little house, speaking Portuguese and laughing at fools like David McAllister.” Sam shook his head and closed his eyes, and dreamed of what might have been.

“Why didn’t you leave when McAllister started making noises?”

“Because I was foolish. It happened slowly. It was like a bad dream coming to life in small segments. First, McAllister got elected with all his promises. Then, a few months later Dogan got nailed by the IRS. I started hearing rumors and reading little things in the newspapers. But I simply refused to believe it could happen. Before I knew it, the FBI was following me and I couldn’t run.”

Adam looked at his watch and was suddenly tired. They had been talking for more than two hours, and he needed fresh air and sunshine. His head ached from the cigarette smoke, and the room was growing warmer by the moment. He screwed the cap on his pen and slid the legal pad into his briefcase. “I’d better go,” he said in the direction of the screen. “I’ll probably come back tomorrow for another round.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Lucas Mann has given me the green light to visit anytime I want.”

“A helluva guy, isn’t he?”

“He’s okay. Just doing his job.”

“So’s Naifeh and Nugent and all those other white folks.”

“White folks?”

“Yeah, it’s slang for the authorities. Nobody really wants to kill me, but they’re just doing their jobs. There’s this little moron with nine fingers who’s the official executioner—the guy who mixes the gas and inserts the canister. Ask him what he’s doing as they strap me in, and he’ll say, ‘Just doing my job.’ The prison chaplain and the prison doctor and the prison psychiatrist, along with the guards who’ll escort me in and the medics who’ll carry me out, well, they’re

nice folks, nothing really against me, but they're just doing their jobs."

"It won't get that far, Sam."

"Is that a promise?"

"No. But think positive."

"Yeah, positive thinking's real popular around here. Me and the boys are big on motivational shows, along with travel programs and home shopping. The Africans prefer 'Soul Train.' "

"Lee's worried about you, Sam. She wanted me to tell you she's thinking about you and praying for you."

Sam bit his bottom lip and looked at the floor. He nodded slowly but said nothing.

"I'll be staying with her for the next month or so."

"She's still married to that guy?"

"Sort of. She wants to see you."

"No."

"Why not?"

Sam carefully eased from his chair and knocked on the door behind him. He turned and looked at Adam through the screen. They watched each other until a guard opened the door and took Sam away.

Fifteen

The kid left an hour ago, with authorization, though I haven't seen it in writing," Lucas Mann explained to Phillip Naifeh, who was standing in his window watching a litter gang along the highway. Naifeh had a headache, a backache, and was in the middle of a generally awful day which had included three early phone calls from the governor and two from Roxburgh, the Attorney General. Sam, of course, had been the reason for the calls.

"So he's got himself a lawyer," Naifeh said while gently pressing a fist in the center of his lower back.

"Yeah, and I really like this kid. He stopped by when he left and looked like he'd been run over by a truck. I think he and his grandfather are having a rough time of it."

"It'll get worse for the grandfather."

"It'll get worse for all of us."

"Do you know what the governor asked me? Wanted to know if he could have a copy of our manual on how to carry out executions. I told him no, that in fact he could not have a copy. He said he was the governor of this state and he felt as though he should have a copy. I tried to explain that it wasn't really a manual as such, just a loose-leaf little book in a black binder that gets heavily revised each time we gas someone. What's it called, he wanted to know. I said it's called nothing, actually, no official name because thankfully it's not used that much, but that on further thought I myself have referred to it as the little black book. He pushed a little harder, I got a little madder, we hung up, and fifteen minutes later his lawyer, that little hunchback fart with eyeglasses pinching his nose—"

"Larramore."

"Larramore called me and said that according to this code section and that code section he, the governor, has a right to a copy of the

manual. I put him on hold, pulled the code sections, made him wait ten minutes, then we read the law together, and, of course, as usual, he's lying and bluffing and figuring I'm an imbecile. No such language in my copy of the code. I hung up on him. Ten minutes later the governor called back, all sugar and spice, told me to forget the little black book, that he's very concerned about Sam's constitutional rights and all, and just wants me to keep him posted as this thing unfolds. A real charmer." Naifeh shifted weight on his feet and changed fists in his back while staring at the window.

"Then, half an hour later Roxburgh calls, and guess what he wants to know? Wants to know if I've talked to the governor. You see, Roxburgh thinks he and I are real tight, old political pals, you know, and therefore we can trust each other. And so he tells me, confidentially of course, buddy to buddy, that he thinks the governor might try to exploit this execution for his own political gain."

"Nonsense!" Lucas hooted.

"Yeah, I told Roxburgh that I just couldn't believe he would think such a thing about our governor. I was real serious, and he got real serious, and we promised each other that we'd watch the governor real close and if we saw any sign that he was trying to manipulate this situation, then we'd call each other real quick. Roxburgh said there were some things he could do to neutralize the governor if he got out of line. I didn't dare ask what or how, but he seemed sure of himself."

"So who's the bigger fool?"

"Probably Roxburgh. But it's a tough call." Naifeh stretched carefully and walked to his desk. His shoes were off and his shirttail was out. He was in obvious pain. "Both have insatiable appetites for publicity. They're like two little boys scared to death that one will get a bigger piece of candy. I hate 'em both."

"Everybody hates them except the voters."

There was a sharp knock on the door, three solid raps delivered at precise intervals. "Must be Nugent," Naifeh said and his pain suddenly intensified. "Come in."

The door opened quickly and Retired Colonel George Nugent marched into the room, pausing only slightly to close the door, and moved officially toward Lucas Mann, who did not stand but shook hands anyway. "Mr. Mann." Nugent greeted him crisply, then stepped forward and shook hands across the desk with Naifeh.

"Have a seat, George," Naifeh said, waving at an empty chair next to Mann. Naifeh wanted to order him to cut the military crap, but he knew it would do no good.

"Yes sir," Nugent answered as he lowered himself into the seat without bending his back. Though the only uniforms at Parchman were worn by guards and inmates, Nugent had managed to fashion one for himself. His shirt and pants were dark olive, perfectly matched and perfectly ironed with precise folds and creases, and they miraculously survived each day without the slightest wrinkling. The pants stopped a few inches above the ankles where they disappeared into a pair of black leather combat boots, shined and buffed at least twice a day to a state of perpetual sparkle. There had once been a weak rumor that a secretary or maybe a trustee had seen a spot of mud on one of the soles, but the rumor had not been confirmed.

The top button was left open to form an exact triangle which revealed a gray tee shirt. The pockets and sleeves were bare and unadorned, free of his medals and ribbons, and Naifeh had long suspected that this caused the colonel no small amount of humiliation. The haircut was strict military with bare skin above the ears and a thin layer of gray sprouts on top. Nugent was fifty-two, had served his country for thirty-four years, first as a buck private in Korea and later as a captain of some variety in Vietnam, where he fought the war from behind a desk. He'd been wounded in a jeep wreck and sent home with another ribbon.

For two years now Nugent had served admirably as an assistant superintendent, a trusted, loyal, and dependable underling of Naifeh's. He loved details and regulations and rules. He devoured manuals, and was constantly writing new procedures and directives and modifications for the warden to ponder. He was a significant

pain in the warden's ass, but he was needed nonetheless. It was no secret that the colonel wanted Naifeh's job in a couple of years.

"George, me and Lucas have been talking about the Cayhall matter. Don't know how much you know about the appeals, but the Fifth Circuit lifted the stay and we're looking at an execution in four weeks."

"Yes sir," Nugent snapped, absorbing and itemizing every word. "I read about it in today's paper."

"Good. Lucas here is of the opinion that this one might come down, you know. Right, Lucas?"

"There's a good chance. Better than fifty-fifty." Lucas said this without looking at Nugent.

"How long have you been here, George?"

"Two years, one month."

The warden calculated something while rubbing his temples. "Did you miss the Parris execution?"

"Yes sir. By a few weeks," he answered with a trace of disappointment.

"So you haven't been through one?"

"No sir."

"Well, they're awful, George. Just awful. Worst part of this job, by far. Frankly, I'm just not up to it. I was hoping I'd retire before we used the chamber again, but now that looks doubtful. I need some help."

Nugent's back, though painfully stiff already, seemed to straighten even more. He nodded quickly, eyes dancing in all directions.

Naifeh delicately sat in his seat, grimacing as he eased onto the soft leather. "Since I'm just not up to it, George, Lucas and I were thinking that maybe you'd do a good job with this one."

The colonel couldn't suppress a smile. Then it quickly disappeared and was replaced with a most serious scowl. "I'm sure I can handle it, sir."

"I'm sure you can too." Naifeh pointed to a black binder on the corner of his desk. "We have a manual of sorts. There it is, the collected wisdom of two dozen visits to the gas chamber over the past thirty years."

Nugent's eyes narrowed and focused on the black book. He noticed that the pages were not all even and uniform, that an assortment of papers were actually folded and stuffed slovenly throughout the text, that the binder itself was worn and shabby. Within hours, he quickly decided, the manual would be transformed into a primer worthy of publication. That would be his first task. The paperwork would be immaculate.

"Why don't you read it tonight, and let's meet again tomorrow?"

"Yes sir," he said smugly.

"Not a word to anyone about this until we talk again, understood?"

"No sir."

Nugent nodded smartly at Lucas Mann, and left the office cradling the black book like a kid with a new toy. The door closed behind him.

"He's a nut," Lucas said.

"I know. We'll watch him."

"We'd better watch him. He's so damned gung-ho he might try to gas Sam this weekend."

Naifeh opened a desk drawer and retrieved a bottle of pills. He swallowed two without the assistance of water. "I'm going home, Lucas. I need to lie down. I'll probably die before Sam does."

"You'd better hurry."

The phone conversation with E. Garner Goodman was brief. Adam explained with some measure of pride that he and Sam had a written agreement on representation, and that they had already spent four hours together though little had been accomplished. Goodman wanted a copy of the agreement, and Adam explained that there were no copies as of now, that the original was safely tucked away in a cell on death row, and, furthermore, there would be copies only if the client decided so.

Goodman promised to review the file and get to work. Adam gave him Lee's phone number and promised to check in every day. He hung up the phone and stared at two terrifying phone messages beside his computer. Both were from reporters, one from a Memphis newspaper and one from a television station in Jackson, Mississippi.

Baker Cooley had talked to both reporters. In fact, a TV crew from Jackson had presented itself to the firm's receptionist and left only after Cooley made threats. All this attention had upset the tedious routine of the Memphis branch of Kravitz & Bane. Cooley was not happy about it. The other partners had little to say to Adam. The secretaries were professionally polite, but anxious to stay away from his office.

The reporters knew, Cooley had warned him gravely. They knew about Sam and Adam, the grandson-grandfather angle, and while he wasn't sure how they knew, it certainly hadn't come from him. He hadn't told a soul, until, of course, word was already out and he'd been forced to gather the partners and associates together just before lunch and break the news.

It was almost five o'clock. Adam sat at his desk with the door shut, listening to the voices in the hall as clerks and paralegals and other salaried staff made last minute preparations to leave for the day. He decided he would have nothing to say to the TV reporter. He dialed the number for Todd Marks at the Memphis Press. A recorded message guided him through the wonders of voice mail, and after a couple of minutes, Mr. Marks picked up his five-digit extension and said hurriedly, "Todd Marks." He sounded like a teenager.

"This is Adam Hall, with Kravitz & Bane. I had a note to call you."

"Yes, Mr. Hall," Marks gushed, instantly friendly and no longer in a hurry. "Thanks for calling. I, uh, well, we, uh, picked up a rumor about your handling of the Cayhall case, and, uh, I was just trying to track it down."

"I represent Mr. Cayhall," Adam said with measured words.

"Yes, well, that's what we heard. And, uh, you're from Chicago?"

"I am from Chicago."

"I see. How, uh, did you get the case?"

“My firm has represented Sam Cayhall for seven years.”

“Yes, right. But didn’t he terminate your services recently?”

“He did. And now he’s rehired the firm.” Adam could hear keys pecking away as Marks gathered his words into a computer.

“I see. We heard a rumor, just a rumor, I guess, that Sam Cayhall is your grandfather.”

“Where’d you hear this?”

“Well, you know, we have sources, and we have to protect them. Can’t really tell you where it came from, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Adam took a deep breath and let Marks hang for a minute. “Where are you now?”

“At the paper.”

“And where’s that? I don’t know the city.”

“Where are you?” Marks asked.

“Downtown. In our office.”

“I’m not far away. I can be there in ten minutes.”

“No, not here. Let’s meet somewhere else. A quiet little bar some place.”

“Fine. The Peabody Hotel is on Union, three blocks from you. There’s a nice bar off the lobby called Mallards.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Just me and you, okay?”

“Sure.”

Adam hung up the phone. Sam’s agreement contained some loose and ambiguous language that attempted to prevent his lawyer from talking to the press. The particular clause had major loopholes that any lawyer could walk through, but Adam did not wish to push the issue. After two visits, his grandfather was still nothing but a mystery. He didn’t like lawyers and would readily fire another, even his own grandson.

Mallards was filling up quickly with young weary professionals who needed a couple of stiff ones for the drive to the suburbs. Few people actually lived in downtown Memphis, so the bankers and

brokers met here and in countless other bars and gulped beer in green bottles and sipped Swedish vodka. They lined the bar and gathered around the small tables to discuss the direction of the market and debate the future of the prime. It was a tony place, with authentic brick walls and real hardwood floors. A table by the door held trays of chicken wings and livers wrapped with bacon.

Adam spotted a young man in jeans holding a notepad. He introduced himself, and they went to a table in the corner. Todd Marks was no more than twenty-five. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and hair to his shoulders. He was cordial and seemed a bit nervous. They ordered Heinekens.

The notepad was on the table, ready for action, and Adam decided to take control. "A few ground rules," he said. "First, everything I say is off the record. You can't quote me on anything. Agreed?"

Marks shrugged as if this was okay but not exactly what he had in mind. "Okay," he said.

"I think you call it deep background, or something like that."

"That's it."

"I'll answer some questions for you, but not many. I'm here because I want you to get it right, okay?"

"Fair enough. Is Sam Cayhall your grandfather?"

"Sam Cayhall is my client, and he has instructed me not to talk to the press. That's why you can't quote me. I'm here to confirm or deny. That's all."

"Okay. But is he your grandfather?"

"Yes."

Marks took a deep breath and savored this incredible fact, which no doubt led to an extraordinary story. He could see the headlines.

Then he realized he should ask some more questions. He carefully took a pen from his pocket. "Who's your father?"

"My father is deceased."

A long pause. "Okay. So Sam is your mother's father?"

"No. Sam is my father's father."

"All right. Why do you have different last names?"

"Because my father changed his name."

“Why?”

“I don’t want to answer that. I don’t want to go into a lot of family background.”

“Did you grow up in Clanton?”

“No. I was born there, but left when I was three years old. My parents moved to California. That’s where I grew up.”

“So you were not around Sam Cayhall?”

“No.”

“Did you know him?”

“I met him yesterday.”

Marks considered the next question, and thankfully the beer arrived. They sipped in unison and said nothing.

He stared at his notepad, scribbled something, then asked, “How long have you been with Kravitz & Bane?”

“Almost a year.”

“How long have you worked on the Cayhall case?”

“A day and a half.”

He took a long drink, and watched Adam as if he expected an explanation. “Look, uh, Mr. Hall—”

“It’s Adam.”

“Okay, Adam. There seem to be a lot of gaps here. Could you help me a bit?”

“No.”

“All right. I read somewhere that Cayhall fired Kravitz & Bane recently. Were you working on the case when this happened?”

“I just told you I’ve been working on the case for a day and a half.”

“When did you first go to death row?”

“Yesterday.”

“Did he know you were coming?”

“I don’t want to get into that.”

“Why not?”

“This is a very confidential matter. I’m not going to discuss my visits to death row. I will confirm or deny only those things which you can verify elsewhere.”

“Does Sam have other children?”

"I'm not going to discuss family. I'm sure your paper has covered this before."

"But it was a long time ago."

"Then look it up."

Another long drink, and another long look at the notepad. "What are the odds of the execution taking place on August 8?"

"It's very hard to say. I wouldn't want to speculate."

"But all the appeals have run, haven't they?"

"Maybe. Let's say I've got my work cut out for me."

"Can the governor grant a pardon?"

"Yes."

"Is that a possibility?"

"Rather unlikely. You'll have to ask him."

"Will your client do any interviews before the execution?"

"I doubt it."

Adam glanced at his watch as if he suddenly had to catch a plane. "Anything else?" he asked, then finished off the beer.

Marks stuck his pen in a shirt pocket. "Can we talk again?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On how you handle this. If you drag up the family stuff, then forget it."

"Must be some serious skeletons in the closet."

"No comment." Adam stood and offered a handshake. "Nice meeting you," he said as they shook hands.

"Thanks. I'll give you a call."

Adam walked quickly by the crowd at the bar, and disappeared through the hotel lobby.

Sixteen

Of all the silly, nitpicking rules imposed upon inmates at the Row, the one that irritated Sam the most was the five-inch rule. This little nugget of regulatory brilliance placed a limit on the volume of legal papers a death row inmate could possess in his cell. The documents could be no thicker than five inches when placed on end and squeezed together. Sam's file was not much different from the other inmates', and after nine years of appellate warfare the file filled a large cardboard box. How in hell was he supposed to research and study and prepare with such limitations as the five-inch rule?

Packer had entered his cell on several occasions with a yardstick which he waved around like a bandleader then carefully placed against the papers. Each time Sam had been over the limit; once being caught, according to Packer's assessment, with twenty-one inches. And each time Packer wrote an RVR, a rules violation report, and some more paperwork went into Sam's institutional file. Sam often wondered if his file in the main administration building was thicker than five inches. He hoped so. And who cared? They'd kept him in a cage for nine and a half years for the sole purpose of sustaining his life so they could one day take it. What else could they do to him?

Each time Packer had given him twenty-four hours to thin his file. Sam usually mailed a few inches to his brother in North Carolina. A few times he had reluctantly mailed an inch or two to E. Garner Goodman.

At the present time, he was about twelve inches over. And he had a thin file of recent Supreme Court cases under his mattress. And he had two inches next door where Hank Henshaw watched it on the bookshelf. And he had about three inches next door in J. B. Gullitt's

stack of papers. Sam reviewed all documents and letters for Henshaw and Gullitt. Henshaw had a fine lawyer, one purchased with family money. Gullitt had a fool from a big-shot firm in D.C. who'd never seen a courtroom.

The three-book rule was another baffling limitation on what inmates could keep in their cells. This rule simply said that a death row inmate could possess no more than three books. Sam owned fifteen, six in his cell, and nine scattered among his clients on the Row. He had no time for fiction. His collection was solely law books about the death penalty and the Eighth Amendment.

He had finished a dinner of boiled pork, pinto beans, and corn bread, and he was reading a case from the Ninth Circuit in California about an inmate who faced his death so calmly his lawyers decided he must be crazy. So they filed a series of motions claiming their client was indeed too crazy to execute. The Ninth Circuit was filled with California liberals opposed to the death penalty, and they jumped at this novel argument. The execution was stayed. Sam liked this case. He had wished many times that he had the Ninth Circuit looking down upon him instead of the Fifth.

Gullitt next door said, "Gotta kite, Sam," and Sam walked to his bars. Flying a kite was the only method of correspondence for inmates several cells away. Gullitt handed him the note. It was from Preacher Boy, a pathetic white kid seven doors down. He had become a country preacher at the age of fourteen, a regular hellfire-and-brimstoner, but that career was cut short and perhaps delayed forever when he was convicted of the rape and murder of a deacon's wife. He was twenty-four now, a resident of the Row for three years, and had recently made a glorious return to the gospel. The note said:

Dear Sam, I am down here praying for you right now. I really believe God will step into this matter and stop this thing. But if he don't, I'm asking him to take you quickly, no pain or nothing, and take you home. Love, Randy.

How wonderful, thought Sam, they're already praying that I go quickly, no pain or nothing. He sat on the edge of his bed and wrote a brief message on a scrap of paper.

Dear Randy:

Thanks for the prayers. I need them. I also need one of my books. It's called Bronstein's Death Penalty Review. It's a green book. Send it down. Sam.

He handed it to J.B., and waited with his arms through the bars as the kite made its way along the tier. It was almost eight o'clock, still hot and muggy but mercifully growing dark outside. The night would lower the temperature to the high seventies, and with the fans buzzing away the cells became tolerable.

Sam had received several kites during the day. All had expressed sympathy and hope. All offered whatever help was available. The music had been quieter and the yelling that erupted occasionally when someone's rights were being tampered with had not occurred. For the second day, the Row had been a more peaceful place. The televisions rattled along all day and into the night, but the volume was lower. Tier A was noticeably calmer.

"Got myself a new lawyer," Sam said quietly as he leaned on his elbows with his hands hanging into the hallway. He wore nothing but his boxer shorts. He could see Gullitt's hands and wrists, but he could never see his face when they talked in their cells. Each day as Sam was led outside for his hour of exercise, he walked slowly along the tier and stared into the eyes of his comrades. And they stared at him. He had their faces memorized, and he knew their voices. But it was cruel to live next door to a man for years and have long conversations about life and death while looking only at his hands.

"That's good, Sam. I'm glad to hear it."

"Yeah. Pretty sharp kid, I think."

"Who is it?" Gullitt's hands were clasped together. They didn't move.

"My grandson." Sam said this just loud enough for Gullitt to hear. He could be trusted with secrets.

Gullitt's fingers moved slightly as he pondered this. "Your grandson?"

"Yep. From Chicago. Big firm. Thinks we might have a chance."

"You never told me you had a grandson."

"I hadn't seen him in twenty years. Showed up yesterday and told me he was a lawyer and wanted to take my case."

"Where's he been for the past ten years?"

"Growing up, I guess. He's just a kid. Twenty-six, I think."

"You're gonna let a twenty-six-year-old kid take your case?"

This irritated Sam a bit. "I don't exactly have a lot of choices at this moment in my life."

"Hell, Sam, you know more law than he does."

"I know, but it'll be nice to have a real lawyer out there typing up motions and appeals on real computers and filing them in the proper courts, you know. It'll be nice to have somebody who can run to court and argue with judges, somebody who can fight with the state on equal footing."

This seemed to satisfy Gullitt because he didn't speak for several minutes. His hands were still, but then he began rubbing his fingertips together and this of course meant something was bothering him. Sam waited.

"I've been thinking about something, Sam. All day long this has been eatin' at me."

"What is it?"

"Well, for three years now you've been right there and I've been right here, you know, and you're my best friend in the world. You're the only person I can trust, you know, and I don't know what I'm gonna do if they walk you down the hall and into the chamber. I mean, I've always had you right there to look over my legal stuff, stuff that I'll never understand, and you've always given me good advice and told me what to do. I can't trust my lawyer in D.C. He never calls me or writes me, and I don't know what the hell's going on with my case. I mean, I don't know if I'm a year away or five years away, and it's enough to drive me crazy. If it hadn't been for you, I'd be a nut case by now. And what if you don't make it?" By

now his hands were jumping and thrusting with all sorts of intensity. His words stopped and his hands died down.

Sam lit a cigarette and offered one to Gullitt, the only person on death row with whom he'd share. Hank Henshaw, to his left, did not smoke. They puffed for a moment, each blowing clouds of smoke at the row of windows along the top of the hallway.

Sam finally said, "I'm not going anywhere, J.B. My lawyer says we've got a good chance."

"Do you believe him?"

"I think so. He's a smart kid."

"That must be weird, man, having a grandson as your lawyer. I can't imagine." Gullitt was thirty-one, childless, married, and often complained about his wife's jody, or free world boyfriend. She was a cruel woman who never visited and had once written a short letter with the good news that she was pregnant. Gullitt pouted for two days before admitting to Sam that he had beaten her for years and chased lots of women himself. She wrote again a month later and said she was sorry. A friend loaned her the money for an abortion, she explained, and she didn't want a divorce after all. Gullitt couldn't have been happier.

"It's somewhat strange, I guess," Sam said. "He looks nothing like me, but he favors his mother."

"So the dude just came right out and told you he was your long-lost grandson?"

"No. Not at first. We talked for a while and his voice sounded familiar. Sounded like his father's."

"His father is your son, right?"

"Yeah. He's dead."

"Your son is dead?"

"Yeah."

The green book finally arrived from Preacher Boy with another note about a magnificent dream he had just two nights ago. He had recently acquired the rare spiritual gift of dream interpretation, and couldn't wait to share it with Sam. The dream was still revealing itself to him, and once he had it all pieced together he would decode

it and untangle it and illustrate it for Sam. It was good news, he already knew that much.

At least he's stopped singing, Sam said to himself as he finished the note and sat on his bed. Preacher Boy had also been a gospel singer of sorts and a songwriter on top of that, and periodically found himself seized with the spirit to the point of serenading the tier at full volume and at all hours of the day and night. He was an untrained tenor with little pitch but incredible volume, and the complaints came fast and furious when he belted his new tunes into the hallway. Packer himself usually intervened to stop the racket. Sam had even threatened to step in legally and speed up the kid's execution if the caterwauling didn't stop, a sadistic move that he later apologized for. The poor kid was just crazy, and if Sam lived long enough he planned to use an insanity strategy that he'd read about from the California case.

He reclined on his bed and began to read. The fan ruffled the pages and circulated the sticky air, but within minutes the sheets under him were wet. He slept in dampness until the early hours before dawn when the Row was almost cool and the sheets were almost dry.

Seventeen

The Auburn House had never been a house or a home, but for decades had been a quaint little church of yellow brick and stained glass. It sat surrounded by an ugly chain-link fence on a shaded lot a few blocks from downtown Memphis. Graffiti littered the yellow brick and the stained glass windows had been replaced with plywood. The congregation had fled east years ago, away from the inner city, to the safety of the suburbs. They took their pews and songbooks, and even their steeple. A security guard paced along the fence ready to open the gate. Next door was a crumbling apartment building, and a block behind was a deteriorating federal housing project from which the patients of Auburn House came.

They were all young mothers, teenagers without exception whose mothers had also been teenagers and whose fathers were generally unknown. The average age was fifteen. The youngest had been eleven. They drifted in from the project with a baby on a hip and sometimes another one trailing behind. They came in packs of three and four and made their visits a social event. They came alone and scared. They gathered in the old sanctuary which was now a waiting room where paperwork was required. They waited with their infants while their toddlers played under the seats. They chatted with their friends, other girls from the project who'd walked to Auburn House because cars were scarce and they were too young to drive.

Adam parked in a small lot to the side and asked the security guard for directions. He examined Adam closely then pointed to the front door where two young girls were holding babies and smoking. He entered between them, nodding and trying to be polite, but they only stared. Inside he found a half dozen of the same mothers sitting in plastic chairs with children swarming at their feet. A young lady

behind a desk pointed at a door and told him to take the hallway on the left.

The door to Lee's tiny office was open and she was talking seriously to a patient. She smiled at Adam. "I'll be five minutes," she said, holding something that appeared to be a diaper. The patient did not have a child with her, but one was due very shortly.

Adam eased along the hallway and found the men's room. Lee was waiting for him in the hall when he came out. They pecked each other on the cheeks. "What do you think of our little operation?" she asked.

"What exactly do you do here?" They walked through the narrow corridor with worn carpet and peeling walls.

"Auburn House is a nonprofit organization staffed with volunteers. We work with young mothers."

"It must be depressing."

"Depends on how you look at it. Welcome to my office." Lee waved at her door and they stepped inside. The walls were covered with colorful charts, one showing a series of babies and the foods they eat; another listed in large simple words the most common ailments of newborns; another cartoonish illustration hailed the benefits of condoms. Adam took a seat and assessed the walls.

"All of our kids come from the projects, so you can imagine the postnatal instruction they receive at home. None of them are married. They live with their mothers or aunts or grandmothers. Auburn House was founded by some nuns twenty years ago to teach these kids how to raise healthy babies."

Adam nodded at the condom poster. "And to prevent babies?"

"Yes. We're not family planners, don't want to be, but it doesn't hurt to mention birth control."

"Maybe you should do more than mention it."

"Maybe. Sixty percent of the babies born in this county last year were out of wedlock, and the numbers go up each year. And each year there are more cases of battered and abandoned children. It'll break your heart. Some of these little fellas don't have a chance."

"Who funds it?"

“It’s all private. We spend half our time trying to raise money. We operate on a very lean budget.”

“How many counselors like you?”

“A dozen or so. Some work a few afternoons a week, a few Saturdays. I’m lucky. I can afford to work here full-time.”

“How many hours a week?”

“I don’t know. Who keeps up with them? I get here around ten and leave after dark.”

“And you do this for free?”

“Yeah. You guys call it pro bono, I think.”

“It’s different with lawyers. We do volunteer work to justify ourselves and the money we make, our little contribution to society. We still make plenty of money, you understand. This is a little different.”

“It’s rewarding.”

“How’d you find this place?”

“I don’t know. It was a long time ago. I was a member of a social club, a hot-tea-drinkers club, and we’d meet once a month for a lovely lunch and discuss ways to raise a few pennies for the less fortunate. One day a nun spoke to us about Auburn House, and we adopted it as our beneficiary. One thing led to another.”

“And you’re not paid a dime?”

“Phelps has plenty of money, Adam. In fact, I donate a lot of it to Auburn House. We have an annual fundraiser now at the Peabody, black tie and champagne, and I make Phelps lean on his banker buddies to show up with their wives and fork over the money. Raised over two hundred thousand last year.”

“Where does it go?”

“Some goes to overhead. We have two full-time staffers. The building is cheap but it still costs. The rest goes for baby supplies, medicine, and literature. There’s never enough.”

“So you sort of run the place?”

“No. We pay an administrator. I’m just a counselor.”

Adam studied the poster behind her, the one with a bulky yellow condom snaking its way harmlessly across the wall. He gathered from the latest surveys and studies that these little devices were not

being used by teenagers, in spite of television campaigns and school slogans and MTV spots by responsible rock stars. He could think of nothing worse than sitting in this cramped little room all day discussing diaper rashes with fifteen-year-old mothers.

"I admire you for this," he said, looking at the wall with the baby food poster.

Lee nodded but said nothing. Her eyes were tired and she was ready to go. "Let's go eat," she said.

"Where?"

"I don't know. Anywhere."

"I saw Sam today. Spent two hours with him."

Lee sunk in her seat, and slowly placed her feet on the desk. As usual, she was wearing faded jeans and a button-down.

"I'm his lawyer."

"He signed the agreement?"

"Yes. He prepared one himself, four pages. We both signed it, and so now it's up to me."

"Are you scared?"

"Terrified. But I can handle it. I talked to a reporter with the Memphis Press this afternoon. They've heard the rumor that Sam Cayhall is my grandfather."

"What did you tell him?"

"Couldn't really deny it, could I? He wanted to ask all kinds of questions about the family, but I told him little. I'm sure he'll dig around and find some more."

"What about me?"

"I certainly didn't tell him about you, but he'll start digging. I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"Sorry that maybe they'll expose your true identity. You'll be branded as the daughter of Sam Cayhall, murderer, racist, anti-Semite, terrorist, Klansman, the oldest man ever led to the gas chamber and gassed like an animal. They'll run you out of town."

"I've been through worse."

"What?"

"Being the wife of Phelps Booth."

Adam laughed at this, and Lee managed a smile. A middle-aged lady walked to the open door and told Lee she was leaving for the day. Lee jumped to her feet and quickly introduced her handsome young nephew, Adam Hall, a lawyer from Chicago, who was visiting for a spell. The lady was sufficiently impressed as she backed out of the office and disappeared down the hall.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Adam said.

“Why not?”

“Because my name will be in the paper tomorrow—Adam Hall, lawyer from Chicago, and grandson.”

Lee’s mouth dropped an inch before she caught it. She then gave a shrug as if she didn’t care, but Adam saw the fear in her eyes. What a stupid mistake, she was telling herself. “Who cares?” she said as she picked up her purse and briefcase. “Let’s go find a restaurant.”

They went to a neighborhood bistro, an Italian family place with small tables and few lights in a converted bungalow. They sat in a dark corner and ordered drinks, iced tea for her and mineral water for him. When the waiter left, Lee leaned over the table and said, “Adam, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He nodded but said nothing.

“I’m an alcoholic.”

His eyes narrowed then froze. They’d had drinks together the last two nights.

“It’s been about ten years, now,” she explained, still low over the table. The nearest person was fifteen feet away. “There were a lot of reasons, okay, some of which you could probably guess. I went through recovery, came out clean, and lasted about a year. Then, rehab again. I’ve been through treatment three times, the last was five years ago. It’s not easy.”

“But you had a drink last night. Several drinks.”

“I know. And the night before. And today I emptied all the bottles and threw away the beer. There’s not a drop in the apartment.”

“That’s fine with me. I hope I’m not the reason.”

“No. But I need your help, okay. You’ll be living with me for a couple of months, and we’ll have some bad times. Just help me.”

“Sure, Lee. I wish you’d told me when I arrived. I don’t drink much. I can take it or leave it.”

“Alcoholism is a strange animal. Sometimes I can watch people drink and it doesn’t bother me. Then I’ll see a beer commercial and break into a sweat. I’ll see an ad in a magazine for a wine I used to enjoy, and the craving is so intense I’ll become nauseated. It’s an awful struggle.”

The drinks arrived and Adam was afraid to touch his mineral water. He poured it over the ice and stirred it with a spoon. “Does it run in the family?” he asked, almost certain that it did.

“I don’t think so. Sam would sneak around and drink a little when we were kids, but he kept it from us. My mother’s mother was an alcoholic, so my mother never touched the stuff. I never saw it in the house.”

“How’d it happen to you?”

“Gradually. When I left home I couldn’t wait to give it a try because it was taboo when Eddie and I were growing up. Then I met Phelps, and he comes from a family of heavy social drinkers. It became an escape, and then it became a crutch.”

“I’ll do whatever I can. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’ve enjoyed having a drink with you, but it’s time to quit, okay. I’ve fallen off the wagon three times, and it all starts with the idea that I can have a drink or two and keep it under control. I went a month one time sipping wine and limiting myself to a glass a day. Then it was a glass and a half, then two, then three. Then rehab. I’m an alcoholic, and I’ll never get over it.”

Adam lifted his glass and touched it to hers. “Here’s to the wagon. We’ll ride it together.” They gulped their soft drinks.

The waiter was a student with a quick idea of what they should eat. He suggested the chef’s baked ravioli because it was simply the best in town and would be on the table in ten minutes. They agreed.

“I often wondered what you did with your time but I was afraid to ask,” Adam said.

“I had a job once. After Walt was born and started school I got bored, so Phelps found me a job with one of his friend’s companies. Big salary, nice office. I had my own secretary who knew much more about my job than I did. I quit after a year. I married money, Adam, so I’m not supposed to work. Phelps’ mother was appalled that I would draw a salary.”

“What do rich women do all day long?”

“Carry the burdens of the world. They must first make sure hubby is off to work, then they must plan the day. The servants have to be directed and supervised. The shopping is divided into at least two parts—morning and afternoon—with the morning usually consisting of several rigorous phone calls to Fifth Avenue for the necessities. The afternoon shopping is sometimes actually done in person, with the driver waiting in the parking lot, of course. Lunch takes up most of the day because it requires hours to plan and at least two hours to execute. It’s normally a small banquet attended by more of the same harried souls. Then there’s the social responsibility part of being a rich woman. At least three times a week she attends tea parties in the homes of her friends where they nibble on imported biscuits and whimper about the plight of abandoned babies or mothers on crack. Then, it’s back home in a hurry to freshen up for hubby’s return from the office wars. She’ll sip her first martini with him by the pool while four people prepare their dinner.”

“What about sex?”

“He’s too tired. Plus, he probably has a mistress.”

“This is what happened to Phelps?”

“I guess, although he couldn’t complain about the sex. I had a baby, I got older, and he’s always had a steady supply of young blondes from his banks. You wouldn’t believe his office. It’s filled with gorgeous women with impeccable teeth and nails, all with short skirts and long legs. They sit behind nice desks and talk on the phone, and wait for his beck and call. He has a small bedroom next to a conference room. The man’s an animal.”

“So you gave up the hard life of a rich woman and moved out?”

“Yeah. I was not a very good rich woman, Adam. I hated it. It was fun for a very short while, but I didn’t fit in. Not the right blood

type. Believe it or not, my family was not known in the social circles of Memphis.”

“You must be kidding.”

“I swear. And to be a proper rich woman with a future in this city you have to come from a family of rich fossils, preferably with a great-grandfather who made money in cotton. I just didn’t fit in.”

“But you still play the social game.”

“No. I still make appearances, but only for Phelps. It’s important for him to have a wife who’s his age but with a touch of gray, a mature wife who looks nice in an evening dress and diamonds and can hold her own while gabbing with his boring friends. We go out three times a year. I’m sort of an aging trophy wife.”

“Seems to me like he’d want a real trophy wife, one of the sleek blondes.”

“No. His family would be crushed, and there’s a lot of money in trust. Phelps walks on eggshells around his family. When his parents are gone, then he’ll be ready to come out of the closet.”

“I thought his parents hated you.”

“Of course they do. It’s ironic that they’re the reason we’re still married. A divorce would be scandalous.”

Adam laughed and shook his head in bewilderment. “This is crazy.”

“Yes, but it works. I’m happy. He’s happy. He has his little girls. I fool around with whomever I want. No questions are asked.”

“What about Walt?”

She slowly sat her glass of tea on the table and looked away. “What about him?” she said, without looking.

“You never talk about him.”

“I know,” she said softly, still watching something across the room.

“Let me guess. More skeletons in the closet. More secrets.”

She looked at him sadly, then gave a slight shrug as if to say, what the hell.

“He is, after all, my first cousin,” Adam said. “And to my knowledge, and barring any further revelations, he’s the only first cousin I have.”

“You wouldn’t like him.”

“Of course not. He’s part Cayhall.”

“No. He’s all Booth. Phelps wanted a son, why I don’t know. And so we had a son. Phelps, of course, had little time for him. Always too busy with the bank. He took him to the country club and tried to teach him golf, but it didn’t work. Walt never liked sports. They went to Canada once to hunt pheasants, and didn’t speak to each other for a week when they came home. He wasn’t a sissy, but he wasn’t athletic either. Phelps was a big prep school jock—football, rugby, boxing, all that. Walt tried to play, but the talent just wasn’t there. Phelps drove him even harder, and Walt rebelled. So, Phelps, with the typical heavy hand, sent him away to boarding school. My son left home at the age of fifteen.”

“Where did he go to college?”

“He spent one year at Cornell, then dropped out.”

“He dropped out?”

“Yes. He went to Europe after his freshman year, and he’s been there ever since.”

Adam studied her face and waited for more. He sipped his water, and was about to speak when the waiter appeared and rapidly placed a large bowl of green salad between them.

“Why did he stay in Europe?”

“He went to Amsterdam and fell in love.”

“A nice Dutch girl?”

“A nice Dutch boy.”

“I see.”

She was suddenly interested in the salad, which she served on her plate and began cutting into small pieces. Adam did likewise, and they ate in silence for a while as the bistro filled up and became noisier. An attractive couple of tired yuppies sat at the small table next to them and ordered strong drinks.

Adam smeared butter on a roll, took a bite, then asked, “How did Phelps react?”

She wiped the corners of her mouth. “The last trip Phelps and I took together was to Amsterdam to find our son. He’d been gone for almost two years. He’d written a few times and called me

occasionally, but then all correspondence stopped. We were worried, of course, so we flew over and camped out in a hotel until we found him.”

“What was he doing?”

“Working as a waiter in a café. Had an earring in each ear. His hair was chopped off. Weird clothes. He was wearing those damned clogs with wool socks. Spoke perfect Dutch. We didn’t want to make a scene, so we asked him to come to our hotel. He did. It was horrible. Just horrible. Phelps handled it like the idiot he is, and the damage was irreparable. We left and came home. Phelps made a big production of redoing his will and revoking Walt’s trust.”

“He’s never come home?”

“Never. I meet him in Paris once a year. We both arrive alone, that’s the only rule. We stay in a nice hotel and spend a week together, roaming the city, eating the food, visiting the museums. It’s the highlight of my year. But he hates Memphis.”

“I’d like to meet him.”

Lee watched him carefully, then her eyes watered. “Bless you. If you’re serious, I’d love for you to go with me.”

“I’m serious. I don’t care if he’s gay. I’d enjoy meeting my first cousin.”

She took a deep breath and smiled. The ravioli arrived on two heaping plates with steam rising in all directions. A long loaf of garlic bread was placed along the edge of the table, and the waiter was gone.

“Does Walt know about Sam?” Adam asked.

“No. I’ve never had the guts to tell him.”

“Does he know about me and Carmen? About Eddie? About any of our family’s glorious history?”

“Yes, a little. When he was a little boy, I told him he had cousins in California, but that they never came to Memphis. Phelps, of course, told him that his California cousins were of a much lower social class and therefore not worthy of his attention. Walt was groomed by his father to be a snob, Adam, you must understand this. He attended the most prestigious prep schools, hung out at the

nicest country clubs, and his family consisted of a bunch of Booth cousins who were all the same. They're all miserable people."

"What do the Booths think of having a homosexual in the family?"

"They hate him, of course. And he hates them."

"I like him already."

"He's not a bad kid. He wants to study art and paint. I send him money all the time."

"Does Sam know he has a gay grandson?"

"I don't think so. I don't know who would tell him."

"I probably won't tell him."

"Please don't. He has enough on his mind."

The ravioli cooled enough to eat, and they enjoyed it in silence. The waiter brought more water and tea. The couple next to them ordered a bottle of red wine, and Lee glanced at it more than once.

Adam wiped his mouth and rested for a moment. He leaned over the table. "Can I ask you something personal?" he said quietly.

"All your questions seem to be personal."

"Right. So can I ask you one more?"

"Please do."

"Well, I was just thinking. Tonight you've told me you're an alcoholic, your husband's an animal, and your son is gay. That's a lot for one meal. But is there anything else I should know?"

"Lemme see. Yes, Phelps is an alcoholic too, but he won't admit it."

"Anything else?"

"He's been sued twice for sexual harassment."

"Okay. Forget about the Booths. Any more surprises from our side of the family?"

"We haven't scratched the surface, Adam."

"I was afraid of that."

Eighteen

A loud thunderstorm rolled across the Delta before dawn, and Sam was awakened by the crack of lightning. He heard raindrops dropping hard against the open windows above the hallway. Then he heard them drip and puddle against the wall under the windows not far from his cell. The dampness of his bed was suddenly cool. Maybe today would not be so hot. Maybe the rain would linger and shade the sun, and maybe the wind would blow away the humidity for a day or two. He always had these hopes when it rained, but in the summer a thunderstorm usually meant soggy ground which under a glaring sun meant nothing but more suffocating heat.

He raised his head and watched the rain fall from the windows and gather on the floor. The water flickered in the reflected light of a distant yellow bulb. Except for this faint light, the Row was dark. And it was silent.

Sam loved the rain, especially at night and especially in the summer. The State of Mississippi, in its boundless wisdom, had built its prison in the hottest place it could find. And it designed its Maximum Security Unit along the same lines as an oven. The windows to the outside were small and useless, built that way for security reasons, of course. The planners of this little branch of hell also decided that there would be no ventilation of any sort, no chance for a breeze getting in or the dank air getting out. And after they built what they considered to be a model penal facility, they decided they would not air condition it. It would sit proudly beside the soybeans and cotton, and absorb the same heat and moisture from the ground. And when the land was dry, the Row would simply bake along with the crops.

But the State of Mississippi could not control the weather, and when the rains came and cooled the air, Sam smiled to himself and offered a small prayer of thanks. A higher being was in control after all. The state was helpless when it rained. It was a small victory.

He eased to his feet and stretched his back. His bed consisted of a piece of foam, six feet by two and a half, four inches thick, otherwise known as a mattress. It rested on a metal frame fastened securely to the floor and wall. It was covered with two sheets. Sometimes they passed out blankets in the winter. Back pain was common throughout the Row, but with time the body adjusted and there were few complaints. The prison doctor was not considered to be a friend of death row inmates.

He took two steps and leaned on his elbows through the bars. He listened to the wind and thunder, and watched the drops bounce along the windowsill and splatter on the floor. How nice it would be to step through that wall and walk through the wet grass on the other side, to stroll around the prison grounds in the driving rain, naked and crazy, soaking wet with water dripping from his hair and beard.

The horror of death row is that you die a little each day. The waiting kills you. You live in a cage and when you wake up you mark off another day and you tell yourself that you are now one day closer to death.

Sam lit a cigarette and watched the smoke float upward toward the raindrops. Weird things happen with our absurd judicial system. Courts rule this way one day and the other way the next. The same judges reach different conclusions on familiar issues. A court will ignore a wild motion or appeal for years, then one day embrace it and grant relief. Judges die and they're replaced by judges who think differently. Presidents come and go and they appoint their pals to the bench. The Supreme Court drifts one way, then another.

At times, death would be welcome. And if given the choice of death on one hand, or life on death row on the other, Sam would quickly take the gas. But there was always hope, always the slight glimmering promise that something somewhere in the vast maze of the judicial jungle would strike a chord with someone, and his case

would be reversed. Every resident of the Row dreamed of the miracle reversal from heaven. And their dreams sustained them from one miserable day to the next.

Sam had recently read that there were almost twenty-five hundred inmates sentenced to die in America, and last year, 1989, only sixteen were executed. Mississippi had executed only four since 1977, the year Gary Gilmore insisted on a firing squad in Utah. There was safety in those numbers. They fortified his resolve to file even more appeals.

He smoked through the bars as the storm passed and the rain stopped. He took his breakfast as the sun rose, and at seven o'clock he turned on the television for the morning news. He had just bitten into a piece of cold toast when suddenly his face appeared on the screen behind a Memphis morning anchorperson. She eagerly reported the thrilling top story of the day, the bizarre case of Sam Cayhall and his new lawyer. Seems his new lawyer was his long-lost grandson, one Adam Hall, a young lawyer from the mammoth Chicago firm of Kravitz & Bane, the outfit who'd represented Sam for the past seven years or so. The photo of Sam was at least ten years old, the same one they used every time his name was mentioned on TV or in print. The photo of Adam was a bit stranger. He obviously had not posed for it. Someone had snapped it outdoors while he wasn't looking. She explained with wild eyes that the Memphis Press was reporting this morning that Adam Hall had confirmed that he was in fact the grandson of Sam Cayhall. She gave a fleeting sketch of Sam's crime, and twice gave the date of his pending execution. More on the story later, she promised, perhaps maybe as soon as the "Noon Report." Then she was off on the morning summary of last night's murders.

Sam threw the toast on the floor next to the bookshelves and stared at it. An insect found it almost immediately and crawled over and around it a half dozen times before deciding it wasn't worth eating. His lawyer had already talked to the press. What do they teach these people in law school? Do they give instruction on media control?

"Sam, you there?" It was Gullitt.

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“Just saw you on channel four.”

“Yeah. I saw it.”

“You pissed?”

“I’m okay.”

“Take a deep breath, Sam. It’s okay.”

Among men sentenced to die in the gas chamber, the expression “Take a deep breath” was used often and considered nothing more than an effort at humor. They said it to each other all the time, usually when one was angry. But when used by the guards it was far from funny. It was a constitutional violation. It had been mentioned in more than one lawsuit as an example of the cruel treatment dispensed on death row.

Sam agreed with the insect and ignored the rest of his breakfast. He sipped coffee and stared at the floor.

At nine-thirty, Sergeant Packer was on the tier looking for Sam. It was time for his hour of fresh air. The rains were far away and the sun was blistering the Delta. Packer had two guards with him and a pair of leg irons. Sam pointed at the chains, and asked, “What are they for?”

“They’re for security, Sam.”

“I’m just going out to play, aren’t I?”

“No, Sam. We’re taking you to the law library. Your lawyer wants to meet you there so y’all can talk amongst the law books. Now turn around.”

Sam stuck both hands through the opening of his door. Packer cuffed them loosely, then the door opened and Sam stepped into the hall. The guards dropped to their knees and were securing the leg irons when Sam asked Packer, “What about my hour out?”

“What about it?”

“When do I get it?”

“Later.”

“You said that yesterday and I didn’t get my rec time. You lied to me yesterday. Now you’re lying to me again. I’ll sue you for this.”

“Lawsuits take a long time, Sam. They take years.”

“I want to talk to the warden.”

“And I’m sure he wants to talk to you too, Sam. Now, do you want to see your lawyer or not?”

“I have a right to my lawyer and I have a right to my rec time.”

“Get off his ass, Packer!” Hank Henshaw shouted from less than six feet away.

“You lie, Packer! You lie!” J. B. Gullitt added from the other side.

“Down, boys,” Packer said coolly. “We’ll take care of old Sam, here.”

“Yeah, you’d gas him today if you could,” Henshaw yelled.

The leg irons were in place, and Sam shuffled into his cell to get a file. He clutched it to his chest and waddled down the tier with Packer at his side and the guards following.

“Give ’em hell, Sam,” Henshaw yelled as they walked away.

There were other shouts of support for Sam and catcalls at Packer as they left the tier. They were cleared through a set of doors and Tier A was behind them.

“The warden says you get two hours out this afternoon, and two hours a day till it’s over,” Packer said as they moved slowly through a short hallway.

“Till what’s over?”

“This thang.”

“What thang?”

Packer and most of the guards referred to an execution as a thang.

“You know what I mean,” Packer said.

“Tell the warden he’s a real sweetheart. And ask him if I get two hours if this thang doesn’t go off, okay? And while you’re at it, tell him I think he’s a lying son of a bitch.”

“He already knows.”

They stopped at a wall of bars and waited for the door to open. They passed through it and stopped again by two guards at the front door. Packer made quick notes on a clipboard, and they walked outside where a white van was waiting. The guards took Sam by the

arms and lifted him and his chains into the side door. Packer sat in the front with the driver.

“Does this thing have air conditioning?” Sam snapped at the driver, whose window was down.

“Yep,” the driver said as they backed away from the front of MSU.

“Then turn the damned thing on, okay.”

“Knock it off, Sam,” Packer said without conviction.

“It’s bad enough to sweat all day in a cage with no air conditioning, but it’s pretty stupid to sit here and suffocate. Turn the damned thing on. I’ve got my rights.”

“Take a deep breath, Sam,” Packer drawled and winked at the driver.

“That’ll cost you, Packer. You’ll wish you hadn’t said that.”

The driver hit a switch and the air started blowing. The van was cleared through the double gates and slowly made its way down the dirt road away from the Row.

Though he was handcuffed and shackled, this brief journey on the outside was refreshing. Sam stopped the bitching and immediately ignored the others in the van. The rains had left puddles in the grassy ditches beside the road, and they had washed the cotton plants, now more than knee-high. The stalks and leaves were dark green. Sam remembered picking cotton as a boy, then quickly dismissed the thought. He had trained his mind to forget the past, and on those rare occasions when a childhood memory flashed before him, he quickly snuffed it out.

The van crept along, and he was thankful for this. He stared at two inmates sitting under a tree watching a buddy lift weights in the sun. There was a fence around them, but how nice, he thought, to be outside walking and talking, exercising and lounging, never giving a thought to the gas chamber, never worrying about the last appeal.

The law library was known as the Twig because it was too small to be considered a full branch. The main prison law library was deeper into the farm, at another camp. The Twig was used exclusively by death row inmates. It was stuck to the rear of an administration building, with only one door and no windows. Sam had been there many times during the past nine years. It was a small room with a decent collection of current law books and up-to-date reporting services. A battered conference table sat in the center with shelves of books lining the four walls. Every now and then a trustee would volunteer to serve as the librarian, but good help was hard to find and the books were seldom where they were supposed to be. This irritated Sam immensely because he admired neatness and he despised the Africans, and he was certain that most if not all of the librarians were black, though he did not know this for a fact.

The two guards unshackled Sam at the door.

“You got two hours,” Packer said.

“I got as long as I want,” Sam said, rubbing his wrists as if the handcuffs had broken them.

“Sure, Sam. But when I come after you in two hours, I’ll bet we load your gimpy little ass into the van.”

Packer opened the door as the guards took their positions beside it. Sam entered the library and slammed the door behind him. He laid his file on the table and stared at his lawyer.

Adam stood at the far end of the conference table, holding a book and waiting for his client. He’d heard voices outside, and he watched Sam enter the room without guards or handcuffs. He stood there in his red jumpsuit, much smaller now without the thick metal screen between them.

They studied each other for a moment across the table, grandson and grandfather, lawyer and client, stranger and stranger. It was an awkward interval in which they sized each other up and neither knew what to do with the other.

“Hello, Sam,” Adam said, walking toward him.

“Mornin’. Saw us on TV a few hours ago.”

“Yeah. Have you seen the paper?”

“Not yet. It comes later.”

Adam slid the morning paper across the table and Sam stopped it. He held it with both hands, eased into a chair, and raised the paper to within six inches of his nose. He read it carefully and studied the pictures of himself and Adam.

Todd Marks had evidently spent most of the evening digging and making frantic phone calls. He had verified that one Alan Cayhall had been born in Clanton, in Ford County, in 1964, and the father's name listed on the birth certificate was one Edward S. Cayhall. He checked the birth certificate for Edward S. Cayhall and found that his father was Samuel Lucas Cayhall, the same man now on death row. He reported that Adam Hall had confirmed that his father's name had been changed in California, and that his grandfather was Sam Cayhall. He was careful not to attribute direct quotes to Adam, but he nonetheless violated their agreement. There was little doubt the two had talked.

Quoting unnamed sources, the story explained how Eddie and his family left Clanton in 1967 after Sam's arrest, and fled to California where Eddie later killed himself. The trail ended there because Marks obviously ran out of time late in the day and could confirm nothing from California. The unnamed source or sources didn't mention Sam's daughter living in Memphis, so Lee was spared. The story ran out of steam with a series of no-comments from Baker Cooley, Garner Goodman, Phillip Naifeh, Lucas Mann, and a lawyer with the Attorney General's office in Jackson. Marks finished strong, though, with a sensational recap of the Kramer bombing.

The story was on the front page of the Press, above the main headline. The ancient picture of Sam was to the right, and next to it was a strange photo of Adam from the waist up. Lee had brought the paper to him hours earlier as he sat on the terrace and watched the early morning river traffic. They drank coffee and juice, and read and reread the story. After much analysis, Adam had decided that Todd Marks had placed a photographer across the street from the Peabody Hotel, and when Adam left their little meeting yesterday and stepped onto the sidewalk, he got his picture taken. The suit and tie were definitely worn yesterday.

“Did you talk to this clown?” Sam growled as he placed the paper on the table. Adam sat across from him.

“We met.”

“Why?”

“Because he called our office in Memphis, said he’d heard some rumors, and I wanted him to get it straight. It’s no big deal.”

“Our pictures on the front page is no big deal?”

“You’ve been there before.”

“And you?”

“I didn’t exactly pose. It was an ambush, you see. But I think I look rather dashing.”

“Did you confirm these facts for him?”

“I did. We agreed it would be background, and he could not quote me on anything. Nor was he supposed to use me as a source. He violated our agreement, and ripped his ass with me. He also planted a photographer, so I’ve spoken for the first and last time to the Memphis Press.”

Sam looked at the paper for a moment. He was relaxed, and his words were as slow as ever. He managed a trace of a smile. “And you confirmed that you are my grandson?”

“Yes. Can’t really deny it, can I?”

“Do you want to deny it?”

“Read the paper, Sam. If I wanted to deny it, would it be on the front page?”

This satisfied Sam, and the smile grew a bit. He bit his lip and stared at Adam. Then he methodically removed a fresh pack of cigarettes, and Adam glanced around for a window.

After the first one was properly lit, Sam said, “Stay away from the press. They’re ruthless and they’re stupid. They lie and they make careless mistakes.”

“But I’m a lawyer, Sam. It’s inbred.”

“I know. It’s hard, but try to control yourself. I don’t want it to happen again.”

Adam reached into his briefcase, smiled, and pulled out some papers. “I have a wonderful idea how to save your life.” He rubbed

his hands together then removed a pen from his pocket. It was time for work.

“I’m listening.”

“Well, as you might guess, I’ve been doing a lot of research.”

“That’s what you’re paid to do.”

“Yes. And I’ve come up with a marvelous little theory, a new claim which I intend to file on Monday. The theory is simple. Mississippi is one of only five states still using the gas chamber, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And the Mississippi Legislature in 1984 passed a law giving a condemned man the choice of dying by lethal injection or in the gas chamber. But the new law applies only to those convicted after July 1, 1984. Doesn’t apply to you.”

“That’s correct. I think about half the guys on the Row will get their choice. It’s years away, though.”

“One of the reasons the legislature approved lethal injection was to make the killings more humane. I’ve studied the legislative history behind the law and there was a lot of discussion of problems the state’s had with gas chamber executions. The theory is simple: make the executions quick and painless, and there will be fewer constitutional claims that they are cruel. Lethal injections raise fewer legal problems, thus the killings are easier to carry out. Our theory, then, is that since the state has adopted lethal injection, it has in effect said that the gas chamber is obsolete. And why is it obsolete? Because it’s a cruel way to kill people.”

Sam puffed on this for a minute and nodded slowly. “Keep going,” he said.

“We attack the gas chamber as a method of execution.”

“Do you limit it to Mississippi?”

“Probably. I know there were problems with Teddy Doyle Meeks and Maynard Tole.”

Sam snorted and blew smoke across the table. “Problems? You could say that.”

“How much do you know?”

“Come on. They died within fifty yards of me. We sit in our cells all day long and think about death. Everyone on the Row knows what happened to those boys.”

“Tell me about them.”

Sam leaned forward on his elbows and stared absently at the newspaper in front of him. “Meeks was the first execution in Mississippi in ten years, and they didn’t know what they were doing. It was 1982. I’d been here for almost two years, and until then we were living in a dream world. We never thought about the gas chamber and cyanide pellets and last meals. We were sentenced to die, but, hell, they weren’t killing anyone, so why worry? But Meeks woke us up. They killed him, so they could certainly kill the rest of us.”

“What happened to him?” Adam had read a dozen stories about the botched execution of Teddy Doyle Meeks, but he wanted to hear it from Sam.

“Everything went wrong. Have you seen the chamber?”

“Not yet.”

“There’s a little room off to the side where the executioner mixes his solution. The sulfuric acid is in a canister which he takes from his little laboratory to a tube running into the bottom of the chamber. With Meeks, the executioner was drunk.”

“Come on, Sam.”

“I didn’t see him, okay. But everyone knows he was drunk. State law designates an official state executioner, and the warden and his gang didn’t think about it until just a few hours before the execution. Keep in mind, no one thought Meeks would die. We were all waiting on a last minute stay, because he’d been through it twice already. But there was no stay, and they scrambled around at the last minute trying to locate the official state executioner. They found him, drunk. He was a plumber, I think. Anyway, his first batch of brew didn’t work. He placed the canister into the tube, pulled a lever, and everyone waited for Meeks to take a deep breath and die. Meeks held his breath as long as he could, then inhaled. Nothing happened. They waited. Meeks waited. The witnesses waited. Everybody slowly turned to the executioner, who was also

waiting and cussing. He went back to his little room, and fixed up another mix of sulfuric acid. Then he had to retrieve the old canister from the chute, and that took ten minutes. The warden and Lucas Mann and the rest of the goons were standing around waiting and fidgeting and cussing this drunk plumber, who finally plugged in the new canister and pulled the lever. This time the sulfuric acid landed where it was supposed to—in a bowl under the chair where Meeks was strapped. The executioner pulled the second lever dropping the cyanide pellets, which were also under the chair, hovering above the sulfuric acid. The pellets dropped, and sure enough, the gas drifted upward to where old Meeks was holding his breath again. You can see the vapors, you know. When he finally sucked in a nose full of it, he started shaking and jerking, and this went on quite a while. For some reason, there's a metal pole that runs from the top of the chamber to the bottom, and it's directly behind the chair. Just about the time Meeks got still and everybody thought he was dead, his head started banging back and forth, striking this pole, just beating it like hell. His eyes were rolled back, his lips were wide open, he was foaming at the mouth, and there he was beating the back of his head in on this pole. It was sick."

"How long did it take to kill him?"

"Who knows. According to the prison doctor, death was instant and painless. According to some of the eyewitnesses, Meeks convulsed and heaved and pounded his head for five minutes."

The Meeks execution had provided death penalty abolitionists with much ammunition. There was little doubt he had suffered greatly, and many accounts were written of his death. Sam's version was remarkably consistent with those of the eyewitnesses.

"Who told you about it?" Adam asked.

"A couple of the guards talked about it. Not to me, of course, but word spread quickly. There was a public outcry, which would've been even worse if Meeks hadn't been such a despicable person. Everyone hated him. And his little victim had suffered greatly, so it was hard to feel sympathetic."

"Where were you when he was executed?"

“In my first cell, Tier D, on the far side away from the chamber. They locked everybody down that night, every inmate at Parchman. It happened just after midnight, which is sort of amusing because the state has a full day to carry out the execution. The death warrant does not specify a certain time, just a certain day. So these gung-ho bastards are just itching to do it as soon as possible. They plan every execution for one minute after midnight. That way, if there’s a stay, then they have the entire day for their lawyers to get it lifted. Buster Moac went down that way. They strapped him in at midnight, then the phone rang and they took him back to the holding room where he waited and sweated for six hours while the lawyers ran from one court to the next. Finally, as the sun was rising, they strapped him in for the last time. I guess you know what his last words were.”

Adam shook his head. “I have no idea.”

“Buster was a friend of mine, a class guy. Naifeh asked him if he had any last words, and he said yes, as a matter of fact, he did have something to say. He said the steak they’d cooked for his last meal was a bit too rare. Naifeh mumbled something to the effect that he’d speak to the cook about it. Then Buster asked if the governor had granted a last minute pardon. Naifeh said no. Buster then said, ‘Well, tell that son of a bitch he’s lost my vote.’ They slammed the door and gassed him.”

Sam was obviously amused by this, and Adam was obliged to offer an awkward laugh. He looked at his legal pad while Sam lit another cigarette.

Four years after the execution of Teddy Doyle Meeks, the appeals of Maynard Tole reached a dead end and it was time for the chamber to be used again. Tole was a Kravitz & Bane pro bono project. A young lawyer named Peter Wiesenbergh represented Tole, under the supervision of E. Garner Goodman. Both Wiesenbergh and Goodman witnessed the execution, which in many ways was dreadfully similar to Meeks’. Adam had not discussed the Tole execution with Goodman, but he’d studied the file and read the eyewitness accounts written by Wiesenbergh and Goodman.

“What about Maynard Tole?” Adam asked.

“He was an African, a militant who killed a bunch of people in a robbery and, of course, blamed everything on the system. Always referred to himself as an African warrior. He threatened me several times, but for the most part he was just selling wolf.”

“Selling wolf?”

“Yeah, that means a guy is talking bad, talking trash. It’s common with the Africans. They’re all innocent, you know. Every damned one of them. They’re here because they’re black and the system is white, and even though they’ve raped and murdered it’s someone else’s fault. Always, always someone else’s fault.”

“So you were happy when he went?”

“I didn’t say that. Killing is wrong. It’s wrong for the Africans to kill. It’s wrong for the Anglos to kill. And it’s wrong for the people of the State of Mississippi to kill death row inmates. What I did was wrong, so how do you make it right by killing me?”

“Did Tole suffer?”

“Same as Meeks. They found them a new executioner and he got it right the first time. The gas hit Tole and he went into convulsions, started banging his head on the pole just like Meeks, except Tole evidently had a harder head because he kept beating the pole with it. It went on and on, and finally Naifeh and the goon squad got real anxious because the boy wouldn’t die and things were getting sloppy, so they actually made the witnesses leave the witness room. It was pretty nasty.”

“I read somewhere that it took ten minutes for him to die.”

“He fought it hard, that’s all I know. Of course, the warden and his doctor said death was instant and painless. Typical. They did, however, make one slight change in their procedure after Tole. By the time they got to my buddy Moac, they had designed this cute little head brace made of leather straps and buckles and attached to that damned pole. With Moac, and later with Jumbo Parris, they belted their heads down so tight there was no way they could flop around and whip the pole. A nice touch, don’t you think? That makes it easier on Naifeh and the witnesses because now they don’t have to watch as much suffering.”

“You see my point, Sam? It’s a horrible way to die. We attack the method. We find witnesses who’ll testify about these executions and we try to convince a judge to rule the gas chamber unconstitutional.”

“So what? Do we then ask for lethal injection? What’s the point? Seems kind of silly for me to say I prefer not to die in the chamber, but, what the hell, lethal injection will do just fine. Put me on the gurney and fill me up with drugs. I’ll be dead, right? I don’t get it.”

“True. But we buy ourselves some time. We’ll attack the gas chamber, get a temporary stay, then pursue it through the higher courts. We could jam this thing for years.”

“It’s already been done.”

“What do you mean it’s already been done?”

“Texas, 1983. Case called Larson. The same arguments were made with no result. The court said gas chambers have been around for fifty years, and they’ve proven themselves quite efficient at killing humanely.”

“Yeah, but there’s one big difference.”

“What?”

“This ain’t Texas. Meeks and Tole and Moac and Parris weren’t gassed in Texas. And, by the way, Texas has already gone to lethal injection. They threw away their gas chamber because they found a better way to kill. Most gas chamber states have traded them in for better technology.”

Sam stood and walked to the other end of the table. “Well, when it’s my time, I damned sure want to go with the latest technology.” He paced along the table, back and forth three or four times, then stopped. “It’s eighteen feet from one end of this room to the other. I can walk eighteen feet without hitting bars. Do you realize what it’s like spending twenty-three hours a day in a cell that’s six feet by nine? This is freedom, man.” He paced some more, puffing as he came and went.

Adam watched the frail figure bounce along the edge of the table with a trail of smoke behind him. He had no socks and wore navy-colored rubber shower shoes that squeaked when he paced. He suddenly stopped, yanked a book from a shelf, threw it hard on the

table, and began flipping pages with a flourish. After a few minutes of intense searching, he found exactly what he was looking for and spent five minutes reading it.

“Here it is,” he mumbled to himself. “I knew I’d read this before.”

“What is it?”

“A 1984 case from North Carolina. The man’s name was Jimmy Old, and evidently Jimmy did not want to die. They had to drag him into the chamber, kicking and crying and screaming, and it took a while to strap him in. They slammed the door and dropped the gas, and his chin crashed onto his chest. Then his head rolled back and began twitching. He turned to the witnesses who could see nothing but the whites of his eyeballs, and he began salivating. His head rocked and swung around forever while his body shook and his mouth foamed. It went on and on, and one of the witnesses, a journalist, vomited. The warden got fed up with it and closed the black curtains so the witnesses couldn’t see anymore. They estimate it took fourteen minutes for Jimmy Old to die.”

“Sounds cruel to me.”

Sam closed the book and placed it carefully onto the shelf. He lit a cigarette and studied the ceiling. “Virtually every gas chamber was built long ago by Eaton Metal Products in Salt Lake City. I read somewhere that Missouri’s was built by inmates. But our little chamber was built by Eaton, and they’re all basically the same—made of steel, octagonal in shape with a series of windows placed here and there so folks can watch the death. There’s not much room inside the actual chamber, just a wooden seat with straps all over it. There’s a metal bowl directly under the chair, and just inches above the bowl is a little bag of cyanide tablets which the executioner controls with a lever. He also controls the sulfuric acid which is introduced into the affair by means of the canister. The canister makes its way through a tube to the bowl, and when the bowl fills with acid, he pulls the lever and drops the cyanide pellets. This causes the gas, which of course causes death, which of course is designed to be painless and quick.”

“Wasn’t it designed to replace the electric chair?”

“Yes. Back in the twenties and thirties, everyone had an electric chair, and it was just the most marvelous device ever invented. I remember as a boy they had a portable electric chair which they simply loaded into a trailer and took around to the various counties. They’d pull up at the local jail, bring ’em out in shackles, line ’em up outside the trailer, then run ’em through. It was an efficient way to alleviate overcrowded jails.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Anyway, they, of course, had no idea what they were doing, and there were some horrible stories of people suffering. This is capital punishment, right? Not capital torture. And it wasn’t just Mississippi. Many states were using these old, half-ass rigged electric chairs with a bunch of jakelegs pulling the switches, and there were all sorts of problems. They’d strap in some poor guy, pull the switch, give him a good jolt but not good enough, guy was roasting on the inside but wouldn’t die, so they’d wait a few minutes, and hit him again. This might go on for fifteen minutes. They wouldn’t fasten the electrodes properly, and it was not uncommon for flames and sparks to shoot from the eyes and ears. I read an account of a guy who received an improper voltage. The steam built up in his head and his eyeballs popped out. Blood ran down his face. During an electrocution, the skin gets so hot that they can’t touch the guy for a while, so in the old days they had to let him cool off before they could tell if he was dead. There are lots of stories about men who would sit still after the initial jolt, then start breathing again. So they would of course hit ’em with another current. This might happen four or five times. It was awful, so this Army doctor invented the gas chamber as a more humane way to kill people. It is now, as you say, obsolete because of lethal injection.”

Sam had an audience, and Adam was captivated. “How many men have died in Mississippi’s chamber?” he asked.

“It was first used here in 1954, or thereabouts. Between then and 1970, they killed thirty-five men. No women. After Furman in 1972, it sat idle until Teddy Doyle Meeks in 1982. They’ve used it three times since then, so that’s a total of thirty-nine. I’ll be number forty.”

He began pacing again, now much slower. “It’s a terribly inefficient way to kill people,” he said, much like a professor in front of a classroom. “And it’s dangerous. Dangerous of course to the poor guy strapped in the chair, but also to those outside the chamber. These damned things are old and they all leak to some degree. The seals and gaskets rot and crumble, and the cost of building a chamber that will not leak is prohibitive. A small leak could be deadly to the executioner or anyone standing nearby. There are always a handful of people—Naifeh, Lucas Mann, maybe a minister, the doctor, a guard or two—standing in the little room just outside the chamber. There are two doors to this little room, and they are always closed during an execution. If any of the gas leaked from the chamber into the room, it would probably hit Naifeh or Lucas Mann and they’d croak right there on the floor. Not a bad idea, come to think of it.

“The witnesses are also in a great deal of danger, and they don’t have a clue. There’s nothing between them and the chamber except for a row of windows, which are old and equally subject to leakage. They’re also in a small room with the door closed, and if there’s a gas leak of any size these gawking fools get gassed too.

“But the real danger comes afterward. There’s a wire they stick to your ribs and it runs through a hole in the chamber to outside where a doctor monitors the heartbeat. Once the doctor says the guy is dead, they open a valve on top of the chamber and the gas is supposed to evaporate. Most of it does. They’ll wait fifteen minutes or so, then open the door. The cooler air from the outside that’s used to evacuate the chamber causes a problem because it mixes with the remaining gas and condenses on everything inside. It creates a death trap for anyone going in. It’s extremely dangerous, and most of these clowns don’t realize how serious it is. There’s a residue of prussic acid on everything—walls, windows, floor, ceiling, door, and, of course, the dead guy.

“They spray the chamber and the corpse with ammonia to neutralize the remaining gas, then the removal team or whatever it’s called goes in with oxygen masks. They’ll wash the inmate a second time with ammonia or chlorine bleach because the poison oozes

through the pores in the skin. While he's still strapped in the chair, they cut his clothes off, put them in a bag, and burn them. In the old days they allowed the guy to wear only a pair of shorts so their job would be easier. But now they're such sweethearts they allow us to wear whatever we want. So if I get that far, I'll have a hell of a time selecting my wardrobe."

He actually spat on the floor as he thought about this. He cursed under his breath and stomped around the far end of the table.

"What happens to the body?" Adam asked, somewhat ashamed to tread on such sensitive matters but nonetheless anxious to complete the story.

Sam grunted a time or two, then stuck the cigarette in his mouth. "Do you know the extent of my wardrobe?"

"No."

"Consists of two of these red monkey suits, four or five sets of clean underwear, and one pair of these cute little rubber shower shoes that look like leftovers from a nigger fire sale. I refuse to die in one of these red suits. I've thought about exercising my constitutional rights and parading into the chamber buck naked. Wouldn't that be a sight? Can you see those goons trying to shove me around and strap me in and trying like hell not to touch my privates. And when they get me strapped down, I'll reach over and take the little heart monitor gizmo and attach it to my testicles. Wouldn't the doctor love that? And I'd make sure the witnesses saw my bare ass. I think that's what I'll do."

"What happens to the body?" Adam asked again.

"Well, once it's sufficiently washed and disinfected, they dress it in prison garb, pull it out of the chair, then put it in a body bag. They place it on a stretcher which goes into the ambulance which takes it to a funeral home somewhere. The family takes over at that point. Most families."

Sam was now standing with his back to Adam, talking to a wall and leaning on a bookshelf. He was silent for a long time, silent and still as he gazed into the corner and thought about the four men he'd known who had already gone to the chamber. There was an unwritten rule on the Row that when your time came you did not go

to the chamber in a red prison suit. You did not give them the satisfaction of killing you in the clothes they'd forced you to wear.

Maybe his brother, the one who sent the monthly supply of cigarettes, would help with a shirt and a pair of pants. New socks would be nice. And anything but the rubber shower shoes. He'd rather go barefoot than wear those damned things.

He turned and walked slowly to Adam's end of the table and took a seat. "I like this idea," he said, very quiet and composed. "It's worth a try."

"Good. Let's get to work. I want you to find more cases like Jimmy Old from North Carolina. Let's dig up every wretched and botched gas chamber execution known to man. We'll throw 'em all in the lawsuit. I want you to make a list of people who might testify about the Meeks and Tole executions. Maybe even Moac and Parris."

Sam was already on his feet again, pulling books from shelves and mumbling to himself. He piled them on the table, dozens of them, then buried himself among the stacks.

Nineteen

The rolling wheat fields stretched for miles then grew steeper as the foothills began. The majestic mountains lined the farmland in the distance. In a sweeping valley above the fields, with a view for miles in front and with the mountains as a barrier to the rear, the Nazi compound lay sprawled over a hundred acres. Its barbed-wire fences were camouflaged with hedgerows and underbrush. Its firing ranges and combat grounds were likewise screened to prevent detection from the air. Only two innocuous log cabins sat above the ground, and if seen from the outside would appear only to be fishing lodges. But below them, deep in the hills, were two shafts with elevators which dropped into a maze of natural caverns and man-made caves. Large tunnels, wide enough for golf carts, ran in all directions and connected a dozen different rooms. One room had a printing press. Two stored weapons, and ammunition. Three large ones were living quarters. One was a small library. The largest room, a cavern forty feet from top to bottom, was the central hall where the members gathered for speeches and films and rallies.

It was a state-of-the-art compound, with satellite dishes feeding televisions with news from around the world, and computers linked to other compounds for the quick flow of information, and fax machines, cellular phones, and every current electronic device in vogue.

No less than ten newspapers were received into the compound each day, and they were taken to a table in a room next to the library where they were first read by a man named Roland. He lived in the compound most of the time, along with several other members who maintained the place. When the newspapers arrived from the city, usually around nine in the morning, Roland poured

himself a large cup of coffee and started reading. It was not a chore. He had traveled the world many times, spoke four languages, and had a voracious appetite for knowledge. If a story caught his attention, he would mark it, and later he would make a copy of it and give it to the computer desk.

His interests were varied. He barely scanned the sports, and never looked at the want ads. Fashion, style, living, fanfare, and related sections were browsed with little curiosity. He collected stories about groups similar to his—Aryans, Nazis, the KKK. Lately, he'd been flagging many stories from Germany and Eastern Europe, and was quite thrilled with the rise of fascism there. He spoke fluent German and spent at least one month a year in that great country. He watched the politicians, with their deep concern about hate crimes and their desire to restrict the rights of groups such as his. He watched the Supreme Court. He followed the trials of skinheads in the United States. He followed the tribulations of the KKK.

He normally spent two hours each morning absorbing the latest news and deciding which stories should be kept for future reference. It was routine, but he enjoyed it immensely.

This particular morning would be different. The first glimpse of trouble was a picture of Sam Cayhall buried deep in the front section of a San Francisco daily. The story had but three paragraphs, but sufficiently covered the hot news that the oldest man on death row in America would now be represented by his grandson. Roland read it three times before he believed it, then marked the story to be saved. After an hour, he'd read the same story five or six times. Two papers had the snapshot of young Adam Hall that appeared on the front page of the Memphis paper the day before.

Roland had followed the case of Sam Cayhall for many years, and for several reasons. First, it was normally the type of case that would interest their computers—an aging Klan terrorist from the sixties biding his time on death row. The Cayhall printout was already a foot thick. Though he was certainly no lawyer, Roland shared the prevailing opinion that Sam's appeals had run their course and he was about to die. This suited Roland just fine, but he kept his opinion to himself. Sam Cayhall was a hero to white

supremacists, and Roland's own little band of Nazis had already been asked to participate in demonstrations before the execution. They had no direct contact with Cayhall because he had never answered their letters, but he was a symbol and they wanted to make the most of his death.

Roland's last name, Forchin, was of Cajun extraction from down around Thibodaux. He had no Social Security number; never filed tax returns; did not exist, as far as the government was concerned. He had three beautifully forged passports, one of which was German, and one allegedly issued by the Republic of Ireland. Roland crossed borders and cleared immigration with no worries.

One of Roland's other names, known only to himself and never divulged to a breathing soul, was Rollie Wedge. He had fled the United States in 1967 after the Kramer bombing, and had lived in Northern Ireland. He had also lived in Libya, Munich, Belfast, and Lebanon. He had returned to the United States briefly in 1967 and 1968 to observe the two trials of Sam Cayhall and Jeremiah Dogan. By then, he was traveling effortlessly with perfect papers.

There had been a few other quick trips back to the United States, all required because of the Cayhall mess. But as time passed, he worried about it less. He had moved to this bunker three years earlier to spread the message of Nazism. He no longer considered himself a Klansman. Now, he was a proud fascist.

When he finished his morning reading, he had found the Cayhall story in seven of the ten papers. He placed them in a metal basket, and decided to see the sun. He poured more coffee in his Styrofoam cup, and rode an elevator eighty feet to a foyer in a log cabin. It was a beautiful day, cool and sunny, not a cloud to be seen. He walked upward along a narrow trail toward the mountains, and within ten minutes was looking at the valley below him. The wheat fields were in the distance.

Roland had been dreaming of Cayhall's death for twenty-three years. They shared a secret, a heavy burden which would be lifted only when Sam was executed. He admired the man greatly. Unlike Jeremiah Dogan, Sam had honored his oath and never talked. Through three trials, several lawyers, countless appeals, and

millions of inquiries, Sam Cayhall had never yielded. He was an honorable man, and Roland wanted him dead. Oh sure, he'd been forced to deliver a few threats to Cayhall and Dogan during the first two trials, but that was so long ago. Dogan cracked under pressure, and he talked and testified against Sam. And Dogan died.

This kid worried him. Like everyone else, Roland had lost track of Sam's son and his family. He knew about the daughter in Memphis, but the son had disappeared. And now this—this nice-looking, well-educated young lawyer from a big, rich Jewish law firm had popped up from nowhere and was primed to save his grandfather. Roland knew enough about executions to understand that in the waning hours the lawyers try everything. If Sam was going to crack, he would do it now, and he would do it in the presence of his grandson.

He tossed a rock down the hillside and watched it bounce out of sight. He'd have to go to Memphis.

Saturday was typically just another day of hard labor at Kravitz & Bane in Chicago, but things were a bit more laid-back at the Memphis branch. Adam arrived at the office at nine and found only two other attorneys and one paralegal at work. He locked himself in his room and closed the blinds.

He and Sam had worked for two hours yesterday, and by the time Packer returned to the law library with the handcuffs and the shackles they had managed to cover the table with dozens of law books and legal pads. Packer had waited impatiently as Sam slowly reshelfed the books.

Adam reviewed their notes. He entered his own research into the computer, and revised the petition for the third time. He had already faxed a copy of it to Garner Goodman, who in turn had revised it and sent it back.

Goodman was not optimistic about a fair hearing on the suit, but at this stage of the proceedings there was nothing to lose. If by

chance an expedited hearing was held in federal court, Goodman was ready to testify about the Maynard Tole execution. He and Peter Wiesenbergs had witnessed it. In fact, Wiesenbergs had been so sickened by the sight of a living person being gassed that he resigned from the firm and took a job teaching. His grandfather had survived the Holocaust; his grandmother had not. Goodman promised to contact Wiesenbergs, and felt confident he too would testify.

By noon, Adam was tired of the office. He unlocked his door and heard no sounds on the floor. The other lawyers were gone. He left the building.

He drove west, over the river into Arkansas, past the truck stops and dog track in West Memphis, and finally through the congestion and into the farm country. He passed the hamlets of Earle and Parkin and Wynne, where the hills began. He stopped for a Coke at a country grocery where three old men in faded overalls sat on the porch swatting flies and suffering in the heat. He lowered the convertible top and sped away.

Two hours later he stopped again, this time in the town of Mountain View to get a sandwich and ask directions. Calico Rock was not far up the road, he was told, just follow the White River. It was a lovely road, winding through the foothills of the Ozarks, through heavy woods and across mountain streams. The White River snaked its way along to the left, and it was dotted with trout fishermen in jon boats.

Calico Rock was a small town on a bluff above the river. Three trout docks lined the east bank near the bridge. Adam parked by the river and walked to the first one, an outfitter called Calico Marina. The building floated on pontoons, and was held close to the bank by thick cables. A row of empty rental boats was strung together next to the pier. The pungent smell of gasoline and oil emanated from a solitary gas pump. A sign listed the rates for boats, guides, gear, and fishing licenses.

Adam walked onto the covered dock and admired the river a few feet away. A young man with dirty hands emerged from a back room and asked if he could be of assistance. He examined Adam

from top to bottom, and apparently decided that he was no fisherman.

“I’m looking for Wyn Lettner.”

The name Ron was stitched above the shirt pocket and slightly covered with a smudge of grease. Ron walked back to his room and yelled, “Mr. Lettner!” in the direction of a screen door that led to a small shop. Ron disappeared.

Wyn Lettner was a huge man, well over six feet tall with a large frame that was quite overloaded. Garner had described him as a beer drinker, and Adam remembered this as he glanced at the large stomach. He was in his late sixties, with thinning gray hair tucked neatly under an EVINRUDE cap. There were at least three newspaper photographs of Special Agent Lettner indexed away somewhere in Adam’s files, and in each he was the standard G-Man—dark suit, white shirt, narrow tie, military haircut. And he was much trimmer in those days.

“Yes sir,” he said loudly as he walked through the screen door, wiping crumbs from his lips. “I’m Wyn Lettner.” He had a deep voice and a pleasant smile.

Adam pushed forward a hand, and said, “I’m Adam Hall. Nice to meet you.”

Lettner took his hand and shook it furiously. His forearms were massive and his biceps bulged. “Yes sir,” he boomed. “What can I do for you?”

Thankfully the dock was deserted, with the exception of Ron, who was out of sight but making noises with a tool in his room. Adam fidgeted a bit, and said, “Well, I’m a lawyer, and I represent Sam Cayhall.”

The smile grew and revealed two rows of strong yellow teeth. “Got your work cut out for you, don’t you?” he said with a laugh and slapped Adam on the back.

“I guess so,” Adam said awkwardly as he waited for another assault. “I’d like to talk about Sam.”

Lettner was suddenly serious. He stroked his chin with a beefy hand and studied Adam with narrow eyes. “I saw it in the papers, son. I know Sam’s your grandfather. Must be tough on you. Gonna

get tougher, too.” Then he smiled again. “Tougher on Sam as well.” His eyes twinkled as if he’d just delivered a side-splitting punch line and he wanted Adam to double over with laughter.

Adam missed the humor. “Sam has less than a month, you know,” he said, certain that Lettner had also read about the execution date.

A heavy hand was suddenly on Adam’s shoulder and was shoving him in the direction of the shop. “Step in here, son. We’ll talk about Sam. You wanna beer?”

“No. Thanks.” They entered a narrow room with fishing gear hanging from the walls and ceilings, with rickety wooden shelves covered with food—crackers, sardines, canned sausages, bread, pork and beans, cupcakes—all the necessities for a day on the river. A soft drink cooler sat in one corner.

“Take a seat,” Lettner said, waving to a corner near the cash register. Adam sat in a shaky wooden chair as Lettner fished through an ice chest and found a bottle of beer. “Sure you don’t want one?”

“Maybe later.” It was almost five o’clock.

He twisted the top, drained at least a third of the bottle with the first gulp, smacked his lips, then sat in a beaten leather captain’s chair which had no doubt been removed from a customized van.

“Are they finally gonna get old Sam?” he asked.

“They’re trying awfully hard.”

“What’re the odds?”

“Not good. We have the usual assortment of last minute appeals, but the clock’s ticking.”

“Sam’s not a bad guy,” Lettner said with a trace of remorse, then washed it away with another long drink. The floor creaked quietly as the dock shifted with the river.

“How long were you in Mississippi?” Adam asked.

“Five years. Hoover called me after the three civil rights workers disappeared. Nineteen sixty-four. We set up a special unit and went to work. After Kramer, the Klan sort of ran out of gas.”

“And you were in charge of what?”

“Mr. Hoover was very specific. He told me to infiltrate the Klan at all costs. He wanted it busted up. To be truthful, we were slow

getting started in Mississippi. Bunch of reasons for it. Hoover hated the Kennedys and they were pushing him hard, so he dragged his feet. But when those three boys disappeared, we got off our asses. Nineteen sixty-four was a helluva year in Mississippi.”

“I was born that year.”

“Yeah, paper said you were born in Clanton.”

Adam nodded. “I didn’t know it for a long time. My parents told me I was born in Memphis.”

The door jingled and Ron entered the shop. He looked at them, then studied the crackers and sardines. They watched him and waited. He glanced at Adam as if to say, “Keep talking. I’m not listening.”

“What do you want?” Lettner snapped at him.

He grabbed a can of Vienna sausage with his dirty hand and showed it to them. Lettner nodded and waved at the door. Ron ambled toward it, checking the cupcakes and potato chips as he went.

“He’s nosy as hell,” Lettner said after he was gone. “I talked to Garner Goodman a few times. It was years ago. Now, that’s a weird bird.”

“He’s my boss. He gave me your name, said you’d talk to me.”

“Talk about what?” Lettner asked, then took another drink.

“The Kramer case.”

“The Kramer case is closed. The only thing left is Sam and his date with the gas chamber.”

“Do you want him executed?”

Voices followed footsteps, then the door opened again. A man and a boy entered and Lettner got to his feet. They needed food and supplies, and for ten minutes they shopped and talked and decided where the fish were biting. Lettner was careful to place his beer under the counter while his customers were present.

Adam removed a soft drink from the cooler and left the shop. He walked along the edge of the wooden dock next to the river, and stopped by the gas pump. Two teenagers in a boat were casting near the bridge, and it struck Adam that he’d never been fishing in his life. His father had not been a man of hobbies and leisure. Nor had

he been able to keep a job. At the moment, Adam could not remember exactly what his father had done with his time.

The customers left and the door slammed. Lettner lumbered to the gas pump. "You like to trout fish?" he asked, admiring the river.

"No. Never been."

"Let's go for a ride. I need to check out a spot two miles downriver. The fish are supposed to be thick."

Lettner was carrying his ice chest which he dropped carefully into a boat. He stepped down from the dock, and the boat rocked violently from side to side as he grabbed the motor. "Come on," he yelled at Adam, who was studying the thirty-inch gap between himself and the boat. "And grab that rope," Lettner yelled again, pointing to a thin cord hooked to a grapple.

Adam unhitched the rope and stepped nervously into the boat, which rocked just as his foot touched it. He slipped and landed on his head and came within inches of taking a swim. Lettner howled with laughter as he pulled the starter rope. Ron, of course, had watched this and was grinning stupidly on the dock. Adam was embarrassed but laughed as if it was all very funny. Lettner gunned the engine, the front of the boat jerked upward, and they were off.

Adam clutched the handles on both sides as they sped through the water and under the bridge. Calico Rock was soon behind them. The river turned and twisted its way through scenic hills and around rocky bluffs. Lettner navigated with one hand and sipped a fresh beer with the other. After a few minutes, Adam relaxed somewhat and managed to pull a beer from the cooler without losing his balance. The bottle was ice cold. He held it with his right hand and clutched the boat with his left. Lettner was humming or singing something behind him. The high-pitched roar of the motor prevented conversation.

They passed a small trout dock where a group of clean-cut city slickers were counting fish and drinking beer, and they passed a flotilla of rubber rafts filled with mangy teenagers smoking something and absorbing the sun. They waved at other fishermen who were hard at work.

The boat slowed finally and Lettner maneuvered it carefully through a bend as if he could see the fish below and had to position himself perfectly. He turned off the engine. "You gonna fish or drink beer?" he asked, staring at the water.

"Drink beer."

"Figures." His bottle was suddenly of secondary importance as he took the rod and cast to a spot toward the bank. Adam watched for a second, and when there was no immediate result he reclined and hung his feet over the water. The boat was not comfortable.

"How often do you fish?" he asked.

"Every day. It's part of my job, you know, part of my service to my customers. I have to know where the fish are biting."

"Tough job."

"Somebody has to do it."

"What brought you to Calico Rock?"

"Had a heart attack in '75, so I had to retire from the Bureau. Had a nice pension and all, but, hell, you get bored just sitting around. The wife and I found this place and found the marina for sale. One mistake led to another, and here I am. Hand me a beer."

He cast again as Adam dispensed the beer. He quickly counted fourteen bottles remaining in the ice. The boat drifted with the river, and Lettner grabbed a paddle. He fished with one hand, sculled the boat with the other, and somehow balanced a fresh beer between his knees. The life of a fishing guide.

They slowed under some trees, and the sun was mercifully shielded for a while. He made the casting look easy. He whipped the rod with a smooth wrist action, and sent the lure anywhere he wanted. But the fish weren't biting. He cast toward the middle of the river.

"Sam's not a bad guy." He'd already said this once.

"Do you think he should be executed?"

"That's not up to me, son. The people of the state want the death penalty, so it's on the books. The people said Sam was guilty and then said he should be executed, so who am I?"

"But you have an opinion."

"What good is it? My thoughts are completely worthless."

“Why do you say Sam’s not a bad guy?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We have fourteen beers left.”

Lettner laughed and the vast smile returned. He gulped from the bottle and looked down the river, away from his line. “Sam was of no concern to us, you understand. He was not active in the really nasty stuff, at least not at first. When those civil rights workers disappeared, we went in with a fury. We spread money all over the place, and before long we had all sorts of Klan informants. These people were basically just ignorant rednecks who’d never had a dime, and we preyed on their craving for money. We’d have never found those three boys had we not dropped some cash. About thirty thousand, as I remember it, though I didn’t deal directly with the informant. Hell, son, they were buried in a levee. We found them, and it made us look good, you understand. Finally, we’d accomplished something. Made a bunch of arrests, but the convictions were difficult. The violence continued. They bombed black churches and black homes so damned often we couldn’t keep up. It was like a war down there. It got worse, and Mr. Hoover got madder, and we spread around more money.

“Listen, son, I’m not going to tell you anything useful, you understand?”

“Why not?”

“Some things I can talk about, some I can’t.”

“Sam wasn’t alone when he bombed the Kramer office, was he?”

Lettner smiled again and studied his line. The rod was sitting in his lap. “Anyway, by late ’65 and early ’66, we had a helluva network of informants. It really wasn’t that difficult. We’d learn that some guy was in the Klan, and so we’d trail him. We’d follow him home at night, flashing our lights behind him, parking in front of his house. It’d usually scare him to death. Then we’d follow him to work, sometimes we’d go talk to his boss, flash our badges around, act like we were about to shoot somebody. We’d go talk to his parents, show them our badges, let them see us in our dark suits, let them hear our Yankee accents, and these poor country people would literally crack up right in front of us. If the guy went to church, we’d

follow him one Sunday, then the next day we'd go talk to his preacher. We'd tell him that we had heard a terrible rumor that Mr. Such and Such was an active member of the Klan, and did he know anything about it. We acted like it was a crime to be a member of the Klan. If the guy had teenage children, we'd follow them on dates, sit behind them at the movies, catch them parking in the woods. It was nothing but pure harassment, but it worked. Finally, we'd call the poor guy or catch him alone somewhere, and offer him some money. We'd promise to leave him alone, and it always worked. Usually, they were nervous wrecks by this time, they couldn't wait to cooperate. I saw them cry, son, if you can believe it. Actually cry when they finally came to the altar and confessed their sins." Lettner laughed in the direction of his line, which was quite inactive.

Adam sipped his beer. Perhaps if they drank it all it would eventually loosen his tongue.

"Had this guy one time, I'll never forget him. We caught him in bed with his black mistress, which was not unusual. I mean, these guys would go out burning crosses and shooting into black homes, then sneak around like crazy to meet their black girlfriends. Never could understand why the black women put up with it. Anyway, he had a little hunting lodge deep in the woods, and he used it for a love nest. He met her there one afternoon for a quickie, and when he was finished and ready to go, he opened the front door and we took his picture. Got her picture too, and then we talked to him. He was a deacon or an elder in some country church, a real pillar, you know, and we talked to him like he was a dog. We ran her off and sat him down inside the little lodge there, and before long he was crying. As it turned out, he was one of our best witnesses. But he later went to jail."

"Why?"

"Well, it seems that while he was sneaking around with his girlfriend, his wife was doing the same thing with a black kid who worked on their farm. Lady got pregnant, baby was half and half, so our informant goes to the hospital and kills mother and child. He spent fifteen years at Parchman."

“Good.”

“We didn’t get a lot of convictions back in those days, but harassed them to a point where they were afraid to do much. The violence had slowed considerably until Dogan decided to go after the Jews. That caught us off guard, I have to admit. We had no clue.”

“Why not?”

“Because he got smart. He learned the hard way that his own people would talk to us, so he decided to operate with a small, quiet unit.”

“Unit? As in more than one person?”

“Something like that.”

“As in Sam and who else?”

Lettner snorted and chuckled at once, and decided the fish had moved elsewhere. He placed his rod and reel in the boat, and yanked on the starter cord. They were off, racing once again downstream. Adam left his feet over the side, and his leather moccasins and bare ankles were soon wet. He sipped the beer. The sun was finally beginning to disappear behind the hills, and he enjoyed the beauty of the river.

The next stop was a stretch of still water below a bluff with a rope hanging from it. Lettner cast and reeled, all to no effect, and assumed the role of interrogator. He asked a hundred questions about Adam and his family—the flight westward, the new identities, the suicide. He explained that while Sam was in jail they checked out his family and knew he had a son who had just left town, but since Eddie appeared to be harmless they did not pursue the investigation. Instead, they spent their time watching Sam’s brothers and cousins. He was intrigued by Adam’s youth, and how he was raised with virtually no knowledge of kinfolks.

Adam asked a few questions, but the answers were vague and immediately twisted into more questions about his past. Adam was sparring with a man who’d spent twenty-five years asking questions.

The third and final hot spot was not far from Calico Rock, and they fished until it was dark. After five beers, Adam mustered the courage to wet a hook. Lettner was a patient instructor, and within

minutes Adam had caught an impressive trout. For a brief interlude, they forgot about Sam and the Klan and other nightmares from the past, and they simply fished. They drank and fished.

Mrs. Lettner's first name was Irene, and she welcomed her husband and his unexpected guest with grace and nonchalance. Wyn had explained, as Ron drove them home, that Irene was accustomed to drop-ins. She certainly seemed to be unruffled as they staggered through the front door and handed her a string of trout.

The Lettner home was a cottage on the river a mile north of town. The rear porch was screened to protect it from insects, and not far below it was a splendid view of the river. They sat in wicker rockers on the porch, and opened another round of brew as Irene fried the fish.

Putting food on the table was a new experience for Adam, and he ate the fish he'd caught with great gusto. It always tastes better, Wyn assured him as he chomped and drank, when you catch it yourself. About halfway through the meal, Wyn switched to Scotch. Adam declined. He wanted a simple glass of water, but machismo drove him to continue with the beer. He couldn't wimp out at this point. Lettner would certainly chastise him.

Irene sipped wine and told stories about Mississippi. She had been threatened on several occasions, and their children refused to visit them. They were both from Ohio, and their families worried constantly about their safety. Those were the days, she said more than once with a certain longing for excitement. She was extremely proud of her husband and his performance during the war for civil rights.

She left them after dinner and disappeared somewhere in the cottage. It was almost ten o'clock, and Adam was ready for sleep. Wyn rose to his feet while holding onto a wooden beam, and excused himself for a visit to the bathroom. He returned in due

course with two fresh Scotches in tall glasses. He handed one to Adam, and returned to his rocker.

They rocked and sipped in silence for a moment, then Lettner said, "So you're convinced Sam had some help."

"Of course he had some help." Adam was very much aware that his tongue was thick and his words were slow. Lettner's speech was remarkably articulate.

"And what makes you so certain?"

Adam lowered the heavy glass and vowed not to take another drink. "The FBI searched Sam's house after the bombing, right?"

"Right."

"Sam was in jail in Greenville, and you guys got a warrant."

"I was there, son. We went in with a dozen agents and spent three days."

"And found nothing."

"You could say that."

"No trace of dynamite. No trace of blasting caps, fuses, detonators. No trace of any device or substance used in any of the bombings. Correct?"

"That's correct. So what's your point?"

"Sam had no knowledge of explosives, nor did he have a history of using them."

"No, I'd say he had quite a history of using them. Kramer was the sixth bombing, as I recall. Those crazy bastards were bombing like hell, son, and we couldn't stop them. You weren't there. I was in the middle of it. We had harassed the Klan and infiltrated to a point where they were afraid to move, then all of a sudden another war erupted and bombs were falling everywhere. We listened where we were supposed to listen. We twisted familiar arms until they broke. And we were clueless. Our informants were clueless. It was like another branch of the Klan had suddenly invaded Mississippi without telling the old one."

"Did you know about Sam?"

"His name was in our records. As I recall, his father had been a Klucker, and maybe a brother or two. So we had their names. But they seemed harmless. They lived in the northern part of the state,

in an area not known for serious Klan violence. They probably burned some crosses, maybe shot up a few houses, but nothing compared to Dogan and his gang. We had our hands full with murderers. We didn't have time to investigate every possible Klucker in the state."

"Then how do you explain Sam's sudden shift to violence?"

"Can't explain it. He was no choirboy, okay? He had killed before."

"Are you sure?"

"You heard me. He shot and killed one of his black employees in the early fifties. Never spent a day in jail for it. In fact, I'm not sure, but I don't think he was ever arrested for it. There may have been another killing, too. Another black victim."

"I'd rather not hear it."

"Ask him. See if the old bastard has guts enough to admit it to his grandson." He took another sip. "He was a violent man, son, and he certainly had the capability to plant bombs and kill people. Don't be naive."

"I'm not naive. I'm just trying to save his life."

"Why? He killed two very innocent little boys. Two children. Do you realize this?"

"He was convicted of the murders. But if the killings were wrong, then it's wrong for the state to kill him."

"I don't buy that crap. The death penalty is too good for these people. It's too clean and sterile. They know they're about to die, so they have time to say their prayers and say good-bye. What about the victims? How much time did they have to prepare?"

"So you want Sam executed?"

"Yeah. I want 'em all executed."

"I thought you said he wasn't a bad guy."

"I lied. Sam Cayhall is a cold-blooded killer. And he's guilty as hell. How else can you explain the fact that the bombings stopped as soon as he was in custody?"

"Maybe they were scared after Kramer?"

"They? Who the hell is they?"

"Sam and his partner. And Dogan."

“Okay. I’ll play along. Let’s assume Sam had an accomplice.”

“No. Let’s assume Sam was the accomplice. Let’s assume the other guy was the explosives expert.”

“Expert? These were very crude bombs, son. The first five were nothing more than a few sticks wrapped together with a fuse. You light the match, run like hell, and fifteen minutes later, Boom! The Kramer bomb was nothing but a half-ass rig with an alarm clock wired to it. They were lucky it didn’t go off while they were playing with it.”

“Do you think it was deliberately set to go off when it did?”

“The jury thought so. Dogan said they planned to kill Marvin Kramer.”

“Then why was Sam hanging around? Why was he close enough to the bomb to get hit with debris?”

“You’ll have to ask Sam, which I’m sure you’ve already done. Does he claim he had an accomplice?”

“No.”

“Then that settles it. If your own client says no, what the hell are you digging for?”

“Because I think my client is lying.”

“Too bad for your client, then. If he wants to lie and protect the identity of someone, then why should you care?”

“Why would he lie to me?”

Lettner shook his head in frustration, then mumbled something and took a drink. “How the hell am I supposed to know? I don’t want to know, okay? I honestly don’t care if Sam’s lying or if Sam’s telling the truth. But if he won’t level with you, his lawyer and his own grandson, then I say gas him.”

Adam took a long drink and stared into the darkness. He actually felt silly at times digging around trying to prove his own client was lying to him. He’d give this another shot, then talk about something else. “You don’t believe the witnesses who saw Sam with another person?”

“No. They were pretty shaky, as I recall. The guy at the truck stop didn’t come forward for a long time. The other guy had just left a honky-tonk. They weren’t credible.”

“Do you believe Dogan?”

“The jury did.”

“I didn’t ask about the jury.”

Lettner’s breathing was finally getting heavy, and he appeared to be fading. “Dogan was crazy, and Dogan was a genius. He said the bomb was intended to kill, and I believe him. Keep in mind, Adam, they almost wiped out an entire family in Vicksburg. I can’t remember the name—”

“Pinder. And you keep saying *they* did this and that.”

“I’m just playing along, okay. We’re assuming Sam had a buddy with him. They planted a bomb at the Pinder house in the middle of the night. An entire family could’ve been killed.”

“Sam said he placed the bomb in the garage so no one would get hurt.”

“Sam told you this? Sam admitted he did it? Then why in the hell are you asking me about an accomplice? Sounds like you need to listen to your client. Son of a bitch is guilty, Adam. Listen to him.”

Adam took another drink and his eyelids grew heavier. He looked at his watch, but couldn’t see it. “Tell me about the tapes,” he said, yawning.

“What tapes?” Lettner asked, yawning.

“The FBI tapes they played at Sam’s trial. The ones with Dogan talking to Wayne Graves about bombing Kramer.”

“We had lots of tapes. And they had lots of targets. Kramer was just one of many. Hell, we had a tape with two Kluckers talking about bombing a synagogue while a wedding was in progress. They wanted to bolt the doors and shoot some gas through the heating ducts so the entire congregation would be wiped out. Sick bastards, man. It wasn’t Dogan, just a couple of his idiots talking trash, and so we dismissed it. Wayne Graves was a Klucker who was also on our payroll, and he allowed us to tap his phones. He called Dogan one night, said he was on a pay phone, and they got to talking about hitting Kramer. They also talked about other targets. It was very effective at Sam’s trial. But the tapes did not help us stop a single bombing. Nor did they help us identify Sam.”

“You had no idea Sam Cayhall was involved?”

“None whatsoever. If the fool had left Greenville when he should have, he’d probably still be a free man.”

“Did Kramer know he was a target?”

“We told him. But by then he was accustomed to threats. He kept a guard at his house.” His words were starting to slur a bit, and his chin had dropped an inch or two.

Adam excused himself and cautiously made his way to the bathroom. As he returned to the porch, he heard heavy snoring. Lettner had slumped in his chair and collapsed with the drink in his hand. Adam removed it, then left in search of a sofa.

Twenty

The late morning was warm but seemed downright feverish in the front of the Army surplus jeep, which lacked air conditioning and other essentials. Adam sweated and kept his hand on the handle of the door which he hoped would open promptly in the event Irene's breakfast came roaring up.

He had awakened on the floor beside a narrow sofa in a room which he had mistaken for the den, but was in fact the washroom beside the kitchen. And the sofa was a bench, Lettner had explained with much laughter, that he used to sit on to take off his boots. Irene had eventually found his body after searching the house, and Adam apologized profusely until they both asked him to stop. She had insisted on a heavy breakfast. It was their one day of the week to eat pork, a regular tradition around the Lettner cottage, and Adam had sat at the kitchen table guzzling ice water while the bacon fried and Irene hummed and Wyn read the paper. She also scrambled eggs and mixed bloody marys.

The vodka deadened some of the pain in his head, but it also did nothing to calm his stomach. As they bounced toward Calico Rock on the bumpy road, Adam was terrified that he would be sick.

Though Lettner had passed out first, he was remarkably healthy this morning. No sign of a hangover. He'd eaten a plate full of grease and biscuits, and he'd sipped only one bloody mary. He'd diligently read the paper and commented about this and that, and Adam figured he was one of those functional alcoholics who got plastered every night but shook it off easily.

The village was in view. The road was suddenly smoother and Adam's stomach stopped bouncing. "Sorry about last night," Lettner said.

"What?" Adam asked.

“About Sam. I was harsh. I know he’s your grandfather and you’re very concerned. I lied about something. I really don’t want Sam to be executed. He’s not a bad guy.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Yeah. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.”

They entered the town and turned toward the bridge. “There’s something else,” Lettner said. “We always suspected Sam had a partner.”

Adam smiled and looked through his window. They passed a small church with elderly people standing under a shade tree in their pretty dresses and neat suits.

“Why?” Adam asked.

“For the same reasons. Sam had no history with bombs. He had not been involved in Klan violence. The two witnesses, especially the truck driver in Cleveland, always bothered us. The trucker had no reason to lie, and he seemed awfully certain of himself. Sam just didn’t seem like the type to start his own bombing campaign.”

“So who’s the man?”

“I honestly don’t know.” They rolled to a stop by the river, and Adam opened his door just in case. Lettner leaned on the steering wheel, and cocked his head toward Adam. “After the third or fourth bombing, I think maybe it was the synagogue in Jackson, some big Jews in New York and Washington met with LBJ, who in turn called in Mr. Hoover, who in turn called me. I went to D.C., where I met with Mr. Hoover and the President, and they pretty much crawled my ass. I returned to Mississippi with renewed determination. We came down hard on our informants. I mean, we hurt some people. We tried everything, but to no avail. Our sources simply did not know who was doing the bombing. Only Dogan knew, and it was obvious he wasn’t telling anybody. But after the fifth bomb, which I think was the newspaper office, we got a break.”

Lettner opened his door and walked to the front of the jeep. Adam joined him there, and they watched the river ease along through Calico Rock. “You wanna beer? I keep it cold in the bait shop.”

“No, please. I’m half-sick now.”

“Just kidding. Anyway, Dogan ran this huge used car lot, and one of his employees was an illiterate old black man who washed the cars and swept the floors. We had carefully approached the old man earlier, but he was hostile. But out of the blue he tells one of our agents that he saw Dogan and another man putting something in the trunk of a green Pontiac a couple of days earlier. He said he waited, then opened the trunk and saw it was dynamite. The next day he heard that there was another bombing. He knew the FBI was swarming all around Dogan, so he figured it was worth mentioning to us. Dogan’s helper was a Klucker named Virgil, also an employee. So I went to see Virgil. I knocked on his door at three o’clock one morning, just beat it like hell, you know, like we always did in those days, and before long he turned on the light and stepped on the porch. I had about eight agents with me, and we all stuck our badges in Virgil’s face. He was scared to death. I told him we knew he had delivered the dynamite to Jackson the night before, and that he was looking at thirty years. You could hear his wife crying through the screen door. Virgil was shaking and ready to cry himself. I left him my card with instructions to call me before noon that very day, and I threatened him if he told Dogan or anybody else. I told him we’d be watching him around the clock.

“I doubt if Virgil went back to sleep. His eyes were red and puffy when he found me a few hours later. We got to be friends. He said the bombings were not the work of Dogan’s usual gang. He didn’t know much, but he’d heard enough from Dogan to believe that the bomber was a very young man from another state. This guy had dropped in from nowhere, and was supposed to be very good with explosives. Dogan picked the targets, planned the jobs, then called this guy, who sneaked into town, carried out the bombings, then disappeared.”

“Did you believe him?”

“For the most part, yes. It just made sense. It had to be someone new, because by then we had riddled the Klan with informants. We knew virtually every move they made.”

“What happened to Virgil?”

“I spent some time with him, gave him some money, you know, the usual routine. They always wanted money. I became convinced he had no idea who was planting the bombs. He would never admit that he’d been involved, that he’d delivered the cars and dynamite, and we didn’t press him. We weren’t after him.”

“Was he involved with Kramer?”

“No. Dogan used someone else for that one. At times, Dogan seemed to have a sixth sense about when to mix things up, to change routines.”

“Virgil’s suspect certainly doesn’t sound like Sam Cayhall, does he?” Adam asked.

“No.”

“And you had no suspects?”

“No.”

“Come on, Wyn. Surely you guys had some idea.”

“I swear. We did not. Shortly after we met Virgil, Kramer got bombed and it was all over. If Sam had a buddy, then the buddy left him.”

“And the FBI heard nothing afterward?”

“Not a peep. We had Sam, who looked and smelled extremely guilty.”

“And, of course, you guys were anxious to close the case.”

“Certainly. And the bombings stopped, remember. There were no bombings after Sam got caught, don’t forget that. We had our man. Mr. Hoover was happy. The Jews were happy. The President was happy. Then they couldn’t convict him for fourteen years, but that was a different story. Everyone was relieved when the bombings stopped.”

“So why didn’t Dogan squeal on the real bomber when he squealed on Sam?”

They had eased down the bank to a point just inches above the water. Adam’s car sat nearby. Lettner cleared his throat and spat into the river. “Would you testify against a terrorist who was not in custody?”

Adam thought for a second. Lettner smiled, flashed his big yellow teeth, then chuckled as he started for the dock. “Let’s have a beer.”

“No. Please. I need to go.”

Lettner stopped, and they shook hands and promised to meet again. Adam invited him to Memphis, and Lettner invited him back to Calico Rock for more fishing and drinking. At the moment, his invitation was not well received. Adam sent his regards to Irene, apologized again for passing out in the washroom, and thanked him again for the chat.

He left the small town behind, driving gingerly around the curves and hills, still careful not to upset his stomach.

Lee was struggling with a pasta dish when he entered her apartment. The table was set with china and silver and fresh flowers. The recipe was for baked manicotti, and things were not going well in the kitchen. On more than one occasion in the past week she'd confessed to being a lousy cook, and now she was proving it. Pots and pans were scattered along the countertops. Her seldom used apron was covered with tomato sauce. She laughed as they kissed each other on the cheeks and said there was a frozen pizza if matters got worse.

“You look awful,” she said, suddenly staring at his eyes.

“It was a rough night.”

“You smell like alcohol.”

“I had two bloody marys for breakfast. And I need another one now.”

“The bar's closed.” She picked up a knife and stepped to a pile of vegetables. A zucchini was the next victim. “What did you do up there?”

“Got drunk with the FBI man. Slept on the floor next to his washer and dryer.”

“How nice.” She came within a centimeter of drawing blood. She jerked her hand away from the chopping block and examined a finger. “Have you seen the Memphis paper?”

“No. Should I?”

“Yes. It’s over there.” She nodded to a corner of the snack bar.

“Something bad?”

“Just read it.”

Adam took the Sunday edition of the Memphis Press and sat in a chair at the table. On the front page of the second section, he suddenly encountered his smiling face. It was a familiar photo, one taken not long ago when he was a second-year law student at Michigan. The story covered half the page, and his photo was joined by many others—Sam, of course, Marvin Kramer, Josh and John Kramer, Ruth Kramer, David McAllister, the Attorney General, Steve Roxburgh, Naifeh, Jeremiah Dogan, and Mr. Elliot Kramer, father of Marvin.

Todd Marks had been busy. His narrative began with a succinct history of the case which took an entire column, then he moved quickly to the present and recapped the same story he’d written two days earlier. He found a bit more biographical data on Adam—college at Pepperdine, law school at Michigan, law review editor, brief employment history with Kravitz & Bane. Naifeh had very little to say, only that the execution would be carried out according to the law. McAllister, on the other hand, was full of wisdom. He had lived with the Kramer nightmare for twenty-three years, he said gravely, thinking about it every day of his life since it happened. It had been his honor and privilege to prosecute Sam Cayhall and bring the killer to justice, and only the execution could close this awful chapter of Mississippi’s history. No, he said after much thought, the idea of clemency was out of the question. Just wouldn’t be fair to the little Kramer boys. And on and on.

Steve Roxburgh had evidently enjoyed his interview too. He stood ready to fight the final efforts by Cayhall and his lawyer to thwart the execution. He and his staff were prepared to work eighteen hours a day to carry out the wishes of the people. This matter had dragged on long enough, he was quoted as saying more than once, and it was time for justice. No, he was not worried about the last ditch legal challenges of Mr. Cayhall. He had confidence in his skills as a lawyer, the people’s lawyer.

Sam Cayhall refused to comment, Marks explained, and Adam Hall couldn't be reached, as if Adam was eager to talk but simply couldn't be found.

The comments from the family were both interesting and disheartening. Elliot Kramer, now seventy-seven and still working, was described as spry and healthy in spite of heart trouble. He was also very bitter. He blamed the Klan and Sam Cayhall not only for killing his two grandsons, but also for Marvin's death. He'd been waiting twenty-three years for Sam to be executed, and it couldn't come a minute too soon. He lashed out at a judicial system that allows a convict to live for almost ten years after the jury gives him a death penalty. He was not certain if he would witness the execution, it would be up to his doctors, he said, but he wanted to. He wanted to be there and look Cayhall in the eyes when they strapped him in.

Ruth Kramer was a bit more moderate. Time had healed many of the wounds, she said, and she was unsure how she would feel after the execution. Nothing would bring back her sons. She had little to say to Todd Marks.

Adam folded the paper and placed it beside the chair. He suddenly had a knot in his fragile stomach, and it came from Steve Roxburgh and David McAllister. As the lawyer expected to save Sam's life, it was frightening to see his enemies so eager for the final battle. He was a rookie. They were veterans. Roxburgh in particular had been through it before, and he had an experienced staff which included a renowned specialist known as Dr. Death, a skilled advocate with a passion for executions. Adam had nothing but an exhausted file full of unsuccessful appeals, and a prayer that a miracle would happen. At this moment he felt completely vulnerable and hopeless.

Lee sat next to him with a cup of espresso. "You look worried," she said, stroking his arm.

"My buddy at the trout dock was of no help."

"Sounds like old man Kramer is hell-bent."

Adam rubbed his temples and tried to ease the pain. "I need a painkiller."

“How about a Valium?”

“Wonderful.”

“Are you real hungry?”

“No. My stomach is not doing well.”

“Good. Dinner has been terminated. A slight problem with the recipe. It’s frozen pizza or nothing.”

“Nothing sounds good to me. Nothing but a Valium.”

Twenty-one

Adam dropped his keys in the red bucket and watched it ascend to a point twenty feet off the ground where it stopped and spun slowly on the end of the rope. He walked to the first gate, which jerked before sliding open. He walked to the second gate, and waited. Packer emerged from the front door a hundred feet away, stretching and yawning as if he'd been napping on the Row.

The second gate closed behind him, and Packer waited nearby. "Good day," he said. It was almost two, the hottest time of the day. A morning radio forecaster had merrily predicted the first one-hundred-degree day of the year.

"Hello, Sergeant," Adam said as if they were old friends now. They walked along the brick path to the small door with the weeds in front of it. Packer unlocked it, and Adam stepped inside.

"I'll get Sam," Packer said, in no hurry, and disappeared.

The chairs on his side of the metal screen were scattered about. Two were flipped over, as if the lawyers and visitors had been brawling. Adam pulled one close to the counter at the far end, as far as possible from the air conditioner.

He removed a copy of the petition he'd filed at nine that morning. By law, no claim or issue could be raised in federal court unless it had first been presented and denied in state court. The petition attacking the gas chamber had been filed in the Mississippi Supreme Court under the state's postconviction relief statutes. It was a formality, in Adam's opinion, and in the opinion of Garner Goodman. Goodman had worked on the claim throughout the weekend. In fact, he'd worked all day Saturday while Adam was drinking beer and trout fishing with Wyn Lettner.

Sam arrived as usual, hands cuffed behind his back, no expression on his face, red jumpsuit unbuttoned almost to the waist. The gray hair on his pale chest was slick with perspiration. Like a well-trained animal, he turned his back to Packer, who quickly removed the cuffs, then left through the door. Sam immediately went for the cigarettes, and made certain one was lit before he sat down and said, "Welcome back."

"I filed this at nine this morning," Adam said, sliding the petition through the narrow slit in the screen. "I talked to the clerk with the supreme court in Jackson. She seemed to think the court will rule on it with due speed."

Sam took the papers, and looked at Adam. "You can bet on that. They'll deny it with great pleasure."

"The state will be required to respond immediately, so we've got the Attorney General scrambling right now."

"Great. We can watch the latest on the evening news. He's probably invited the cameras into his office while they prepare their response."

Adam removed his jacket and loosened his tie. The room was humid and he was already sweating. "Does the name Wyn Lettner ring a bell?"

Sam tossed the petition onto an empty chair and sucked hard on the filter. He released a steady stream of exhaust at the ceiling. "Yes. Why?"

"Did you ever meet him?"

Sam thought about this for a moment, before speaking, and, as usual, spoke with measured words. "Maybe. I'm not sure. I knew who he was at the time. Why?"

"I found him over the weekend. He's retired now, and runs a trout dock on the White River. We had a long talk."

"That's nice. And what exactly did you accomplish?"

"He says he still thinks you had someone working with you."

"Did he give you any names?"

"No. They never had a suspect, or so he says. But they had an informant, one of Dogan's people, who told Lettner that the other guy was someone new, not one of the usual gang. They thought he

was from another state, and that he was very young. That's all Lettner knew."

"And you believe this?"

"I don't know what I believe."

"What difference does it make now?"

"I don't know. It could give me something to use as I try to save your life. Nothing more than that. I'm desperate, I guess."

"And I'm not?"

"I'm grasping for straws, Sam. Grasping and filling in holes."

"So my story has holes?"

"I think so. Lettner said he was always doubtful because they found no trace of explosives when they searched your house. And you had no history of using them. He said you didn't seem to be the type to initiate your own bombing campaign."

"And you believe everything Lettner says?"

"Yeah. Because it makes sense."

"Let me ask you this. What if I told you there was someone else? What if I gave you his name, address, phone number, blood type, and urine analysis? What would you do with it?"

"Start screaming like hell. I'd file motions and appeals by the truckload. I'd get the media stirred up, and make a scapegoat out of you. I'd try to sensationalize your innocence and hope someone noticed, someone like an appellate judge."

Sam nodded slowly as if this was quite ridiculous and exactly what he'd expected. "It wouldn't work, Adam," he said carefully, as if lecturing to a child. "I have three and a half weeks. You know the law. There's no way to start screaming John Doe did it, when John Doe has never been mentioned."

"I know. But I'd do it anyway."

"It won't work. Stop trying to find John Doe."

"Who is he?"

"He doesn't exist."

"Yes he does."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because I want to believe you're innocent, Sam. It's very important to me."

"I told you I'm innocent. I planted the bomb, but I had no intention of killing anyone."

"But why'd you plant the bomb? Why'd you bomb the Pinder house, and the synagogue, and the real estate office? Why were you bombing innocent people?"

Sam just puffed and looked at the floor.

"Why do you hate, Sam? Why does it come so easy? Why were you taught to hate blacks and Jews and Catholics and anyone slightly different from you? Have you ever asked yourself why?"

"No. Don't plan to."

"So, it's just you, right. It's your character, your composition, same as your height and blue eyes. It's something you were born with and can't change. It was passed down in the genes from your father and grandfather, faithful Kluckers all, and it's something you'll proudly take to your grave, right?"

"It was a way of life. It was all I knew."

"Then what happened to my father? Why couldn't you contaminate Eddie?"

Sam thumped the cigarette onto the floor and leaned forward on his elbows. The wrinkles tightened in the corners of his eyes and across his forehead. Adam's face was directly through the slit, but he did not look at him. Instead, he stared down at the base of the screen. "So this is it. Time for our Eddie talk." His voice was much softer and his words even slower.

"Where did you go wrong with him?"

"This, of course, has not a damned thing to do with the little gas party they're planning for me. Does it? Nothing to do with issues and appeals, lawyers and judges, motions and stays. This is a waste of time."

"Don't be a coward, Sam. Tell me where you went wrong with Eddie. Did you teach him the word nigger? Did you teach him to hate little black kids? Did you try to teach him how to burn crosses or build bombs? Did you take him to his first lynching? What did you do with him, Sam? Where did you go wrong?"

"Eddie didn't know I was in the Klan until he was in high school."

“Why not? Surely you weren’t ashamed of it. It was a great source of family pride, wasn’t it?”

“It was not something we talked about.”

“Why not? You were the fourth generation of Cayhall Klansmen, with roots all the way back to the Civil War, or something like that. Isn’t that what you told me?”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you sit little Eddie down and show him pictures from the family album? Why didn’t you tell him bedtime stories of the heroic Cayhalls and how they rode around at night with masks on their brave faces and burned Negro shacks? You know, war stories. Father to son.”

“I repeat, it was not something we talked about.”

“Well, when he got older, did you try to recruit him?”

“No. He was different.”

“You mean, he didn’t hate?”

Sam jerked forward and coughed, the deep, scratchy hacking action of a chain-smoker. His face reddened as he struggled for breath. The coughing grew worse and he spat on the floor. He stood and leaned at the waist with both hands on his hips, coughing and hacking while shuffling around and trying to stop it.

Finally, a break. He stood straight and breathed rapidly. He swallowed and spat again, then relaxed and inhaled slowly. The seizure was over, and his red face was suddenly pale again. He took his seat across from Adam, and puffed mightily on the cigarette as if some other device or habit was to blame for the coughing. He took his time, breathing deeply and clearing his throat.

“Eddie was a tender child,” he began hoarsely. “He got it from his mother. He wasn’t a sissy. In fact, he was just as tough as other little boys.” A long pause, another drag of nicotine. “Not far from our house was a nigger family—”

“Could we just call them blacks, Sam? I’ve asked you this already.”

“Forgive me. There was an African family on our place. The Lincolns. Joe Lincoln was his name, and he’d worked for us for many years. Had a common-law wife and a dozen common-law

children. One of the boys was the same age as Eddie, and they were inseparable, best of friends. It was not that unusual in those days. You played with whoever lived nearby. I even had little African buddies, believe it or not. When Eddie started school, he got real upset because he rode one bus and his African pal rode another. Kid's name was Quince. Quince Lincoln. They couldn't wait to get home from school and go play on the farm. I remember Eddie was always disturbed because they couldn't go to school together. And Quince couldn't spend the night in our house, and Eddie couldn't spend the night with the Lincolns. He was always asking me questions about why the Africans in Ford County were so poor, and lived in run-down houses, and didn't have nice clothes, and had so many children in each family. He really suffered over it, and that made him different. As he got older, he grew even more sympathetic toward the Africans. I tried to talk to him."

"Of course you did. You tried to straighten him out, didn't you?"

"I tried to explain things to him."

"Such as?"

"Such as the need to keep the races separate. There's nothing wrong with separate but equal schools. Nothing wrong with laws prohibiting miscegenation. Nothing wrong with keeping the Africans in their place."

"Where's their place?"

"Under control. Let 'em run wild, and look at what's happened. Crime, drugs, AIDS, illegitimate births, general breakdown in the moral fabric of society."

"What about nuclear proliferation and killer bees?"

"You get my point."

"What about basic rights, radical concepts like the right to vote, the right to use public rest rooms, the right to eat in restaurants and stay in hotels, the right not to be discriminated against in housing, employment, and education?"

"You sound like Eddie."

"Good."

"By the time he was finishing high school he was spouting off like that, talking about how badly the Africans were being mistreated.

He left home when he was eighteen.”

“Did you miss him?”

“Not at first, I guess. We were fighting a lot. He knew I was in the Klan, and he hated the sight of me. At least, he said he did.”

“So you thought more of the Klan than you did your own son?”

Sam stared at the floor. Adam scribbled on a legal pad. The air conditioner rattled and faded, and for a moment seemed determined to finally quit. “He was a sweet kid,” Sam said quietly. “We used to fish a lot, that was our big thing together. I had an old boat, and we’d spend hours on the lake fishing for crappie and bream, sometimes bass. Then he grew up and didn’t like me. He was ashamed of me, and of course it hurt. He expected me to change, and I expected him to see the light like all the other white kids his age. It never happened. We drifted apart when he was in high school, then it seems like the civil rights crap started, and there was no hope after that.”

“Did he participate in the movement?”

“No. He wasn’t stupid. He might have been sympathetic, but he kept his mouth shut. You just didn’t go around talking that trash if you were local. There were enough Northern Jews and radicals to keep things stirred up. They didn’t need any help.”

“What did he do after he left home?”

“Joined the Army. It was an easy way out of town, away from Mississippi. He was gone for three years, and when he came back he brought a wife. They lived in Clanton and we barely saw them. He talked to his mother occasionally, but didn’t have much to say to me. It was the early sixties by then, and the African movement was getting cranked up. There were a lot of Klan meetings, a lot of activity, most to the south of us. Eddie kept his distance. He was very quiet, never had much to say anyway.”

“Then I was born.”

“You were born around the time those three civil rights workers disappeared. Eddie had the nerve to ask me if I was involved in it.”

“Were you?”

“Hell no. I didn’t know who did it for almost a year.”

“They were Kluckers, weren’t they?”

"They were Klansmen."

"Were you happy when those boys were murdered?"

"How the hell is that relevant to me and the gas chamber in 1990?"

"Did Eddie know it when you got involved with the bombing?"

"No one knew it in Ford County. We had not been too active. As I said, most of it was to the south of us, around Meridian."

"And you couldn't wait to jump in the middle of it?"

"They needed help. The Fibbies had infiltrated so deep hardly anyone could be trusted. The civil rights movement was snowballing fast. Something had to be done. I'm not ashamed of it."

Adam smiled and shook his head. "Eddie was ashamed, wasn't he?"

"Eddie didn't know anything about it until the Kramer bombing."

"Why did you involve him?"

"I didn't."

"Yes you did. You told your wife to get Eddie and drive to Cleveland and pick up your car. He was an accessory after the fact."

"I was in jail, okay. I was scared. And no one ever knew. It was harmless."

"Perhaps Eddie didn't think so."

"I don't know what Eddie thought, okay. By the time I got out of jail, he had disappeared. Y'all were gone. I never saw him again until his mother's funeral, and then he slipped in and out without a word to anyone." He rubbed the wrinkles on his forehead with his left hand, then ran it through his oily hair. His face was sad, and as he glanced through the slit Adam saw a trace of moisture in the eyes. "The last time I saw Eddie, he was getting in his car outside the church after the funeral service. He was in a hurry. Something told me I'd never see him again. He was there because his mother had died, and I knew that would be his last visit home. There was no other reason for him to come back. I was on the front steps of the church, Lee was with me, and we both watched him drive away. There I was burying my wife, and at the same time watching my son disappear for the last time."

"Did you try to find him?"

“No. Not really. Lee said she had a phone number, but I didn’t feel like begging. It was obvious he didn’t want anything to do with me, so I left him alone. I often wondered about you, and I remember telling your grandmother how nice it would be to see you. But I wasn’t about to spend a lot of time trying to track y’all down.”

“It would’ve been hard to find us.”

“That’s what I heard. Lee talked to Eddie occasionally, and she would report to me. It sounded like you guys were moving all over California.”

“I went to six schools in twelve years.”

“But why? What was he doing?”

“A number of things. He’d lose his job, and we’d move because we couldn’t pay the rent. Then Mother would find a job, and we’d move somewhere else. Then Dad would get mad at my school for some vague reason, and he’d yank me out.”

“What kind of work did he do?”

“Once he worked for the post office, until he got fired. He threatened to sue them, and for a long time he maintained this massive little war against the postal system. He couldn’t find a lawyer to take his case, so he abused them with paperwork. He always had a small desk with an old typewriter and boxes filled with his papers, and they were his most valuable possessions. Every time we moved, he took great care with his office, as he called it. He didn’t care about anything else, there wasn’t much, but he protected his office with his life. I can remember many nights lying in bed trying to sleep and listening to that damned typewriter pecking away at all hours. He hated the federal government.”

“That’s my boy.”

“But for different reasons, I think. The IRS came after him one year, which I always found odd because he didn’t earn enough to pay three dollars in taxes. So he declared war on the Infernal Revenue, as he called it, and that raged for years. The State of California revoked his driver’s license one year when he didn’t renew, and this violated all sorts of civil and human rights. Mother had to drive him for two years until he surrendered to the bureaucracy. He was always writing letters to the governor, the

President, U.S. senators, congressmen, anyone with an office and staff. He would just raise hell about this and that, and when they wrote him back he'd declare a small victory. He saved every letter. He got in a fight one time with a next-door neighbor, something to do with a strange dog peeing on our porch, and they were yelling at each other across the hedgerow. The madder they got, the more powerful their friends became, and both were just minutes away from making phone calls to all sorts of hotshots who would instantly inflict punishment on the other. Dad ran in the house, and within seconds returned to the argument with thirteen letters from the governor of the State of California. He counted them loudly and waved them under the neighbor's nose, and the poor guy was crushed. End of argument. End of dog pissing on our porch. Of course, every one of the letters had asked him, in a nice way, to get lost."

Though they didn't realize it, they were both smiling by the end of this brief story.

"If he couldn't keep a job, how did y'all survive?" Sam asked, staring through the opening.

"I don't know. Mother always worked. She was very resourceful, and she sometimes kept two jobs. Cashier in a grocery store. Clerk in a pharmacy. She could do anything, and I remember a couple of pretty good jobs as a secretary. At some point, Dad got a license to sell life insurance, and that became a permanent part-time job. I guess he was good at it, because things improved as I got older. He could work his own hours and reported to no one. This suited him, although he said he hated insurance companies. He sued one for canceling a policy or something, I really didn't understand it, and he lost the case. Of course, he blamed it all on his lawyer, who made the mistake of sending Eddie a long letter full of strong statements. Dad typed for three days, and when his masterpiece was finished he proudly showed it to Mother. Twenty-one pages of mistakes and lies by the lawyer. She just shook her head. He fought with that poor lawyer for years."

"What kind of father was he?"

"I don't know. That's a hard question, Sam."

“Why?”

“Because of the way he died. I was mad at him for a long time after his death, and I didn’t understand how he could decide that he should leave us, that we didn’t need him anymore, that it was time for him to check out. And after I learned the truth, I was mad at him for lying to me all those years, for changing my name and running away. It was terribly confusing for a young kid. Still is.”

“Are you still angry?”

“Not really. I tend to remember the good things about Eddie. He was the only father I’ve had, so I don’t know how to rate him. He didn’t smoke, drink, gamble, do drugs, chase women, beat his kids, or any of that. He had trouble keeping a job, but we never went without food or shelter. He and Mother were constantly talking about divorce, but it didn’t work out. She moved out several times, and then he would move out. It was disruptive, but Carmen and I became accustomed to it. He had his dark days, or bad times, as they were known, when he would withdraw to his room and lock the door and pull the shades. Mother would gather us around her and explain that he was not feeling well, and that we should be very quiet. No television or radios. She was very supportive when he withdrew. He would stay in his room for days, then suddenly emerge as if nothing happened. We learned to live with Eddie’s bad times. He looked and dressed normal. He was almost always there if we needed him. We played baseball in the backyard and rode rides at the carnival. He took us to Disneyland a couple of times. I guess he was a good man, a good father who just had this dark, strange side that flared up occasionally.”

“But you weren’t close.”

“No, we weren’t close. He helped me with my homework and science projects, and he insisted on perfect report cards. We talked about the solar system and the environment, but never about girls and sex and cars. Never about family and ancestors. There was no intimacy. He was not a warm person. There were times when I needed him and he was locked up in his room.”

Sam rubbed the corners of his eyes, then he leaned forward again on his elbows with his face close to the screen and looked directly at

Adam. "What about his death?" he asked.

"What about it?"

"How'd it happen?"

Adam waited for a long time before answering. He could tell this story several ways. He could be cruel and hateful and brutally honest, and in doing so destroy the old man. There was a mighty temptation to do this. It needed to be done, he'd told himself many times before. Sam needed to suffer; he needed to be slapped in the face with the guilt of Eddie's suicide. Adam wanted to really hurt the old bastard and make him cry.

But at the same time he wanted to tell the story quickly, glossing over the painful parts and then moving on to something else. The poor old man sitting captive on the other side of the screen was suffering enough. The government was planning to kill him in less than four weeks. Adam suspected he knew more about Eddie's death than he let on.

"He was going through a bad time," Adam said, gazing at the screen but avoiding Sam. "He'd been in his room for three weeks, which was longer than usual. Mother kept telling us that he was getting better, just a few more days and he'd come out. We believed her, because he always seemed to bounce out of it. He picked a day when she was at work and Carmen was at a friend's house, a day when he knew I'd be the first one home. I found him lying on the floor of my bedroom, still holding the gun, a thirty-eight. One shot to the right temple. There was a neat circle of blood around his head. I sat on the edge of my bed."

"How old were you?"

"Almost seventeen. A junior in high school. Straight A's. I realized he'd carefully arranged a half dozen towels on the floor then placed himself in the middle of them. I checked the pulse in his wrist, and he was already stiff. Coroner said he'd been dead three hours. There was a note beside him, typed neatly on white paper. The note was addressed Dear Adam. Said he loved me, that he was sorry, that he wanted me to take care of the girls, and that maybe one day I would understand. Then he directed my attention to a plastic garbage bag, also on the floor, and said I should place the dirty towels in the

garbage bag, wipe up the mess, then call the police. Don't touch the gun, he said. And hurry, before the girls get home." Adam cleared his throat and looked at the floor.

"And so I did exactly what he said, and I waited for the police. We were alone for fifteen minutes, just the two of us. He was lying on the floor, and I was lying on my bed looking down at him. I started crying and crying, asking him why and how and what happened and a hundred other questions. There was my dad, the only dad I would ever have, lying there in his faded jeans and dirty socks and favorite UCLA sweatshirt. From the neck down he could've been napping, but he had a hole in his head and the blood had dried in his hair. I hated him for dying, and I felt so sorry for him because he was dead. I remember asking him why he hadn't talked to me before this. I asked him a lot of questions. I heard voices, and suddenly the room was filled with cops. They took me to the den and put a blanket around me. And that was the end of my father."

Sam was still on his elbows, but one hand was now over his eyes. There were just a couple more things Adam wanted to say.

"After the funeral, Lee stayed with us for a while. She told me about you and about the Cayhalls. She filled in a lot of gaps about my father. I became fascinated with you and the Kramer bombing, and I began reading old magazine articles and newspaper stories. It took about a year for me to figure out why Eddie killed himself when he did. He'd been hiding in his room during your trial, and he killed himself when it was over."

Sam removed his hand and glared at Adam with wet eyes. "So you blame me for his death, right, Adam? That's what you really want to say, isn't it?"

"No. I don't blame you entirely."

"Then how much? Eighty percent? Ninety percent? You've had time to do the numbers. How much of it's my fault?"

"I don't know, Sam. Why don't you tell me?"

Sam wiped his eyes and raised his voice. "Oh what the hell! I'll claim a hundred percent. I'll take full responsibility for his death, okay? Is that what you want?"

"Take whatever you want."

“Don’t patronize me! Just add my son’s name to my list, is that what you want? The Kramer twins, their father, then Eddie. That’s four I’ve killed, right? Anyone else you want to tack on here at the end? Do it quick, old boy, because the clock is ticking.”

“How many more are out there?”

“Dead bodies?”

“Yes. Dead bodies. I’ve heard the rumors.”

“And of course you believe them, don’t you? You seem eager to believe everything bad about me.”

“I didn’t say I believed them.”

Sam jumped to his feet and walked to the end of the room. “I’m tired of this conversation!” he yelled from thirty feet away. “And I’m tired of you! I almost wish I had those damned Jew lawyers harassing me again.”

“We can accommodate you,” Adam shot back.

Sam walked slowly back to his chair. “Here I am worried about my ass, twenty-three days away from the chamber, and all you want to do is talk about dead people. Just keep chirping away, old boy, and real soon you can start talking about me. I want some action.”

“I filed a petition this morning.”

“Fine! Then leave, dammit. Just get the hell out and stop tormenting me!”

Twenty-two

The door on Adam's side opened, and Packer entered with two gentlemen behind him. They were obviously lawyers—dark suits, frowns, thick bulging briefcases. Packer pointed to some chairs under the air conditioner, and they sat down. He looked at Adam, and paid particular attention to Sam, who was still standing on the other side. "Everything okay?" he asked Adam.

Adam nodded and Sam eased into his chair. Packer left and the two new lawyers efficiently went about their business of pulling heavy documents from fat files. Within a minute, both jackets were off.

Five minutes passed without a word from Sam. Adam caught a few glimpses from the lawyers on the other end. They were in the same room with the most famous inmate on the Row, the next one to be gassed, and they couldn't help but steal curious peeks at Sam Cayhall and his lawyer.

Then the door opened behind Sam, and two guards entered with a wiry little black man who was shackled and manacled and cuffed as if he might erupt any moment and kill dozens with his bare hands. They led him to a seat across from his lawyers, and went about the business of liberating most of his limbs. The hands remained cuffed behind his back. One of the guards left the room, but the other took a position halfway between Sam and the black inmate.

Sam glanced down the counter at his comrade, a nervous type who evidently was not happy with his lawyers. His lawyers did not appear to be thrilled either. Adam watched them from his side of the screen, and within minutes their heads were close together and they were talking in unison through the slit while their client sat militantly on his hands. Their low voices were audible, but their words were indecipherable.

Sam eased forward again, on his elbows, and motioned for Adam to do likewise. Their faces met ten inches apart with the opening between them.

“That’s Stockholm Turner,” Sam said, almost in a whisper.

“Stockholm?”

“Yeah, but he goes by Stock. These rural Africans love unusual names. He says he has a brother named Denmark and one named Germany. Probably does.”

“What’d he do?” Adam asked, suddenly curious.

“Robbed a whiskey store, I think. Shot the owner. About two years ago he got a death warrant, and it went down to the wire. He came within two hours of the chamber.”

“What happened?”

“His lawyers got a stay, and they’ve been fighting ever since. You can never tell, but he’ll probably be the next after me.”

They both looked toward the end of the room where the conference was raging in full force. Stock was off his hands and sitting on the edge of his chair and raising hell with his lawyers.

Sam grinned, then chuckled, then leaned even closer to the screen. “Stock’s family is dirt poor, and they have little to do with him. It’s not unusual, really, especially with the Africans. He seldom gets mail or visitors. He was born fifty miles from here, but the free world has forgotten about him. As his appeals were losing steam, Stock started worrying about life and death and things in general. Around here, if no one claims your body, then the state buries you like a pauper in some cheap grave. Stock got concerned about what would happen to his body, and he started asking all kinds of questions. Packer and some of the guards picked up on it, and they convinced Stock that his body would be sent to a crematorium where it would be burned. The ashes would be dropped from the air and spread over Parchman. They told him that since he’d be full of gas anyway, when they stuck a match to him he’d go off like a bomb. Stock was devastated. He had trouble sleeping and lost weight. Then he started writing letters to his family and friends begging them for a few dollars so he could have a Christian burial, as he called it. The money trickled in, and he wrote more letters. He

wrote to ministers and civil rights groups. Even his lawyers sent money.

“When his stay was lifted, Stock had close to four hundred dollars, and he was ready to die. Or so he thought.”

Sam’s eyes were dancing and his voice was light. He told the story slowly, in a low voice, and savored the details. Adam was amused more by the telling than by the narrative.

“They have a loose rule here that allows almost unlimited visitation for seventy-two hours prior to the execution. As long as there’s no security risk, they’ll allow the condemned man to do damned near anything. There’s a little office up front with a desk and phone, and that becomes the visiting room. It’s usually filled with all sorts of people—grandmothers, nieces, nephews, cousins, aunties—especially with these Africans. Hell, they run ’em in here by the busload. Kinfolks who haven’t spent five minutes thinking about the inmate suddenly show up to share his last moments. It almost becomes a social event.

“They also have this rule, it’s unwritten I’m sure, that allows one final conjugal visit with the wife. If there’s no wife, then the warden in his boundless mercy allows a brief appointment with a girlfriend. One last little quickie before lover boy checks out.” Sam glanced along the counter at Stock, then leaned even closer.

“Well, ole Stock here is one of the more popular residents of the Row, and he somehow convinced the warden that he had both a wife and a girlfriend, and that these ladies would agree to spend a few moments with him before he died. At the same time! All three of them, together! The warden allegedly knew something fishy was going on, but everyone likes Stock, and, well, they were about to kill him anyway, so what’s the harm. So Stock here was sitting in the little room with his mother and sisters and cousins and nieces, a whole passel of Africans, most of whom hadn’t uttered his name in ten years, and he was eating his last meal of steak and potatoes while everybody else was crying and grieving and praying. With about four hours to go, they emptied the room and sent the family to the chapel. Stock waited for a few minutes while another van brought his wife and his girlfriend here to the Row. They arrived

with guards, and were taken to the little office up front where Stock was waiting, all wild-eyed and ready. Poor guy'd been on the Row for twelve years.

"Well, they brought in a little cot for this liaison, and Stock and his gals got it on. The guards said later that Stock had some fine-looking women, and the guards also said they commented at the time on how young they looked. Stock was just about to have a go with either his wife or his girlfriend, it didn't really matter, when the phone rang. It was his lawyer. And his lawyer was crying and out of breath as he yelled out the great news that the Fifth Circuit had issued a stay.

"Stock hung up on him. He had more important matters at hand. A few minutes passed, then the phone rang again. Stock grabbed it. It was his lawyer again, and this time he was much more composed as he explained to Stock the legal maneuvering that had saved his life, for the moment. Stock offered his appreciation, then asked his lawyer to keep it quiet for another hour."

Adam again glanced to his right, and wondered which of the two lawyers had called Stock while he was exercising his constitutional right of the last conjugal visit.

"Well, by this time, the Attorney General's office had talked to the warden, and the execution had been called off, or aborted as they like to say. Made no difference to Stock. He was proceeding as if he would never see another woman. The door to the room cannot be locked from the inside, for obvious reasons, so Naifeh, after waiting patiently, gently knocked on the door and asked Stock to come on out. Time to go back to your cell, Stock, he said. Stock said he needed just another five minutes. No, said Naifeh. Please, Stock begged, and suddenly there were noises again. So the warden grinned at the guards who grinned at the warden, and for five minutes they studied the floor while the cot rattled and bounced around the little room.

"Stock finally opened the door and strutted out like the heavyweight champ of the world. The guards said he was happier about his performance than he was about his stay. They quickly got

rid of the women, who as it turned out, were not really his wife and girlfriend after all.”

“Who were they?”

“A couple of prostitutes.”

“Prostitutes!” Adam said a bit too loud, and one of the lawyers stared at him.

Sam leaned so close his nose was almost in the slit. “Yeah, local whores. His brother somehow arranged it for him. Remember the funeral money he worked so hard to raise.”

“You’re kidding.”

“That’s it. Four hundred bucks spent on whores, which at first seems a bit stiff, especially for local African whores, but it seems they were scared to death about coming to death row, which I guess makes sense. They took all Stock’s money. He told me later he didn’t give a damn how they buried him. Said it was worth every dime. Naifeh got embarrassed, and he threatened to prohibit the conjugal visits. But Stock’s lawyer, that little dark-haired one over there, filed a lawsuit and got a ruling that ensures one last quickie. I think Stock’s almost looking forward to his next one.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and the smile slowly left his face. “Personally, I haven’t given much thought to my conjugal visit. It’s intended for husband and wife relations only, you know, that’s what the term means. But the warden’ll probably bend the rules for me. What do you think?”

“I really haven’t thought about it.”

“I’m just kidding, you know. I’m an old man. I’d settle for a back rub and a stiff drink.”

“What about your last meal?” Adam asked, still very quietly.

“That’s not funny.”

“I thought we were kidding.”

“Probably something gross like boiled pork and rubber peas. Same crap they’ve been feeding me for almost ten years. Maybe an extra piece of toast. I’d hate to give the cook the opportunity to prepare a meal fit for free world humans.”

“Sounds delicious.”

“Oh, I’ll share it with you. I’ve often wondered why they feed you before they kill you. They also bring the doctor in and give you a preexecution physical. Can you believe it? Gotta make sure you’re fit to die. And they have a shrink on staff here who examines you before the execution, and he must report to the warden in writing that you’re mentally sound enough to gas. And they have a minister on the payroll who’ll pray and meditate with you and make sure your soul is headed in the right direction. All paid for by the taxpayers of the State of Mississippi and administered by these loving people around here. Don’t forget the conjugal visit. You can die with your lust satisfied. They think of everything. They’re very considerate. Really concerned about your appetite and health and spiritual well-being. Right at the very last, they put a catheter in your penis and a plug up your ass so you won’t make a mess. This is for their benefit, not yours. They don’t wanna have to clean you afterward. So, they feed you real good, anything you want, then they plug you up. Sick, isn’t it? Sick, sick, sick, sick.”

“Let’s talk about something else.”

Sam finished the last cigarette and thumped it on the floor in front of the guard. “No. Let’s stop talking. I’ve had enough for one day.”

“Fine.”

“And no more about Eddie, okay? It’s really not fair to come in here and hit me with stuff like that.”

“I’m sorry. No more about Eddie.”

“Let’s try to focus on me the next three weeks, okay? That’s more than enough to keep us busy.”

“It’s a deal, Sam.”

Along Highway 82 from the east, Greenville was growing in an unsightly sprawl, with its strip shopping centers filled with video rental and dinky liquor stores, and its endless fast-food franchises and drive-up motels with free cable and breakfast. The river blocked

such progress to the west, and since 82 was the main corridor it had evidently become the developers' favorite territory.

In the past twenty-five years, Greenville had grown from a sleepy river town of thirty-five thousand to a busy river city of sixty thousand. It was prosperous and progressive. In 1990, Greenville was the fifth-largest city in the state.

The streets leading into the central district were shaded and lined with stately old homes. The center of the town was pretty and quaint, well preserved and apparently unchanged, Adam thought, in stark contrast to the thoughtless chaos along Highway 82. He parked on Washington Street, at a few minutes after five, as downtown merchants and their customers were busy preparing for the end of the day. He removed his tie and left it with his jacket in the car because the temperature was still in the nineties and showed no sign of relenting.

He walked three blocks, and found the park with the life-sized bronze statue of two little boys in the center. They were the same size with the same smile and the same eyes. One was running while the other one skipped, and the sculptor had captured them perfectly. Josh and John Kramer, forever five years old, frozen in time with copper and tin. A brass plate below them said simply:

JOSH AND JOHN KRAMER
DIED HERE ON APRIL 21, 1967
(MARCH 2, 1962–APRIL 21, 1967)

The park was a perfect square, half a city block which had once held Marvin's law office and an old building next to it. The land had been in the Kramer family for years, and Marvin's father gave it to the city to be used as a memorial. Sam had done a fine job of leveling the law office, and the city had razed the building next to it. Some money had been spent on Kramer Park, and a lot of thought had gone into it. It was completely fenced with ornamental wrought iron and an entrance on each side from the sidewalks. Perfect rows of oaks and maples followed the fencing. Lines of manicured shrubs met at precise angles, then encircled flower beds

of begonias and geraniums. A small amphitheater sat in one corner under the trees, and across the way a group of black children sailed through the air on wooden swings.

It was small and colorful, a pleasant little garden amid the streets and buildings. A teenaged couple argued on a bench as Adam walked by. A bicycle gang of eight-year-olds roared around a fountain. An ancient policeman ambled by and actually tipped his hat to Adam as he said hello.

He sat on a bench and stared at Josh and John, less than thirty feet away. "Never forget the victims," Lee had admonished. "They have the right to want retribution. They've earned it."

He remembered all the gruesome details from the trials—the FBI expert who testified about the bomb and the speed at which it ripped through the building; the medical examiner who delicately described the little bodies and what exactly killed them; the firemen who tried to rescue but were much too late and were left only to retrieve. There had been photographs of the building and the boys, and the trial judges had used great restraint in allowing just a few of these to go to the jury. McAllister, typically, had wanted to show huge enlarged color pictures of the mangled bodies, but they were excluded.

Adam was now sitting on ground which had once been the office of Marvin Kramer, and he closed his eyes and tried to feel the ground shake. He saw the footage from his video of smoldering debris and the cloud of dust suspended over the scene. He heard the frantic voice of the news reporter, the sirens shrieking in the background.

Those bronze boys were not much older than he was when his grandfather killed them. They were five and he was almost three, and for some reason he kept up with their ages. Today, he was twenty-six and they would be twenty-eight.

The guilt hit hard and low in the stomach. It made him shudder and sweat. The sun hid behind two large oaks to the west, and as it flickered through the branches the boys' faces gleamed.

How could Sam have done this? Why was Sam Cayhall his grandfather and not someone else's? When did he decide to

participate in the Klan's holy war against Jews? What made him change from a harmless cross-burner to a full-fledged terrorist?

Adam sat on the bench, stared at the statue, and hated his grandfather. He felt guilty for being in Mississippi trying to help the old bastard.

He found a Holiday Inn and paid for a room. He called Lee and reported in, then watched the evening news on the Jackson channels. Evidently, it had been just another languid summer day in Mississippi with little happening. Sam Cayhall and his latest efforts to stay alive were the hot topics. Each station carried somber comments by the governor and the Attorney General about the newest petition for relief filed by the defense this morning, and each man was just sick and tired of the endless appeals. Each would fight valiantly to pursue this matter until justice was realized. One station began its own countdown—twenty-three days until execution, the anchorperson rattled off, as if reciting the number of shopping days left until Christmas. The number 23 was plastered under the same overworked photo of Sam Cayhall.

Adam ate dinner in a small downtown café. He sat alone in a booth, picking at roast beef and peas, listening to harmless chatter around him. No one mentioned Sam.

At dusk, he walked the sidewalks in front of the shops and stores, and thought of Sam pacing along these same streets, on the same concrete, waiting for the bomb to go off and wondering what in the world had gone wrong. He stopped by a phone booth, maybe the same one Sam had tried to use to call and warn Kramer.

The park was deserted and dark. Two gaslight street lamps stood by the front entrance, providing the only light. Adam sat at the base of the statue, under the boys, under the brass plate with their names and dates of birth and death. On this very spot, it said, they died.

He sat there for a long time, oblivious to the darkness, pondering imponderables, wasting time with fruitless considerations of what might have been. The bomb had defined his life, he knew that much. It had taken him away from Mississippi and deposited him in another world with a new name. It had transformed his parents into refugees, fleeing their past and hiding from their present. It had

killed his father, in all likelihood, though no one could predict what might have happened to Eddie Cayhall. The bomb had played a principal role in Adam's decision to become a lawyer, a calling he'd never felt until he learned of Sam. He'd dreamed of flying airplanes.

And now the bomb had led him back to Mississippi for an undertaking laden with agony and little hope. The odds were heavy that the bomb would claim its final victim in twenty-three days, and Adam wondered what would happen to him after that.

What else could the bomb have in store for him?

Twenty-three

For the most part, death penalty appeals drag along for years at a snail's pace. A very old snail. No one is in a hurry. The issues are complicated. The briefs, motions, petitions, etc., are thick and burdensome. The court dockets are crowded with more pressing matters.

Occasionally, though, a ruling can come down with stunning speed. Justice can become terribly efficient. Especially in the waning days, when a date for an execution has been set and the courts are tired of more motions, more appeals. Adam received his first dose of quick justice while he was wandering the streets of Greenville Monday afternoon.

The Mississippi Supreme Court took one look at his petition for postconviction relief, and denied it around 5 p.m. Monday. Adam was just arriving in Greenville and knew nothing about it. The denial was certainly no surprise, but its speed certainly was. The court kept the petition less than eight hours. In all fairness, the court had dealt with Sam Cayhall off and on for over ten years.

In the final days of death cases, the courts watch each other closely. Copies of filings and rulings are faxed along so that the higher courts know what's coming. The denial by the Mississippi Supreme Court was routinely faxed to the federal district court in Jackson, Adam's next forum. It was sent to the Honorable F. Flynn Slattery, a young federal judge who was new to the bench. He had not been involved with the Cayhall appeals.

Judge Slattery's office attempted to locate Adam Hall between 5 and 6 p.m. Monday, but he was sitting in Kramer Park. Slattery called the Attorney General, Steve Roxburgh, and at eight-thirty a brief meeting took place in the judge's office. The judge happened to

be a workaholic, and this was his first death case. He and his clerk studied the petition until midnight.

If Adam had watched the late news Monday, he would have learned that his petition had already been denied by the supreme court. He was, however, sound asleep.

At six Tuesday morning, he casually picked up the Jackson paper and learned that the supreme court had turned him down, that the matter was now in federal court, assigned to Judge Slattery, and that both the Attorney General and the governor were claiming another victory. Odd, he thought, since he hadn't yet officially filed anything in federal court. He jumped in his car and raced to Jackson, two hours away. At nine, he entered the federal courthouse on Capitol Street in downtown, and met briefly with Breck Jefferson, an unsmiling young man, fresh from law school and holding the important position of Slattery's law clerk. Adam was told to return at eleven for a meeting with the judge.

Although he arrived at Slattery's office at exactly eleven, it was obvious a meeting of sorts had been in progress for some time. In the center of Slattery's huge office was a mahogany conference table, long and wide with eight black leather chairs on each side. Slattery's throne was at one end, near his desk, and before him on the table were stacks of papers, legal pads, and other effects. The side to his right was crowded with young white men in navy suits, all bunched together along the table, with another row of eager warriors seated close behind. This side belonged to the state, with His Honor, the governor, Mr. David McAllister, sitting closest to Slattery. His Honor, the Attorney General, Steve Roxburgh, had been banished to the middle of the table in an obvious losing battle over turf. Each distinguished public servant had brought to the table his most trusted litigators and thinkers, and this squadron of strategists had obviously been meeting with the judge and plotting long before Adam arrived.

Breck, the clerk, swung the door open and greeted Adam pleasantly enough, then asked him to step inside. The room was instantly silent as Adam slowly approached the table. Slattery reluctantly rose from his chair and introduced himself to Adam. The handshake was cold and fleeting. "Have a seat," he said ominously, fluttering his left hand at the eight leather chairs on the defense side of the table. Adam hesitated, then picked one directly across from a face he recognized as belonging to Roxburgh. He placed his briefcase on the table, and sat down. Four empty chairs were to his right, in the direction of Slattery, and three to his left. He felt like a lonesome trespasser.

"I assume you know the governor and the Attorney General," Slattery said, as if everyone had personally met these two.

"Neither," Adam said, shaking his head slightly.

"I'm David McAllister, Mr. Hall, nice to meet you," the governor said quickly, ever the anxious glad-handing politician, with an incredibly rapid flash of flawless teeth.

"A pleasure," Adam said, barely moving his lips.

"And I'm Steve Roxburgh," said the Attorney General.

Adam only nodded at him. He'd seen his face in the newspapers.

Roxburgh took the initiative. He began talking and pointing at people. "These are attorneys from my criminal appeals division. Kevin Laird, Bart Moody, Morris Henry, Hugh Simms, and Joseph Ely. These guys handle all death penalty cases." They all nodded obediently while maintaining their suspicious frowns. Adam counted eleven people on the other side of the table.

McAllister chose not to introduce his band of clones, all of whom were suffering from either migraines or hemorrhoids. Their faces were contorted from pain, or perhaps from quite serious deliberation about legal matters at hand.

"Hope we haven't jumped the gun, Mr. Hall," Slattery said as he slipped a pair of reading glasses on his nose. He was in his early forties, one of the young Reagan appointees. "When do you expect to officially file your petition here in federal court?"

"Today," Adam said nervously, still astounded by the speed of it all. This was a positive development though, he'd decided while

driving to Jackson. If Sam got any relief, it would be in federal court, not state.

"When can the state respond?" the judge asked Roxburgh.

"Tomorrow morning. Assuming the petition here raises the same issues as those raised in the supreme court."

"They're the same," Adam said to Roxburgh, then he turned to Slattery. "I was told to be here at eleven o'clock. What time did the meeting start?"

"The meeting started when I decided it would start, Mr. Hall," Slattery said icily. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Yes. It's obvious this conference started some time ago, without me."

"What's wrong with that? This is my office, and I'll start meetings whenever I want."

"Yeah, but it's my petition, and I was invited here to discuss it. Seems as though I should've been here for the entire meeting."

"You don't trust me, Mr. Hall?" Slattery was easing forward on his elbows, thoroughly enjoying this.

"I don't trust anybody," Adam said, staring at His Honor.

"We're trying to accommodate you, Mr. Hall. Your client doesn't have much time, and I'm only trying to move things along. I thought you'd be pleased that we were able to arrange this meeting with such speed."

"Thank you," Adam said, and looked at his legal pad. There was a brief silence as the tension eased a bit.

Slattery held a sheet of paper. "Get the petition filed today. The state will file its response tomorrow. I'll consider it over the weekend and issue a ruling on Monday. In the event I decide to conduct a hearing, I need to know from both sides how long it will take to prepare. How about you, Mr. Hall? How long to get ready for a hearing?"

Sam had twenty-two days to live. Any hearing would have to be a hurried, concise affair with quick witnesses and, he hoped, a swift ruling by the court. Adding to the stress of the moment was the crucial fact that Adam had no idea how long it would take to prepare for a hearing because he'd never tried such a matter. He'd

participated in a few minor skirmishes in Chicago, but always with Emmitt Wycoff close by. He was just a rookie, dammit! He wasn't even certain where the courtroom was located.

And something told him that the eleven vultures examining him at this precise second knew full well he didn't know what the hell he was doing. "I can be ready in a week," he said with a steady poker face and as much faith as he could muster.

"Very well," Slattery said, as if this was fine, a good answer, Adam, good boy. A week was reasonable. Then Roxburgh whispered something to one of his warlocks, and the whole bunch thought it was funny. Adam ignored them.

Slattery scribbled something with an ink pen, then studied it. He gave it to Breck the clerk who treasured it and raced off to do something else with it. His Honor looked along the wall of legal infantry to his right, then he dropped his gaze upon young Adam. "Now, Mr. Hall, there's something else I'd like to discuss. As you know, this execution is scheduled to take place in twenty-two days, and I would like to know if this court can expect any additional filings on behalf of Mr. Cayhall. I know this is an unusual request, but we're operating here in an unusual situation. Frankly, this is my first involvement with a death penalty case as advanced as this one, and I think it's best if we all work together here."

In other words, Your Honor, you want to make damned sure there are no stays. Adam thought for a second. It was an unusual request, and one that was quite unfair. But Sam had a constitutional right to file anything at anytime, and Adam could not be bound by any promises made here. He decided to be polite. "I really can't say, Your Honor. Not now. Maybe next week."

"Surely you'll file the usual gangplank appeals," Roxburgh said, and the smirking bastards around him all looked at Adam with wondrous amazement.

"Frankly, Mr. Roxburgh, I'm not required to discuss my plans with you. Or with the court, for that matter."

"Of course not," McAllister chimed in for some reason, probably just his inability to stay quiet for more than five minutes.

Adam had noticed the lawyer sitting to Roxburgh's right, a methodical sort with steely eyes that seldom left Adam. He was young but gray, clean-shaven, and very neat. McAllister favored him, and had leaned to his right several times as if receiving advice. The others from the AG's office seemed to accede to his thoughts and movements. There was a reference in one of the hundred articles Adam had clipped and filed away about an infamous litigator in the AG's office known as Dr. Death, a clever bird with a penchant for pushing death penalty cases to their conclusion. Either his first or last name was Morris, and Adam vaguely recalled a Morris something or other mentioned moments earlier during Roxburgh's garbled introduction of his staff.

Adam assumed him to be the nefarious Dr. Death. Morris Henry was his name.

"Well, hurry up and file them then," Slattery said with a good dose of frustration. "I don't want to work around the clock as this thing goes down to the wire."

"No sir," Adam said in mock sympathy.

Slattery glared at him for a moment, then returned to the paperwork in front of him. "Very well, gentlemen, I suggest you stick by your telephones Sunday night and Monday morning. I'll be calling as soon as I've made a decision. This meeting is adjourned."

The conspiracy on the other side broke up in a flurry of papers and files snatched from the table and sudden mumbled conversations. Adam was nearest the door. He nodded at Slattery, offered a feeble "Good day, Your Honor," and left the office. He gave a polite grin to the secretary and was into the hallway when someone called his name. It was the governor, with two flunkies in tow.

"Can we talk a minute?" McAllister asked, out thrusting a hand at Adam's waist. They shook for a second.

"What about?"

"Just five minutes, okay."

Adam looked at the governor's boys waiting a few feet away. "Alone. Private. And off the record," he said.

“Sure,” McAllister said, then pointed to a set of double doors. They stepped inside a small empty courtroom with the lights off. The governor’s hands were free. Someone else carried his briefcase and bags. He stuck them deep in his pockets and leaned against a railing. He was lean and well dressed, nice suit, fashionable silk tie, obligatory white cotton shirt. He was under forty and aging remarkably well. Only a touch of gray tinted his sideburns. “How’s Sam?” he asked, feigning deep concern.

Adam snorted, looked away, then sat his briefcase on the floor. “Oh, he’s wonderful. I’ll tell him you asked. He’ll be thrilled.”

“I’d heard he was in bad health.”

“Health? You’re trying to kill him. How can you be worried about his health?”

“Just heard a rumor.”

“He hates your guts, okay? His health is bad, but he can hang on for another three weeks.”

“Hate is nothing new for Sam, you know.”

“What exactly do you want to talk about?”

“Just wanted to say hello. I’m sure we’ll get together shortly.”

“Look, Governor, I have a signed contract with my client that expressly forbids me from talking to you. I repeat, he hates you. You’re the reason he’s on death row. He blames you for everything, and if he knew we were talking now, he’d fire me.”

“Your own grandfather would fire you?”

“Yes. I truly believe it. So if I read in tomorrow’s paper that you met with me today and we discussed Sam Cayhall, then I’ll be on my way back to Chicago, which will probably screw up your execution because Sam won’t have a lawyer. Can’t kill a man if he doesn’t have a lawyer.”

“Says who?”

“Just keep it quiet, okay?”

“You have my word. But if we can’t talk, then how do we discuss the issue of clemency?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t reached that point yet.”

McAllister’s face was always pleasant. The comely smile was always in place or just beneath the surface. “You have thought

about clemency, haven't you?"

"Yes. With three weeks to go, I've thought about clemency. Every death row inmate dreams of a pardon, Governor, and that's why you can't grant one. You pardon one convict, and you'll have the other fifty pestering you for the same favor. Fifty families writing letters and calling night and day. Fifty lawyers pulling strings and trying to get in your office. You and I both know it can't be done."

"I'm not sure he should die."

He said this while looking away, as if a change of heart was under way, as if the years had matured him and softened his zeal to punish Sam. Adam started to say something, then realized the magnitude of these last words. He watched the floor for a minute, paying particular attention to the governor's tasseled loafers. The governor was deep in thought.

"I'm not sure he should die, either," Adam said.

"How much has he told you?"

"About what?"

"About the Kramer bombing."

"He says he's told me everything."

"But you have doubts?"

"Yes."

"So do I. I always had doubts."

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons. Jeremiah Dogan was a notorious liar, and he was scared to death of going to prison. The IRS had him cold, you know, and he was convinced that if he went to prison he'd be raped and tortured and killed by gangs of blacks. He was the Imperial Wizard, you know. Dogan was also ignorant about a lot of things. He was sly and hard to catch when it came to terrorism, but he didn't understand the criminal justice system. I always thought someone, probably the FBI, told Dogan that Sam had to be convicted or they'd ship him off to prison. No conviction, no deal. He was a very eager witness on the stand. He desperately wanted the jury to convict Sam."

"So he lied?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

“About what?”

“Have you asked Sam if he had an accomplice?”

Adam paused for a second and analyzed the question. “I really can’t discuss what Sam and I have talked about. It’s confidential.”

“Of course it is. There are a lot of people in this state who secretly do not wish to see Sam executed.” McAllister was now watching Adam closely.

“Are you one of them?”

“I don’t know. But what if Sam didn’t plan to kill either Marvin Kramer or his sons? Sure Sam was there, right in the thick of it. But what if someone else possessed the intent to murder?”

“Then Sam isn’t as guilty as we think.”

“Right. He’s certainly not innocent, but not guilty enough to be executed either. This bothers me, Mr. Hall. Can I call you Adam?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t suppose Sam has mentioned anything about an accomplice.”

“I really can’t discuss that. Not now.”

The governor slipped a hand from a pocket and gave Adam a business card. “Two phone numbers on the back. One is my private office number. The other is my home number. All phone calls are confidential, I swear. I play for the cameras sometimes, Adam, it goes with the job, but I can also be trusted.”

Adam took the card and looked at the handwritten numbers.

“I couldn’t live with myself if I failed to pardon a man who didn’t deserve to die,” McAllister said as he walked to the door. “Give me a call, but don’t wait too late. This thing’s already heating up. I’m getting twenty phone calls a day.”

He winked at Adam, showed him the sparkling teeth once again, and left the room.

Adam sat in a metal chair against the wall, and looked at the front of the card. It was gold-embossed with an official seal. Twenty calls a day. What did that mean? Did the callers want Sam dead or did they want him pardoned?

A lot of people in this state do not wish to see Sam executed, he’d said, as if he was already weighing the votes he’d lose against those

he might gain.

Twenty-four

The smile from the receptionist in the foyer was not as quick as usual, and as Adam walked to his office he detected a more somber atmosphere among the staff and the handful of lawyers. The chatter was an octave lower. Things were a bit more urgent.

Chicago had arrived. It happened occasionally, not necessarily for purposes of inspection, but more often than not to service a local client or to conduct bureaucratic little firm meetings. No one had ever been fired when Chicago arrived. No one had ever been cursed or abused. But it always provided for a few anxious moments until Chicago left and headed back North.

Adam opened his office door and nearly smacked into the worried face of E. Garner Goodman, complete with green paisley bow tie, white starched shirt, bushy gray hair. He'd been pacing around the room and happened to be near the door when it opened. Adam stared at him, then took his hand and shook it quickly.

"Come in, come in," Goodman said, closing the door as he invited Adam into his own office. He hadn't smiled yet.

"What are you doing here?" Adam asked, throwing his briefcase on the floor and walking to his desk. They faced each other.

Goodman stroked his neat gray beard, then adjusted his bow tie. "There's a bit of an emergency, I'm afraid. Could be bad news."

"What?"

"Sit down, sit down. This might take a minute."

"No. I'm fine. What is it?" It had to be horrible if he needed to take it sitting down.

Goodman tinkered with his bow tie, rubbed his beard, then said, "Well, it happened at nine this morning. You see, the Personnel Committee is made up of fifteen partners, almost all are younger

guys. The full committee has several subcommittees, of course, one for recruiting, hiring, one for discipline, one for disputes, and on and on. And, as you might guess, there's one for terminations. The Termination Subcommittee met this morning, and guess who was there to orchestrate everything."

"Daniel Rosen."

"Daniel Rosen. Evidently, he's been working the Termination Subcommittee for ten days trying to line up enough votes for your dismissal."

Adam sat in a chair at the table, and Goodman sat across from him.

"There are seven members of the subcommittee, and they met this morning at Rosen's request. There were five members present, so they had a quorum. Rosen, of course, did not notify me or anyone else. Termination meetings are strictly confidential, for obvious reasons, so there was no requirement that he notify anyone."

"Not even me?"

"No, not even you. You were the only item on the agenda, and the meeting lasted less than an hour. Rosen had the deck stacked before he went in, but he presented his case very forcefully. Remember, he was a courtroom brawler for thirty years. They record all termination meetings, just in case there's litigation afterward, so Rosen made a complete record. He, of course, claims that you were deceitful when you applied for employment with Kravitz & Bane; that it presents the firm with a conflict of interest, and on and on. And he had copies of a dozen or so newspaper articles about you and Sam and the grandfather-grandson angle. His argument was that you had embarrassed the firm. He was very prepared. I think we underestimated him last Monday."

"And so they voted."

"Four to one to terminate you."

"Bastards!"

"I know. I've seen Rosen in tough spots before, and the guy can be brutally persuasive. He usually gets his way. He can't go to courtrooms anymore, so he's picking fights around the office. He'll be gone in six months."

“That’s a small comfort at the moment.”

“There’s hope. Word finally filtered to my office around eleven, and luckily Emmitt Wycoff was in. We went to Rosen’s office and had a terrible fight, then we got on the phone. Bottom line is this—the full Personnel Committee meets at eight o’clock in the morning to review your dismissal. You need to be there.”

“Eight o’clock in the morning!”

“Yeah. These guys are busy. Many have court dates at nine. Some have depositions all day. Out of fifteen, we’ll be lucky to have a quorum.”

“How much is a quorum?”

“Two-thirds. Ten. And if there’s no quorum, then we might be in trouble.”

“Trouble! What do you call this?”

“It could get worse. If there’s no quorum in the morning, then you have the right to request another review in thirty days.”

“Sam will be dead in thirty days.”

“Maybe not. At any rate, I think we’ll have the meeting in the morning. Emmitt and I have commitments from nine of the members to be there.”

“What about the four who voted against me this morning?”

Goodman grinned and glanced away. “Guess. Rosen made sure his votes can be there tomorrow.”

Adam suddenly slapped the table with both hands. “I quit dammit!”

“You can’t quit. You’ve just been terminated.”

“Then I won’t fight it. Sonofabitches!”

“Listen, Adam—”

“Sonofabitches!”

Goodman retreated for a moment to allow Adam to cool. He straightened his bow tie and checked the growth of his beard. He tapped his fingers on the table. Then he said, “Look, Adam, we’re in good shape in the morning, okay. Emmitt thinks so. I think so. The firm’s behind you on this. We believe in what you’re doing, and, frankly, we’ve enjoyed the publicity. There’ve been nice stories in the Chicago papers.”

“The firm certainly appears to be supportive.”

“Just listen to me. We can pull this off tomorrow. I’ll do most of the talking. Wycoff’s twisting arms right now. We’ve got other people twisting arms.”

“Rosen’s not stupid, Mr. Goodman. He wants to win, that’s all. He doesn’t care about me, doesn’t care about Sam, or you, or anyone else involved. He simply wants to win. It’s a contest, and I’ll bet he’s on the phone right now trying to line up votes.”

“Then let’s go fight his cranky ass, okay. Let’s walk into that meeting tomorrow with a chip on our shoulders. Let’s make Rosen the bad guy. Honestly, Adam, the man does not have a lot of friends.”

Adam walked to the window and peeked through the shades. Foot traffic was heavy on the Mall below. It was almost five. He had close to five thousand dollars in mutual funds, and if he was frugal and if he made certain lifestyle changes the money might last for six months. His salary was sixty-two thousand, and replacing it in the very near future would be difficult. But he had never been one to worry about money, and he wouldn’t start now. He was much more concerned about the next three weeks. After a ten-day career as a death penalty lawyer, he knew he needed help.

“What will it be like at the end?” he asked after a heavy silence.

Goodman slowly rose from his chair and walked to another window. “Pretty crazy. You won’t sleep much the last four days. You’ll be running in all directions. The courts are unpredictable. The system is unpredictable. You keep filing petitions and appeals knowing full well they won’t work. The press will be dogging you. And, most importantly, you’ll need to spend as much time as possible with your client. It’s crazy work and it’s all free.”

“So I’ll need some help.”

“Oh yes. You can’t do it alone. When Maynard Tole was executed, we had a lawyer from Jackson staked out at the governor’s office, one at the supreme court clerk’s office in Jackson, one in Washington, and two on death row. That’s why you have to go fight tomorrow, Adam. You’ll need the firm and its resources. You can’t do it by yourself. It takes a team.”

“This is a real kick in the crotch.”

“I know. A year ago you were in law school, now you’ve been terminated. I know it hurts. But believe me, Adam, it’s just a fluke. It won’t stand. Ten years from now you’ll be a partner in this firm, and you’ll be terrorizing young associates.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

“Let’s go to Chicago. I’ve got two tickets for a seven-fifteen flight. We’ll be in Chicago by eight-thirty, and we’ll find a nice restaurant.”

“I need to get some clothes.”

“Fine. Meet me at the airport at six-thirty.”

The matter was effectively settled before the meeting began. Eleven members of the Personnel Committee were present, a sufficient number for a quorum. They gathered in a locked library on the sixtieth floor, around a long table with gallons of coffee in the center of it, and they brought with them thick files and portable Dictaphones and fatigued pocket schedules. One brought his secretary, and she sat in the hallway and worked furiously. These were busy people, all of them less than an hour away from another frantic day of endless conferences, meetings, briefings, depositions, trials, telephones, and significant lunches. Ten men, one woman, all in their late thirties or early forties, all partners of K&B, all in a hurry to return to their cluttered desks.

The matter of Adam Hall was a nuisance to them. The Personnel Committee, in fact, was a nuisance to them. It was not one of the more pleasant panels upon which to serve, but they’d been duly elected and no one dared decline. All for the firm. Go team Go!

Adam had arrived at the office at seven-thirty. He’d been gone for ten days, his longest absence yet. Emmitt Wycoff had shifted Adam’s work to another young associate. There was never a shortage of rookies at Kravitz & Bane.

By eight o’clock he was hiding in a small, useless conference room near the library on the sixtieth floor. He was nervous, but worked

hard at not showing it. He sipped coffee and read the morning papers. Parchman was a world away. And he studied the list of fifteen names on the Personnel Committee, none of whom he knew. Eleven strangers who would kick his future around for the next hour, then vote quickly and get on with more important matters. Wycoff checked in and said hello a few minutes before eight. Adam thanked him for everything, apologized for being so much trouble, and listened as Emmitt promised a speedy and satisfactory outcome.

Garner Goodman opened the door at five minutes after eight. "Looks pretty good," he said, almost in a whisper. "Right now there are eleven present. We have commitments from at least five. Three of Rosen's votes from the subcommittee are here, but it looks like he might be a vote or two shy."

"Is Rosen here?" Adam asked, knowing the answer but hoping that maybe the old bastard had died in his sleep.

"Yes, of course. And I think he's worried. Emmitt was still making phone calls at ten last night. We've got the votes, and Rosen knows it." Goodman eased through the door and was gone.

At eight-fifteen, the chairman called the meeting to order and declared a quorum. The termination of Adam Hall was the sole issue on the agenda, indeed the only reason for this special meeting. Emmitt Wycoff went first, and in ten minutes did a fine job of telling how wonderful Adam was. He stood at one end of the table in front of a row of bookshelves, and chatted comfortably as if trying to persuade a jury. At least half of the eleven did not hear a word. They scanned documents and juggled their calendars.

Garner Goodman spoke next. He quickly summarized the case of Sam Cayhall, and provided the honest assessment that, in all likelihood, Sam would be executed in three weeks. Then he bragged on Adam, said he might have been wrong in not disclosing his relationship with Sam, but what the hell. That was then, and this is now, and the present is a helluva lot more important when your client has only three weeks to live.

Not a single question was asked of either Wycoff or Goodman. The questions, evidently, were being saved for Rosen.

Lawyers have long memories. You cut one's throat today, and he'll wait patiently in the weeds for years until he can return the favor. Daniel Rosen had lots of favors lying around the hallways of Kravitz & Bane, and as managing partner he was in the process of collecting them. He'd stepped on people, his own people, for years. He was a bully, a liar, a thug. In his glory days, he'd been the heart and soul of the firm, and he knew it. No one would challenge him. He had abused young associates and tormented his fellow partners. He had run roughshod over committees, ignored firm policies, stolen clients from other lawyers at Kravitz & Bane, and now in the decline of his career he was collecting favors.

Two minutes into his presentation, he was interrupted for the first time by a young partner who rode motorcycles with Emmitt Wycoff. Rosen was pacing, as if playing to a packed courtroom in his glory days, when the question stopped him. Before he could think of a sarcastic answer, another question hit him. By the time he could think of an answer to either of the first two, a third came from nowhere. The brawl was on.

The three interrogators worked like an efficient tag team, and it was apparent that they had been practicing. They took turns needling Rosen with relentless questions, and within a minute he was cursing and throwing insults. They kept their collective cool. Each had a legal pad with what appeared to be long lists of questions.

"Where's the conflict of interest, Mr. Rosen?"

"Certainly a lawyer can represent a family member, right, Mr. Rosen?"

"Did the application for employment specifically ask Mr. Hall if this firm represented a member of his family?"

"Do you have something against publicity, Mr. Rosen?"

"Why do you consider the publicity to be negative?"

"Would you try to help a family member on death row?"

"What are your feelings about the death penalty, Mr. Rosen?"

"Do you secretly want to see Sam Cayhall executed because he killed Jews?"

"Don't you think you've ambushed Mr. Hall?"

It was not a pleasant sight. Some of the greatest courtroom victories in recent Chicago history belonged to Daniel Rosen, and here he was getting his teeth kicked in in a meaningless fight before a committee. Not a jury. Not a judge. A committee.

The idea of retreat had never entered his mind. He pressed on, growing louder and more caustic. His retorts and acid replies grew personal, and he said some nasty things about Adam.

This was a mistake. Others joined the fray, and soon Rosen was flailing like wounded prey, just a few steps in front of the wolf pack. When it was apparent that he could never reach a majority of the committee, he lowered his voice and regained his composure.

He rallied nicely with a quiet summation about ethical considerations and avoiding the appearance of impropriety, scriptures that lawyers learn in law school and spit at each other when fighting but otherwise ignore when convenient.

When Rosen finished, he stormed out of the room, mentally taking notes of those who'd had the nerve to grill him. He'd write their names in a file the minute he got to his desk, and one day, well, one day he'd just do something about it.

Papers and pads and electronic equipment vanished from the table which was suddenly clean except for the coffee and empty cups. The chairman called for a vote. Rosen got five. Adam got six, and the Personnel Committee adjourned itself immediately and disappeared in a rush.

"Six to five?" Adam repeated as he looked at the relieved but unsmiling faces of Goodman and Wycoff.

"A regular landslide," Wycoff quipped.

"Could be worse," Goodman said. "You could be out of a job."

"Why am I not ecstatic? I mean, one lousy vote and I'd be history."

"Not really," Wycoff explained. "The votes were counted before the meeting. Rosen had maybe two solid votes, and the others stuck with him because they knew you would win. You have no idea of the amount of arm twisting that took place last night. This does it for Rosen. He'll be gone in three months."

“Maybe quicker,” added Goodman. “He’s a loose cannon. Everybody’s sick of him.”

“Including me,” Adam said.

Wycoff glanced at his watch. It was eight forty-five, and he had to be in court at nine. “Look, Adam, I’ve gotta run,” he said, buttoning his jacket. “When are you going back to Memphis?”

“Today, I guess.”

“Can we have lunch? I’d like to talk to you.”

“Sure.”

He opened the door, and said, “Great. My secretary will give you a call. Gotta run. See you.” And he was gone.

Goodman suddenly glanced at his watch too. His watch ran much slower than the real lawyers in the firm, but he did have appointments to keep. “I need to see someone in my office. I’ll join you guys for lunch.”

“One lousy vote,” Adam repeated, staring at the wall.

“Come on, Adam. It wasn’t that close.”

“It certainly feels close.”

“Look, we need to spend a few hours together before you leave. I wanna hear about Sam, okay? Let’s start with lunch.” He opened the door and was gone.

Adam sat on the table, shaking his head.

Twenty-five

If Baker Cooley and the other lawyers in the Memphis office knew anything about Adam's sudden termination and its quick reversal, it was not apparent. They treated him the same, which was to say they kept to themselves and stayed away from his office. They were not rude to him, because, after all, he was from Chicago. They smiled when forced to, and they could muster a moment of small talk in the hallways if Adam was in the mood. But they were corporate lawyers, with starched shirts and soft hands which were unaccustomed to the dirt and grime of criminal defense. They did not go to jails or prisons or holding tanks to visit with clients, nor did they wrangle with cops and prosecutors and cranky judges. They worked primarily behind their desks and around mahogany conference tables. Their time was spent talking to clients who could afford to pay them several hundred dollars an hour for advice, and when they weren't talking to clients they were on the phone or doing lunch with other lawyers and bankers and insurance executives.

There'd been enough in the newspapers already to arouse resentment around the office. Most of the lawyers were embarrassed to see the name of their firm associated with a character such as Sam Cayhall. Most of them had no idea that he'd been represented by Chicago for seven years. Now friends were asking questions. Other lawyers were making wisecracks. Wives were humiliated over garden club teas. In-laws were suddenly interested in their legal careers.

Sam Cayhall and his grandson had quickly become a pain in the ass for the Memphis office, but nothing could be done about it.

Adam could sense it but didn't care. It was a temporary office, suitable for three more weeks and hopefully not a day longer. He

stepped from the elevator Friday morning, and ignored the receptionist who was suddenly busy arranging magazines. He spoke to his secretary, a young woman named Darlene, and she handed him a phone message from Todd Marks at the Memphis Press.

He took the pink phone message to his office and threw it in the wastebasket. He hung his coat on a hanger, and began covering the table with paper. There were pages of notes he'd taken on the flights to and from Chicago, and similar pleadings he'd borrowed from Goodman's files, and dozens of copies of recent federal decisions.

He was soon lost in a world of legal theories and strategies. Chicago was a fading memory.

Rollie Wedge entered the Brinkley Plaza building through the front doors to the Mall. He had waited patiently at a table of a sidewalk café until the black Saab appeared then turned into a nearby parking garage. He was dressed in a white shirt with a tie, seersucker slacks, casual loafers. He sipped an iced tea while watching Adam walk along the sidewalk and enter the building.

The lobby was empty as Wedge scanned the directory. Kravitz & Bane had the third and fourth floors. There were four identical elevators, and he rode one to the eighth floor. He stepped into a narrow foyer. To the right was a door with the name of a trust company emblazoned in brass, and to the left was an adjoining hallway lined with doors to all kinds of enterprises. Next to the water fountain was a door to the stairway. He casually walked down eight flights, checking doors as he went. No one passed him in the stairwell. He reentered the lobby, then rode the other elevator, alone, to the third floor. He smiled at the receptionist, who was still busy with the magazines, and was about to ask directions to the trust company when the phone rang and she became occupied with it. A set of double glass doors separated the reception area from the entryway to the elevators. He rode to the fourth floor, and found an identical set of doors, but no receptionist. The doors were locked.

On a wall to the right was a coded entry panel with nine numbered buttons.

He heard voices, and stepped into the stairwell. There was no lock on the door from either side. He waited for a moment, then eased through the door and took a long drink of water. An elevator opened, and a young man in khakis and blue blazer bounced out with a cardboard box under one arm and a thick book in his right hand. He headed for the Kravitz & Bane doors. He hummed a loud tune and did not notice as Wedge fell in behind him. He stopped and carefully balanced the law book on top of the box, freeing his right hand to punch the code. Seven, seven, three, and the panel beeped with each number. Wedge was inches away, peering over his shoulder and gathering the code.

The young man quickly grabbed the book, and was about to turn around when Wedge bumped into him slightly, and said, "Damn! Sorry! I wasn't—" Wedge took a step backwards and looked at the lettering above the door. "This isn't Riverbend Trust," he said, dazed and bewildered.

"Nope. This is Kravitz & Bane."

"What floor is this?" Wedge asked. Something clicked and the door was free.

"Fourth. Riverbend Trust is on the eighth."

"Sorry," Wedge said again, now embarrassed and almost pitiful. "Must've got off on the wrong floor."

The young man frowned and shook his head, then opened the door.

"Sorry," Wedge said for the third time as he backed away. The door closed and the kid was gone. Wedge rode the elevator to the main lobby and left the building.

He left downtown, and drove east and north for ten minutes until he came to a section of the city filled with government housing. He pulled into the driveway beside the Auburn House, and was stopped by a uniformed guard. He was just turning around, he explained, lost again, and he was very sorry. As he backed into the street, he saw the burgundy Jaguar owned by Lee Booth parked between two subcompacts.

He headed toward the river, toward downtown again, and twenty minutes later parked at an abandoned red-brick warehouse on the bluffs. While sitting in his car, he quickly changed into a tan shirt with blue trim around the short sleeves and the name Rusty stitched above the pocket. Then he was moving swiftly but inconspicuously on foot around the corner of the building and down a slope through weeds until he stopped in the brush. A small tree provided shade as he caught his breath and hid from the scorching sun. In front of him was a small field of Bermuda grass, thick and green and obviously well tended, and beyond the grass was a row of twenty luxury condominiums hanging over the edge of the bluff. A fence of brick and iron presented a vexing problem, and he studied it patiently from the privacy of the brush.

One side of the condos was the parking lot with a closed gate leading to the only entrance and exit. A uniformed guard manned the small, boxlike, air-conditioned gatehouse. Few cars were in sight. It was almost 10 a.m. The outline of the guard could be seen through tinted glass.

Wedge ignored the fence and chose instead to penetrate from the bluff. He crawled along a row of boxwoods, clutching handfuls of grass to keep from sliding eighty feet onto Riverside Drive. He slid under wooden patios, some of which hung ten feet into the air as the bluff dropped fast below them. He stopped at the seventh condo, and swung himself onto the patio.

He rested for a moment in a wicker chair and toyed with an outside cable as if on a routine service call. No one was watching. Privacy was important to these wealthy people, they paid for it dearly, and each little terrace was shielded from the next by decorative wooden planks and all sorts of hanging vegetation. His shirt by now was sticky and clinging to his back.

The sliding glass door from the patio to the kitchen was locked, of course, a rather simple lock that slowed him for almost one minute. He picked it, leaving neither damage nor evidence, then glanced around for another look before he went in. This was the tricky part. He assumed there was a security system, probably one with contacts at every window and door. Since no one was home, it was highly

probable the system would be activated. The delicate question was exactly how much noise would be made when he opened the door. Would there be a silent alert, or would he be startled with a screaming siren?

He took a breath, then carefully slid the door open. No siren greeted him. He took a quick look at the monitor above the door, then stepped inside.

The relay immediately alerted Willis, the guard at the gate, who heard a frantic though not very loud beeping sound from his monitoring screen. He looked at the red light blinking at Number 7, home of Lee Booth, and he waited for it to stop. Mrs. Booth tripped her alarm at least twice a month, which was about the average for the flock he guarded. He checked his clipboard and noticed that Mrs. Booth had left at nine-fifteen. But she occasionally had sleepovers, usually men, and now she had her nephew staying with her, and so Willis watched the red light for forty-five seconds until it stopped blinking and fixed itself in a permanent ON position.

This was unusual, but no need to panic. These people lived behind walls and paid for around-the-clock armed guards, so they were not serious about their alarm systems. He quickly dialed Mrs. Booth's number, and there was no answer. He punched a button and set in motion a recorded 911 call requesting police assistance. He opened the key drawer and selected one for Number 7, then left the gatehouse and walked quickly across the parking lot to see about Mrs. Booth's unit. He unfastened his holster so he could grab his revolver, just in case.

Rollie Wedge stepped into the gatehouse and saw the open key drawer. He took a set, marked for Unit 7, along with a card with the alarm code and instructions, and for good measure he also grabbed keys and cards for Numbers 8 and 13, just to baffle old Willis and the cops.

Twenty-six

They went to the cemetery first, to pay their respects to the dead. It covered two small hills on the edge of Clanton, one lined with elaborate tombstones and monuments where prominent families had buried themselves together, over time, and had their names carved in heavy granite. The second hill was for the newer graves, and as time had passed in Mississippi the tombstones had grown smaller. Stately oaks and elms shaded most of the cemetery. The grass was trimmed low and the shrubs were neat. Azaleas were in every corner. Clanton placed a priority on its memories.

It was a lovely Saturday, with no clouds and a slight breeze that had started during the night and chased away the humidity. The rains were gone for a while, and the hillsides were lush with greenery and wildflowers. Lee knelt by her mother's headstone and placed a small bouquet of flowers under her name. She closed her eyes as Adam stood behind her and stared at the grave. Anna Gates Cayhall, September 3, 1922–September 18, 1977. She was fifty-five when she died, Adam calculated, so he was thirteen, still living in blissful ignorance somewhere in Southern California.

She was buried alone, under a single headstone, and this in itself had presented some problems. Mates for life are usually buried side by side, at least in the South, with the first one occupying the first slot under a double headstone. Upon each visit to the deceased, the survivor gets to see his or her name already carved and just waiting.

“Daddy was fifty-six when Mother died,” Lee explained as she took Adam's hand and inched away from the grave. “I wanted him to bury her in a plot where he could one day join her, but he refused. I guess he figured he still had a few years left, and he might remarry.”

“You told me once that she didn’t like Sam.”

“I’m sure she loved him in a way, they were together for almost forty years. But they were never close. As I grew older I realized she didn’t like to be around him. She confided in me at times. She was a simple country girl who married young, had babies, stayed home with them, and was expected to obey her husband. And this was not unusual for those times. I think she was a very frustrated woman.”

“Maybe she didn’t want Sam next to her for eternity.”

“I thought about that. In fact, Eddie wanted them separated and buried at opposite ends of the cemetery.”

“Good for Eddie.”

“He wasn’t joking either.”

“How much did she know about Sam and the Klan?”

“I have no idea. It was not something we discussed. I remember she was humiliated after his arrest. She even stayed with Eddie and you guys for a while because the reporters were bothering her.”

“And she didn’t attend any of his trials.”

“No. He didn’t want her to watch. She had a problem with high blood pressure, and Sam used that as an excuse to keep her away from it.”

They turned and walked along a narrow lane through the old section of the cemetery. They held hands and looked at the passing tombstones. Lee pointed to a row of trees across the street on another hill. “That’s where the blacks are buried,” she said. “Under those trees. It’s a small cemetery.”

“You’re kidding? Even today?”

“Sure, you know, keep ’em in their place. These people couldn’t stand the idea of a Negro lying amongst their ancestors.”

Adam shook his head in disbelief. They climbed the hill and rested under an oak. The rows of graves spread peacefully beneath them. The dome of the Ford County Courthouse glittered in the sun a few blocks away.

“I played here as a little girl,” she said quietly. She pointed to her right, to the north. “Every Fourth of July the city celebrates with a fireworks display, and the best seats in the house are here in the cemetery. There’s a park down there, and that’s where they shoot

from. We'd load up our bikes and come to town to watch the parade and swim in the city pool and play with our friends. And right after dark, we'd all gather around here, in the midst of the dead, and sit on these tombstones to watch the fireworks. The men would stay by their trucks where the beer and whiskey were hidden, and the women would lie on quilts and tend to the babies. We would run and romp and ride bikes all over the place."

"Eddie?"

"Of course. Eddie was just a normal little brother, pesky as hell sometimes, but very much a boy. I miss him, you know. I miss him very much. We weren't close for many years, but when I come back to this town I think of my little brother."

"I miss him too."

"He and I came here, to this very spot, the night he graduated from high school. I had been in Nashville for two years, and I came back because he wanted me to watch him graduate. We had a bottle of cheap wine, and I think it was his first drink. I'll never forget it. We sat here on Emil Jacob's tombstone and sipped wine until the bottle was empty."

"What year was it?"

"Nineteen sixty-one, I think. He wanted to join the Army so he could leave Clanton and get away from Sam. I didn't want my little brother in the Army, and we discussed it until the sun came up."

"He was pretty confused?"

"He was eighteen, probably as confused as most kids who've just finished high school. Eddie was terrified that if he stayed in Clanton something would happen to him, some mysterious genetic flaw would surface and he'd become another Sam. Another Cayhall with a hood. He was desperate to run from this place."

"But you ran as soon as you could."

"I know, but I was tougher than Eddie, at least at the age of eighteen. I couldn't see him leaving home so young. So we sipped wine and tried to get a handle on life."

"Did my father ever have a handle on life?"

"I doubt it, Adam. We were both tormented by our father and his family's hatred. There are things I hope you never learn, stories that

I pray remain untold. I guess I pushed them away, while Eddie couldn't."

She took his hand again and they strolled into the sunlight and down a dirt path toward the newer section of the cemetery. She stopped and pointed to a row of small headstones. "Here are your great-grandparents, along with aunts, uncles, and other assorted Cayhalls."

Adam counted eight in all. He read the names and dates, and spoke aloud the poetry and Scriptures and farewells inscribed in granite.

"There are lots more out in the country," Lee said. "Most of the Cayhalls originated around Karaway, fifteen miles from here. They were country people, and they're buried behind rural churches."

"Did you come here for these burials?"

"A few. It's not a close family, Adam. Some of these people had been dead for years before I knew about it."

"Why wasn't your mother buried here?"

"Because she didn't want to be. She knew she was about to die, and she picked the spot. She never considered herself a Cayhall. She was a Gates."

"Smart woman."

Lee pulled a handful of weeds from her grandmother's grave, and rubbed her fingers over the name of Lydia Newsome Cayhall, who died in 1961 at the age of seventy-two. "I remember her well," Lee said, kneeling on the grass. "A fine, Christian woman. She'd roll over in her grave if she knew her third son was on death row."

"What about him?" Adam asked, pointing to Lydia's husband, Nathaniel Lucas Cayhall, who died in 1952 at the age of sixty-four. The fondness left Lee's face. "A mean old man," she said. "I'm sure he'd be proud of Sam. Nat, as he was known, was killed at a funeral."

"A funeral?"

"Yes. Traditionally, funerals were social occasions around here. They were preceded by long wakes with lots of visiting and eating. And drinking. Life was hard in the rural South, and often the funerals turned into drunken brawls. Nat was very violent, and he

picked a fight with the wrong men just after a funeral service. They beat him to death with a stick of wood.”

“Where was Sam?”

“Right in the middle of it. He was beaten too, but survived. I was a little girl, and I remember Nat’s funeral. Sam was in the hospital and couldn’t attend.”

“Did he get retribution?”

“Of course.”

“How?”

“Nothing was ever proven, but several years later the two men who’d beaten Nat were released from prison. They surfaced briefly around here, then disappeared. One body was found months later next door in Milburn County. Beaten, of course. The other man was never found. The police questioned Sam and his brothers, but there was no proof.”

“Do you think he did it?”

“Sure he did. Nobody messed with the Cayhalls back then. They were known to be half-crazy and mean as hell.”

They left the family gravesites and continued along the path. “So, Adam, the question for us is, where do we bury Sam?”

“I think we should bury him over there, with the blacks. That would serve him right.”

“What makes you think they’d want him?”

“Good point.”

“Seriously.”

“Sam and I have not reached that point yet.”

“Do you think he’ll want to be buried here? In Ford County?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t discussed it, for obvious reasons. There’s still hope.”

“How much hope?”

“A trace. Enough to keep fighting.”

They left the cemetery on foot, and walked along a tranquil street with worn sidewalks and ancient oaks. The homes were old and well painted, with long porches and cats resting on the front steps. Children raced by on bikes and skateboards, and old people rocked in their porch swings and waved slowly. “These are my old

stomping grounds, Adam,” Lee said as they walked aimlessly along. Her hands were stuck deep in denim pockets, her eyes moistened with memories that were at once sad and pleasant. She looked at each house as if she’d stayed there as a child and could remember the little girls who’d been her friends. She could hear the giggles and laughs, the silly games and the serious fights of ten-year-olds.

“Were those happy times?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know. We never lived in town, so we were known as country kids. I always longed for one of these houses, with friends all around and stores a few blocks away. The town kids considered themselves to be a bit better than us, but it wasn’t much of a problem. My best friends lived here, and I spent many hours playing in these streets, climbing these trees. Those were good times, I guess. The memories from the house in the country are not pleasant.”

“Because of Sam?”

An elderly lady in a flowered dress and large straw hat was sweeping around her front steps as they approached. She glanced at them, then she froze and stared. Lee slowed then stopped near the walkway to the house. She looked at the old woman, and the old woman looked at Lee. “Mornin’, Mrs. Langston,” Lee said in a friendly drawl.

Mrs. Langston gripped the broom handle and stiffened her back, and seemed content to stare.

“I’m Lee Cayhall. You remember me,” Lee drawled again.

As the name Cayhall drifted across the tiny lawn, Adam caught himself glancing around to see if anyone else heard it. He was prepared to be embarrassed if the name fell on other ears. If Mrs. Langston remembered Lee, it was not apparent. She managed a polite nod of the head, just a quick up and down motion, rather awkward as if to say, “Good morning to you. Now move along.”

“Nice to see you again,” Lee said and began walking away. Mrs. Langston scurried up the steps and disappeared inside. “I dated her son in high school,” Lee said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“She was thrilled to see you.”

“She was always sort of wacky,” Lee said without conviction. “Or maybe she’s afraid to talk to a Cayhall. Afraid of what the neighbors might say.”

“I think it might be best if we go incognito for the rest of the day. What about it?”

“It’s a deal.”

They passed other folks puttering in their flower beds and waiting for the mailman, but they said nothing. Lee covered her eyes with sun shades. They zigzagged through the neighborhood in the general direction of the central square, chatting about Lee’s old friends and where they were now. She kept in touch with two of them, one in Clanton and one in Texas. They avoided family history until they were on a street with smaller, wood-framed houses stacked tightly together. They stopped at the corner, and Lee nodded at something down the street.

“You see the third house on the right, the little brown one there?”

“Yes.”

“That’s where you lived. We could walk down there but I see people moving about.”

Two small children played with toy guns in the front yard and someone was swinging on the narrow front porch. It was a square house, small, neat, perfect for a young couple having babies.

Adam had been almost three when Eddie and Evelyn disappeared, and as he stood on the corner he tried desperately to remember something about the house. He couldn’t.

“It was painted white back then, and of course the trees were smaller. Eddie rented it from a local real estate agent.”

“Was it nice?”

“Nice enough. They hadn’t been married long. They were just kids with a new child. Eddie worked in an auto parts store, then he worked for the state highway department. Then he took another job.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“Evelyn worked part-time in a jewelry store on the square. I think they were happy. She was not from here, you know, and so she didn’t know a lot of people. They kept to themselves.”

They walked by the house and one of the children aimed an orange machine gun at Adam. There were no memories of the place to be evoked at that moment. He smiled at the child and looked away. They were soon on another street with the square in sight.

Lee was suddenly a tour guide and historian. The Yankees had burned Clanton in 1863, the bastards, and after the war, General Clanton, a Confederate hero whose family owned the county, returned, with only one leg, the other one lost somewhere on the battlefield at Shiloh, and designed the new courthouse and the streets around it. His original drawings were on the wall upstairs in the courthouse. He wanted lots of shade so he planted oaks in perfect rows around the new courthouse. He was a man of vision who could see the small town rising from the ashes and prospering, so he designed the streets in an exact square around the courthouse common. They had walked by the great man's grave, she said, just a moment ago, and she would show it to him later.

There was a struggling mall north of town and a row of discount supermarkets to the east, but the people of Ford County still enjoyed shopping around the square on Saturday morning, she explained as they strolled along the sidewalk next to Washington Street. Traffic was slow and the pedestrians were even slower. The buildings were old and adjoining, filled with lawyers and insurance agents, banks and cafés, hardware stores and dress shops. The sidewalk was covered with canopies, awnings, and verandas from the offices and stores. Creaky fans hung low and spun sluggishly. They stopped in front of an ancient pharmacy, and Lee removed her sunglasses. "This was a hangout," she explained. "There was a soda fountain in the back with a jukebox and racks of comic books. You could buy an enormous cherry sundae for a nickel, and it took hours to eat it. It took even longer if the boys were here."

Like something from a movie, Adam thought. They stopped in front of a hardware store, and for some reason examined the shovels and hoes and rakes leaning against the window. Lee looked at the battered double doors, opened and held in place by bricks, and thought of something from her childhood. But she kept it to herself.

They crossed the street, hand in hand, and passed a group of old men whittling wood and chewing tobacco around the war memorial. She nodded at a statue and informed him quietly that this was General Clanton, with both legs. The courthouse was not open for business on Saturdays. They bought colas from a machine outside and sipped them in a gazebo on the front lawn. She told the story of the most famous trial in the history of Ford County, the murder trial of Carl Lee Hailey in 1984. He was a black man who shot and killed two rednecks who'd raped his little daughter. There were marches and protests by blacks on one side and Klansmen on the other, and the National Guard actually camped out here, around the courthouse, to keep the peace. Lee had driven down from Memphis one day to watch the spectacle. He was acquitted by an all-white jury.

Adam remembered the trial. He'd been a junior at Pepperdine, and had followed it in the papers because it was happening in the town of his birth.

When she was a child, entertainment was scarce, and trials were always well attended. Sam had brought her and Eddie here once to watch the trial of a man accused of killing a hunting dog. He was found guilty and spent a year in prison. The county was split—the city folks were against the conviction for such a lowly crime, while the country folks placed a higher value on good beagles. Sam had been particularly happy to see the man sent away.

Lee wanted to show him something. They walked around the courthouse to the rear door where two water fountains stood ten feet apart. Neither had been used in years. One had been for whites, the other for blacks. She remembered the story of Rosia Alfie Gatewood, Miss Allie as she was known, the first black person to drink from the white fountain and escape without injury. Not long after that, the water lines were disconnected.

They found a table in a crowded café known simply as The Tea Shoppe, on the west side of the square. She told stories, all of them pleasant and most of them funny, as they ate BLT's and french fries. She kept her sunglasses on, and Adam caught her watching the people.

They left Clanton after lunch, and after a leisurely walk back to the cemetery. Adam drove, and Lee pointed this way and that until they were on a county highway running through small, neat farms with cows grazing the hillsides. They passed occasional pockets of white trash—dilapidated double-wide trailers with junk cars strewn about—and they passed run-down shotgun houses still inhabited by poor blacks. But the hilly countryside was pretty, for the most part, and the day was beautiful.

She pointed again, and they turned onto a smaller, paved road that snaked its way deeper into the sticks. They finally stopped in front of an abandoned white frame house with weeds shooting from the porch and ivy swarming into the windows. It was fifty yards from the road, and the gravel drive leading to it was gullied and impassable. The front lawn was overgrown with Johnsongrass and cocklebur. The mailbox was barely visible in the ditch beside the road.

“The Cayhall estate,” she mumbled, and they sat for a long time in the car and looked at the sad little house.

“What happened to it?” Adam finally asked.

“Oh, it was a good house. Didn’t have much of a chance, though. The people were a disappointment.” She slowly removed her sunglasses and wiped her eyes. “I lived here for eighteen years, and I couldn’t wait to leave it.”

“Why is it abandoned?”

She took a deep breath, and tried to arrange the story. “I think it was paid for many years ago, but Daddy mortgaged it to pay the lawyers for his last trial. He, of course, never came home again, and at some point the bank foreclosed. There are eighty acres around it, and everything was lost. I haven’t been back here since the foreclosure. I asked Phelps to buy it, and he said no. I couldn’t blame him. I really didn’t want to own it myself. I heard later from some friends here that it was rented several times, and I guess eventually abandoned. I didn’t know if the house was still standing.”

“What happened to the personal belongings?”

“The day before the foreclosure, the bank allowed me to go in and box up anything I wanted. I saved some things—photo albums, keepsakes, yearbooks, Bibles, some of Mother’s valuables. They’re in storage in Memphis.”

“I’d like to see them.”

“The furniture was not worth saving, not a decent piece of anything. My mother was dead, my brother had just committed suicide, and my father had just been sent to death row, and I was not in the mood to keep a lot of memorabilia. It was a horrible experience, going through that dirty little house and trying to salvage objects that might one day bring a smile. Hell, I wanted to burn everything. Almost did.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Of course I am. After I’d been here for a couple of hours, I decided to just burn the damned house and everything in it. Happens all the time, right? I found an old lantern with some kerosene in it, and I sat it on the kitchen table and talked to it as I boxed stuff up. It would’ve been easy.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I wish I’d had the guts to do it, but I remember worrying about the bank and the foreclosure and, well, arson is a crime, isn’t it? I remember laughing at the idea of going off to prison where I’d be with Sam. That’s why I didn’t strike a match. I was afraid I’d get in trouble and go to prison.”

The car was hot now, and Adam opened his door. “I want to look around,” he said, getting out. They picked their way down the gravel drive, stepping over gullies two feet wide. They stopped at the front porch and looked at the rotting boards.

“I’m not going in there,” she said firmly and pulled her hand away from his. Adam studied the decaying porch and decided against stepping on it. He walked along the front of the house, looking at the broken windows with vines disappearing inside. He followed the drive around the house, and Lee tagged along.

The backyard was shaded by old oaks and maples, and the ground was bare in places where the sun was kept out. It stretched for an

eighth of a mile down a slight incline until it stopped at a thicket. The plot was surrounded by woods in the distance.

She took his hand again, and they walked to a tree beside a wooden shed that, for some reason, was in much better condition than the house. "This was my tree," she said, looking up at the branches. "My own pecan tree." Her voice had a slight quiver.

"It's a great tree."

"Wonderful for climbing. I'd spend hours here, sitting in those branches, swinging my feet and resting my chin on a limb. In the spring and summer, I'd climb about halfway up, and no one could see me. I had my own little world up there."

She suddenly closed her eyes and covered her mouth with a hand. Her shoulders trembled. Adam placed his arm around her and tried to think of something to say.

"This is where it happened," she said after a moment. She bit her lip and fought back tears. Adam said nothing.

"You asked me once about a story," she said with clenched teeth as she wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands. "The story of Daddy killing a black man." She nodded toward the house. Her hands shook so she stuck them in her pockets.

A minute passed as they stared at the house, neither wanting to speak. The only rear door opened onto a small, square porch with a railing around it. A delicate breeze ruffled the leaves above them and made the only sound.

She took a deep breath, then said, "His name was Joe Lincoln, and he lived down the road there with his family." She nodded at the remnants of a dirt trail that ran along the edge of a field then disappeared into the woods. "He had about a dozen kids."

"Quince Lincoln?" Adam asked.

"Yeah. How'd you know about him?"

"Sam mentioned his name the other day when we were talking about Eddie. He said Quince and Eddie were good friends when they were kids."

"He didn't talk about Quince's father, did he?"

"No."

“I didn’t think so. Joe worked here on the farm for us, and his family lived in a shotgun house that we also owned. He was a good man with a big family, and like most poor blacks back then they just barely survived. I knew a couple of his kids, but we weren’t friends like Quince and Eddie. One day the boys were playing here in the backyard, it was summertime and we weren’t in school. They got into an argument over a small toy, a Confederate Army soldier, and Eddie accused Quince of stealing it. Typical boy stuff, you know. I think they were eight or nine years old. Daddy happened to walk by, over there, and Eddie ran to him and told how Quince had stolen the toy. Quince emphatically denied it. Both boys were really mad and on the verge of tears. Sam, typically, flew into a rage and cursed Quince, calling him all sorts of names like ‘thieving little nigger’ and ‘sorry little nigger bastard.’ Sam demanded the soldier, and Quince started crying. He kept saying he didn’t have it, and Eddie kept saying he did. Sam grabbed the boy, shook him real hard, and started slapping him on the butt. Sam was yelling and screaming and cursing, and Quince was crying and pleading. They went around the yard a few times with Sam shaking him and hitting him. Quince finally pulled free, and ran home. Eddie ran into our house, and Daddy followed him inside. A moment later, Sam stepped through the door there, with a walking cane, which he carefully laid on the porch. He then sat on the steps and waited patiently. He smoked a cigarette and watched the dirt road. The Lincoln house was not far away, and, sure enough, within a few minutes Joe came running out of the trees there with Quince right behind him. As he got close to the house, he saw Daddy waiting on him, and he slowed to a walk. Daddy yelled over his shoulder, ‘Eddie! Come here! Watch me whip this nigger!’ ”

She began walking very slowly to the house, then stopped a few feet from the porch. “When Joe was right about here, he stopped and looked at Sam. He said something like, ‘Quince says you hit him, Mr. Sam.’ To which my father replied something like, ‘Quince is a thieving little nigger, Joe. You should teach your kids not to steal.’ They began to argue, and it was obvious there was going to be a fight. Sam suddenly jumped from the porch, and threw the first

punch. They fell to the ground, right about here, and fought like cats. Joe was a few years younger and stronger, but Daddy was so mean and angry that the fight was pretty even. They struck each other in the face and cursed and kicked like a couple of animals.” She stopped the narrative and looked around the yard, then she pointed to the back door. “At some point, Eddie stepped onto the porch to watch it. Quince was standing a few feet away, yelling at his father. Sam made a dash for the porch and grabbed the walking cane, and the matter got out of hand. He beat Joe in the face and head until he fell to his knees, and he poked him in the stomach and groin until he could barely move. Joe looked at Quince and yelled for him to run get the shotgun. Quince took off. Sam stopped the beating, and turned to Eddie. ‘Go get my shotgun,’ he said. Eddie froze, and Daddy yelled at him again. Joe was on the ground, on all fours, trying to collect himself, and just as he was about to stand, Sam beat him again and knocked him down. Eddie went inside and Sam walked to the porch. Eddie returned in a matter of seconds with a shotgun, and Daddy made him go inside. The door closed.”

Lee walked to the porch and sat on the edge of it. She buried her face in her hands, and cried for a long time. Adam stood a few feet away, staring at the ground, listening to the sobs. When she finally looked at him, her eyes were glazed, her mascara was running, her nose dripped. She wiped her face with her hands, then rubbed them on her jeans. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Finish it, please,” he said quickly.

She breathed deeply for a moment, then wiped her eyes some more. “Joe was just over there,” she said, pointing to a spot in the grass not far from Adam. “He’d made it to his feet, and he turned and saw Daddy with the gun. He glanced around in the direction of his house, but there was no sign of Quince and his gun. He turned back to Daddy, who was standing right here, on the edge of the porch. Then my dear sweet father slowly raised the gun, hesitated for a second, looked around to see if anyone was watching, and pulled the trigger. Just like that. Joe fell hard and never moved.”

“You saw this happen, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Where were you?”

“Over there,” she nodded, but didn’t point. “In my pecan tree. Hidden from the world.”

“Sam couldn’t see you?”

“No one could see me. I watched the whole thing.” She covered her eyes again and fought back tears. Adam eased onto the porch and sat beside her.

She cleared her throat and looked away. “He watched Joe for a minute, ready to shoot again if necessary. But Joe never moved. He was quite dead. There was some blood around his head on the grass, and I could see it from the tree. I remember digging my fingernails into the bark to keep from falling, and I remember wanting to cry but being too scared. I didn’t want him to hear me. Quince appeared after a few minutes. He’d heard the shot, and he was crying by the time I saw him. Just running like crazy and crying, and when he saw his father on the ground he started screaming like any child would’ve done. My father raised the gun again, and for a second I knew he was about to shoot the boy. But Quince threw Joe’s shotgun to the ground and ran to his father. He was bawling and wailing. He wore a light-colored shirt, and soon it was covered with blood. Sam eased to the side and picked up Joe’s shotgun, then he went inside with both guns.”

She stood slowly and took several measured steps. “Quince and Joe were right about here,” she said, marking the spot with her heel. “Quince held his father’s head next to his stomach, blood was everywhere, and he made this strange moaning sound, like the whimper of a dying animal.” She turned and looked at her tree. “And there I was, sitting up there like a little bird, crying too. I hated my father so badly at that moment.”

“Where was Eddie?”

“Inside the house, in his room with the door locked.” She pointed to a window with broken panes and a shutter missing. “That was his room. He told me later that he looked outside when he heard the shot, and he saw Quince clutching his father. Within minutes, Ruby Lincoln came running up with a string of children behind her. They all collapsed around Quince and Joe, and, God, it was horrible. They

were screaming and weeping and yelling at Joe to get up, to please not die on them.

“Sam went inside and called an ambulance. He also called one of his brothers, Albert, and a couple of neighbors. Pretty soon there was a crowd in the backyard. Sam and his gang stood on the porch with their guns and watched the mourners, who dragged the body under that tree over there.” She pointed to a large oak. “The ambulance arrived after an eternity, and took the body away. Ruby and her children walked back to their house, and my father and his buddies had a good laugh on the porch.”

“How long did you stay in the tree?”

“I don’t know. As soon as everybody was gone, I climbed down and ran into the woods. Eddie and I had a favorite place down by a creek, and I knew he would come looking for me. He did. He was scared and out of breath; told me all about the shooting, and I told him that I’d seen it. He didn’t believe me at first, but I gave him the details. We were both scared to death. He reached in his pocket and pulled out something. It was the little Confederate soldier he and Quince had fought over. He’d found it under his bed, and so he decided on the spot that everything was his fault. We swore each other to secrecy. He promised he would never tell anyone that I had witnessed the killing, and I promised I would never tell anyone that he’d found the soldier. He threw it in the creek.”

“Did either of you ever tell?”

She shook her head for a long time.

“Sam never knew you were in the tree?” Adam asked.

“Nope. I never told my mother. Eddie and I talked about it occasionally over the years, and as time passed we just sort of buried it away. When we returned to the house, our parents were in the middle of a huge fight. She was hysterical and he was wild-eyed and crazy. I think he’d hit her a few times. She grabbed us and told us to get in the car. As we were backing out of the driveway, the sheriff pulled up. We drove around for a while, Mother in the front seat, and Eddie and I in the back, both of us too scared to talk. She didn’t know what to say. We assumed he would be taken to jail, but

when we parked in the driveway he was sitting on the front porch as if nothing had happened.”

“What did the sheriff do?”

“Nothing, really. He and Sam talked for a bit. Sam showed him Joe’s shotgun and explained how it was a simple matter of self-defense. Just another dead nigger.”

“He wasn’t arrested?”

“No, Adam. This was Mississippi in the early fifties. I’m sure the sheriff had a good laugh about it, patted Sam on the back, and told him to be a good boy, and then left. He even allowed Sam to keep Joe’s shotgun.”

“That’s incredible.”

“We were hoping he’d go to jail for a few years.”

“What did the Lincolns do?”

“What could they do? Who would listen to them? Sam forbade Eddie from seeing Quince, and to make sure the boys didn’t get together, he evicted them from their house.”

“Good God!”

“He gave them one week to get out, and the sheriff arrived to fulfill his sworn duties by forcing them out of the house. The eviction was legal and proper, Sam assured Mother. It was the only time I thought she might leave him. I wish she had.”

“Did Eddie ever see Quince?”

“Years later. When Eddie started driving, he started looking for the Lincolns. They had moved to a small community on the other side of Clanton, and Eddie found them there. He apologized and said he was sorry a hundred times. But they were never friends again. Ruby asked him to leave. He told me they lived in a run-down shack with no electricity.”

She walked to her pecan tree and sat against its trunk. Adam followed and leaned against it. He looked down at her, and thought of all the years she’d been carrying this burden. And he thought of his father, of his anguish and torment, of the indelible scars he’d borne to his death. Adam now had the first clue to his father’s destruction, and he wondered if the pieces might someday fit together. He thought of Sam, and as he glanced at the porch he

could see a younger man with a gun and hatred in his face. Lee was sobbing quietly.

“What did Sam do afterward?”

She struggled to control herself. “The house was so quiet for a week, maybe a month, I don’t know. But it seemed like years before anyone spoke over dinner. Eddie stayed in his room with the door locked. I would hear him crying at night, and he told me again and again how much he hated his father. He wanted him dead. He wanted to run away from home. He blamed himself for everything. Mother became concerned, and she spent a lot of time with him. As for me, they thought I was off playing in the woods when it happened. Shortly after Phelps and I married, I secretly began seeing a psychiatrist. I tried to work it out in therapy, and I wanted Eddie to do the same. But he wouldn’t listen. The last time I talked to Eddie before he died, he mentioned the killing. He never got over it.”

“And you got over it?”

“I didn’t say that. Therapy helped, but I still wonder what would’ve happened if I had screamed at Daddy before he pulled the trigger. Would he have killed Joe with his daughter watching? I don’t think so.”

“Come on, Lee. That was forty years ago. You can’t blame yourself.”

“Eddie blamed me. And he blamed himself, and we blamed each other until we were grown. We were children when it happened, and we couldn’t run to our parents. We were helpless.”

Adam could think of a hundred questions about the killing of Joe Lincoln. The subject was not likely to be raised again with Lee, and he wanted to know everything that happened, every small detail. Where was Joe buried? What happened to his shotgun? Was the shooting reported in the local paper? Was the case presented to a grand jury? Did Sam ever mention it to his children? Where was her mother during the fight? Did she hear the argument and the gunshot? What happened to Joe’s family? Did they still live in Ford County?

“Let’s burn it, Adam,” she said strongly, wiping her face and glaring at him.

“You’re not serious.”

“Yes I am! Let’s burn the whole damned place, the house, the shed, this tree, the grass and weeds. It won’t take much. Just a couple of matches here and there. Come on.”

“No, Lee.”

“Come on.”

Adam bent over gently and took her by the arm. “Let’s go, Lee. I’ve heard enough for one day.”

She didn’t resist. She too had had enough for one day. He helped her through the weeds, around the house, over the ruins of the driveway, and back to the car.

They left the Cayhall estate without a word. The road turned to gravel, then stopped at the intersection of a highway. Lee pointed to the left, then closed her eyes as if trying to nap. They bypassed Clanton and stopped at a country store near Holly Springs. Lee said she needed a cola, and insisted on getting it herself. She returned to the car with a six-pack of beer and offered a bottle to Adam. “What’s this?” he asked.

“Just a couple,” she said. “My nerves are shot. Don’t let me drink more than two, okay. Only two.”

“I don’t think you should, Lee.”

“I’m okay,” she insisted with a frown, and took a drink.

Adam declined and sped away from the store. She drained two bottles in fifteen minutes, then went to sleep. Adam placed the sack in the backseat, and concentrated on the road.

He had a sudden desire to leave Mississippi, and longed for the lights of Memphis.

Twenty-seven

Exactly one week earlier, he had awakened with a fierce headache and a fragile stomach, and had been forced to face the greasy bacon and oily eggs of Irene Lettner. And in the past seven days, he'd been to the courtroom of Judge Slattery, and to Chicago, Greenville, Ford County, and Parchman. He'd met the governor, and the Attorney General. He hadn't talked to his client in six days.

To hell with his client. Adam had sat on the patio watching the river traffic and sipping decaffeinated coffee until 2 a.m. He swatted mosquitoes and struggled with the vivid images of Quince Lincoln grasping at his father's body while Sam Cayhall stood on the porch and admired his handiwork. He could hear the muted laughter of Sam and his buddies on the narrow porch as Ruby Lincoln and her children fell around the corpse and eventually dragged it across the yard to the shade of a tree. He could see Sam on the front lawn with both shotguns explaining to the sheriff exactly how the crazy nigger was about to kill him, and how he acted reasonably and in self-defense. The sheriff was quick to see Sam's point, of course. He could hear the whispers of the tormented children, Eddie and Lee, as they blamed themselves and struggled with the horror of Sam's deed. And he cursed a society so willing to ignore violence against a despised class.

He'd slept fitfully, and at one point had sat on the edge of his bed and declared to himself that Sam could find another lawyer, that the death penalty might in fact be appropriate for some people, notably his grandfather, and that he would return to Chicago immediately and change his name again. But that dream passed, and when he awoke for the last time the sunlight filtered through the blinds and cast neat lines across his bed. He contemplated the ceiling and

crown molding along the walls for half an hour as he remembered the trip to Clanton. Today, he hoped, would be a late Sunday with a thick newspaper and strong coffee. He would go to the office later in the afternoon. His client had seventeen days.

Lee had finished a third beer after they arrived at the condo, then she'd gone to bed. Adam had watched her carefully, half-expecting a wild binge or sudden slide into an alcoholic stupor. But she'd been very quiet and composed, and he heard nothing from her during the night.

He finished his shower, didn't shave, and walked to the kitchen where the syrupy remains of the first pot of coffee awaited him. Lee had been up for some time. He called her name, then walked to her bedroom. He quickly checked the patio, then roamed through the condo. She was not there. The Sunday paper was stacked neatly on the coffee table in the den.

He fixed fresh coffee and toast, and took his breakfast on the patio. It was almost nine-thirty, and thankfully the sky was cloudy and the temperature was not suffocating. It would be a good Sunday for office work. He read the paper, starting with the front section.

Perhaps she'd run to the store or something. Maybe she'd gone to church. They hadn't yet reached the point of leaving notes for each other. But there'd been no talk of Lee going anywhere this morning.

He'd eaten one piece of toast with strawberry jam when his appetite suddenly vanished. The front page of the Metro section carried another story on Sam Cayhall, with the same picture from ten years ago. It was a chatty little summary of the past week's developments, complete with a chronological chart giving the important dates in the history of the case. A cute question mark was left dangling by the date of August 8, 1990. Would there be an execution then? Evidently, Todd Marks had been given unlimited column inches by the editors because the story contained almost nothing new. The disturbing part was a few quotes from a law professor at Ole Miss, an expert in constitutional matters who'd worked on many death penalty cases. The learned professor was generous with his opinions, and his bottom line was that Sam's goose was pretty much cooked. He'd studied the file at length, had

followed it for many years in fact, and was of the opinion that there was basically nothing left for Sam to do. He explained that in many death penalty cases, miracles can sometimes be performed at the last moment because usually the inmate has suffered from mediocre legal representation, even during his appeals. In those cases, experts such as himself can often pull rabbits out of hats because they're just so damned brilliant, and thus able to create issues ignored by lesser legal minds. But, regrettably, Sam's case was different because he had been competently represented by some very fine lawyers from Chicago.

Sam's appeals had been handled skillfully, and now the appeals had run their course. The professor, evidently a gambling man, gave five to one odds the execution would take place on August 8. And for all of this, the opinions and the odds, he got his picture in the paper.

Adam was suddenly nervous. He'd read dozens of death cases in which lawyers at the last minute grabbed ropes they'd never grabbed before, and convinced judges to listen to new arguments. The lore of capital litigation was full of stories about latent legal issues undiscovered and untapped until a different lawyer with a fresh eye entered the arena and captured a stay. But the law professor was right. Sam had been lucky. Though Sam despised the lawyers at Kravitz & Bane, they had provided superb representation. Now there was nothing left but a bunch of desperate motions, the gangplank appeals, as they were known.

He flung the paper on the wooden deck and went inside for more coffee. The sliding door beeped, a new sound from a new security system installed last Friday after the old one malfunctioned and some keys mysteriously disappeared. There was no evidence of a break-in. Security was tight at the complex. And Willis didn't really know how many sets of keys he kept for each unit. The Memphis police decided the sliding door had been left unlocked and slipped open somehow. Adam and Lee had not worried about it.

He inadvertently struck a glass tumbler next to the sink, and it shattered as it hit the floor. Bits of glass bounced around his bare feet, and he tiptoed gingerly to the pantry to get a broom and

dustpan. He carefully swept the debris, without bloodshed, into a neat pile and dumped it into a wastebasket under the sink. Something caught his attention. He slowly reached into the black plastic garbage bag, and felt his way through warm coffee grounds and broken glass until he found a bottle and pulled it out. It was an empty pint of vodka.

He raked the coffee grounds from it and studied the label. The trash basket was small and normally emptied every other day, sometimes once a day. It was now half-filled. The bottle had not been there long. He opened the refrigerator and looked for the remaining three bottles of beer from yesterday's six-pack. She'd had two en route back to Memphis, then one at the condo. He did not remember where they had been stored, but they were not in the refrigerator. Nor in the trash in the kitchen, den, bathrooms, or bedrooms. The more he searched the more determined he became to find the bottles. He inspected the pantry, the broom closet, the linen closet, the kitchen cabinets. He went through her closets and drawers, and felt like a thief and a cheat but pressed on because he was scared.

They were under her bed, empty of course, and carefully hidden in an old Nike shoe box. Three empty bottles of Heineken stacked neatly together, as if they were to be shipped somewhere as a gift. He sat on the floor and examined them. They were fresh, with a few drops still rolling around the bottoms.

He guessed her weight to be around a hundred and thirty pounds, and her height at five feet six or seven. She was slender but not too thin. Her body couldn't handle much booze. She'd gone to bed early, around nine, then at some point sneaked around the condo fetching beer and vodka. Adam leaned against the wall, his mind racing wildly. She'd given much thought to the hiding of the green bottles, but she knew she'd get caught. She had to know Adam would look for them later. Why hadn't she been more careful with the empty pint bottle? Why was it hidden in the trash, and the beer bottles tucked away under her bed?

Then he realized he was attempting to track a rational mind, instead of a drunk one. He closed his eyes and tapped the back of

his head against the wall. He'd taken her to Ford County, where they looked at graves and relived a nightmare, and where she'd worn sunglasses to hide her face. For two weeks now, he'd been demanding family secrets and yesterday he'd been kicked in the face with a few. He needed to know, he'd told himself. He wasn't certain why, but he just felt as if he had to know the reasons his family was strange and violent and hateful.

And now, it occurred to him for the first time, perhaps this was much more complicated than the casual telling of family stories. Perhaps this was painful for everyone involved. Maybe his selfish interest in closeted skeletons wasn't as important as Lee's stability.

He slid the shoe box back to its original position, then threw the vodka bottle in the wastebasket for the second time. He dressed quickly and left the building. He asked the gate man about Lee. According to a sheet of paper on his clipboard, she'd left almost two hours ago, at eight-ten.

It was customary for lawyers at Kravitz & Bane in Chicago to spend Sunday at the office, but evidently the practice was frowned upon in Memphis. Adam had the place entirely to himself. He locked his door anyway, and was soon lost in the murky legal world of federal habeas corpus practice.

His concentration, though, was difficult and only lasted for short intervals. He worried about Lee, and he hated Sam. It would be difficult to look at him again, probably tomorrow, through the metal screen at the Row. He was frail and bleached and wrinkled, and by all rights entitled to a little sympathy from someone. Their last discussion had been about Eddie, and when it ended Sam had asked him to leave the family stuff outside the Row. He had enough on his mind at the moment. It wasn't fair to confront a condemned man with his ancient sins.

Adam was not a biographer, nor a genealogist. He hadn't been trained in sociology or psychiatry, and, frankly, he was, at the

moment, quite weary of further expeditions into the cryptic history of the Cayhall family. He was simply a lawyer, a rather green one, but an advocate nonetheless whose client needed him.

It was time to practice law and forget the folklore.

At eleven-thirty, he dialed Lee's number and listened to the phone ring. He left a message on the recorder, telling her where he was and would she please call. He called again at one, and at two. No answer. He was preparing an appeal when the phone rang.

Instead of Lee's pleasant voice, he heard the clipped words of the Honorable F. Flynn Slattery. "Yes, Mr. Hall, Judge Slattery here. I've carefully considered this matter, and I'm denying all relief, including your request for a stay of execution," he said, almost with a trace of cheer. "Lots of reasons, but we won't go into them. My clerk will fax you my opinion right now, so you'll have it in a moment."

"Yes sir," Adam said.

"You'll need to appeal as soon as possible, you know. I suggest you do so in the morning."

"I'm working on the appeal now, Your Honor. In fact, it's almost finished."

"Good. So you were expecting this."

"Yes sir. I started working on the appeal right after I left your office on Tuesday." It was tempting to take a shot or two at Slattery. He was, after all, two hundred miles away. But he was also, after all, a federal judge. Adam was very aware that one day very soon he might need His Honor again.

"Good day, Mr. Hall." And with that, Slattery hung up.

Adam walked around the table a dozen times, then watched the light rain on the Mall below. He swore quietly about federal judges in general and Slattery in particular, then returned to his computer where he stared at the screen and waited for inspiration.

He typed and read, researched and printed, looked from his windows and dreamed of miracles until it was dark. He had killed several hours with footless piddling, and one reason he worked until eight o'clock was to give Lee plenty of time to return to the condo.

There was no sign of her. The security guard said she had not returned. There was no message on the recorder, other than his. He dined on microwave popcorn, and watched two movies on video. The idea of calling Phelps Booth was so repugnant he nearly shuddered at the thought.

He thought of sleeping on the sofa in the den so he would hear her if she came home, but after the last movie he retired to his room upstairs and closed the door.

Twenty-eight

The explanation for yesterday's disappearance was slow in coming, but sounded plausible by the time she finished with it. She'd been at the hospital all day, she said as she moved slowly around the kitchen, with one of her kids from the Auburn House. Poor little girl was only thirteen, baby number one but of course there would be others, and she had gone into labor a month early. Her mother was in jail and her aunt was off selling drugs, and she had no one else to turn to. Lee'd held her hand throughout the complicated delivery. The girl was fine and the baby was okay, and now there was another unwanted little child in the Memphis ghettos.

Lee's voice was scratchy and her eyes were puffy and red. She said she'd returned a few minutes after one, and she would've called earlier but they were in the labor room for six hours and the delivery room for two. St. Peter's Charity Hospital is a zoo, especially the maternity wing, and, well, she just couldn't get to a phone.

Adam sat in his pajamas at the table, sipping coffee and studying the paper as she talked. He hadn't asked for the explanation. He tried his best to act unconcerned about her. She insisted on cooking breakfast: scrambled eggs and canned biscuits. And she was doing a good job of busying herself in the kitchen as she talked and avoided eye contact.

"What's the kid's name?" he asked seriously as if he was deeply concerned with Lee's story.

"Uh, Natasha. Natasha Perkins."

"And she's only thirteen?"

"Yes. Her mother is twenty-nine. Can you believe it? A twenty-nine-year-old grandmother."

Adam shook his head in disbelief. He happened to be looking at the small section of the Memphis Press where it registered the county's vital records. Marriage licenses. Divorce petitions. Births. Arrests. Deaths. He scanned the list of yesterday's births as if he were checking scores, and found no record of a new mother named Natasha Perkins.

Lee finished her struggle with the canned biscuits. She placed them on a small platter along with the eggs and served them, then sat at the other end of the table, as far away from Adam as possible. "Bon appétit," she said with a forced smile. Her cooking was already a rich source of humor.

Adam smiled as if everything was fine. They needed humor at this moment, but wit failed them. "Cubs lost again," he said, taking a bite of eggs and glancing at the folded newspaper.

"The Cubs always lose, don't they?"

"Not always. You follow baseball?"

"I hate baseball. Phelps turned me against every sport known to man."

Adam grinned and read the paper. They ate without talking for a few minutes, and the silence grew heavy. Lee punched the remote and the television on the counter came on and created noise. They were both suddenly interested in the weather, which was again hot and dry. She played with her food, nibbling on a half-baked biscuit and pushing the eggs around her plate. Adam suspected her stomach was feeble at the moment.

He finished quickly and took his plate to the kitchen sink. He sat again at the table to finish the paper. She was staring at the television, anything to keep her eyes away from her nephew.

"I'll probably go see Sam today," he said. "I haven't been in a week."

Her gaze fell to a spot somewhere in the middle of the table. "I wish we hadn't gone to Clanton Saturday," she said.

"I know."

"It was not a good idea."

"I'm sorry, Lee. I insisted on going, and it was not a good idea. I've insisted on a lot of things, and maybe I've been wrong."

“It’s not fair—”

“I know it’s not fair. I realize now that it’s not a simple matter of learning family history.”

“It’s not fair to him, Adam. It’s almost cruel to confront him with these things when he has only two weeks to live.”

“You’re right. And it’s wrong to make you relive them.”

“I’ll be fine.” She said this as if she certainly wasn’t fine now, but there might be a bit of hope for the future.

“I’m sorry, Lee. I’m truly sorry.”

“It’s okay. What will you and Sam do today?”

“Talk, primarily. The local federal court ruled against us yesterday, and so we’ll appeal this morning. Sam likes to talk legal strategies.”

“Tell him I’m thinking about him.”

“I will.”

She pushed her plate away and cuddled her cup with both hands. “And ask him if he wants me to come see him.”

“Do you really want to?” Adam asked, unable to conceal his surprise.

“Something tells me I should. I haven’t seen him in many years.”

“I’ll ask him.”

“And don’t mention Joe Lincoln, okay Adam? I never told Daddy what I saw.”

“You and Sam never mentioned the killing?”

“Never. It became well known in the community. Eddie and I grew up with it and carried it as a burden, but, to be honest, Adam, it was not a big deal to the neighbors. My father killed a black man. It was 1950, and it was Mississippi. It was never discussed in our house.”

“So Sam makes it to his grave without being confronted with the killing?”

“What do you accomplish by confronting him? It was forty years ago.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’ll say he was sorry.”

“To you? He apologizes to you, and that makes everything okay? Come on, Adam, you’re young and you don’t understand. Leave it

alone. Don't hurt the old man anymore. Right now, you're the only bright spot in his pathetic life."

"Okay, okay."

"You have no right to ambush him with the story of Joe Lincoln."

"You're right. I won't. I promise."

She stared at him with bloodshot eyes until he looked at the television, then she quickly excused herself and disappeared through the den. Adam heard the bathroom door close and lock. He eased across the carpet and stood in the hallway, listening as she heaved and vomited. The toilet flushed, and he ran upstairs to his room to shower and change.

By 10 a.m., Adam had perfected the appeal to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans. Judge Slattery had already faxed a copy of his order to the clerk of the Fifth Circuit, and Adam faxed his appeal shortly after arriving at the office. He Fed-Exed the original by overnight.

He also had his first conversation with the Death Clerk, a full-time employee of the United States Supreme Court who does nothing but monitor the final appeals of all death row inmates. The Death Clerk often works around the clock as executions go down to the wire. E. Garner Goodman had briefed Adam on the machinations of the Death Clerk and his office, and it was with some reluctance that Adam placed the first call.

The clerk's name was Richard Olander, a rather efficient sort who sounded quite tired early Monday morning. "We've been expecting this," he said to Adam, as if the damned thing should've been filed some time ago. He asked Adam if this was his first execution.

"Afraid so," Adam said. "And I hope it's my last."

"Well, you've certainly picked a loser," Mr. Olander said, then explained in tedious detail exactly how the Court expected the final appeals to be handled. Every filing from this point forward, until the end, regardless of where it's filed or what it's about, must also

simultaneously be filed with his office, he stated flatly as if reading from a textbook. In fact, he would immediately fax to Adam a copy of the Court's rules, all of which had to be meticulously followed up until the very end. His office was on call, around the clock, he repeated more than once, and it was essential that they receive copies of everything. That was, of course, if Adam wanted his client to have a fair hearing with the Court. If Adam didn't care, then, well, just follow the rules haphazardly and his client would pay for it.

Adam promised to follow the rules. The Supreme Court had become increasingly weary of the endless claims in death cases, and wanted to have all motions and appeals in hand to expedite matters. Adam's appeal to the Fifth Circuit would be scrutinized by the justices and their clerks long before the Court actually received the case from New Orleans. The same would be true for all his eleventh-hour filings. The Court would then be able to grant immediate relief, or deny it quickly.

So efficient and speedy was the Death Clerk that the Court had recently been embarrassed by denying an appeal before it was actually filed.

Then Mr. Olander explained that his office had a checklist of every conceivable last minute appeal and motion, and he and his quite able staff monitored each case to see if all possible filings took place. And if a lawyer somewhere missed a potential issue, then they would actually notify the lawyer that he should pursue the forgotten claim. Did Adam desire a copy of their checklist?

No, Adam explained that he already had a copy. E. Garner Goodman had written the book on gangplank appeals.

Very well, said Mr. Olander. Mr. Cayhall had sixteen days, and, of course, a lot can happen in sixteen days. But Mr. Cayhall had been ably represented, in his humble opinion, and the matter had been thoroughly litigated. He would be surprised, he ventured, if there were additional delays.

Thanks for nothing, Adam thought.

Mr. Olander and his staff were watching a case in Texas very closely, he explained. The execution was set for a day before Sam's,

but, in his opinion, there was a likely chance for a stay. Florida had one scheduled for two days after Mr. Cayhall's. Georgia had two set for a week later, but, well, who knows. He or someone on his staff would be available at all hours, and he himself would personally be by the phone for the twelve-hour period leading up to the execution.

Just call anytime, he said, and ended the conversation with a terse promise to make things as easy as possible for Adam and his client.

Adam slammed the phone down and stalked around his office. His door was locked, as usual, and the hallway was busy with eager Monday morning gossip. His face had been in the paper again yesterday, and he did not want to be seen. He called the Auburn House and asked for Lee Booth, but she was not in. He called her condo, and there was no answer. He called Parchman, and told the officer at the front gate to expect him around one.

He went to his computer and found one of his current projects, a condensed, chronological history of Sam's case.

The Lakehead County jury convicted Sam on February 12, 1981, and two days later handed him a verdict of death. He appealed directly to the Mississippi Supreme Court, claiming all sorts of grievances with the trial and the prosecution but taking particular exception to the fact that the trial occurred almost fourteen years after the bombing. His lawyer, Benjamin Keyes, argued vehemently that Sam was denied a speedy trial, and that he was subjected to double jeopardy, being tried three times for the same crime. Keyes presented a very strong argument. The Mississippi Supreme Court was bitterly divided over these issues, and on July 23, 1982, handed down a split decision affirming Sam's conviction. Five justices voted to affirm, three to reverse, and one abstained.

Keyes then filed a petition for writ of certiorari with the U.S. Supreme Court, which, in effect, asked that Court to review Sam's case. Since the Supreme Court "grants cert" on such a small number

of cases, it was somewhat of a surprise when, on March 4, 1983, the Court agreed to review Sam's conviction.

The U.S. Supreme Court split almost as badly as Mississippi's on the issue of double jeopardy, but nonetheless reached the same conclusion. Sam's first two juries had been hopelessly deadlocked, hung up by the shenanigans of Clovis Brazelton, and thus Sam was not protected by the double jeopardy clause of the Fifth Amendment. He was not acquitted by either of the first two juries. Each had been unable to reach a verdict, so reprosecution was quite constitutional. On September 21, 1983, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled six to three that Sam's conviction should stand. Keyes immediately filed some motions requesting a rehearing, but to no avail.

Sam had hired Keyes to represent him during the trial and on appeal to the Mississippi Supreme Court, if necessary. By the time the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the conviction, Keyes was working without getting paid. His contract for legal representation had expired, and he wrote Sam a long letter and explained that it was now time for Sam to make other arrangements. Sam understood this.

Keyes also wrote a letter to an ACLU lawyer-friend of his in Washington, who in turn wrote a letter to his pal E. Garner Goodman at Kravitz & Bane in Chicago. The letter landed on Goodman's desk at precisely the right moment. Sam was running out of time and was desperate. Goodman was looking for a pro bono project. They swapped letters, and on December 18, 1983, Wallace Tyner, a partner in the white-collar criminal defense section of Kravitz & Bane, filed a petition seeking postconviction relief with the Mississippi Supreme Court.

Tyner alleged many errors in Sam's trial, including the admission into evidence of the gory pictures of the bodies of Josh and John Kramer. He attacked the selection of the jury, and claimed that McAllister systematically picked blacks over whites. He claimed a fair trial was not possible because the social environment was far different in 1981 than in 1967. He maintained the venue selected by the trial judge was unfair. He raised yet again the issues of double

jeopardy and speedy trial. In all, Wallace Tyner and Garner Goodman raised eight separate issues in the petition. They did not, however, maintain that Sam had suffered because of ineffective trial counsel, the primary claim of all death row inmates. They had wanted to, but Sam wouldn't allow it. He initially refused to sign the petition because it attacked Benjamin Keyes, a lawyer Sam was fond of.

On June 1, 1985, the Mississippi Supreme Court denied all of the postconviction relief requested. Tyner again appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, but cert was denied. He then filed Sam's first petition for writ of habeas corpus and request for a stay of execution in federal court in Mississippi. Typically, the petition was quite thick, and contained every issue already raised in state court.

Two years later, on May 3, 1987, the district court denied all relief, and Tyner appealed to the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans, which in due course affirmed the lower court's denial. On March 20, 1988, Tyner filed a petition for a rehearing with the Fifth Circuit, which was also denied. On September 3, 1988, Tyner and Goodman again trekked to the Supreme Court and asked for cert. A week later, Sam wrote the first of many letters to Goodman and Tyner threatening to fire them.

The U.S. Supreme Court granted Sam his last stay on May 14, 1989, pursuant to a grant of certiorari being granted in a Florida case the Court had decided to hear. Tyner argued successfully that the Florida case raised similar issues, and the Supreme Court granted stays in several dozen death cases around the country.

Nothing was filed in Sam's case while the Supreme Court delayed and debated the Florida case. Sam, however, had begun his own efforts to rid himself of Kravitz & Bane. He filed a few clumsy motions himself, all of which were quickly denied. He did succeed, however, in obtaining an order from the Fifth Circuit which effectively terminated the pro bono services of his lawyers. On June 29, 1990, the Fifth Circuit allowed him to represent himself, and Garner Goodman closed the file on Sam Cayhall. It wasn't closed for long.

On July 9, 1990, the Supreme Court vacated Sam's stay. On July 10, the Fifth Circuit vacated Sam's stay, and on the same day the Mississippi Supreme Court set his execution date for August 8, four weeks away.

After nine years of appellate warfare, Sam now had sixteen days to live.

Twenty-nine

The row was quiet and still as another day dragged itself toward noon. The diverse collection of fans buzzed and rattled in the tiny cells, trying valiantly to push around air that grew stickier by the moment.

The early television news had been filled with excited reports that Sam Cayhall had lost his latest legal battle. Slattery's decision was trumpeted around the state as if it were indeed the final nail in the coffin. A Jackson station continued its countdown, only sixteen days to go. Day Sixteen! it said in bold letters under the same old photo of Sam. Bright-eyed reporters with heavy makeup and no knowledge of the law spouted at the cameras with fearless predictions: "According to our sources, Sam Cayhall's legal options are virtually gone. Many people believe that his execution will take place, as scheduled, on August 8." Then on to sports and weather.

There was much less talk on the Row, less yelling back and forth, fewer kites being floated along the cells. There was about to be an execution.

Sergeant Packer smiled to himself as he shuffled along Tier A. The bitching and griping that was so much a part of his daily work had almost disappeared. Now, the inmates were concerned with appeals and their lawyers. The most common request in the past two weeks had been to use the phone to call a lawyer.

Packer did not look forward to another execution, but he did enjoy the quiet. And he knew it was only temporary. If Sam got a stay tomorrow, the noise would increase immediately.

He stopped in front of Sam's cell. "Hour out, Sam."

Sam was sitting on his bed, typing and smoking as usual. "What time is it?" he asked, placing the typewriter to his side and standing.

"Eleven."

Sam turned his back to Packer and stuck his wrists through the opening in his door. Packer carefully cuffed them together. "You out by yourself?" he asked.

Sam turned with his hands behind him. "No. Henshaw wants to come out too."

"I'll get him," Packer said, nodding at Sam then nodding at the end of the tier. The door opened, and Sam slowly followed him past the other cells. Each inmate was leaning on the bars with hands and arms dangling through, each watching Sam closely as he walked by.

They made their way through more bars and more hallways, and Packer unlocked an unpainted metal door. It opened to the outside, and the sunlight burst through. Sam hated this part of his hour out. He stepped onto the grass and closed his eyes tightly as Packer uncuffed him, then opened them slowly as they focused and adjusted to the painful glow of the sun.

Packer disappeared inside without a word, and Sam stood in the same spot for a full minute as lights flashed and his head pounded. The heat didn't bother him because he lived with it, but the sunlight hit like lasers and caused a severe headache each time he was allowed to venture from the dungeon. He could easily afford a pair of cheap sunglasses, similar to Packer's, but of course that would be too sensible. Sunglasses were not on the approved list of items an inmate could own.

He walked unsteadily through the clipped grass, looking through the fence to the cotton fields beyond. The recreation yard was nothing more than a fenced-in plot of dirt and grass with two wooden benches and a basketball hoop for the Africans. It was known to guards and prisoners alike as the bullpen. Sam had stepped it off carefully a thousand times, and had compared his measurements with those of other inmates. The yard was fifty-one feet long and thirty-six feet wide. The fence was ten feet tall and crowned with another eighteen inches of razor wire. Beyond the fence was a stretch of grass which ran a hundred feet or so to the main fence, which was watched by the guards in the towers.

Sam walked in a straight line next to the fence, and when it stopped he turned ninety degrees and continued his little routine,

counting every step along the way. Fifty-one feet by thirty-six. His cell was six by nine. The law library, the Twig, was eighteen by fifteen. His side of the visitors' room was six by thirty. He'd been told the Chamber Room was fifteen by twelve, and the chamber itself was a mere cube barely four feet wide.

During the first year of his confinement, he had jogged around the edges of the yard, trying to sweat and give his heart a workout. He'd also tossed shots at the basketball hoop, but quit when he went days without making one. He had eventually quit exercising, and for years had used this hour to do nothing but enjoy the freedom from his cell. At one time, he'd fallen into the habit of standing at the fence and staring past the fields to the trees where he imagined all sorts of things. Freedom. Highways. Fishing. Food. Sex occasionally. He could almost picture his little farm in Ford County not far over there between two small patches of woods. He would dream of Brazil or Argentina or some other laid-back hiding place where he should be living with a new name.

And then he'd stopped the dreaming. He'd stopped gazing through the fence as if a miracle would take him away. He walked and smoked, almost always by himself. His most rigorous activity was a game of checkers.

The door opened again, and Hank Henshaw walked through it. Packer uncuffed him as he squinted furiously and looked at the ground. He rubbed his wrists as soon as they were free, then stretched his back and legs. Packer walked to one of the benches and placed a worn cardboard box on it.

The two inmates watched Packer until he left the yard, then they walked to the bench and assumed their positions astraddle the wooden plank with the box between them. Sam carefully placed the checkerboard on the bench as Henshaw counted the checkers.

"My turn to be red," Sam said.

"You were red last time," Henshaw said, staring at him.

"I was black last time."

"No, I was black last time. It's my turn to be red."

"Look, Hank. I've got sixteen days, and if I want to be red, then I get to be red."

Henshaw shrugged and conceded. They arranged their checkers meticulously.

"I guess you get the first move," Henshaw said.

"Of course." Sam slid a checker to a vacant square, and the match was on. The midday sun baked the ground around them and within minutes their red jumpsuits stuck to their backs. They both wore rubber shower shoes with no socks.

Hank Henshaw was forty-one, now a resident of the Row for seven years but not expected to ever see the gas chamber. Two crucial errors had been made at trial, and Henshaw had a decent chance of getting reversed and freed from the Row.

"Bad news yesterday," he said as Sam pondered the next move.

"Yes, things are lookin' pretty grim, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah. What does your lawyer say?" Neither of them looked up from the checkerboard.

"He says we have a fightin' chance."

"What the hell does that mean?" Henshaw asked as he made a move.

"I think it means they're gonna gas me, but I'll go down swinging."

"Does the kid know what he's doing?"

"Oh yeah. He's sharp. Runs in the blood, you know."

"But he's awfully young."

"He's a smart kid. Great education. Number two in his law class at Michigan, you know. Editor of the law review."

"What does that mean?"

"Means he's brilliant. He'll think of something."

"Are you serious, Sam? Do you think it's gonna happen?"

Sam suddenly jumped two black checkers, and Henshaw cursed. "You're pitiful," Sam said with a grin. "When was the last time you beat me?"

"Two weeks ago."

"You liar. You haven't beat me in three years."

Henshaw made a tentative move, and Sam jumped him again. Five minutes later, the game was over with Sam victorious again. They cleared the board, and started over.

At noon, Packer and another guard appeared with handcuffs, and the fun was over. They were led to their cells where lunch was in progress. Beans, peas, mashed potatoes, and several slices of dry toast. Sam ate less than a third of the bland food on his plate, and waited patiently for a guard to come after him. He held a pair of clean boxer shorts and a bar of soap. It was time to bathe.

The guard arrived and led Sam to a small shower at the end of the tier. By court order, death row inmates were allowed five quick showers a week, whether they needed them or not, as the guards liked to say.

Sam showered quickly, washing his hair twice with the soap and rinsing himself in the warm water. The shower itself was clean enough, but used by all fourteen inmates on the tier. Thus, the rubber shower shoes remained on the feet. After five minutes, the water stopped, and Sam dripped for a few more minutes as he stared at the moldy tiled walls. There were some things about the Row that he would not miss.

Twenty minutes later, he was loaded into a prison van and driven a half a mile to the law library.

Adam was waiting inside. He removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves as the guards uncuffed Sam and left the room. They greeted each other and shook hands. Sam quickly took a seat and lit a cigarette. "Where've you been?" he asked.

"Busy," Adam said, sitting across the table. "I had an unexpected trip to Chicago last Wednesday and Thursday."

"Anything to do with me?"

"You could say that. Goodman wanted to review the case, and there were a couple of other matters."

"So Goodman's still involved?"

"Goodman is my boss right now, Sam. I have to report to him if I want to keep my job. I know you hate him, but he's very concerned about you and your case. Believe it or not, he does not want to see you gassed."

"I don't hate him anymore."

"Why the change of heart?"

"I don't know. When you get this close to death, you do a lot of thinking."

Adam was anxious to hear more, but Sam let it pass. Adam watched him smoke and tried not to think about Joe Lincoln. He tried not to think of Sam's father being beaten in a drunken brawl at a funeral, and he tried to ignore all the other miserable stories Lee had told him in Ford County. He tried to block these things from his mind, but he couldn't.

He had promised her he would not mention any more nightmares from the past. "I guess you've heard about our latest defeat," he said as he pulled papers from his briefcase.

"It didn't take long, did it?"

"No. A rather quick loss, but I've already appealed to the Fifth Circuit."

"I've never won in the Fifth Circuit."

"I know. But we can't select our review court at this point."

"What can we do at this point?"

"Several things. I bumped into the governor last Tuesday after a meeting with the federal judge. He wanted to talk in private. He gave me his private phone numbers and invited me to call and talk about the case. Said he had doubts about the extent of your guilt."

Sam glared at him. "Doubts? He's the only reason I'm here. He can't wait to see me executed."

"You're probably right, but—"

"You promised not to talk to him. You signed an agreement with me expressly prohibiting any contact with that fool."

"Relax, Sam. He grabbed me outside the judge's office."

"I'm surprised he didn't call a press conference to talk about it."

"I threatened him, okay. I made him promise not to talk."

"Then you're the first person in history to silence that bastard."

"He's open to the idea of clemency."

"He told you this?"

"Yes."

"Why? I don't believe it."

“I don’t know why, Sam. And I don’t really care. But how can it hurt? What’s the danger in requesting a clemency hearing? So he gets his picture in the paper. So the TV cameras chase him around some more. If there’s a chance he’ll listen, then why should you care if he gets some mileage from it?”

“No. The answer is no. I will not authorize you to request a clemency hearing. Hell no. A thousand times no. I know him, Adam. He’s trying to suck you into his game plan. It’s all a sham, a show for the public. He’ll grieve over this until the very end, milking it for all he can. He’ll get more attention than I will, and it’s my execution.”

“So what’s the harm?”

Sam slapped the table with the palm of his hand. “Because it won’t do any good, Adam! He will not change his mind.”

Adam scribbled something on a legal pad and let a moment pass. Sam eased back in his seat, and lit another cigarette. His hair was still wet and he combed it back with his fingernails.

Adam placed his pen on the table and looked at his client. “What do you want to do, Sam? Quit? Throw in the towel? You think you know so damned much law, tell me what you want to do.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“I’m sure you have.”

“The lawsuit on its way to the Fifth Circuit has merit, but it doesn’t look promising. There’s not much left, as I see things.”

“Except Benjamin Keyes.”

“Right. Except Keyes. He did a fine job for me at trial and on appeal, and he was almost a friend. I hate to go after him.”

“It’s standard in death cases, Sam. You always go after the trial lawyer and claim ineffective assistance of counsel. Goodman told me he wanted to do it, but you refused. It should’ve been done years ago.”

“He’s right about that. He begged me to do it, but I said no. I guess it was a mistake.”

Adam was on the edge of his seat taking notes. “I’ve studied the record, and I think Keyes made a mistake when he didn’t put you on the stand to testify.”

“I wanted to talk to the jury, you know. I think I’ve already told you that. After Dogan testified, I thought it was essential for me to explain to the jury that I did in fact plant the bomb, but there was no intent to kill anyone. That’s the truth, Adam. I didn’t intend to kill anyone.”

“You wanted to testify, but your lawyer said no.”

Sam smiled and looked at the floor. “Is that what you want me to say?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“No.”

“Okay. That’s the way it happened. I wanted to testify, but my lawyer wouldn’t allow it.”

“I’ll file first thing in the morning.”

“It’s too late, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s certainly late, and this issue should’ve been raised a long time ago. But what’s there to lose?”

“Will you call Keyes and tell him?”

“If I have time. I’m really not concerned with his feelings at the moment.”

“Then neither am I. To hell with him. Who else can we attack?”

“The list is rather short.”

Sam jumped to his feet and began pacing along the table in measured steps. The room was eighteen feet long. He walked around the table, behind Adam, and along each of the four walls, counting as he went. He stopped and leaned against a shelf of books.

Adam finished some notes and watched him carefully. “Lee wants to know if she can come visit,” he said.

Sam stared at him, then slowly returned to his seat across the table. “She wants to?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Well hurry.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Pretty fair, I guess. She sends her love and prayers, and she thinks about you a lot these days.”

“Do people in Memphis know she’s my daughter?”

“I don’t think so. It hasn’t been in the papers yet.”

“I hope they keep it quiet.”

“She and I went to Clanton last Saturday.”

Sam looked at him sadly, then gazed at the ceiling. “What did you see?” he asked.

“Lots of things. She showed me my grandmother’s grave, and the plot with the other Cayhalls.”

“She didn’t want to be buried with the Cayhalls, did Lee tell you that?”

“Yes. Lee asked me where you wanted to be buried.”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Sure. Just let me know when you make the decision. We walked through the town, and she showed me the house we lived in. We went to the square and sat in the gazebo on the courthouse lawn. The town was very busy. People were packed around the square.”

“We used to watch fireworks in the cemetery.”

“Lee told me all about it. We ate lunch at The Tea Shoppe, and took a drive in the country. She took me to her childhood home.”

“It’s still there?”

“Yeah, it’s abandoned. The house is run-down and the weeds have taken over. We walked around the place. She told me lots of stories of her childhood. Talked a lot about Eddie.”

“Does she have fond memories?”

“Not really.”

Sam crossed his arms and looked at the table. A minute passed without a word. Finally, Sam asked, “Did she tell you about Eddie’s little African friend, Quince Lincoln?”

Adam nodded slowly, and their eyes locked together. “Yes, she did.”

“And about his father, Joe?”

“She told me the story.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I do. Should I?”

“It’s true. It’s all true.”

“I thought so.”

“How did you feel when she told you the story? I mean, how did you react to it?”

“I hated your guts.”

“And how do you feel now?”

“Different.”

Sam slowly rose from his seat and walked to the end of the table where he stopped and stood with his back to Adam. “That was forty years ago,” he mumbled, barely audible.

“I didn’t come here to talk about it,” Adam said, already feeling guilty.

Sam turned and leaned on the same bookshelf. He crossed his arms and stared at the wall. “I’ve wished a thousand times it hadn’t happened.”

“I promised Lee I wouldn’t bring it up, Sam. I’m sorry.”

“Joe Lincoln was a good man. I’ve often wondered what happened to Ruby and Quince and the rest of the kids.”

“Forget it, Sam. Let’s talk about something else.”

“I hope they’re happy when I’m dead.”

Thirty

As Adam drove past the security station at the main gate the guard waved, as if by now he was regular customer. He waved back as he slowed and pushed a button to release his trunk. No paperwork was required for visitors to leave, only a quick look in the trunk to make sure no prisoners had caught a ride. He turned onto the highway, heading south, away from Memphis, and calculated that this was his fifth visit to Parchman. Five visits in two weeks. He had a suspicion that the place would be his second home for the next sixteen days. What a rotten thought.

He was not in the mood to deal with Lee tonight. He felt some responsibility for her relapse into alcohol, but by her own admission this had been a way of life for many years. She was an alcoholic, and if she chose to drink there was nothing he could do to stop her. He would be there tomorrow night, to make coffee and conversation. Tonight, he needed a break.

It was mid-afternoon, the heat emanated from the asphalt highway, the fields were dusty and dry, the farm implements languid and slow, the traffic light and sluggish. Adam pulled to the shoulder and raised the convertible top. He stopped at a Chinese grocery in Ruleville and bought a can of iced tea, then sped along a lonely highway in the general direction of Greenville. He had an errand to run, probably an unpleasant one, but something he felt obligated to do. He hoped he had the courage to go through with it.

He stayed on the back roads, the small paved county routes, and zipped almost aimlessly across the Delta. He got lost twice, but worked himself out of it. He arrived in Greenville a few minutes before five, and cruised the downtown area in search of his target. He passed Kramer Park twice. He found the synagogue, across the street from the First Baptist Church. He parked at the end of Main

Street, at the river where a levee guarded the city. He straightened his tie and walked three blocks along Washington Street to an old brick building with the sign Kramer Wholesale hanging from a veranda above the sidewalk in front of it. The heavy glass door opened to the inside, and the ancient wooden floors squeaked as he walked on them. The front part of the building had been preserved to resemble an old-fashioned retail store, with glass counters in front of wide shelves that ran to the ceiling. The shelves and counters were filled with boxes and wrappings of food products sold years ago, but now extinct. An antique cash register was on display. The little museum quickly yielded to modern commerce. The rest of the huge building was renovated and gave the appearance of being quite efficient. A wall of paned glass cut off the front foyer, and a wide carpeted hallway ran down the center of the building and led, no doubt, to offices and secretaries, and somewhere in the rear there had to be a warehouse.

Adam admired the displays in the front counters. A young man in jeans appeared from the back and asked, "Can I help you?"

Adam smiled, and was suddenly nervous. "Yes, I'd like to see Mr. Elliot Kramer."

"Are you a salesman?"

"No."

"Are you a buyer?"

"No."

The young man was holding a pencil and had things on his mind. "Then, may I ask what you need?"

"I need to see Mr. Elliot Kramer. Is he here?"

"He spends most of his time at the main warehouse south of town."

Adam took three steps toward the guy and handed him a business card. "My name is Adam Hall. I'm an attorney from Chicago. I really need to see Mr. Kramer."

He took the card and studied it for a few seconds, then he looked at Adam with a great deal of suspicion. "Just a minute," he said, and walked away.

Adam leaned on a counter and admired the cash register. He had read somewhere in his voluminous research that Marvin Kramer's family had been prosperous merchants in the Delta for several generations. An ancestor had made a hasty exit from a steamboat at the port in Greenville, and decided to call it home. He opened a small dry goods store, and one thing led to another. Throughout the ordeal of Sam's trials, the Kramer family was repeatedly described as wealthy.

After twenty minutes of waiting, Adam was ready to leave, and quite relieved. He'd made the effort. If Mr. Kramer didn't want to meet with him, there was nothing he could do about it.

He heard footsteps on the wooden floor, and turned around. An elderly gentleman stood with a business card in his hand. He was tall and thin, with wavy gray hair, dark brown eyes with heavy shadows under them, a lean, strong face which at the moment was not smiling. He stood erect, no cane to aid him, no eyeglasses to help him see. He scowled at Adam, but said nothing.

For an instant, Adam wished he'd left five minutes ago. Then he asked himself why he was there to begin with. Then he decided to go for it anyway. "Good afternoon," he said, when it was obvious the gentleman would not speak. "Mr. Elliot Kramer?"

Mr. Kramer nodded in the affirmative, but nodded ever so slowly as if challenged by the question.

"My name is Adam Hall. I'm an attorney from Chicago. Sam Cayhall is my grandfather, and I represent him." It was obvious Mr. Kramer had already figured this out, because Adam's words didn't faze him. "I would like to talk to you."

"Talk about what?" Mr. Kramer said in a slow drawl.

"About Sam."

"I hope he rots in hell," he said, as if he was already certain of Sam's eternal destination. His eyes were so brown they were almost black.

Adam glanced at the floor, away from the eyes, and tried to think of something noninflammatory. "Yes sir," he said, very much aware that he was in the Deep South where politeness went a long way. "I

understand how you feel. I don't blame you, but I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Does Sam send his apologies?" Mr. Kramer asked. The fact that he referred to him simply as Sam struck Adam as odd. Not Mr. Cayhall, not Cayhall, just Sam, as if the two were old friends who'd been feuding and now it was time to reconcile. Just say you're sorry, Sam, and everything's fine.

The thought of a quick lie raced through Adam's mind. He could lay it on thick, say how terrible Sam felt in these, his last days, and how he desperately wanted forgiveness. But Adam couldn't bring himself to do it. "Would it make any difference?" he asked.

Mr. Kramer carefully placed the card in his shirt pocket, and began what would become a long stare past Adam and through the front window. "No," he said, "it wouldn't make any difference. It's something that should've been done long ago." His words were accented with the heavy drip of the Delta, and even though their meanings were not welcome, their sounds were very soothing. They were slow and thoughtful, uttered as if time meant nothing. They also conveyed the years of suffering, and the hint that life had ceased long ago.

"No, Mr. Kramer. Sam does not know I'm here, so he does not send his apologies. But I do."

The gaze through the window and into the past did not flinch or waver. But he was listening.

Adam continued, "I feel the obligation to at least say, for myself and Sam's daughter, that we're terribly sorry for all that's happened."

"Why didn't Sam say it years ago?"

"I can't answer that."

"I know. You're new."

Ah, the power of the press. Of course Mr. Kramer had been reading the papers like everyone else.

"Yes sir. I'm trying to save his life."

"Why?"

"Many reasons. Killing him will not bring back your grandsons, nor your son. He was wrong, but it's also wrong for the government

to kill him.”

“I see. And you think I’ve never heard this before?”

“No sir. I’m sure you’ve heard it all. You’ve seen it all. You’ve felt it all. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through. I’m just trying to avoid it myself.”

“What else do you want?”

“Could you spare five minutes?”

“We’ve been talking for three minutes. You have two more.” He glanced at his watch as if to set a timer, then eased his long fingers into the pockets of his pants. His eyes returned to the window and the street beyond it.

“The Memphis paper quoted you as saying you wanted to be there when they strapped Sam Cayhall in the gas chamber; that you wanted to look him in the eyes.”

“That’s an accurate quote. But I don’t believe it’ll ever happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because we have a rotten criminal justice system. He’s been coddled and protected in prison for almost ten years now. His appeals go on and on. You’re filing appeals and pulling strings at this very moment to keep him alive. The system is sick. We don’t expect justice.”

“I assure you he’s not being coddled. Death row is a horrible place. I just left it.”

“Yeah, but he’s alive. He’s living and breathing and watching television and reading books. He’s talking to you. He’s filing lawsuits. And when and if death gets near, he’ll have plenty of time to make plans for it. He can say his good-byes. Say his prayers. My grandsons didn’t have time to say good-bye, Mr. Hall. They didn’t get to hug their parents and give them farewell kisses. They were simply blown to bits while they were playing.”

“I understand that, Mr. Kramer. But killing Sam will not bring them back.”

“No, it won’t. But it’ll make us feel a helluva lot better. It’ll ease a lot of pain. I’ve prayed a million times that I’ll live long enough to see him dead. I had a heart attack five years ago. They had me strapped to machines for two weeks, and the one thing that kept me

alive was my desire to outlive Sam Cayhall. I'll be there, Mr. Hall, if my doctors allow it. I'll be there to watch him die, then I'll come home and count my days."

"I'm sorry you feel this way."

"I'm sorry I do too. I'm sorry I ever heard the name Sam Cayhall."

Adam took a step backward and leaned on the counter near the cash register. He stared at the floor, and Mr. Kramer stared through the window. The sun was falling to the west, behind the building, and the quaint little museum was growing dimmer.

"I lost my father because of this," Adam said softly.

"I'm sorry. I read where he had committed suicide shortly after the last trial."

"Sam has suffered too, Mr. Kramer. He wrecked his family, and he wrecked yours. And he carries more guilt than you or I could ever imagine."

"Perhaps he won't be as burdened when he's dead."

"Perhaps. But why don't we stop the killing?"

"How do you expect me to stop it?"

"I read somewhere that you and the governor are old friends."

"Why is it any of your business?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

"He's a local boy. I've known him for many years."

"I met him last week for the first time. He has the power to grant clemency, you know."

"I wouldn't count on that."

"I'm not. I'm desperate, Mr. Kramer. I have nothing to lose at this point, except my grandfather. If you and your family are hell-bent on pushing for the execution, then the governor will certainly listen to you."

"You're right."

"And if you decided you didn't want an execution, I think the governor might listen to that as well."

"So it's all up to me," he said, finally moving. He walked in front of Adam and stopped near the window. "You're not only desperate, Mr. Hall, you're also naive."

"I won't argue that."

“It’s nice to know I have so much power. If I had known this before now, your grandfather would’ve been dead years ago.”

“He doesn’t deserve to die, Mr. Kramer,” Adam said as he walked to the door. He hadn’t expected to find sympathy. It was important only for Mr. Kramer to see him and know that other lives were being affected.

“Neither did my grandsons. Neither did my son.”

Adam opened the door, and said, “I’m sorry for the intrusion, and I thank you for your time. I have a sister, a cousin, and an aunt, Sam’s daughter. I just wanted you to know that Sam has a family, such as it is. We will suffer if he dies. If he’s not executed, he’ll never leave prison. He’ll simply wilt away and die some day very soon of natural causes.”

“You will suffer?”

“Yes sir. It’s a pathetic family, Mr. Kramer, filled with tragedy. I’m trying to avoid another one.”

Mr. Kramer turned and looked at him. His face bore no expression. “Then I feel sorry for you.”

“Thanks again,” Adam said.

“Good day, sir,” Mr. Kramer said without a smile.

Adam left the building and walked along a shaded street until he was in the center of town. He found the memorial park, and sat on the same bench not far from the bronze statue of the little boys. After a few minutes, though, he was tired of the guilt and memories, and he walked away.

He went to the same café a block away, drank coffee, and toyed with a grilled cheese. He heard a Sam Cayhall conversation several tables away, but couldn’t discern what exactly was being said.

He checked into a motel and called Lee. She sounded sober, and maybe a bit relieved that he would not be there tonight. He promised to return tomorrow evening. By the time it was dark, Adam had been asleep for half an hour.

Thirty-one

Adam drove through downtown Memphis in the predawn hours, and was locked in his office by 7 a.m. By eight, he'd talked to E. Garner Goodman three times. Goodman, it seemed, was wired and also having trouble sleeping. They discussed at length the issue of Keyes' representation at trial. The Cayhall file was filled with memos and research about what went wrong at trial, but little of it placed blame on Benjamin Keyes.

But that had been many years ago, when the gas chamber seemed too distant to worry about. Goodman was pleased to hear that Sam now felt he should've testified at trial, and that Keyes had stopped him. Goodman was skeptical of the truth at this point, but he would take Sam's word for it.

Both Goodman and Adam knew the issue should've been raised years ago, and that to do so now was a long shot at best. Law books were getting thicker by the week with Supreme Court decisions barring legitimate claims because they weren't timely filed. But it was a real issue, one always examined by the courts, and Adam got excited as he drafted and redrafted the claim and swapped faxes with Goodman.

Again, the claim would first be filed under the postconviction relief statutes in state court. He hoped for a quick denial there so he could immediately run to federal court.

At ten, he faxed his final draft to the clerk of the Mississippi Supreme Court, and also faxed a copy of it to the attention of Breck Jefferson in Slattery's office. Faxes also went to the clerk of the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans. Then he called the Death Clerk at the Supreme Court, and told Mr. Olander what he was doing. Mr. Olander instructed him to immediately fax a copy to Washington.

Darlene knocked on the door, and Adam unlocked it. He had a visitor waiting in the reception area, a Mr. Wyn Lettner. Adam thanked her, and a few minutes later walked down the hall and greeted Lettner, who was alone and dressed like a man who owned a trout dock. Deck shoes, fishing cap. They exchanged pleasantries: fish were biting, Irene was fine, when was he coming back to Calico Rock?

"I'm in town on business, and I just wanted to see you for a few minutes," he said in a low whisper with his back to the receptionist.

"Sure," Adam whispered. "My office is down the hall."

"No. Let's take a walk."

They rode the elevator to the lobby, and stepped from the building onto the pedestrian mall. Lettner bought a bag of roasted peanuts from a pushcart vendor, and offered Adam a handful. He declined. They walked slowly north toward city hall and the federal building. Lettner alternately ate the peanuts and tossed them to the pigeons.

"How's Sam?" he finally asked.

"He has two weeks. How would you feel if you had two weeks?"

"Guess I'd be praying a lot."

"He's not at that point yet, but it won't be long."

"Is it gonna happen?"

"It's certainly being planned. There's nothing in writing to stop it."

Lettner threw a handful of peanuts into his mouth. "Well, good luck to you. Since you came to see me, I've found myself pulling for you and ol' Sam."

"Thanks. And you came to Memphis to wish me luck?"

"Not exactly. After you left, I thought a lot about Sam and the Kramer bombing. I looked at my personal files and records—stuff I haven't thought about in years. It brought back a lot of memories. I called a few of my old buddies and we told war stories about the Klan. Those were the days."

"I'm sorry that I missed them."

"Anyway, I thought of a few things that maybe I should've told you."

“Such as.”

“There’s more to the Dogan story. You know he died a year after he testified.”

“Sam told me.”

“He and his wife were killed when their house blew up. Some kind of propane leak in the heater. House filled up with gas, and something ignited it. Went off like a bomb, a huge fireball. Buried them in sandwich bags.”

“Sad, but so what?”

“We never believed it was an accident. The crime lab boys down there tried to reconstruct the heater. A lot of it was destroyed, but they were of the opinion it had been rigged to leak.”

“How does this affect Sam?”

“It doesn’t affect Sam.”

“Then why are we talking about it?”

“It might affect you.”

“I really don’t follow.”

“Dogan had a son, a kid who joined the Army in 1979 and was sent to Germany. At some point in the summer of 1980, Dogan and Sam were indicted again by the circuit court in Greenville, and shortly thereafter it became widely known that Dogan had agreed to testify against Sam. It was a big story. In October of 1980, Dogan’s son went AWOL in Germany. Vanished.” He crunched on some peanuts and tossed the hulls to a covey of pigeons. “Never found him either. Army searched high and low. Months went by. Then a year. Dogan died not knowing what happened to the kid.”

“What happened to him?”

“Don’t know. To this day, he’s never turned up.”

“He died?”

“Probably. There was no sign of him.”

“Who killed him?”

“Maybe the same person who killed his parents.”

“And who might that be?”

“We had a theory, but no suspect. We thought at the time that the son was grabbed before the trial as a warning to Dogan. Perhaps Dogan knew secrets.”

“Then why kill Dogan after the trial?”

They stopped under a shade tree and sat on a bench in Court Square. Adam finally took some peanuts.

“Who knew the details of the bombing?” Lettner asked. “All the details.”

“Sam. Jeremiah Dogan.”

“Right. And who was their lawyer in the first two trials?”

“Clovis Brazelton.”

“Would it be safe to assume Brazelton knew the details?”

“I suppose. He was active in the Klan, wasn’t he?”

“Yep, he was a Klucker. That makes three—Sam, Dogan, and Brazelton. Anybody else?”

Adam thought for a second. “Perhaps the mysterious accomplice.”

“Perhaps. Dogan’s dead. Sam wouldn’t talk. And Brazelton died many years ago.”

“How’d he die?”

“Plane crash. The Kramer case made him a hero down there, and he was able to parlay his fame into a very successful law practice. He liked to fly, so he bought himself a plane and buzzed around everywhere trying lawsuits. A real big shot. He was flying back from the Coast one night when the plane disappeared from radar. They found his body in a tree. The weather was clear. The FAA said there’d been some type of engine failure.”

“Another mysterious death.”

“Yep. So everybody’s dead but Sam, and he’s getting close.”

“Any link between Dogan’s death and Brazelton’s?”

“No. They were years apart. But the theory includes the scenario that the deaths were the work of the same person.”

“So who’s at work here?”

“Someone who’s very concerned about secrets. Could be Sam’s mysterious accomplice, John Doe.”

“That’s a pretty wild theory.”

“Yes, it is. And it’s one with absolutely no proof to support it. But I told you in Calico Rock that we always suspected Sam had help. Or perhaps Sam was merely a helper for John Doe. At any rate, when

Sam screwed up and got caught, John Doe vanished. Perhaps he's been at work eliminating witnesses."

"Why would he kill Dogan's wife?"

"Because she happened to be in bed with him when the house blew up."

"Why would he kill Dogan's son?"

"To keep Dogan quiet. Remember, when Dogan testified his son had been missing for four months."

"I've never read anything about the son."

"It was not well known. It happened in Germany. We advised Dogan to keep it quiet."

"I'm confused. Dogan didn't finger anybody else at trial. Only Sam. Why would John Doe kill him afterward?"

"Because he still knew secrets. And because he testified against another Klansman."

Adam cracked two shells and dropped the peanuts in front of a single, fat pigeon. Lettner finished the bag and threw another handful of hulls on the sidewalk near a water fountain. It was almost noon, and dozens of office workers hurried through the park in pursuit of the perfect thirty-minute lunch.

"You hungry?" Lettner asked, glancing at his watch.

"No."

"Thirsty? I need a beer."

"No. How does John Doe affect me?"

"Sam's the only witness left, and he's scheduled to be silenced in two weeks. If he dies without talking, then John Doe can live in peace. If Sam doesn't die in two weeks, then John Doe is still anxious. But if Sam starts talking, then somebody might get hurt."

"Me?"

"You're the one trying to find the truth."

"You think he's out there?"

"Could be. Or he might be driving a cab in Montreal. Or maybe he never existed."

Adam glanced over both shoulders with exaggerated looks of fear.

"I know it sounds crazy," Lettner said.

"John Doe is safe. Sam ain't talking."

“There’s a potential danger, Adam. I just wanted you to know.”

“I’m not scared. If Sam gave me John Doe’s name right now, I’d scream it in the streets and file motions by the truckload. And it wouldn’t do any good. It’s too late for new theories of guilt or innocence.”

“What about the governor?”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, I want you to be careful.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Let’s get a beer.”

I’ve got to keep this guy away from Lee, Adam thought. “It’s five minutes before noon. Surely you don’t start this early.”

“Oh, sometimes I start with breakfast.”

John Doe sat on a park bench with a newspaper in front of his face and pigeons around his feet. He was eighty feet away, so he couldn’t hear what they were saying. He thought he recognized the old man with Adam as an FBI agent whose face had appeared in the newspapers years ago. He would follow the guy and find out who he was and where he lived.

Wedge was getting bored with Memphis, and this suited him fine. The kid worked at the office and drove to Parchman and slept at the condo, and seemed to be spinning his wheels. Wedge followed the news carefully. His name had not been mentioned. No one knew about him.

The note on the counter was dated properly. She had given the time as 7:15 p.m. It was Lee’s handwriting, which was not neat to begin with but was even sloppier now. She said she was in bed with what appeared to be the flu. Please don’t disturb. She’d been to the doctor who told her to sleep it off. For added effect, a prescription bottle

from a local pharmacy was sitting nearby next to a half-empty glass of water. It had today's date on it.

Adam quickly checked the wastebasket under the sink—no sign of booze.

He quietly put a frozen pizza in the microwave and went to the patio to watch the barges on the river.

Thirty-two

The first kite of the morning arrived shortly after breakfast, as Sam stood in his baggy boxer shorts and leaned through the bars with a cigarette. It was from Preacher Boy, and it brought bad news. It read:

Dear Sam:

The dream is finished. The Lord worked on me last night and finally showed me the rest of it. I wish he hadn't done it. There's a lot to it, and I'll explain it all if you want. Bottom line is that you'll be with him shortly. He told me to tell you to get things right with him. He's waiting. The journey will be rough, but the rewards will be worth it. I love you.

Brother Randy

Bon voyage, Sam mumbled to himself as he crumpled the paper and threw it on the floor. The kid was slowly deteriorating, and there was no way to help him. Sam had already prepared a series of motions to be filed at some uncertain point in the future when Brother Randy was thoroughly insane.

He saw Gullitt's hands come through the bars next door.

"How you doin', Sam?" Gullitt finally asked.

"God's upset with me," Sam said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Preacher Boy finished his dream last night."

"Thank God for that."

"It was more like a nightmare."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it. Crazy bastard has dreams when he's wide awake. They said yesterday he's been crying for a week."

"Can you hear him?"

"No. Thank God."

"Poor kid. I've done some motions for him, just in case I leave this place. I want to leave them with you."

"I don't know what to do with them."

"I'll leave instructions. They're to be sent to his lawyer."

Gullitt whistled softly. "Man oh man, Sam. What am I gonna do if you leave? I ain't talked to my lawyer in a year."

"Your lawyer is a moron."

"Then help me fire him, Sam. Please. You just fired yours. Help me fire mine. I don't know how to do it."

"Then who'll represent you?"

"Your grandson. Tell him he can have my case."

Sam smiled, then he chuckled. And then he laughed at the idea of rounding up his buddies on the Row and delivering their hopeless cases to Adam.

"What's so damned funny?" Gullitt demanded.

"You. What makes you think he'll want your case?"

"Come on, Sam. Talk to the kid for me. He must be smart if he's your grandson."

"What if they gas me? Do you want a lawyer who's just lost his first death row client?"

"Hell, I can't be particular right now."

"Relax, J.B. You have years to go."

"How many years?"

"At least five, maybe more."

"You swear?"

"You have my word. I'll put it in writing. If I'm wrong, you can sue me."

"Real funny, Sam. Real funny."

A door clicked open at the end of the hall, and heavy footsteps came their way. It was Packer, and he stopped in front of number six. "Mornin', Sam," he said.

"Mornin', Packer."

"Put your reds on. You have a visitor."

"Who is it?"

“Somebody who wants to talk to you.”

“Who is it?” Sam repeated as he quickly slipped into his red jumpsuit. He grabbed his cigarettes. He didn’t care who the visitor was or what he wanted. A visit by anyone was a welcome relief from his cell.

“Hurry up, Sam,” Packer said.

“Is it my lawyer?” Sam asked as he slid his feet into the rubber shower shoes.

“No.” Packer handcuffed him through the bars, and the door to his cell opened. They left Tier A and headed for the same little room where the lawyers always waited.

Packer removed the handcuffs and slammed the door behind Sam, who focused on the heavy-set woman seated on the other side of the screen. He rubbed his wrists for her benefit and took a few steps to the seat opposite her. He did not recognize the woman. He sat down, lit a cigarette, and glared at her.

She scooted forward in her chair, and nervously said, “Mr. Cayhall, my name is Dr. Stegall.” She slipped a business card through the opening. “I’m the psychiatrist for the State Department of Corrections.”

Sam studied the card on the counter in front of him. He picked it up and examined it suspiciously. “Says here your name is N. Stegall. Dr. N. Stegall.”

“That’s correct.”

“That’s a strange name, N. I’ve never met a woman named N. before.”

The small, anxious grin disappeared from her face, and her spine stiffened. “It’s just an initial, okay. There are reasons for it.”

“What’s it stand for?”

“That’s really none of your business.”

“Nancy? Nelda? Nona?”

“If I wanted you to know, I would’ve put it on the card, now wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know. Must be something horrible, whatever it is. Nick? Ned? I can’t imagine hiding behind an initial.”

“I’m not hiding, Mr. Cayhall.”

“Just call me S., okay?”

Her jaws clenched and she scowled through the screen. “I’m here to help you.”

“You’re too late, N.”

“Please call me Dr. Stegall.”

“Oh, well, in that case you can call me Lawyer Cayhall.”

“Lawyer Cayhall?”

“Yes. I know more law than most of the clowns who sit over there where you are.”

She managed a slight, patronizing smile, then said, “I’m supposed to consult you at this stage of the proceedings to see if I can be of any assistance. You don’t have to cooperate if you don’t want.”

“Thank you so much.”

“If you need to talk to me, or if you need any medication now or later, just let me know.”

“How about some whiskey?”

“I can’t prescribe that.”

“Why not?”

“Prison regulations, I guess.”

“What can you prescribe?”

“Tranquilizers, Valium, sleeping pills, things like that.”

“For what?”

“For your nerves.”

“My nerves are fine.”

“Are you able to sleep?”

Sam thought for a long moment. “Well, to be honest, I am having a little trouble. Yesterday I slept off and on for no more than twelve hours. Usually I’m good for fifteen or sixteen.”

“Twelve hours?”

“Yeah. How often do you get over here to death row?”

“Not very often.”

“That’s what I thought. If you knew what you were doing, you’d know that we average about sixteen hours a day.”

“I see. And what else might I learn?”

“Oh, lots of things. You’d know that Randy Dupree is slowly going insane, and no one around here cares about him. Why haven’t you

been to see him?”

“There are five thousand inmates here, Mr. Cayhall. I—”

“Then leave. Go away. Go tend to the rest of them. I’ve been here for nine and a half years and never met you. Now that y’all are about to gas me, you come running over with a bag full of drugs to calm my nerves so I’ll be sweet and gentle when you kill me. Why should you care about my nerves and my sleeping habits? You’re working for the state and the state is working like hell to execute me.”

“I’m doing my job, Mr. Cayhall.”

“Your job stinks, Ned. Get a real job where you can help people. You’re here right now because I’ve got thirteen days and you want me to go in peace. You’re just another flunkie for the state.”

“I didn’t come here to be abused.”

“Then get your big ass out of here. Leave. Go and sin no more.”

She jumped to her feet and grabbed her briefcase. “You have my card. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Sure, Ned. Don’t sit by the phone.” Sam stood and walked to the door on his side. He banged it twice with the palm of his hand, and waited with his back to her until Packer opened it.

Adam was packing his briefcase in preparation for a quick trip to Parchman when the phone rang. Darlene said it was urgent. She was right.

The caller identified himself as the clerk of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, and was remarkably friendly. He said the Cayhall petition attacking the constitutionality of the gas chamber had been received on Monday, had been assigned to a three-judge panel, and that the panel wanted to hear oral argument from both sides. Could he be in New Orleans at 1 p.m. tomorrow, Friday, for the oral argument?

Adam almost dropped the phone. Tomorrow? Of course, he said after a slight hesitation. One o’clock sharp, the clerk said, then

explained that the court did not normally hear oral argument in the afternoon. But because of the urgency of this matter, the court had scheduled a special hearing. He asked Adam if he'd ever argued before the Fifth Circuit before.

Are you kidding, Adam thought. A year ago I was studying for the bar exam. He said no, in fact he had not, and the clerk said he would immediately fax to Adam a copy of the court's rules governing oral argument. Adam thanked him profusely, and hung up.

He sat on the edge of the table and tried to collect his thoughts. Darlene brought the fax to him, and he asked her to check the flights to New Orleans.

Had he caught the attention of the court with his issues? Was this good news, or just a formality? In his brief career as a lawyer, he had stood alone before the bench to argue a client's position on only one occasion. But Emmitt Wycoff had been seated nearby, just in case. And the judge had been a familiar one. And it had happened in downtown Chicago, not far from his office. Tomorrow he would walk into a strange courtroom in a strange city and try to defend an eleventh-hour plea before a panel of judges he'd never heard of.

He called E. Garner Goodman with the news. Goodman had been to the Fifth Circuit many times, and as he talked Adam relaxed. It was neither good news nor bad, in Goodman's opinion. The court was obviously interested in the lawsuit, but they'd heard it all before. Both Texas and Louisiana had sent similar constitutional claims to the Fifth Circuit in recent years.

Goodman assured him that he could handle the arguments. Just be prepared, he said. And try to relax. It might be possible for him to fly to New Orleans and be there, but Adam said no. He said he could do it alone. Keep in touch, Goodman said.

Adam checked with Darlene, then locked himself in his office. He memorized the rules for oral argument. He studied the lawsuit attacking the gas chamber. He read briefs and cases. He called Parchman and left word for Sam that he would not be there today.

He worked until dark, then made the dreaded trip to Lee's condo. The same note was sitting on the counter, untouched and still declaring that she was in bed with the flu. He eased around the apartment and saw no signs of movement or life during the day.

Her bedroom door was slightly opened. He tapped on it while pushing. "Lee," he called out gently into the darkness. "Lee, are you all right?"

There was movement in the bed, though he couldn't see what it was. "Yes dear," she said. "Come in."

Adam slowly sat on the edge of the bed and tried to focus on her. The only light was a faint beam from the hallway. She pushed herself up and rested on the pillows. "I'm better," she said with a scratchy voice. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm fine, Lee. I'm worried about you."

"I'll be okay. It's a wicked little virus."

The first pungent vapor wafted from the bedsheets and covers, and Adam wanted to cry. It was the reeking odor of stale vodka or gin or sour mash, or maybe a combination of everything. He couldn't see her eyes in the murky shadows, only the vague outline of her face. She was wearing a dark shirt of some sort.

"What type of medication?" he asked.

"I don't know. Just some pills. The doctor said it'll last for a few days, then quickly disappear. I feel better already."

Adam started to say something about the oddity of a flu-like virus in late July, but let it pass. "Are you able to eat?"

"No appetite, really."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No dear. How have you been? What day is it?"

"It's Thursday."

"I feel like I've been in a cave for a week."

Adam had two choices. He could play along with the wicked little virus act and hope she stopped the drinking before it got worse. Or he could confront her now and make her realize she was not fooling him. Maybe they would fight, and maybe this was what you were supposed to do with drunks who'd fallen off the wagon. How was he supposed to know what to do?

“Does your doctor know you’re drinking?” he asked, holding his breath.

There was a long pause. “I haven’t been drinking,” she said, almost inaudible.

“Come on, Lee. I found the vodka bottle in the wastebasket. I know the other three bottles of beer disappeared last Saturday. You smell like a brewery right now. You’re not fooling anyone, Lee. You’re drinking heavily, and I want to help.”

She sat straighter, and pulled her legs up to her chest. Then she was still for a long time. Adam glanced at her silhouette. Minutes passed. The apartment was deathly quiet.

“How’s my dear father?” she muttered. Her words were sluggish, but still bitter.

“I didn’t see him today.”

“Don’t you think we’ll be better off when he’s dead?”

Adam looked at her silhouette. “No, Lee, I don’t. Do you?”

She was silent and still for at least a minute. “You feel sorry for him, don’t you?” she finally asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Is he pitiful?”

“Yes, he is.”

“What does he look like?”

“A very old man, with plenty of gray hair that’s always oily and pulled back. He has a short gray beard. Lots of wrinkles. His skin is very pale.”

“What does he wear?”

“A red jumpsuit. All death row inmates wear the same thing.”

Another long pause as she thought about this. Then she said, “I guess it’s easy to feel sorry for him.”

“It is for me.”

“But you see, Adam, I’ve never seen him the way you see him. I saw a different person.”

“And what did you see?”

She adjusted the blanket around her legs, then grew still again. “My father was a person I despised.”

“Do you still despise him?”

“Yes. Very much so. I think he should go ahead and die. God knows he deserves it.”

“Why does he deserve it?”

This prompted another spell of silence. She moved slightly to her left and took a cup or glass from the nightstand. She sipped slowly, as Adam watched her shadows. He didn’t ask what she was drinking.

“Does he talk to you about the past?”

“Only when I ask questions. We’ve talked about Eddie, but I promised we wouldn’t do it again.”

“He’s the reason Eddie’s dead. Does he realize this?”

“Maybe.”

“Did you tell him? Did you blame him for Eddie?”

“No.”

“You should have. You’re too easy on him. He needs to know what he’s done.”

“I think he does. But you said yourself it’s not fair to torment him at this point of his life.”

“How about Joe Lincoln? Did you talk to him about Joe Lincoln?”

“I told Sam that you and I went to the old family place. He asked me if I knew about Joe Lincoln. I said that I did.”

“Did he deny it?”

“No. He showed a lot of remorse.”

“He’s a liar.”

“No. I think he was sincere.”

Another long pause as she sat motionless. Then, “Has he told you about the lynching?”

Adam closed his eyes and rested his elbows on his knees. “No,” he mumbled.

“I didn’t think so.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Lee.”

“Yes you do. You came down here full of questions about the family and about your past. Two weeks ago you just couldn’t get enough of the Cayhall family misery. You wanted all the blood and gore.”

“I’ve heard enough,” he said.

“What day is it?” she asked.

“It’s Thursday, Lee. You’ve already asked once.”

“One of my girls was due today. Her second child. I didn’t call the office. I guess it’s the medication.”

“And the alcohol.”

“All right, dammit. So I’m an alcoholic. Who can blame me? Sometimes I wish I had the guts to do what Eddie did.”

“Come on, Lee. Let me help you.”

“Oh, you’ve already helped a great deal, Adam. I was fine, nice and sober until you arrived.”

“Okay. I was wrong. I’m sorry. I just didn’t realize—” His words trailed off, then quit.

She moved slightly and Adam watched as she took another sip. A heavy silence engulfed them as minutes passed. The rancid smell emanated from her end of the bed.

“Mother told me the story,” she said quietly, almost whispering. “She said she’d heard rumors about it for years. Long before they married she knew he’d helped lynch a young black man.”

“Please, Lee.”

“I never asked him about it, but Eddie did. We had whispered about it for many years, and finally one day Eddie just up and confronted him with the story. They had a nasty fight, but Sam admitted it was true. It really didn’t bother him, he said. The black kid had allegedly raped a white girl, but she was white trash and many people doubted if it was really a rape. This is according to Mother’s version. Sam was fifteen or so at the time, and a bunch of men went down to the jail, got the black kid, and took him out in the woods. Sam’s father, of course, was the ringleader, and his brothers were involved.”

“That’s enough, Lee.”

“They beat him with a bullwhip, then hung him from a tree. My dear father was right in the middle of it. He couldn’t really deny it, you know, because somebody took a picture of it.”

“A photograph?”

“Yeah. A few years later the photo found its way into a book about the plight of Negroes in the Deep South. It was published in

1947. My mother had a copy of it for years. Eddie found it in the attic.”

“And Sam’s in the photograph.”

“Sure. Smiling from ear to ear. They’re standing under the tree and the black guy’s feet are dangling just above their heads. Everybody’s having a ball. Just another nigger lynching. There are no credits with the photo, no names. The picture speaks for itself. It’s described as a lynching in rural Mississippi, 1936.”

“Where’s the book?”

“Over there in the drawer. I’ve kept it in storage with other family treasures since the foreclosure. I got it out the other day. I thought you might want to see it.”

“No. I do not want to see it.”

“Go ahead. You wanted to know about your family. Well, there they are. Grandfather, great-grandfather, and all sorts of Cayhalls at their very best. Caught in the act, and quite proud of it.”

“Stop it, Lee.”

“There were other lynchings, you know.”

“Shut up, Lee. Okay? I don’t want to hear any more.”

She leaned to her side and reached for the nightstand.

“What are you drinking, Lee?”

“Cough syrup.”

“Bullshit!” Adam jumped to his feet and walked through the darkness to the nightstand. Lee quickly gulped the last of the liquid. He grabbed the glass from her hand and sniffed the top of it. “This is bourbon.”

“There’s more in the pantry. Would you get it for me?”

“No! You’ve had more than enough.”

“If I want it, I’ll get it.”

“No you won’t, Lee. You’re not drinking any more tonight. Tomorrow I’ll take you to the doctor, and we’ll get some help.”

“I don’t need help. I need a gun.”

Adam placed the glass on the dresser and switched on a lamp. She shielded her eyes for a few seconds, then looked at him. They were red and puffy. Her hair was wild, dirty, and unkempt.

“Not a pretty sight, huh,” she said, slurring her words, and looking away.

“No. But we’ll get help, Lee. We’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Get me a drink, Adam. Please.”

“No.”

“Then leave me alone. This is all your fault, you know. Now, leave, please. Go on to bed.”

Adam grabbed a pillow from the center of the bed and threw it against the door. “I’m sleeping here tonight,” he said, pointing at the pillow. “I’m locking the door, and you’re not leaving this room.”

She glared at him, but said nothing. He switched off the lamp, and the room was completely dark. He pressed the lock on the knob and stretched out on the carpet against the door. “Now sleep it off, Lee.”

“Go to bed, Adam. I promise I won’t leave the room.”

“No. You’re drunk, and I’m not moving. If you try to open this door, I’ll physically put you back in the bed.”

“That sounds sort of romantic.”

“Knock it off, Lee. Go to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Try it.”

“Let’s tell Cayhall stories, okay, Adam? I know a few more lynching stories.”

“Shut up, Lee!” Adam screamed, and she was suddenly quiet. The bed squeaked as she wiggled and flipped and got herself situated. After fifteen minutes, she was subdued. After thirty minutes, the floor became uncomfortable and Adam rolled from side to side.

Sleep came in brief naps, interrupted by long periods of staring at the ceiling and worrying about her, and about the Fifth Circuit. At one point during the night he sat with his back to the door and stared through the darkness in the direction of the drawer. Was the book really there? He was tempted to sneak over and get it, then ease into the bathroom to look for the picture. But he couldn’t risk waking her. And he didn’t want to see it.

Thirty-three

He found a pint of bourbon hidden behind a box of saltines in the pantry, and emptied it in the sink. It was dark outside. Sunlight was an hour away. He made the coffee strong, and sipped it on the sofa while he rehearsed the arguments he would present in a few hours in New Orleans.

He reviewed his notes on the patio at dawn, and by seven he was in the kitchen making toast. No sign of Lee. He didn't want a confrontation, but one was necessary. He had things to say, and she had apologies to make, and he rattled plates and forks on the counter. The volume was increased for the morning news.

But there was no movement from her part of the condo. After he showered and dressed, he gently turned the knob to her door. It was locked. She had sealed herself in her cave, and prevented the painful talk of the morning after. He wrote a note and explained that he would be in New Orleans today and tonight, and he would see her tomorrow. He said he was sorry for now, and they would talk about it later. He pleaded with her not to drink.

The note was placed on the counter where she couldn't miss it. Adam left the condo and drove to the airport.

The direct flight to New Orleans took fifty-five minutes. Adam drank fruit juice and tried to sit comfortably to soothe his stiff back. He'd slept less than three hours on the floor by the door, and vowed not to do it again. By her own admission, she'd been through recovery three times over the years, and if she couldn't stay off the booze by herself there was certainly nothing he could do to help. He would stay in Memphis until this miserable case was over, and if his aunt couldn't stay sober, then he could manage things from a hotel room.

He fought himself to forget about her for the next few hours. He needed to concentrate on legal matters, not lynchings and photographs and horror stories from the past; not his beloved aunt and her problems.

The plane touched down in New Orleans, and suddenly his concentration became sharper. He mentally clicked off the names of dozens of recent death penalty cases from the Fifth Circuit and the U.S. Supreme Court.

The hired car was a Cadillac sedan, one arranged by Darlene and charged to Kravitz & Bane. It came with a driver, and as Adam relaxed in the rear seat he conceded that life in a big firm did indeed have certain advantages. Adam had never been to New Orleans before, and the drive from the airport could've taken place in any city. Just traffic and expressways. The driver turned onto Poydras Street by the Superdome, and suddenly they were downtown. He explained to his passenger that the French Quarter was a few blocks away, not far from Adam's hotel. The car stopped on Camp Street, and Adam stepped onto the sidewalk in front of a building simply called the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. It was an impressive structure, with Greek columns and lots of steps leading to the front entrance.

He found the clerk's office on the main floor, and asked for the gentleman he'd spoken to, a Mr. Feriday. Mr. Feriday was as sincere and courteous in person as he'd been on the phone. He properly registered Adam, and explained some of the rules of the court. He asked Adam if he wanted a quick tour of the place. It was almost noon, the place was not busy, and it was the perfect time for a look around. They headed for the courtrooms, passing along the way various offices of the judges and staff.

"The Fifth Circuit has fifteen judges," Mr. Feriday explained as they walked casually over marble floors, "and their offices are along these hallways. Right now the court has three vacancies, and the nominations are tied up in Washington." The corridors were dark and quiet, as if great minds were at work behind the broad wooden doors.

Mr. Feriday went first to the En Banc courtroom, a large, intimidating stage with fifteen chairs sitting snugly together in a half-circle in the front of the room. “Most of the work here is assigned to three-judge panels. But occasionally the entire body sits en banc,” he explained quietly, as if still in awe of the spectacular room. The bench was elevated well above the rest of the room, so that the lawyers at the podium below looked upward as they pleaded. The room was marble and dark wood, heavy drapes and a huge chandelier. It was ornate but understated, old but meticulously maintained, and as Adam inspected it he felt quite frightened. Only rarely does the entire court sit en banc, Mr. Feriday explained again as if he were instructing a first-year student of the law. The great civil rights decisions of the sixties and seventies took place right here, he said with no small amount of pride. Portraits of deceased justices hung behind the bench.

As beautiful and stately as it was, Adam hoped he never saw it again, at least not as a lawyer representing a client. They walked down the hall to the West Courtroom, which was smaller than the first but just as intimidating. This is where the three-judge panels operate, Mr. Feriday explained as they walked past the seats in the spectators’ section, through the bar and to the podium. The bench again was elevated, though not as lofty or as long as En Banc.

“Virtually all oral arguments take place in the morning, beginning at nine,” Mr. Feriday said. “Your case is a bit different because it’s a death case that’s going down to the wire.” He pointed a crooked finger at the seats in the back. “You’ll need to be seated out there a few minutes before one, and the clerk will call the case. Then you come through the bar and sit right here at counsel table. You’ll go first, and you have twenty minutes.”

Adam knew this, but it was certainly nice to be walked through it.

Mr. Feriday pointed to a device on the podium which resembled a traffic light. “This is the timer,” he said gravely. “And it is very important. Twenty minutes, okay. There are horrific stories of long-winded lawyers who ignored this. Not a pretty sight. The green is on when you’re talking. The yellow comes on when you want your warning—two minutes, five minutes, thirty seconds, whatever.

When the red comes on, you simply stop in mid-sentence and go sit down. It's that simple. Any questions?"

"Who are the judges?"

"McNeely, Robichaux, and Judy." He said this as if Adam personally knew all three. "There's a waiting room over there, and there's a library on the third floor. Just be here about ten minutes before one. Any more questions?"

"No sir. Thanks."

"I'm in my office if you need me. Good luck." They shook hands. Mr. Feriday left Adam standing at the podium.

At ten minutes before one, Adam walked through the massive oak doors of the West Courtroom for the second time, and found other lawyers preparing for battle. On the first row behind the bar, Attorney General Steve Roxburgh and his cluster of assistants were huddled together plotting tactics. They hushed when Adam walked in, and a few nodded and tried to smile. Adam sat by himself along the aisle and ignored them.

Lucas Mann was seated on their side of the courtroom, though several rows behind Roxburgh and his boys. He casually read a newspaper, and waved to Adam when their eyes met. It was good to see him. He was starched from head to toe in wrinkle-free khaki, and his tie was wild enough to glow in the dark. It was obvious Mann was not intimidated by the Fifth Circuit and its trappings, and equally as obvious that he was keeping his distance from Roxburgh. He was only the attorney for Parchman, only doing his job. If the Fifth Circuit granted a stay and Sam didn't die, Lucas Mann would be pleased. Adam nodded and smiled at him.

Roxburgh and his gang rehuddled. Morris Henry, Dr. Death, was in the middle of it, explaining things to lesser minds.

Adam breathed deeply and tried to relax. It was quite difficult. His stomach was churning and his feet twitched, and he kept telling himself that it would only last for twenty minutes. The three judges

couldn't kill him, they could only embarrass him, and even that could last for only twenty minutes. He could endure anything for twenty minutes. He glanced at his notes, and to calm himself he tried to think of Sam—not Sam the racist, the murderer, the lynch mob thug, but Sam the client, the old man wasting away on death row who was entitled to die in peace and dignity. Sam was about to get twenty minutes of this court's valuable time, so his lawyer had to make the most of it.

A heavy door thudded shut somewhere, and Adam jumped in his seat. The court crier appeared from behind the bench and announced that this honorable court was now in session. He was followed by three figures in flowing black robes—McNeely, Robichaux, and Judy, each of whom carried files and seemed to be totally without humor or goodwill. They sat in their massive leather chairs high up on the shiny, dark, oak-paneled bench, and looked down upon the courtroom. The case of State of Mississippi v. Sam Cayhall was called, and the attorneys were summoned from the back of the room. Adam nervously walked through the swinging gate in the bar, and was followed by Steve Roxburgh. The Assistant Attorney Generals kept their seats, as did Lucas Mann and a handful of spectators. Most of these, Adam would later learn, were reporters.

The presiding judge was Judy, the Honorable T. Eileen Judy, a young woman from Texas. Robichaux was from Louisiana, and in his late fifties. McNeely looked to be a hundred and twenty, and was also from Texas. Judy made a brief statement about the case, then asked Mr. Adam Hall from Chicago if he was ready to proceed. He stood nervously, his knees rubber-like, his bowels jumping, his voice high and nervous, and he said that, yes, in fact he was ready to go. He made it to the podium in the center of the room and looked up, way up, it seemed, at the panel behind the bench.

The green light beside him came on, and he assumed correctly this meant to get things started. The room was silent. The judges glared down at him. He cleared his throat, glanced at the portraits of dead honorables hanging on the wall, and plunged into a vicious attack on the gas chamber as a means of execution.

He avoided eye contact with the three of them, and for five minutes or so was allowed to repeat what he'd already submitted in his brief. It was post-lunch, in the heat of the summer, and it took a few minutes for the judges to shrug off the cobwebs.

"Mr. Hall, I think you're just repeating what you've already said in your brief," Judy said testily. "We're quite capable of reading, Mr. Hall."

Mr. Hall took it well, and thought to himself that this was his twenty minutes, and if he wanted to pick his nose and recite the alphabet then he should be allowed to do so. For twenty minutes. As green as he was, Adam had heard this comment before from an appellate judge. It happened while he was in law school and watching a case being argued. It was standard fare in oral argument.

"Yes, Your Honor," Adam said, carefully avoiding any reference to gender. He then moved on to discuss the effects of cyanide gas on laboratory rats, a study not included in his brief. The experiments had been conducted a year ago by some chemists in Sweden for the purpose of proving that humans do not die instantly when they inhale the poison. It had been funded by a European organization working to abolish the death penalty in America.

The rats went into seizures and convulsed. Their lungs and hearts stopped and started erratically for several minutes. The gas burst blood vessels throughout their bodies, including their brains. Their muscles quivered uncontrollably. They salivated and squeaked.

The obvious point of the study was that the rats did not die quickly, but in fact suffered a great deal. The tests were conducted with scientific integrity. Appropriate doses were given to the small animals. On the average, it took almost ten minutes for death to occur. Adam labored over the details, and as he warmed to his presentation his nerves settled a bit. The judges were not only listening, but seemed to be enjoying this discussion of dying rats.

Adam had found the study in a footnote to a recent North Carolina case. It was in the fine print, and had not been widely reported.

"Now, let me get this straight," Robichaux interrupted in a high-pitched voice. "You don't want your client to die in the gas chamber

because it's a cruel way to go, but are you telling us you don't mind if he's executed by lethal injection?"

"No, Your Honor. That's not what I'm saying. I do not want my client executed by any method."

"But lethal injection is the least offensive?"

"All methods are offensive, but lethal injection seems to be the least cruel. There's no doubt the gas chamber is a horrible way to die."

"Worse than being bombed? Blown up by dynamite?"

A heavy silence fell over the courtroom as Robichaux's words settled in. He had emphasized the word "dynamite," and Adam struggled for something appropriate. McNeely shot a nasty look at his colleague on the other side of the bench.

It was a cheap shot, and Adam was furious. He controlled his temper, and said firmly, "We're talking about methods of execution, Your Honor, not the crimes that send men to death row."

"Why don't you want to talk about the crime?"

"Because the crime is not an issue here. Because I have only twenty minutes, and my client has only twelve days."

"Perhaps your client shouldn't have been planting bombs?"

"Of course not. But he was convicted of his crime, and now he faces death in the gas chamber. Our point is that the chamber is a cruel way to execute people."

"What about the electric chair?"

"The same argument applies. There have been some hideous cases of people suffering terribly in the chair before they died."

"What about a firing squad?"

"Sounds cruel to me."

"And hanging?"

"I don't know much about hanging, but it too sounds awfully cruel."

"But you like the idea of lethal injection?"

"I didn't say I like it. I believe I said it was not as cruel as the other methods."

Justice McNeely interrupted and asked, "Mr. Hall, why did Mississippi switch from the gas chamber to lethal injection?"

This was covered thoroughly in the lawsuit and the brief, and Adam sensed immediately that McNeely was a friend. “I’ve condensed the legislative history of the law in my brief, Your Honor, but it was done principally to facilitate executions. The legislature admitted it was an easier way to die, and so to sidestep constitutional challenges such as this one it changed the method.”

“So the State has effectively admitted that there is a better way to execute people?”

“Yes sir. But the law took effect in 1984, and applies only to those inmates convicted afterward. It does not apply to Sam Cayhall.”

“I understand that. You’re asking us to strike down the gas chamber as a method. What happens if we do? What happens to your client and those like him who were convicted prior to 1984? Do they fall through the cracks? There is no provision in the law to execute them by lethal injection.”

Adam was anticipating the obvious question. Sam had already asked it. “I can’t answer that, Your Honor, except to say that I have great confidence in the Mississippi Legislature’s ability and willingness to pass a new law covering my client and those in his position.”

Judge Judy inserted herself at this point. “Assuming they do, Mr. Hall, what will you argue when you return here in three years?”

Thankfully, the yellow light came on, and Adam had only one minute remaining. “I’ll think of something,” he said with a grin. “Just give me time.”

“We’ve already seen a case like this, Mr. Hall,” Robichaux said. “In fact, it’s cited in your brief. A Texas case.”

“Yes, Your Honor. I’m asking the court to reconsider its decision on this issue. Virtually every state with a gas chamber or an electric chair has switched to lethal injection. The reason is obvious.”

He had a few seconds left, but decided it was a good place to stop. He didn’t want another question. “Thank you,” he said, and walked confidently back to his seat. It was over. He had held his breakfast, and performed quite well for a rookie. It would be easier the next time.

Roxburgh was wooden and methodical, and thoroughly prepared. He tried a few one-liners about rats and the crimes they commit, but it was a dismal effort at humor. McNeely peppered him with similar questions about why the states were rushing to lethal injection. Roxburgh stuck to his guns, and recited a long line of cases where the various federal circuits had endorsed death by gas, electricity, hanging, and firing squads. The established law was on his side, and he made the most of it. His twenty minutes raced by, and he returned to his seat as quickly as Adam had.

Judge Judy talked briefly about the urgency of this matter, and promised a ruling within days. Everyone rose in unison, and the three judges disappeared from the bench. The court crier declared matters to be in recess until Monday morning.

Adam shook hands with Roxburgh and made it through the doors before a reporter stopped him. He was with a paper in Jackson, and just had a couple of questions. Adam was polite, but declined comment. He then did the same for two more reporters. Roxburgh, typically, had things to say, and as Adam walked away, the reporters surrounded the Attorney General and shoved recorders near his face.

Adam wanted to leave the building. He stepped into the tropical heat, and quickly covered his eyes with sunglasses. "Have you had lunch?" a voice asked from close behind. It was Lucas Mann, in aviator sunglasses. They shook hands between the columns.

"I couldn't eat," Adam admitted.

"You did fine. It's quite nerve-racking, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Why are you here?"

"It's part of my job. The warden asked me to fly down and watch the argument. We'll wait until there's a ruling before we start preparations. Let's go eat."

Adam's driver stopped the car at the curb, and they got in.

"Do you know the city?" Mann asked.

"No. This is my first visit."

"The Bon Ton Café," Mann told the driver. "It's a wonderful old place just around the corner. Nice car."

"The benefits of working for a wealthy firm."

Lunch began with a novelty—raw oysters on the half shell. Adam had heard of them before, but had never been tempted. Mann artfully demonstrated the proper blending of horseradish, lemon juice, Tabasco, and cocktail sauce, then dropped the first oyster into the mixture. It was then delicately placed on a cracker and eaten in one bite. Adam's first oyster slid off the cracker and onto the table, but his second slid properly down his throat.

"Don't chew it," Mann instructed. "Just let it slither down." The next ten slithered down, and not soon enough for Adam. He was happy when the dozen shells on his plate were empty. They sipped Dixie beer and waited for shrimp remoulade.

"I saw where you're claiming ineffective assistance of counsel," Mann said, nibbling on a cracker.

"I'm sure we'll be filing everything from now on."

"The supreme court didn't waste any time with it."

"No, they didn't. Seems as if they're tired of Sam Cayhall. I'll file it in district court today, but I don't expect any relief from Slattery."

"I wouldn't either."

"What are my odds, with twelve days to go?"

"Getting slimmer by the day, but things are wildly unpredictable. Probably still around fifty-fifty. A few years back we came very close with Stockholm Turner. With two weeks to go, it looked certain. With a week to go, there was simply nothing else for him to file. He had a decent lawyer, but the appeals had run. He was given his last meal, and—"

"And his conjugal visit, with two prostitutes."

"How'd you know?"

"Sam told me all about it."

"It's true. He got a last minute stay, and now he's years away from the chamber. You never know."

"But what's your gut feeling?"

Mann took a long drink of beer and leaned backward as two large platters of shrimp remoulade were placed before them. "I don't have

gut feelings when it comes to executions. Anything can happen. Just keep filing writs and appeals. It becomes a marathon. You can't give up. The lawyer for Jumbo Parris collapsed with twelve hours to go, and was in a hospital bed when his client went down."

Adam chewed on a boiled shrimp and washed it down with beer. "The governor wants me to talk to him. Should I?"

"What does your client want?"

"What do you think? He hates the governor. He has forbidden me to talk to him."

"You have to ask for a clemency hearing. That's standard practice."

"How well do you know McAllister?"

"Not very well. He's a political animal with great ambitions, and I wouldn't trust him for a minute. He does, however, have the power to grant clemency. He can commute the death sentence. He can impose life, or he can set him free. The statute grants broad discretionary authority to the governor. He'll probably be your last hope."

"God help us."

"How's the remoulade?" Mann asked with a mouthful.

"Delicious."

They busied themselves with eating for a while. Adam was thankful for the company and conversation, but decided to limit the talk to appeals and strategy. He liked Lucas Mann, but his client did not. As Sam would say, Mann worked for the state and the state was working to execute him.

A late afternoon flight would have taken him back to Memphis by six-thirty, long before dark. And once there he could've killed an hour or so at the office before returning to Lee's. But he wasn't up to it. He had a fancy room in a modern hotel by the river, paid for without question by the boys at Kravitz & Bane. All expenses were covered. He'd never seen the French Quarter.

And so he awoke at six after a three-hour nap brought on by three Dixies for lunch and a bad night's rest. He was lying across the bed with his shoes on, and he studied the ceiling fan for half an hour before he moved. The sleep had been heavy.

Lee did not answer the phone. He left a message on her recorder, and hoped she was not drinking. And if she was, then he hoped she'd locked herself in her room where she couldn't hurt anyone. He brushed his teeth and hair, and rode an elevator to the spacious lobby where a jazz band performed for happy hour. Five-cent oysters on the half shell were being hawked from a corner bar.

He walked in the sweltering heat along Canal Street until he came to Royal, where he took a right and was soon lost in a throng of tourists. Friday night was coming to life in the Quarter. He gawked at the strip clubs, trying desperately for a peek inside. He was stopped cold by an open door which revealed a row of male strippers on a stage—men who looked like beautiful women. He ate an egg roll on a stick from a Chinese carryout. He stepped around a wino vomiting in the street. He spent an hour at a small table in a jazz club, listening to a delightful combo and sipping a four-dollar beer. When it was dark, he walked to Jackson Square and watched the artists pack up their easels and leave. The street musicians and dancers were out in force in front of an old cathedral, and he clapped for an amazing string quartet comprised of Tulane students. People were everywhere, drinking and eating and dancing, enjoying the festiveness of the French Quarter.

He bought a dish of vanilla ice cream, and headed for Canal. On another night and under far different circumstances, he might be tempted to take in a strip show, sitting in the rear, of course, where no one could see him, or he might hang out in a trendy bar looking for lonely, beautiful women.

But not tonight. The drunks reminded him of Lee, and he wished he'd returned to Memphis to see her. The music and laughter reminded him of Sam, who at this very moment was sitting in a humid oven, staring at the bars and counting the days, hoping and perhaps praying now that his lawyer might work a miracle. Sam would never see New Orleans, never again eat oysters or red beans

and rice, never taste a cold beer or a good coffee. He would never hear jazz or watch artists paint. He would never again fly on a plane or stay in a nice hotel. He would never fish or drive or do a thousand things free people take for granted.

Even if Sam lived past August 8, he would simply continue the process of dying a little each day.

Adam left the Quarter and walked hurriedly to his hotel. He needed rest. The marathon was about to begin.

Thirty-four

The guard named Tiny handcuffed Sam and led him off Tier A. Sam carried a plastic bag filled tightly with the last two weeks' worth of fan mail. For most of his career as a death row inmate, he had averaged a handful of letters a month from supporters—Klansmen and their sympathizers, racial purists, anti-Semites, all types of bigots. For a couple of years he had answered these letters, but with time had grown weary of it. What was the benefit? To some he was a hero, but the more he swapped words with his admirers the wackier they became. There were a lot of nuts out there. The idea had crossed his mind that perhaps he was safer on the Row than in the free world.

Mail had been declared to be a right by the federal court, not a privilege. Thus, it could not be taken away. It could, however, be regulated. Each letter was opened by an inspector unless the envelope clearly was from an attorney. Unless an inmate was under mail censorship, the letters were not read. They were delivered to the Row in due course and dispensed to the inmates. Boxes and packages were also opened and inspected.

The thought of losing Sam was frightening to many fanatics, and his mail had picked up dramatically since the Fifth Circuit lifted his stay. They offered their unwavering support, and their prayers. A few offered money. Their letters tended to run long as they invariably blasted Jews and blacks and liberals and other conspirators. Some bitched about taxes, gun control, the national debt. Some delivered sermons.

Sam was tired of the letters. He was averaging six per day. He placed them on the counter as the handcuffs were removed, then asked the guard to unlock a small door in the screen. The guard

shoved the plastic bag through the door and Adam took it on the other side. The guard left, locking the door behind.

“What’s this?” Adam asked, holding the bag.

“Fan mail.” Sam took his regular seat and lit a cigarette.

“What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Read it. Burn it. I don’t care. I was cleaning my cell this morning and the stuff got in the way. I understand you were in New Orleans yesterday. Tell me about it.”

Adam placed the letters on a chair, and sat across from Sam. The temperature outside was a hundred and two, and not much cooler inside the visitors’ room. It was Saturday, and Adam was dressed in jeans, loafers, and a very light cotton polo. “The Fifth Circuit called Thursday, and said they wanted to hear from me on Friday. I went down, dazzled them with my brilliance, and flew back to Memphis this morning.”

“When do they rule?”

“Soon.”

“A three-judge panel?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Judy, Robichaux, and McNeely.”

Sam contemplated the names for a moment. “McNeely’s an old warrior who’ll help us. Judy’s a conservative bitch, oops, sorry, I mean a conservative Female-American, a Republican appointee. I doubt if she’ll help. I’m not familiar with Robichaux. Where’s he from?”

“Southern Louisiana.”

“Ah, a Cajun-American.”

“I guess. He’s a hard-ass. He won’t help.”

“Then we’ll lose by two to one. I thought you said you dazzled them with your brilliance.”

“We haven’t lost yet.” Adam was surprised to hear Sam speak with such familiarity about the individual judges. But then, he’d been studying the court for many years.

“Where’s the ineffective counsel claim?” Sam asked.

“Still in district court here. It’s a few days behind the other.”

“Let’s file something else, okay.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Work fast. I’ve got eleven days. There’s a calendar on my wall, and I spend at least three hours a day staring at it. When I wake up in the morning I make a big X over the date for the day before. I’ve got a circle around August 8. My X’s are getting closer to the circle. Do something.”

“I’m working, okay. In fact, I’m developing a new theory of attack.”

“Atta boy.”

“I think we can prove you’re mentally unbalanced.”

“I’ve been considering that.”

“You’re old. You’re senile. You’re too calm about this. Something must be wrong. You’re unable to comprehend the reason for your execution.”

“We’ve been reading the same cases.”

“Goodman knows an expert who’ll say anything for a fee. We’re considering bringing him down here to examine you.”

“Wonderful. I’ll pull out my hair and chase butterflies around the room.”

“I think we can make a hard run at a mental incompetency claim.”

“I agree. Go for it. Let’s file lots of things.”

“I’ll do it.”

Sam puffed and pondered for a few minutes. They were both sweating, and Adam needed fresh air. He needed to get in his car with the windows up and turn the air on high.

“When are you coming back?” Sam asked.

“Monday. Listen, Sam, this is not a pleasant subject, but we need to address it. You’re gonna die one of these days. It might be on August 8, or it might be five years from now. At the rate you’re smoking, you can’t last for long.”

“Smoking is not my most pressing health concern.”

“I know. But your family, Lee and I, need to make some burial arrangements. It can’t be done overnight.”

Sam stared at the rows of tiny triangles in the screen. Adam scribbled on a legal pad. The air conditioner spewed and hissed, accomplishing little.

"Your grandmother was a fine lady, Adam. I'm sorry you didn't know her. She deserved better than me."

"Lee took me to her grave."

"I caused her a lot of suffering, and she bore it well. Bury me next to her, and maybe I can tell her I'm sorry."

"I'll take care of it."

"Do that. How will you pay for the plot?"

"I can handle it, Sam."

"I don't have any money, Adam. I lost it years ago, for reasons which are probably obvious. I lost the land and the house, so there are no assets to leave behind."

"Do you have a will?"

"Yes. I prepared it myself."

"We'll look at it next week."

"You promise you'll be here Monday."

"I promise, Sam. Can I bring you anything?"

Sam hesitated for a second and almost seemed embarrassed. "You know what I'd really like?" he asked with a childish grin.

"What? Anything, Sam."

"When I was a kid, the greatest thrill in life was an Eskimo Pie."

"An Eskimo Pie?"

"Yeah, it's a little ice cream treat on a stick. Vanilla, with a chocolate coating. I ate them until I came to this place. I think they still make them."

"An Eskimo Pie?" Adam repeated.

"Yeah. I can still taste it. The greatest ice cream in the world. Can you imagine how good one would taste right now in this oven?"

"Then, Sam, you shall have an Eskimo Pie."

"Bring more than one."

"I'll bring a dozen. We'll eat 'em right here while we sweat."

Sam's second visitor on Saturday was not expected. He stopped at the guard station by the front gate, and produced a North Carolina driver's license with his picture on it. He explained to the guard that he was the brother of Sam Cayhall, and had been told he could visit Sam on death row at his convenience between now and the scheduled execution. He had talked to a Mr. Holland somewhere deep in Administration yesterday, and Mr. Holland had assured him the visitation rules were relaxed for Sam Cayhall. He could visit anytime between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., any day of the week. The guard stepped inside and made a phone call.

Five minutes passed as the visitor sat patiently in his rented car. The guard made two more calls, then copied the registration number of the car onto her clipboard. She instructed the visitor to park a few feet away, lock his car, and wait by the guard station. He did so, and within a few minutes a white prison van appeared. An armed, uniformed guard was behind the wheel, and he motioned for the visitor to get in.

The van was cleared through the double gates at MSU, and driven to the front entrance where two other guards waited. They frisked him on the steps. He was carrying no packages or bags.

They led him around the corner and into the empty visitors' room. He took a seat near the middle of the screen. "We'll get Sam," one of the guards said. "Take about five minutes."

Sam was typing a letter when the guards stopped at his door. "Let's go, Sam. You have a visitor."

He stopped typing and stared at them. His fan was blowing hard and his television was tuned to a baseball game. "Who is it?" he snapped.

"Your brother."

Sam gently placed the typewriter on the bookshelf and grabbed his jumpsuit. "Which brother?"

"We didn't ask any questions, Sam. Just your brother. Now come on."

They handcuffed him and he followed them along the tier. Sam once had three brothers, but his oldest had died of a heart attack before Sam was sent to prison. Donnie, the youngest at age sixty-

one, now lived near Durham, North Carolina. Albert, age sixty-seven, was in bad health and lived deep in the woods of rural Ford County. Donnie sent the cigarettes each month, along with a few dollars and an occasional note. Albert hadn't written in seven years. A spinster aunt had written until her death in 1985. The rest of the Cayhalls had forgotten Sam.

It had to be Donnie, he said to himself. Donnie was the only one who cared enough to visit. He hadn't seen him in two years, and he stepped lighter as they neared the door to the visitors' room. What a pleasant surprise.

Sam stepped through the door and looked at the man sitting on the other side of the screen. It was a face he didn't recognize. He glanced around the room, and confirmed it was empty except for this visitor, who at the moment was staring at Sam with a cool and even gaze. The guards watched closely as they sprung the handcuffs, so Sam smiled and nodded at the man. Then he stared at the guards until they left the room and shut the door. Sam sat opposite his visitor, lit a cigarette, and said nothing.

There was something familiar about him, but he couldn't identify him. They watched each other through the opening in the screen.

"Do I know you?" Sam finally asked.

"Yes," the man answered.

"From where?"

"From the past, Sam. From Greenville and Jackson and Vicksburg. From the synagogue and the real estate office and the Pinder home and Marvin Kramer's."

"Wedge?"

The man nodded slowly, and Sam closed his eyes and exhaled at the ceiling. He dropped his cigarette and slumped in his chair. "God, I was hoping you were dead."

"Too bad."

Sam glared wildly at him. "You son of a bitch," he said with clenched teeth. "Son of a bitch. I've hoped and dreamed for twenty-three years that you were dead. I've killed you a million times myself, with my bare hands, with sticks and knives and every

weapon known to man. I've watched you bleed and I've heard you scream for mercy."

"Sorry. Here I am, Sam."

"I hate you more than any person has ever been hated. If I had a gun right now I'd blow your sorry ass to hell and back. I'd pump your head full of lead and laugh until I cried. God, how I hate you."

"Do you treat all your visitors like this, Sam?"

"What do you want, Wedge?"

"Can they hear us in here?"

"They don't give a damn what we're saying."

"But this place could be wired, you know."

"Then leave, fool, just leave."

"I will in a minute. But first I just wanted to say that I'm here, and I'm watching things real close, and I'm very pleased that my name has not been mentioned. I certainly hope this continues. I've been very effective at keeping people quiet."

"You're very subtle."

"Just take it like a man, Sam. Die with dignity. You were with me. You were an accomplice and a conspirator, and under the law you're just as guilty as me. Sure I'm a free man, but who said life is fair. Just go on and take our little secret to your grave, and no one gets hurt, okay?"

"Where have you been?"

"Everywhere. My name's not really Wedge, Sam, so don't get any ideas. It was never Wedge. Not even Dogan knew my real name. I was drafted in 1966, and I didn't want to go to Vietnam. So I went to Canada and came back to the underground. Been there ever since. I don't exist, Sam."

"You should be sitting over here."

"No, you're wrong. I shouldn't, and neither should you. You were an idiot for going back to Greenville. The FBI was clueless. They never would've caught us. I was too smart. Dogan was too smart. You, however, happened to be the weak link. It would've been the last bombing too, you know, with the dead bodies and all. It was time to quit. I fled the country and would've never returned to this miserable place. You would've gone home to your chickens and

cows. Who knows what Dogan would've done. But the reason you're sitting over there, Sam, is because you were a dumbass."

"And you're a dumbass for coming here today."

"Not really. No one would believe you if you started screaming. Hell, they all think you're crazy anyway. But just the same, I'd rather keep things the way they are. I don't need the hassle. Just accept what's coming, Sam, and do it quietly."

Sam carefully lit another cigarette, and thumped the ashes in the floor. "Leave, Wedge. And don't ever come back."

"Sure. I hate to say it, Sam, but I hope they gas you."

Sam stood and walked to the door behind him. A guard opened it, and took him away.

They sat in the rear of the cinema and ate popcorn like two teenagers. The movie was Adam's idea. She'd spent three days in her room, with the virus, and by Saturday morning the binge was over. He had selected a family restaurant for dinner, one with quick food and no alcohol on the menu. She'd devoured pecan waffles with whipped cream.

The movie was a western, politically correct with the Indians as the good guys and the cowboys as scum. All pale faces were evil and eventually killed. Lee drank two large Dr. Peppers. Her hair was clean and pulled back over her ears. Her eyes were clear and pretty again. Her face was made up and the wounds of the past week were hidden. She was as cool as ever in jeans and cotton button-down. And she was sober.

Little had been said about last Thursday night when Adam slept by the door. They had agreed to discuss it later, at some distant point in the future when she could handle it. That was fine with him. She was walking a shaky tightrope, teetering on the edge of another plunge into the blackness of dipsomania. He would protect her from torment and distress. He would make things pleasant and

enjoyable. No more talk of Sam and his killings. No more talk of Eddie. No more Cayhall family history.

She was his aunt, and he loved her dearly. She was fragile and sick, and she needed his strong voice and broad shoulders.

Thirty-five

Phillip Naifeh awoke in the early hours of Sunday morning with severe chest pains, and was rushed to the hospital in Cleveland. He lived in a modern home on the grounds at Parchman with his wife of forty-one years. The ambulance ride took twenty minutes, and he was stable by the time he entered the emergency room on a gurney.

His wife waited anxiously in the corridor as the nurses scurried about. She had waited there before, three years earlier with the first heart attack. A somber-faced young doctor explained that it was a mild one, that he was quite steady and secure and resting comfortably with the aid of medication. He would be monitored diligently for the next twenty-four hours, and if things went as expected he'd be home in less than a week.

He was absolutely forbidden from getting near Parchman, and could have nothing to do with the Cayhall execution. Not even a phone call from his bed.

Sleep was becoming a battle. Adam habitually read for an hour or so in bed, and had learned in law school that legal publications were marvelous sleeping aids. Now, however, the more he read the more he worried. His mind was burdened with the events of the past two weeks—the people he'd met, the things he'd learned, the places he'd been. And his mind raced wildly with what was to come.

He slept fitfully Saturday night, and was awake for long stretches of time. When he finally awoke for the last time, the sun was up. It was almost eight o'clock. Lee had mentioned the possibility of another foray into the kitchen. She had once been quite good with

sausage and eggs, she'd said, and anybody could handle canned biscuits, but as he pulled up his jeans and slipped on a tee shirt, he could smell nothing.

The kitchen was quiet. He called her name as he examined the coffee pot—half full. Her bedroom door was open and the lights were off. He quickly checked every room. She was not on the patio sipping coffee and reading the paper. A sick feeling came over him and grew worse with each empty room. He ran to the parking lot—no sign of her car. He stepped barefoot across the hot asphalt and asked the security guard when she'd left. He checked a clipboard, and said it had been almost two hours ago. She appeared to be fine, he said.

He found it on a sofa in the den, a three-inch stack of news and ads known as the Sunday edition of the Memphis Press. It had been left in a neat pile with the Metro section on top. Lee's face was on the front of this section, in a photo taken at a charity ball years earlier. It was a close-up of Mr. and Mrs. Phelps Booth, all smiles for the camera. Lee was smashing in a strapless black dress. Phelps was decorated fashionably in black tie. They seemed to be a wonderfully happy couple.

The story was Todd Marks' latest exploitation of the Cayhall mess, and with each report the series was becoming more tabloid-like. It started friendly enough, with a weekly summary of the events swirling around the execution. The same voices were heard—McAllister's, Roxburgh's, Lucas Mann's, and Naifeh's steady "no comments." Then it turned mean-spirited quickly as it gleefully exposed Lee Cayhall Booth: prominent Memphis socialite, wife of important banker Phelps Booth of the renowned and rich Booth family, community volunteer, aunt of Adam Hall, and, believe it or not, daughter of the infamous Sam Cayhall!

The story was written as if Lee herself were guilty of a terrible crime. It quoted alleged friends, unnamed of course, as being shocked to learn her true identity. It talked about the Booth family and its money, and pondered how a blue blood such as Phelps could stoop to marry into a clan such as the Cayhalls. It mentioned their son Walt, and again quoted unnamed sources who speculated about

his refusal to return to Memphis. Walt had never married, it reported breathlessly, and lived in Amsterdam.

And then, worst of all, it quoted another nameless source and told the story of a charity event not too many years ago at which Lee and Phelps Booth were present and sat at a table near Ruth Kramer. The source had also been at the dinner, and distinctly remembered where these people had sat. The source was a friend of Ruth's and an acquaintance of Lee's, and was just plain shocked to learn that Lee had such a father.

A smaller photo of Ruth Kramer accompanied the story. She was an attractive woman in her early fifties.

After the sensational uncovering of Lee, the story went on to summarize Friday's oral argument in New Orleans and the latest maneuverings of the Cayhall defense.

Taken as a whole, it was sleazy narrative that accomplished nothing except that it pushed the daily murder summaries onto the second page.

Adam threw the paper on the floor and sipped coffee. She had awakened on this warm Sunday, clean and sober for the first time in days, probably in much better spirits, and had settled on the sofa with a fresh cup of coffee and the paper. Within minutes she'd been slapped in the face and kicked in the stomach, and now she'd left again. Where did she go during these times? Where was her sanctuary? Certainly she stayed away from Phelps. Maybe she had a boyfriend somewhere who took her in and gave her comfort, but that was doubtful. He prayed she wasn't driving the streets aimlessly with a bottle in her hand.

No doubt, things were hopping around the Booth estates this morning. Their dirty little secret was out, plastered on the front page for the world to see. How would they cope with the humiliation? Imagine, a Booth marrying and producing offspring with such white trash, and now everyone knew. The family might never recover. Madame Booth was certainly distressed, and probably bedridden by now.

Good for them, Adam thought. He showered and changed clothes, then lowered the top on the Saab. He didn't expect to see Lee's

maroon Jaguar on the deserted streets of Memphis, but he drove around anyway. He started at Front Street near the river, and with Springsteen blaring from the speakers he randomly made his way east, past the hospitals on Union, through the stately homes of midtown, and back to the projects near Auburn House. Of course he didn't find her, but the drive was refreshing. By noon, the traffic had resumed, and Adam went to the office.

Sam's only guest on Sunday was again an unexpected one. He rubbed his wrists when the handcuffs were removed, and sat across the screen from the gray-haired man with a jolly face and a warm smile.

"Mr. Cayhall, my name is Ralph Griffin, and I'm the chaplain here at Parchman. I'm new, so we haven't met."

Sam nodded, and said, "Nice to meet you."

"My pleasure. I'm sure you knew my predecessor."

"Ah yes, the Right Reverend Rucker. Where is he now?"

"Retired."

"Good. I never cared for him. I doubt if he makes it to heaven."

"Yes, I've heard he wasn't too popular."

"Popular? He was despised by everyone here. For some reason we didn't trust him. Don't know why. Could be because he was in favor of the death penalty. Can you imagine? He was called by God to minister to us, yet he believed we should die. Said it was in the Scriptures. You know, the eye for an eye routine."

"I've heard that before."

"I'm sure you have. What kind of preacher are you? What denomination?"

"I was ordained in a Baptist church, but I'm sort of nondenominational now. I think the Lord's probably frustrated with all this sectarianism."

"He's frustrated with me too, you know."

"How's that?"

“You’re familiar with Randy Dupree, an inmate here. Just down the tier from me. Rape and murder.”

“Yes. I’ve read his file. He was a preacher at one time.”

“We call him Preacher Boy, and he’s recently acquired the spiritual gift of interpreting dreams. He also sings and heals. He’d probably play with snakes if they allowed it. You know, take up the serpents, from the book of Mark, sixteenth chapter, eighteenth verse. Anyway, he just finished this long dream, took over a month, sort of like a mini-series, and it eventually was revealed to him that I will in fact be executed, and that God is waiting for me to clean up my act.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea, you know. To get things in order.”

“What’s the rush? I have ten days.”

“So you believe in God?”

“Yes, I do. Do you believe in the death penalty?”

“No, I don’t.”

Sam studied him for a while, then said, “Are you serious?”

“Killing is wrong, Mr. Cayhall. If in fact you are guilty of your crime, then you were wrong to kill. It’s also wrong for the government to kill you.”

“Hallelujah, brother.”

“I’ve never been convinced that Jesus wanted us to kill as a punishment. He didn’t teach that. He taught love and forgiveness.”

“That’s the way I read the Bible. How in hell did you get a job here?”

“I have a cousin in the state senate.”

Sam smiled and chuckled at this response. “You won’t last long. You’re too honest.”

“No. My cousin is the chairman of the Committee on Corrections, and rather powerful.”

“Then you’d better pray he gets reelected.”

“I do every morning. I just wanted to stop by and introduce myself. I’d like to talk to you during the next few days. I’d like to pray with you if you want. I’ve never been through an execution before.”

“Neither have I.”

“Does it scare you?”

“I’m an old man, Reverend. I’ll be seventy in a few months, if I make it. At times, the thought of dying is quite pleasant. Leaving this godforsaken place will be a relief.”

“But you’re still fighting.”

“Sure, though sometimes I don’t know why. It’s like a long bout with cancer. You gradually decline and grow weak. You die a little each day, and you reach the point where death would be welcome. But no one really wants to die. Not even me.”

“I’ve read about your grandson. That must be heartwarming. I know you’re proud of him.”

Sam smiled and looked at the floor.

“Anyway,” the reverend continued, “I’ll be around. Would you like for me to come back tomorrow?”

“That would be nice. Let me do some thinking, okay?”

“Sure. You know the procedures around here, don’t you? During your last few hours you’re allowed to have only two people present. Your lawyer and your spiritual adviser. I’ll be honored to stay with you.”

“Thanks. And can you find the time to talk to Randy Dupree? The poor kid is cracking up, and he really needs help.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

Adam watched a rented movie by himself, with the phone nearby. There had been no word from Lee. At ten, he made two calls to the West Coast. The first was to his mother in Portland. She was subdued, but glad to hear from him, she said. She did not ask about Sam, and Adam did not offer. He reported that he was working hard, that he was hopeful, and that he would, in all likelihood, return to Chicago in a couple of weeks. She’d seen a few stories in the papers, and she was thinking about him. Lee was fine, Adam said.

The second call was to his younger sister, Carmen, in Berkeley. A male voice answered the phone in her apartment, Kevin somebody if Adam remembered correctly, a steady companion for several years now. Carmen was soon on the phone, and seemed anxious to hear about events in Mississippi. She too had followed the news closely, and Adam put an optimistic spin on things. She was worried about him down there in the midst of all those horrible Kluckers and racists. Adam insisted he was safe, things were quite peaceful, actually. The people were surprisingly gentle and laid-back. He was staying at Lee's and they were making the best of it. To Adam's surprise, she wanted to know about Sam—what was he like, his appearance, his attitude, his willingness to talk about Eddie. She asked if she should fly down and see Sam before August 8, a meeting Adam had not contemplated. Adam said he would think about it, and that he would ask Sam.

He fell asleep on the sofa, with the television on.

At three-thirty Monday morning, he was awakened by the phone. A voice he'd never heard before crisply identified himself as Phelps Booth. "You must be Adam," he said.

Adam sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Yes, that's me."

"Have you seen Lee?" Phelps asked, neither calm nor urgent.

Adam glanced at a clock on the wall above the television. "No. What's the matter?"

"Well, she's in trouble. The police called me about an hour ago. They picked her up for drunk driving at eight-twenty last night, and took her to jail."

"Oh no," Adam said.

"This is not the first time. She was taken in, refused the breath test of course, and was put in the drunk tank for five hours. She listed my name on the paperwork, so the cops called me. I ran downtown to the jail, and she had already posted bail and walked out. I thought maybe she'd called you."

"No. She was not here when I woke up yesterday morning, and this is the first thing I've heard. Who would she call?"

"Who knows? I hate to start calling her friends and waking them up. Maybe we should just wait."

Adam was uncomfortable with his sudden inclusion into the decision making. These people had been married, for better or for worse, for almost thirty years, and they had obviously been through this before. How was he supposed to know what to do? “She didn’t drive away from the jail, did she?” he asked timidly, certain of the answer.

“Of course not. Someone picked her up. Which brings up another problem. We need to get her car. It’s in a lot by the jail. I’ve already paid the towing charges.”

“Do you have a key?”

“Yes. Can you help me get it?”

Adam suddenly remembered the newspaper story with the smiling photo of Phelps and Lee, and he also remembered his speculation about the Booth family’s reaction to it. He was certain most of the blame and venom had been directed at him. If he’d stayed in Chicago, none of this would’ve happened.

“Sure. Just tell me what—”

“Go wait by the guardhouse. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Adam brushed his teeth and laced up his Nikes, and spent fifteen minutes chatting about this and that with Willis, the guard, at the gate. A black Mercedes, the longest model in history, approached and stopped. Adam said good-bye to Willis, and got in the car.

They shook hands because it was the polite thing to do. Phelps was dressed in a white jogging suit and wore a Cubs cap. He drove slowly on the empty street. “I guess Lee has told you some things about me,” he said, without a trace of concern or regret.

“A few things,” Adam said carefully.

“Well, there’s a lot to tell, so I’m not going to ask what subjects she’s covered.”

A very good idea, Adam thought. “It’s probably best if we just talk about baseball or something. I take it you’re a Cubs fan.”

“Always a Cubs fan. You?”

“Sure. This is my first season in Chicago, and I’ve been to Wrigley a dozen times. I live pretty close to the park.”

“Really. I go up three or four times a year. I have a friend with a box. Been doing it for years. Who’s your favorite player?”

“Sandberg, I guess. How about you?”

“I like the old guys. Ernie Banks and Ron Santo. Those were the good days of baseball, when the players had loyalty and you knew who’d be on your team from one year to the next. Now, you never know. I love the game, but greed’s corrupted it.”

It struck Adam as odd that Phelps Booth would denounce greed. “Maybe, but the owners wrote the book on greed for the first hundred years of baseball. What’s wrong with the players asking for all the money they can get?”

“Who’s worth five million a year?”

“Nobody. But if rock stars make fifty, what’s wrong with baseball players making a few million? It’s entertainment. The players are the game, not the owners. I go to Wrigley to see the players, not because the Tribune happens to be the current owner.”

“Yeah, but look at ticket prices. Fifteen bucks to watch a game.”

“Attendance is up. The fans don’t seem to mind.”

They drove through downtown, deserted at four in the morning, and within minutes were near the jail. “Listen, Adam, I don’t know how much Lee has told you about her drinking problem.”

“She told me she’s an alcoholic.”

“Definitely. This is the second drunk driving charge. I was able to keep the first out of the papers, but I don’t know about this. She’s suddenly become an item around town. Thank heaven she hasn’t hurt anybody.” Phelps stopped the car at a curb near a fenced lot. “She’s been in and out of recovery half a dozen times.”

“Half a dozen. She told me she’d been through treatment three times.”

“You can’t believe alcoholics. I know of at least five times in the past fifteen years. Her favorite place is a swanky little abuse center called Spring Creek. It’s on a river a few miles north of the city, real nice and peaceful. It’s for the wealthy only. They get dried out and pampered. Good food, exercise, saunas, you know, all the bells and whistles. It’s so damned nice I think people want to go there. Anyway, I have a hunch she’ll turn up there later today. She has some friends who’ll help her get checked in. She’s well known around the place. Sort of a second home.”

“How long will she stay there?”

“It varies. The minimum is a week. She has stayed as long as a month. Costs two thousand bucks a day, and of course they send me the bills. But I don’t mind. I’ll pay any amount to help her.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“First, we try to find her. I’ll get my secretaries on the phones in a few hours, and we’ll track her down. She’s fairly predictable at this point, and I’m sure she’ll turn up in a detox ward, probably at Spring Creek. I’ll start pulling strings in a few hours and try to keep it out of the paper. It won’t be easy, in light of everything else that’s been printed recently.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Once we find her, you need to go see her. Take some flowers and candy. I know you’re busy, and I know what’s ahead for the next, uh —”

“Nine days.”

“Nine days. Right. Well, try to see her. And, when the thing down at Parchman is over, I suggest you go back to Chicago, and leave her alone.”

“Leave her alone?”

“Yeah. It sounds harsh, but it’s necessary. There are many reasons for her many problems. I’ll admit I’m one of the reasons, but there’s lots of stuff you don’t know. Her family is another reason. She adores you, but you also bring back nightmares and a lot of suffering. Don’t think bad of me for saying this. I know it hurts, but it’s the truth.”

Adam stared at the chain-link fence across the sidewalk next to his door.

“She was sober once for five years,” Phelps continued. “And we thought she’d stay that way forever. Then Sam was convicted, and then Eddie died. When she returned from his funeral, she fell into the black hole, and I thought many times that she’d never get out. It’s best for her if you stay away.”

“But I love Lee.”

“And she loves you. But you need to adore her from a distance. Send her letters and cards from Chicago. Flowers for her birthday.

Call once a month and talk about movies and books, but stay away from the family stuff.”

“Who’ll take care of her?”

“She’s almost fifty years old, Adam, and for the most part she’s very independent. She’s been an alcoholic for many years, and there’s nothing you or I can do to help her. She knows the disease. She’ll stay sober when she wants to stay sober. You’re not a good influence. Nor am I. I’m sorry.”

Adam breathed deeply and grabbed the door latch. “I’m sorry, Phelps, if I’ve embarrassed you and your family. It was not intentional.”

Phelps smiled and placed a hand on Adam’s shoulder. “Believe it or not, my family is in many ways more dysfunctional than yours. We’ve been through worse.”

“That, sir, is difficult to believe.”

“It’s true.” Phelps handed him a key ring and pointed to a small building inside the fence. “Check in there, and they’ll show you the car.”

Adam opened the door and got out. He watched the Mercedes ease away and disappear. As Adam walked through a gate in the fence, he couldn’t shake the unmistakable feeling that Phelps Booth actually still loved his wife.

Thirty-six

Retired Colonel George Nugent was barely ruffled by the news of Naifeh's heart attack. The old guy was doing quite well by Monday morning, resting comfortably and out of danger, and what the hell he was only months away from retirement anyway. Naifeh was a good man, but past his usefulness and hanging on simply to bolster his pension. Nugent was considering a run for the head position if he could get his politics straight.

Now, however, he was pressed with a more critical matter. The Cayhall execution was nine days away, actually only eight because it was scheduled for one minute after midnight on Wednesday of next week, which meant that Wednesday counted as another day though only one minute of it was used. Tuesday of next week was actually the last day.

On his desk was a shiny leather-bound notebook with the words Mississippi Protocol printed professionally on the front. It was his masterpiece, the result of two weeks of tedious organizing. He'd been appalled at the haphazard guides and outlines and checklists thrown together by Naifeh for previous executions. It was a wonder they'd actually been able to gas anyone. But now there was a plan, a detailed and carefully arranged blueprint which included everything, in his opinion. It was two inches thick and a hundred and eighty pages long, and of course had his name all over it.

Lucas Mann entered his office at fifteen minutes after eight, Monday morning. "You're late," Nugent snapped, now a man in charge of things. Mann was just a simple lawyer. Nugent was the head of an execution team. Mann was content with his work. Nugent had aspirations, which in the past twenty-four hours had been bolstered considerably.

“So what,” Mann said as he stood by a chair facing the desk. Nugent was dressed in his standard dark olive pants with no wrinkles and heavily starched dark olive shirt with gray tee shirt underneath. His boots gleamed with heavily buffed polish. He marched to a point behind his desk. Mann hated him.

“We have eight days,” Nugent said as if this were known only to him.

“I think it’s nine,” Mann said. Both men were standing.

“Next Wednesday doesn’t count. We have eight working days left.”

“Whatever.”

Nugent sat stiffly in his chair. “Two things. First, here is a manual I’ve put together for executions. A protocol. From A to Z. Completely organized, indexed, cross-indexed. I’d like for you to review the statutes contained herein and make sure they’re current.”

Mann stared at the black binder but did not touch it.

“And second, I’d like a report each day on the status of all appeals. As I understand it, there are no legal impediments as of this morning.”

“That’s correct, sir,” Mann answered.

“I’d like something in writing first thing each morning with the updates.”

“Then hire yourself a lawyer, sir. You’re not my boss, and I’ll be damned if I’ll write a little brief for your morning coffee. I’ll let you know if something happens, but I won’t push paper for you.”

Ah, the frustrations of civilian life. Nugent longed for the discipline of the military. Damned lawyers. “Very well. Will you please review the protocol?”

Mann flipped it open and turned a few pages. “You know, we’ve managed four executions without all this.”

“I find that very surprising, frankly.”

“Frankly, I don’t. We’ve become quite efficient, I’m sad to say.”

“Look, Lucas, I don’t relish this,” Nugent said wistfully. “Phillip asked me to do it. I hope there’s a stay. I really do. But if not, then we must be prepared. I want this to run smoothly.”

Mann acknowledged the obvious lie, and picked up the manual. Nugent had yet to witness an execution, and he was counting hours, not days. He couldn't wait to see Sam strapped in the chair, sniffing gas.

Lucas nodded and left the office. In the hallway, he passed Bill Monday, the state executioner, no doubt headed to Nugent's for a quiet pep talk.

Adam arrived at the Twig shortly before 3 p.m. The day had begun with the panic over Lee's drunk driving mess, and had not improved.

He had been sipping coffee at his desk, nursing a headache and trying to do some research, when in the span of ten minutes Darlene brought a fax from New Orleans and a fax from the district court. He'd lost twice. The Fifth Circuit upheld the decision of the federal court on Sam's claim that the gas chamber was unconstitutional because it was cruel and obsolete, and the district court denied the claim that Benjamin Keyes had performed ineffectively at trial. The headache had suddenly been forgotten. Within an hour, the Death Clerk, Mr. Richard Olander, had called from Washington inquiring about Adam's plans to appeal, and he also wanted to know what other filings might be contemplated by the defense. He told Adam that there were only eight working days to go, you know, as if Adam had to be reminded. Thirty minutes after Olander's call, a clerk at the death desk of the Fifth Circuit called and asked Adam when he planned to appeal the district court's ruling.

Adam had explained to both death clerks at both courts that he was perfecting his appeals as quickly as possible, and he would try to file by the end of the day. When he stopped to think about it, it was a little unnerving practicing law with such an audience. At this moment of the process, there were courts and justices watching to see what he would do next. There were clerks calling and asking what he might be contemplating. The reason was obvious and

disheartening. They weren't concerned with whether or not Adam would seize the magical issue that would prevent an execution. They were concerned only about logistics. The death clerks had been instructed by their superiors to monitor the waning days so the courts could rule quickly, usually against the inmate. These justices did not enjoy reading briefs at three in the morning. They wanted copies of all last minute filings on their desks long before the appeals officially arrived.

Phelps had called him at the office just before noon with the news that Lee had not been found. He had checked every detox and recovery facility within a hundred miles, and no one had admitted a Lee Booth. He was still searching, but was very busy now with meetings and such.

Sam arrived at the prison library thirty minutes later in a somber mood. He'd heard the bad news at noon on television, on the Jackson station that was counting down the days. Only nine more. He sat at the table and stared blankly at Adam. "Where are the Eskimo Pies?" he asked sadly, like a small child who wanted candy.

Adam reached under the table and retrieved a small Styrofoam cooler. He placed it on the table and opened it. "They almost confiscated these at the front gate. Then the guards picked through and threatened to throw them out. So, enjoy."

Sam grabbed one, admired it for a long second, then carefully peeled off the wrapper. He licked the chocolate coating, then took a massive bite. He chewed it slowly with his eyes closed.

Minutes later, the first Eskimo Pie was gone, and Sam started on the second. "Not a good day," he said, licking the edges.

Adam slid some papers to him. "Here are both decisions. Short, to the point, and strongly against us. You don't have a lot of friends on these courts, Sam."

"I know. At least the rest of the world adores me. I don't wanna read that crap. What do we do next?"

"We're gonna prove you're too crazy to execute, that because of your advanced age you don't fully comprehend the nature of your punishment."

"Won't work."

“You liked the idea Saturday. What’s happened?”

“It won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not insane. I know full well why I’m being executed. You’re doing what lawyers do best—dreaming up offbeat theories, then finding wacky experts to prove them.” He took a large bite of ice cream and licked his lips.

“You want me to quit?” Adam snapped.

Sam pondered his yellow fingernails. “Maybe,” he said, quickly running his tongue across a finger.

Adam slid into the seat next to him, as opposed to his usual lawyerly position across the table, and studied him closely. “What’s the matter, Sam?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking.”

“I’m listening.”

“When I was very young, my best friend was killed in a car wreck. He was twenty-six, had a new wife, new child, new house, his whole life in front of him. Suddenly, he was dead. I’ve outlived him by forty-three years. My oldest brother died when he was fifty-six. I’ve outlived him by thirteen years. I’m an old man, Adam. A very old man. I’m tired. I feel like giving it up.”

“Come on, Sam.”

“Look at the advantages. It takes the pressure off you. You won’t be forced to spend the next week running crazy and filing useless claims. You won’t feel like a failure when it’s over. I won’t spend my last days praying for a miracle, but instead I can get my things in order. We can spend more time together. It’ll make a lot of people happy—the Kramers, McAllister, Roxburgh, eighty percent of the American people who favor the death penalty. It’ll be another glorious moment for law and order. I can go out with a little dignity, instead of looking like a desperate man who’s afraid to die. It’s really quite appealing.”

“What’s happened to you, Sam? Last Saturday you were still ready to fight the bear.”

“I’m tired of fighting. I’m an old man. I’ve had a long life. And what if you’re successful in saving my skin? Where does that leave

me? I'm not going anyplace, Adam. You'll go back to Chicago and bury yourself in your career. I'm sure you'll come down whenever you can. We'll write letters and send cards. But I have to live on the Row. You don't. You have no idea."

"We're not quitting, Sam. We still have a chance."

"It's not your decision." He finished the second Eskimo Pie and wiped his mouth with a sleeve.

"I don't like you like this, Sam. I like it when you're mad and nasty and fighting."

"I'm tired, okay?"

"You can't let them kill you. You have to fight to the bitter end, Sam."

"Why?"

"Because it's wrong. It's morally wrong for the state to kill you, and that's why we can't give up."

"But we're gonna lose anyway."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But you've been fighting for almost ten years. Why quit with a week to go?"

"Because it's over, Adam. This thing has finally run its course."

"Perhaps, but we can't quit. Please don't throw in the towel. Hell, I'm making progress. I've got these clowns on the run."

Sam offered a gentle smile and a patronizing gaze.

Adam inched closer and placed his hand on Sam's arm. "I've thought of several new strategies," he said in earnest. "In fact, tomorrow we've got an expert coming to examine you."

Sam looked at him. "What kind of expert?"

"A shrink."

"A shrink?"

"Yeah. From Chicago."

"I've already talked to a shrink. It didn't go well."

"This guy's different. He works for us and he'll say that you've lost your mental faculties."

"You're assuming I had them when I got here."

"Yes, we're assuming that. This psychiatrist will examine you tomorrow, then he'll quickly prepare a report to the effect that

you're senile and insane and just a blithering idiot, and who knows what else he'll say."

"How do you know he'll say this?"

"Because we're paying him to say it."

"Who's paying him?"

"Kravitz & Bane, those dedicated Jewish-Americans in Chicago you hate, but who've been busting their asses to keep you alive. It's Goodman's idea, actually."

"Must be a fine expert."

"We can't be too particular at this point. He's been used by some of the other lawyers in the firm on various cases, and he'll say whatever we want him to say. Just act bizarre when you talk to him."

"That shouldn't be too difficult."

"Tell him all the horror stories about this place. Make it sound atrocious and deplorable."

"No problem there."

"Tell him how you've deteriorated over the years, and how it's especially hard on a man your age. You're by far the oldest one here, Sam, so tell him how it's affected you. Lay it on thick. He'll fix up a compelling little report, and I'll run to court with it."

"It won't work."

"It's worth a try."

"The Supreme Court allowed Texas to execute a retarded boy."

"This ain't Texas, Sam. Every case is different. Just work with us on this, okay."

"Us? Who is us?"

"Me and Goodman. You said you didn't hate him anymore, so I figured I'd let him in on the fun. Seriously, I need help. There's too much work for only one lawyer."

Sam scooted his chair away from the table, and stood. He stretched his arms and legs, and began pacing along the table, counting steps as he went.

"I'll file a petition for cert to the Supreme Court in the morning," Adam said as he looked at a checklist on his legal pad. "They probably won't agree to hear it, but I'll do it anyway. I'll also finish

the appeal to the Fifth Circuit on the ineffectiveness claim. The shrink will be here tomorrow afternoon. I'll file the mental competency claim Wednesday morning."

"I'd rather go peacefully, Adam."

"Forget it, Sam. We're not quitting. I talked to Carmen last night, and she wants to come see you."

Sam sat on the edge of the table and watched the floor. His eyes were narrow and sad. He puffed and blew smoke at his feet. "Why would she want to do that?"

"I didn't ask why, nor did I suggest it. She brought it up. I told her I'd ask you."

"I've never met her."

"I know. She's your only granddaughter, Sam, and she wants to come."

"I don't want her to see me like this," he said, waving at his red jumpsuit.

"She won't mind."

Sam reached into the cooler and took another Eskimo Pie. "Do you want one?" he asked.

"No. What about Carmen?"

"Let me think about it. Does Lee still want to visit?"

"Uh, sure. I haven't talked to her in a couple of days, but I'm sure she wants to."

"I thought you were staying with her."

"I am. She's been out of town."

"Let me think about it. Right now I'm against it. I haven't seen Lee in almost ten years, and I just don't want her to remember me like this. Tell her I'm thinking about it, but right now I don't think so."

"I'll tell her," Adam promised, uncertain if he would see her anytime soon. If she had in fact sought treatment, she would undoubtedly be secluded for several weeks.

"I'll be glad when the end comes, Adam. I'm really sick of all this." He took a large bite of ice cream.

"I understand. But let's put it off for a while."

"Why?"

“Why? It’s obvious. I don’t want to spend my entire legal career encumbered with the knowledge that I lost my first case.”

“That’s not a bad reason.”

“Great. So we’re not quitting?”

“I guess not. Bring on the shrink. I’ll act as loony as possible.”

“That’s more like it.”

Lucas Mann was waiting for Adam at the front gate of the prison. It was almost five, the temperature still hot and the air still sticky. “Gotta minute?” he asked through the window of Adam’s car.

“I guess. What’s up?”

“Park over there. We’ll sit under the shade.”

They walked to a picnic table by the Visitors Center, under a mammoth oak with the highway in view not far away. “A couple of things,” Mann said. “How’s Sam? Is he holding up okay?”

“As well as can be expected. Why?”

“Just concerned, that’s all. At last count, we had fifteen requests for interviews today. Things are heating up. The press is on its way.”

“Sam is not talking.”

“Some want to talk to you.”

“I’m not talking either.”

“Fine. We have a form that Sam needs to sign. It gives us written authorization to tell the reporters to get lost. Have you heard about Naifeh?”

“I saw it in the paper this morning.”

“He’ll be okay, but he can’t supervise the execution. There’s a nut named George Nugent, an assistant superintendent, who’ll coordinate everything. He’s a commandant. Retired military and all, a real gung-ho type.”

“It really makes no difference to me. He can’t carry out the death warrant unless the courts allow it.”

“Right. I just wanted you to know who he was.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.”

“One more thing. I have a friend, an old buddy from law school who now works in the governor’s administration. He called this morning, and it seems as if the governor is concerned about Sam’s execution. According to my friend, who no doubt was told by the governor to solicit me to speak to you, they would like to conduct a clemency hearing, preferably in a couple of days.”

“Are you close to the governor?”

“No. I despise the governor.”

“So do I. So does my client.”

“That’s why my friend was recruited to call and lean on me. Allegedly, the governor is having serious doubts about whether Sam should be executed.”

“Do you believe it?”

“It’s doubtful. The governor’s reputation was made at the expense of Sam Cayhall, and I’m certain he’s fine-tuning his media plan for the next eight days. But what is there to lose?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s not a bad idea.”

“I’m all for it. My client, however, has given me strict orders not to request such a hearing.”

Mann shrugged as if he really didn’t care what Sam did. “It’s up to Sam then. Does he have a will?”

“Yes.”

“How about burial arrangements?”

“I’m working on them. He wants to be buried in Clanton.”

They started walking toward the front gate. “The body goes to a funeral home in Indianola, not far from here. It’ll be released to the family there. All visitation ends four hours before the scheduled execution. From that point on, Sam can have only two people with him—his lawyer and his spiritual adviser. He also needs to select his two witnesses, if he so chooses.”

“I’ll speak to him.”

“We need his approved list of visitors between now and then. It’s usually family and close friends.”

“That’ll be a very short list.”

“I know.”

Thirty-seven

Every occupant of the row knew the procedure, though it had never been reduced to writing. The veterans, including Sam, had endured four executions over the past eight years, and with each the procedure had been followed with small variations. The old hands talked and whispered among themselves, and they were usually quick to dispense descriptions of the last hours to the new guys, most of whom arrived at the Row with muted questions about how it's done. And the guards liked to talk about it.

The last meal was to be taken in a small room near the front of the Row, a room referred to simply as the front office. It had a desk and some chairs, a phone and an air conditioner, and it was in this room that the condemned man received his last visitors. He sat and listened as his lawyers tried to explain why things were not developing as planned. It was a plain room with locked windows. The last conjugal visit was held here, if in fact the inmate was up to it. Guards and administrators loitered in the hallway outside.

The room was not designed for the last hours, but when Teddy Doyle Meeks became the first in many years to be executed in 1982, such a room was suddenly needed for all sorts of purposes. It once belonged to a lieutenant, then a case manager. It had no other name except for the front office. The phone on the desk was the last one used by the inmate's lawyer when he received the final word that there would be no more stays, no more appeals. He then made the long walk back to Tier A, to the far end where his client waited in the Observation Cell.

The Observation Cell was nothing more than a regular cell on Tier A, just eight doors down from Sam. It was six by nine, with a bunk, a sink, and a toilet, just like Sam's, just like all the others. It was the last cell on the tier, and the nearest to the Isolation Room, which

was next to the Chamber Room. The day before the execution, the inmate was to be taken for the last time from his cell and placed in Observation. His personal belongings were to be moved too, which was usually a quick task. There he waited. Usually, he watched his own private drama on television as the local television stations monitored his last ditch appeals. His lawyer waited with him, seated on the flimsy bed, in the dark cell, watching the news reports. The lawyer ran back and forth to the front office. A minister or spiritual adviser was also allowed in the cell.

The Row would be dark and deathly quiet. Some of the inmates would hover above their televisions. Others would hold hands and pray through the bars. Others would lie on their beds and wonder when their time would come. The outside windows above the hallway were all closed and bolted. The Row was locked down. But there were voices between the tiers, and there were lights from the outside. For men who sit for hours in tiny cells, seeing and hearing everything, the flurry of strange activity was nerve-racking.

At eleven, the warden and his team would enter Tier A and stop at the Observation Cell. By now, the hope of a last minute stay was virtually exhausted. The inmate would be sitting on his bed, holding hands with his lawyer and his minister. The warden would announce that it was time to go to the Isolation Room. The cell door would clang and open, and the inmate would step into the hallway. There would be shouts of support and reassurance from the other inmates, many of whom would be in tears. The Isolation Room is no more than twenty feet from the Observation Cell. The inmate would walk through the center of two rows of armed and bulky security guards, the largest the warden could find. There was never any resistance. It wouldn't do any good.

The warden would lead the inmate into a small room, ten feet by ten, with nothing in it except a foldaway bed. The inmate would sit on the bed with his lawyer by his side. At this point, the warden, for some baffling reason, would feel the need to spend a few moments with the inmate, as if he, the warden, was the last person the inmate wanted to chat with. The warden eventually would leave. The room would be quiet except for an occasional bang or knock from the

room next door. Prayers were normally completed at this point. There were just minutes to go.

Next door to the Isolation Room was the Chamber Room itself. It was approximately fifteen feet by twelve, with the gas chamber in the center of it. The executioner would be hard at work while the inmate prayed in isolation. The warden, the prison attorney, the doctor, and a handful of guards would be making preparations. There would be two telephones on the wall for the last minute clearance. There was a small room to the left where the executioner mixed his solutions. Behind the chamber was a series of three windows, eighteen inches by thirty, and covered for the moment by black drapes. On the other side of the windows was the witness room.

At twenty minutes before midnight, the doctor would enter the Isolation Room and attach a stethoscope to the inmate's chest. He would leave, and the warden would enter to take the condemned man to see the chamber.

The Chamber Room was always filled with people, all anxious to help, all about to watch a man die. They would back him into the chamber, strap him in, close the door, and kill him.

It was a fairly straightforward procedure, varied a bit to accommodate the individual case. For example, Buster Moac was in the chair with half the straps in place when the phone rang in the Chamber Room. He went back to the Isolation Room and waited six miserable hours until they came for him again. Jumbo Parris was the smartest of the four. A longtime drug user before he made it to the Row, he began asking the psychiatrist for Valium days before his execution. He chose to spend his last hours alone, no lawyer or minister, and when they came to fetch him from the Observation Cell, he was stoned. He had evidently stockpiled the Valium, and had to be dragged to the Isolation Room where he slept in peace. He was then dragged to the chamber and given his final dosage.

It was a humane and thoughtful procedure. The inmate remained in his cell, next to his pals, up to the very end. In Louisiana, they were removed from the Row and placed in a small building known

as the Death House. They spent their final three days there, under constant supervision. In Virginia, they were moved to another city.

Sam was eight doors from the Observation Cell, about forty-eight feet. Then another twenty feet to the Isolation Room, then another twelve feet to the chamber. From a point in the center of his bed, he'd calculated many times that he was approximately eighty-five feet from the gas chamber.

And he made the calculation again Tuesday morning as he carefully made an X on his calendar. Eight days. It was dark and hot. He had slept off and on and spent most of the night sitting in front of his fan. Breakfast and coffee were an hour away now. This would be day number 3,449 on the Row, and the total did not include time spent in the county jail in Greenville during his first two trials. Only eight more days.

His sheets were soaked with sweat, and as he lay on the bed and watched the ceiling for the millionth time he thought of death. The actual act of dying would not be too terrible. For obvious reasons, no one knew the exact effects of the gas. Maybe they would give him an extra dose so he'd be dead long before his body twitched and jerked. Maybe the first breath would knock him senseless. At any rate, it wouldn't take long, he hoped. He'd watched his wife shrivel and suffer greatly from cancer. He'd watched kinfolks grow old and vegetate. Surely, this was a better way to go.

"Sam," J. B. Gullitt whispered, "you up?"

Sam walked to his door and leaned through the bars. He could see Gullitt's hands and forearms. "Yeah. I'm up. Can't seem to sleep." He lit the first cigarette of the day.

"Me neither. Tell me it's not gonna happen, Sam."

"It's not gonna happen."

"You serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. My lawyer's about to unload the heavy stuff. He'll probably walk me outta here in a coupla weeks."

"Then why can't you sleep?"

"I'm so excited about gettin' out."

"Have you talked to him about my case?"

“Not yet. He’s got a lot on his mind. As soon as I get out, we’ll go to work on your case. Just relax. Try and get some sleep.”

Gullitt’s hands and forearms slowly withdrew, then his bed squeaked. Sam shook his head at the kid’s ignorance. He finished the cigarette and thumped it down the hall, a breach of the rules which would earn him a violation report. As if he cared.

He carefully took his typewriter from the shelf. He had things to say and letters to write. There were people out there he needed to speak to.

George Nugent entered the Maximum Security Unit like a five-star general and glared disapprovingly at the hair and then at the unshined boots of a white security guard. “Get a haircut,” he growled, “or I’ll write you up. And work on those boots.”

“Yes sir,” the kid said, and almost saluted.

Nugent jerked his head and nodded at Packer, who led the way through the center of the Row to Tier A. “Number six,” Packer said as the door opened.

“Stay here,” Nugent instructed. His heels clicked as he marched along the tier, gazing with disdain into each cell. He stopped at Sam’s, and peered inside. Sam was stripped to his boxers, his thin and wrinkled skin gleaming with sweat as he pecked away. He looked at the stranger staring at him through the bars, then returned to his work.

“Sam, my name is George Nugent.”

Sam hit a few keys. The name was not familiar, but Sam assumed he worked somewhere up the ladder since he had access to the tiers. “What do you want?” Sam asked without looking.

“Well, I wanted to meet you.”

“My pleasure, now shove off.”

Gullitt to the right and Henshaw to the left were suddenly leaning through the bars, just a few feet from Nugent. They snickered at Sam’s response.

Nugent glared at them, and cleared his throat. "I'm an assistant superintendent, and Phillip Naifeh has placed me in charge of your execution. There are a few things we need to discuss."

Sam concentrated on his correspondence, and cursed when he hit a wrong key. Nugent waited. "If I could have a few minutes of your valuable time, Sam."

"Better call him Mr. Cayhall," Henshaw added helpfully. "He's a few years older than you, and it means a lot to him."

"Where'd you get those boots?" Gullitt asked, staring at Nugent's feet.

"You boys back away," Nugent said sternly. "I need to talk to Sam."

"Mr. Cayhall's busy right now," Henshaw said. "Perhaps you should come back later. I'll be happy to schedule an appointment for you."

"Are you some kinda military asshole?" Gullitt asked.

Nugent stood stiffly and glanced to his right and to his left. "I'm ordering you two to get back, okay. I need to speak to Sam."

"We don't take orders," Henshaw said.

"And what're you gonna do about it?" Gullitt asked. "Throw us in solitary? Feed us roots and berries? Chain us to the walls? Why don't you just go ahead and kill us?"

Sam placed his typewriter on the bed, and walked to the bars. He took a long drag, and shot smoke through them in the general direction of Nugent. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"I need a few things from you."

"Such as?"

"Do you have a will?"

"That's none of your damned business. A will is a private document to be seen only if it's probated, and it's probated only after a person dies. That's the law."

"What a dumbass!" Henshaw shrieked.

"I don't believe this," Gullitt offered. "Where did Naifeh find this idiot?" he asked.

"Anything else?" Sam asked.

Nugent's face was changing colors. "We need to know what to do with your things."

"It's in my will, okay."

"I hope you're not going to be difficult, Sam."

"It's Mr. Cayhall," Henshaw said again.

"Difficult?" Sam asked. "Why would I be difficult? I intend to cooperate fully with the state while it goes about its business of killing me. I'm a good patriot. I would vote and pay taxes if I could. I'm proud to be an American, an Irish-American, and at this moment I'm still very much in love with my precious state, even though it plans to gas me. I'm a model prisoner, George. No problems out of me."

Packer was thoroughly enjoying this as he waited at the end of the tier. Nugent stood firm.

"I need a list of the people you want to witness the execution," he said. "You're allowed two."

"I'm not giving up yet, George. Let's wait a few days."

"Fine. I'll also need a list of your visitors for the next few days."

"Well, this afternoon I have this doctor coming down from Chicago, you see. He's a psychiatrist, and he's gonna talk to me and see how nutty I really am, then my lawyers will run to court and say that you, George, can't execute me because I'm crazy. He'll have time to examine you, if you want. It won't take long."

Henshaw and Gullitt horselaughed, and within seconds most of the other inmates on the tier were chiming in and cackling loudly. Nugent took a step backward and scowled up and down the tier. "Quiet!" he demanded, but the laughter increased. Sam continued puffing and blowing smoke through the bars. Catcalls and insults could be heard amid the ruckus.

"I'll be back," Nugent shouted angrily at Sam.

"He shall return!" Henshaw yelled, and the commotion grew even louder. The commandant stormed away, and as he marched swiftly to the end of the hall, shouts of "Heil Hitler" rang through the tier.

Sam smiled at the bars for a moment as the noise died, then returned to his position on the edge of the bed. He took a bite of dry toast, a sip of cold coffee. He resumed his typing.

The afternoon drive to Parchman was not a particularly pleasant one. Garner Goodman sat in the front seat as Adam drove, and they talked strategy and brainstormed about the last minute appeals and procedures. Goodman planned to return to Memphis over the weekend, and be available during the last three days. The psychiatrist was Dr. Swinn, a cold, unsmiling man in a black suit. He had wild, bushy hair, dark eyes hidden behind thick glasses, and was completely incapable of small talk. His presence in the backseat was discomfiting. He did not utter a single word from Memphis to Parchman.

The examination had been arranged by Adam and Lucas Mann to take place in the prison hospital, a remarkably modern facility. Dr. Swinn had very plainly informed Adam that neither he nor Goodman could be present during his evaluation of Sam. And this was perfectly fine with Adam and Goodman. A prison van met them at the front gate, and carried Dr. Swinn to the hospital deep inside the farm.

Goodman had not seen Lucas Mann in several years. They shook hands like old friends, and immediately lapsed into war stories about executions. The conversation was kept away from Sam, and Adam appreciated it.

They walked from Mann's office across a parking lot to a small building behind the administration complex. The building was a restaurant, designed along the lines of a neighborhood tavern. Called The Place, it served basic food to the office workers and prison employees. No alcohol. It was on state property.

They drank iced tea and talked about the future of capital punishment. Both Goodman and Mann agreed that executions would soon become even more commonplace. The U.S. Supreme Court was continuing its swing to the right, and it was weary of the endless appeals. Ditto for the lower levels of the federal judiciary. Plus, American juries were becoming increasingly reflective of society's intolerance of violent crime. There was much less sympathy for

death row inmates, a much greater desire to fry the bastards. Fewer federal dollars were being spent to fund groups opposed to the death penalty, and fewer lawyers and their firms were willing to make the enormous pro bono commitments. The death row population was growing faster than the number of lawyers willing to take capital cases.

Adam was quite bored with the conversation. He'd read and heard it a hundred times. He excused himself and found a pay phone in a corner. Phelps was not in, a young secretary said, but he'd left a message for Adam: no word from Lee. She was scheduled to be in court in two weeks; maybe she'd turn up then.

Darlene typed Dr. Swinn's report while Adam and Garner Goodman worked on the petition to accompany it. The report was twenty pages long in rough draft, and sounded like soft music. Swinn was a hired gun, a prostitute who'd sell an opinion to the highest bidder, and Adam detested him and his ilk. He roamed the country as a professional testifier, able to say this today and that tomorrow, depending on who had the deepest pockets. But for the moment, he was their whore, and he was quite good. Sam was suffering from advanced senility. His mental faculties had eroded to the point where he did not know and appreciate the nature of his punishment. He lacked the requisite competence to be executed, and therefore the execution would not serve any purpose. It was not an entirely unique legal argument, nor had the courts exactly embraced it. But, as Adam found himself saying every day, what was there to lose? Goodman seemed to be more than a little optimistic, primarily because of Sam's age. He could not recall an execution of a man over the age of fifty.

They, Darlene included, worked until almost eleven.

Thirty-eight

Garner Goodman did not return to Chicago Wednesday morning, but instead flew to Jackson, Mississippi. The flight took thirty minutes, hardly time for a cup of coffee and an unthawed croissant. He rented a car at the airport and drove straight to the state capitol. The legislature was not in session, and there were plenty of parking places on the grounds. Like many county courthouses rebuilt after the Civil War, the capitol defiantly faced south. He stopped to admire the war monument to Southern women, but spent more time studying the splendid Japanese magnolias at the bottom of the front steps.

Four years earlier, during the days and hours prior to the Maynard Tole execution, Goodman had made this same journey on two occasions. There was a different governor then, a different client, and a different crime. Tole had murdered several people in a two-day crime spree, and it had been quite difficult to arouse sympathy for him. He hoped Sam Cayhall was different. He was an old man who'd probably die within five years anyway. His crime was ancient history to many Mississippians. And on and on.

Goodman had been rehearsing his routine all morning. He entered the capitol building and once again marveled at its beauty. It was a smaller version of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, and no expense had been spared. It had been built in 1910 with prison labor. The state had used the proceeds from a successful lawsuit against a railroad to construct itself this monument.

He entered the governor's office on the second floor and handed his card to the lovely receptionist. The governor was not in this morning, she said, and did he have an appointment? No, Goodman explained pleasantly, but it was very important, and would it be

possible for him to see Mr. Andy Larramore, chief counsel for the governor?

He waited as she made several calls, and half an hour later Mr. Larramore presented himself. They made their introductions and disappeared into a narrow hallway that ran through a maze of small offices. Larramore's cubbyhole was cluttered and disorganized, much like the man himself. He was a small guy with a noticeable bend at the waist and absolutely no neck. His long chin rested on his chest, and when he talked his eyes, nose, and mouth all squeezed together tightly. It was a horrible sight. Goodman couldn't tell if he was thirty or fifty. He had to be a genius.

"The governor is speaking to a convention of insurance agents this morning," Larramore said, holding an itinerary as if it were a piece of fine jewelry. "And then he visits a public school in the inner city."

"I'll wait," Goodman said. "It's very important, and I don't mind hanging around."

Larramore placed the sheet of paper aside, and folded his hands on the table. "What happened to that young fellow, Sam's grandson?"

"Oh, he's still lead counsel. I'm the director of pro bono for Kravitz & Bane, so I'm here to assist him."

"We're monitoring this thing very closely," Larramore said, his face wrinkling fiercely in the center, then relaxing at the end of each sentence. "Looks like it will go down to the wire."

"They always do," Goodman said. "How serious is the governor about a clemency hearing?"

"I'm sure he'll entertain the idea of a hearing. The granting of clemency is an entirely different matter. The statute is very broad, as I'm sure you know. He can commute the death sentence and instantly parole the convict. He can commute it to life in prison, or something less than that."

Goodman nodded. "Will it be possible for me to see him?"

"He's scheduled to return here at eleven. I'll speak to him then. He'll probably eat lunch at his desk, so there may be a gap around one. Can you be here?"

“Yes. This must be kept quiet. Our client is very much opposed to this meeting.”

“Is he opposed to the idea of clemency?”

“We have seven days to go, Mr. Larramore. We’re not opposed to anything.”

Larramore crinkled his nose and exposed his upper teeth, and picked up the itinerary again. “Be here at one. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” They chatted aimlessly for five minutes, then Larramore was besieged by a series of urgent phone calls. Goodman excused himself and left the capitol. He paused again at the Japanese magnolias and removed his jacket. It was nine-thirty, and his shirt was wet under the arms and sticking to his back.

He walked south in the general direction of Capitol Street, four blocks away and considered to be the main street of Jackson. In the midst of the buildings and traffic of downtown, the governor’s mansion sat majestically on manicured grounds and faced the capitol. It was a large antebellum home surrounded by gates and fences. A handful of death penalty opponents had gathered on the sidewalk the night Tole was executed and yelled at the governor. Evidently, he had not heard them. Goodman stopped on the sidewalk and remembered the mansion. He and Peter Wiesenberg had walked hurriedly through a gate to the left of the main drive with their last plea, just hours before Tole was gassed. The governor at that time was having a late dinner with important people, and had become quite irritated with their interruption. He denied their final request for clemency, then, in the finest Southern tradition, invited them to stay for dinner.

They’d politely declined. Goodman explained to His Honor that they had to hurry back to Parchman to be with their client as he died. “Be careful,” the governor had told them, then returned to his dinner party.

Goodman wondered how many protestors would be standing on this spot in a few short days, chanting and praying and burning candles, waving placards, and yelling at McAllister to spare old Sam. Probably not very many.

There has seldom been a shortage of office space in the central business district in Jackson, and Goodman had little trouble finding what he wanted. A sign directed his attention to vacant footage on the third floor of an ugly building. He inquired at the front desk of a finance company on the ground level, and an hour later the owner of the building arrived and showed him the available space. It was a dingy two-room suite with worn carpet and holes in the wallboard. Goodman walked to the lone window and looked at the front of the capitol building three blocks away. "Perfect," he said.

"It's three hundred a month, plus electricity. Rest room's down the hall. Six-month minimum."

"I need it for only two months," Goodman said, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a neatly folded collection of cash.

The owner looked at the money, and asked, "What kind of business are you in?"

"Marketing analysis."

"Where are you from?"

"Detroit. We're thinking about establishing a branch in this state, and we need this space to get started. But for only two months. All cash. Nothing in writing. We'll be out before you know it. Won't make a sound."

The owner took the cash and handed Goodman two keys, one for the office, the other for the entrance on Congress Street. They shook hands and the deal was closed.

Goodman left the dump and returned to his car at the capitol. Along the way he chuckled at the scheme he was pursuing. The idea was Adam's brainchild, another long shot in a series of desperate plots to save Sam. There was nothing illegal about it. The cost would be slight, and who cared about a few dollars at this point? He was, after all, Mr. Pro Bono at the firm, the source of great pride and self-righteousness among his peers. Nobody, not even Daniel Rosen, would question his expenditures for a little rent and a few phones.

After three weeks as a death row lawyer, Adam was beginning to yearn for the predictability of his office in Chicago, if, in fact, he still had an office. Before ten o'clock Wednesday, he had finished a claim for postconviction relief. He had talked with various court clerks four times, then with a court administrator. He had talked with Richard Olander in Washington twice concerning the habeas claim attacking the gas chamber, and he had talked with a clerk at the death desk at the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans regarding the ineffectiveness claim.

The claim alleging Sam's lack of mental competence was now in Jackson, by fax with the original to follow by Fed-Ex, and Adam was forced to politely beg the court's administrator to speed things up. Hurry up and deny it, he said, though not in those words. If a stay of execution was forthcoming, it would in all likelihood be issued by a federal judge.

Each new claim brought with it a scant new ray of hope, and, as Adam was quickly learning, also the potential for another loss. A claim had to clear four obstacles before it was extinguished—the Mississippi Supreme Court, the federal district court, the Fifth Circuit, and the U.S. Supreme Court—so the odds were against success, especially at this stage of the appeals. Sam's bread and butter issues had been litigated thoroughly by Wallace Tyner and Garner Goodman years ago. Adam was now filing the crumbs.

The clerk at the Fifth Circuit doubted if the court would care to indulge in another oral argument, especially since it appeared that Adam would be filing new claims every day. The three-judge panel would probably consider only the briefs. Conference calls would be used if the judges wished to hear his voice.

Richard Olander called again to say the Supreme Court had received Adam's petition for cert, or request to hear the case, and that it had been assigned. No, he did not think the Court would care to hear oral argument. Not this late in the game. He also informed Adam that he had received by fax a copy of the new claim of mental incompetency, and that he would monitor it through the local courts. Interesting, he said. He asked again what new claims Adam might be contemplating, but Adam wouldn't say.

Judge Slattery's law clerk, Breck Jefferson, he of the permanent scowl, called to inform Adam that His Honor had received by fax a copy of the new claim filed with the Mississippi Supreme Court, and frankly His Honor didn't think much of it but would nonetheless give it full consideration once it arrived in their court.

Adam took a little satisfaction in the knowledge that he had managed to keep four very different courts hopping at the same time.

At eleven, Morris Henry, the infamous Dr. Death in the Attorney General's office, called to inform Adam that they had received the latest round of gangplank appeals, as he enjoyed calling them, and Mr. Roxburgh himself had assigned a dozen lawyers to produce the responding paperwork. Henry was nice enough on the phone, but the call had made its point—we have lots of lawyers, Adam.

The paperwork was being generated by the pound now, and the small conference table was covered with neat stacks of it. Darlene was in and out of the office constantly—making copies, delivering phone messages, fetching coffee, proofreading briefs and petitions. She'd been trained in the tedious field of government bonds, so the detailed and voluminous documents did not intimidate her. She confessed more than once that this was an exciting change from her normal drudgery. "What's more exciting than a looming execution?" Adam asked.

Even Baker Cooley managed to tear himself away from the latest updates in federal banking regulations and popped in for a look.

Phelps called around eleven to ask if Adam wanted to meet for lunch. Adam did not, and begged off by blaming deadlines and cranky judges. Neither had heard from Lee. Phelps said she'd disappeared before, but never for more than two days. He was worried and thinking about hiring a private investigator. He'd keep in touch.

"There's a reporter here to see you," Darlene said, handing him a business card declaring the presence of Anne L. Piazza, correspondent for Newsweek. She was the third reporter who'd contacted the office on Wednesday. "Tell her I'm sorry," Adam said with no regret.

“I did that already, but I thought that since it was Newsweek you might wanna know.”

“I don’t care who it is. Tell her the client’s not talking either.”

She left in a hurry as the phone was ringing. It was Goodman, reporting from Jackson that he was to see the governor at one. Adam brought him up to date on the flurry of activity and phone calls.

Darlene delivered a deli sandwich at twelve-thirty. Adam ate it quickly, then napped in a chair as his computer spewed forth another brief.

Goodman flipped through a car magazine as he waited alone in the reception area next to the governor’s office. The same pretty secretary worked on her nails between phone calls at her switchboard. One o’clock came and went without comment. Same for one-thirty. The receptionist, now with glorious peach nails, apologized at two. No problem, said Goodman with a warm smile. The beauty of a pro bono career was that labor was not measured by time. Success meant helping people, regardless of hours billed.

At two-fifteen, an intense young woman in a dark suit appeared from nowhere and walked to Goodman. “Mr. Goodman, I’m Mona Stark, the governor’s chief of staff. The governor will see you now.” She smiled correctly, and Goodman followed her through a set of double doors and into a long, formal room with a desk at one end and a conference table far away at the other.

McAllister was standing by the window with his jacket off, tie loosened, sleeves up, very much the beleaguered and overworked servant of the people. “Hello, Mr. Goodman,” he said with a hand thrust forward and teeth flashing brilliantly.

“Governor, my pleasure,” Goodman said. He had no briefcase, no standard lawyer accessories. He looked as if he’d simply passed by on the street and decided to stop and meet the governor.

“You’ve met Mr. Larramore and Ms. Stark,” McAllister said, waving a hand at each.

“Yes. We’ve met. Thanks for seeing me on such short notice.” Goodman tried to match his dazzling smile, but it was hopeless. At the moment, he was most humble and appreciative just to be in this great office.

“Let’s sit over here,” the governor said, waving at the conference table and leading the way. The four of them sat on separate sides of the table. Larramore and Mona withdrew pens and were poised for serious note-taking. Goodman had nothing but his hands in front of him.

“I understand there’ve been quite of lot of filings in the past few days,” McAllister said.

“Yes sir. Just curious, have you been through one of these before?” Goodman asked.

“No. Thankfully.”

“Well, this is not unusual. I’m certain we’ll be filing petitions until the last moment.”

“Can I ask you something, Mr. Goodman?” the governor said sincerely.

“Certainly.”

“I know you’ve handled many of these cases. What’s your prediction at this point? How close will it get?”

“You never know. Sam’s a bit different from most inmates on death row because he’s had good lawyers—good trial counsel, then superb appellate work.”

“By you, I believe.”

Goodman smiled, then McAllister smiled, then Mona managed a grin. Larramore remained hunched over his legal pad, his face contorted in furious concentration.

“That’s right. So Sam’s major claims have already been ruled on. What you’re seeing now are the desperate moves, but they often work. I’d say fifty-fifty, today, seven days away.”

Mona quickly recorded this on paper as if it carried some enormous legal significance. Larramore had written every word so far.

McAllister thought about it for a few seconds. "I'm a little confused, Mr. Goodman. Your client does not know we're meeting. He's opposed to the idea of a clemency hearing. You want this meeting kept quiet. So why are we here?"

"Things change, Governor. Again, I've been here many times before. I've watched men count down their last days. It does strange things to the mind. People change. As the lawyer, I have to cover every base, every angle."

"Are you asking for a hearing?"

"Yes sir. A closed hearing."

"When?"

"What about Friday?"

"In two days," McAllister said as he gazed through a window. Larramore cleared his throat, and asked, "What sort of witnesses do you anticipate?"

"Good question. If I had names, I'd give them to you now, but I don't. Our presentation will be brief."

"Who will testify for the state?" McAllister asked Larramore, whose moist teeth glistened as he pondered. Goodman looked away.

"I'm certain the victims' family will want to say something. The crime is usually discussed. Someone from the prison might be needed to discuss the type of inmate he's been. These hearings are quite flexible."

"I know more about the crime than anyone," McAllister said, almost to himself.

"It's a strange situation," Goodman confessed. "I've had my share of clemency hearings, and the prosecutor is usually the first witness to testify against the defendant. In this case, you were the prosecutor."

"Why do you want the hearing closed?"

"The governor has long been an advocate of open meetings," Mona added.

"It's really best for everyone," Goodman said, much like the learned professor. "It's less pressure on you, Governor, because it's not exposed and you don't have a lot of unsolicited advice. We, of course, would like for it to be closed."

“Why?” McAllister asked.

“Well, frankly, sir, we don’t want the public to see Ruth Kramer talking about her little boys.” Goodman watched them as he delivered this. The real reason was something else altogether. Adam was convinced that the only way to talk Sam into a clemency hearing was to promise him it would not be a public spectacle. If such a hearing was closed, then Adam could maybe convince Sam that McAllister would be prevented from grandstanding.

Goodman knew dozens of people around the country who would gladly come to Jackson on a moment’s notice to testify on Sam’s behalf. He had heard these people make some persuasive, last minute arguments against death. Nuns, priests, ministers, psychologists, social workers, authors, professors, and a couple of former death row inmates. Dr. Swinn would testify about how dreadfully Sam was doing these days, and he would do an excellent job of trying to convince the governor that the state was about to kill a vegetable.

In most states, the inmate has a right to a last minute clemency hearing, usually before the governor. In Mississippi, however, the hearing was discretionary.

“I guess that makes sense,” the governor actually said.

“There’s enough interest already,” Goodman said, knowing that McAllister was giddy with dreams of the forthcoming media frenzy. “It will benefit no one if the hearing is open.”

Mona, the staunch open meetings advocate, frowned even harder and wrote something in block letters. McAllister was deep in thought.

“Regardless of whether it’s open or closed,” he said, “there’s no real reason for such a hearing unless you and your client have something new to add. I know this case, Mr. Goodman. I smelled the smoke. I saw the bodies. I cannot change my mind unless there’s something new.”

“Such as?”

“Such as a name. You give me the name of Sam’s accomplice, and I’ll agree to a hearing. No promise of clemency, you understand, just a regular clemency hearing. Otherwise, this is a waste of time.”

“Do you believe there was an accomplice?” Goodman asked.

“We were always suspicious. What do you think?”

“Why is it important?”

“It’s important because I make the final decision, Mr. Goodman. After the courts are finished with it, and the clock ticks down next Tuesday night, I’m the only person in the world who can stop it. If Sam deserves the death penalty, then I have no problem sitting by while it happens. But if he doesn’t, then the execution should be stopped. I’m a young man. I do not want to be haunted by this for the rest of my life. I want to make the right decision.”

“But if you believe there was an accomplice, and you obviously do, then why not stop it anyway?”

“Because I want to be sure. You’ve been his lawyer for many years. Do you think he had an accomplice?”

“Yes. I’ve always thought there were two of them. I don’t know who was the leader and who was the follower, but Sam had help.”

McAllister leaned closer to Goodman and looked into his eyes. “Mr. Goodman, if Sam will tell me the truth, then I will grant a closed hearing, and I will consider clemency. I’m not promising a damned thing, you understand, only that we’ll have the hearing. Otherwise, there’s nothing new to add to the story.”

Mona and Larramore scribbled faster than court reporters.

“Sam says he’s telling the truth.”

“Then forget the hearing. I’m a busy man.”

Goodman sighed in frustration, but kept a smile in place. “Very well, we’ll talk to him again. Can we meet here again tomorrow?”

The governor looked at Mona, who consulted a pocket calendar and began shaking her head as if tomorrow was hopelessly filled with speeches and appearances and meetings. “You’re booked,” she said in a commanding tone.

“What about lunch?”

Nope. Wouldn’t work. “You’re speaking to the NRA convention.”

“Why don’t you call me?” Larramore offered.

“Good idea,” the governor said, standing now and buttoning his sleeves.

Goodman stood and shook hands with the three. "I'll call if something breaks. We are requesting a hearing as soon as possible, regardless."

"The request is denied unless Sam talks," said the governor.

"Please put the request in writing, sir, if you don't mind," Larramore asked.

"Certainly."

They walked Goodman to the door, and after he left the office McAllister sat in his official chair behind his desk. He unbuttoned his sleeves again. Larramore excused himself and went to his little room down the hall.

Ms. Stark studied a printout while the governor watched the rows of buttons blink on his phone. "How many of these calls are about Sam Cayhall?" he asked. She moved a finger along a column.

"Yesterday, you had twenty-one calls regarding the Cayhall execution. Fourteen in favor of gassing him. Five said to spare him. Two couldn't make up their minds."

"That's an increase."

"Yeah, but the paper had that article about Sam's last ditch efforts. It mentioned the possibility of a clemency hearing."

"What about the polls?"

"No change. Ninety percent of the white people in this state favor the death penalty, and about half the blacks do. Overall, it's around eighty-four percent."

"Where's my approval?"

"Sixty-two. But if you pardon Sam Cayhall, I'm sure it'll drop to single digits."

"So you're against the idea."

"There's absolutely nothing to gain, and much to lose. Forget polls and numbers, if you pardon one of those thugs up there you'll have the other fifty sending lawyers and grandmothers and preachers down here begging for the same favor. You have enough on your mind. It's foolish."

"Yeah, you're right. Where's the media plan?"

"I'll have it in an hour."

"I need to see it."

“Nagel’s putting the final touches on it. I think you should grant the request for a clemency hearing anyway. But hold it Monday. Announce it tomorrow. Let it simmer over the weekend.”

“It shouldn’t be closed.”

“Hell no! We want Ruth Kramer crying for the cameras.”

“It’s my hearing. Sam and his lawyers will not dictate its conditions. If they want it, they’ll do it my way.”

“Right. But keep in mind, you want it too. Tons of coverage.”

Goodman signed a three-month lease for four cellular phones. He used a Kravitz & Bane credit card and deftly dodged the barrage of questions by the chirpy young salesman. He went to a public library on State Street and found a reference table filled with phonebooks. Judging by their thickness, he selected those of the larger Mississippi towns, places like Laurel, Hattiesburg, Tupelo, Vicksburg, Biloxi, and Meridian. Then he picked the thinner ones—Tunica, Calhoun City, Bude, Long Beach, West Point. At the information desk, he converted bills to quarters, and spent two hours copying pages from the phonebooks.

He went merrily about his work. No one would’ve believed the natty little man with bushy gray hair and bow tie was in fact a partner in a major Chicago firm with secretaries and paralegals at his beck and call. No one would’ve believed he earned over four hundred thousand dollars a year. And he couldn’t have cared less. E. Garner Goodman was happy with his work. He was trying his best to save another soul from being legally killed.

He left the library and drove a few blocks to the Mississippi College School of Law. A professor there by the name of John Bryan Glass taught criminal procedure and law, and also had begun publishing scholarly articles against the death penalty. Goodman wanted to make his acquaintance, and to see if maybe the professor had a few bright students interested in a research project.

The professor was gone for the day, but scheduled to teach a 9 a.m. class on Thursday. Goodman checked out the law school's library, then left the building. He drove a few blocks to the Old State Capitol Building, just killing time, and took an extended tour of it. It lasted for thirty minutes, half of which was spent at the Civil Rights Exhibit on the ground floor. He asked the clerk in the gift shop about a bed and breakfast, and she suggested the Millsaps-Buie House, about a mile down the street. He found the lovely Victorian mansion just where she'd said, and took the last vacant room. The house was immaculately restored with period pieces and furnishings. The butler fixed him a Scotch and water, and he took it to his room.

Thirty-nine

The Auburn House opened for business at eight. A feeble and dispirited security guard in a bad uniform unlocked the gate across the drive, and Adam was the first person into the parking lot. He waited in his car for ten minutes until another parked nearby. He recognized the woman as the counselor he'd met in Lee's office two weeks earlier. He stopped her on the sidewalk as she was entering a side door. "Excuse me," he said. "We've met before. I'm Adam Hall. Lee's nephew. I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name."

The lady held a worn briefcase in one hand and a brown lunch bag in the other. She smiled and said, "Joyce Cobb. I remember. Where's Lee?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you might know something. You haven't heard from her?"

"No. Not since Tuesday."

"Tuesday? I haven't talked to her since Saturday. Did you talk to her Tuesday?"

"She called here, but I didn't talk to her. It was the day they ran that drunk driving story in the paper."

"Where was she?"

"She never said. She asked for the administrator, said she would be out for a while, had to get some help, stuff like that. Never said where she was or when she was coming back."

"What about her patients?"

"We're covering for her. It's always a struggle, you know. But we'll manage."

"Lee wouldn't forget these girls. Do you think maybe she's talked to them this week?"

“Look, Adam, most of these girls don’t have phones, okay? And Lee certainly would not go into the projects. We’re seeing her girls, and I know they haven’t talked to her.”

Adam took a step back and looked at the gate. “I know. I need to find her. I’m really worried.”

“She’ll be okay. She’s done this once before, and everything worked out.” Joyce was suddenly in a hurry to get inside. “If I hear something, I’ll let you know.”

“Please do. I’m staying at her place.”

“I know.”

Adam thanked her, and drove away. By nine, he was at the office, buried in paper.

Colonel Nugent sat at the end of a long table in the front of a room filled with guards and staff people. The table was on a slight platform twelve inches above the rest of the room, and behind it on the wall was a large chalkboard. A portable podium sat in a corner. The chairs along the table to his right were empty, so that the guards and staff sitting in the folding chairs could see the faces of the more important ones on Nugent’s left. Morris Henry from the Attorney General’s office was there, thick briefs lying before him. Lucas Mann sat at the far end taking notes. Two assistant superintendents were next to Henry. A flunkie from the governor’s office was next to Lucas.

Nugent glanced at his watch, then began his little pep talk. He referred to his notes, and aimed his comments at the guards and staff. “As of this morning, August 2, all stays have been lifted by the various courts, and there’s nothing to stop the execution. We are proceeding as if it will take place as planned, at one minute after midnight next Wednesday. We have six full days to prepare, and I am determined for this thing to take place smoothly, without a hitch.

“The inmate has at least three petitions and appeals currently working their way through the various courts, and, of course, there’s no way to predict what might happen. We are in constant contact with the Attorney General’s office. In fact, Mr. Morris Henry is here with us today. It is his opinion, and an opinion shared by Mr. Lucas Mann, that this thing will go down to the wire. A stay could be granted at any moment, but that looks doubtful. We have to be ready regardless. The inmate is also expected to request a clemency hearing from the governor, but, frankly, that is not expected to be successful. From now until next Wednesday, we will be in a state of preparedness.”

Nugent’s words were strong and clear. He had center stage, and was obviously enjoying every moment of it. He glanced at his notes, and continued. “The gas chamber itself is being prepared. It’s old and it hasn’t been used in two years, so we’re being very careful with it. A representative of the manufacturer arrives this morning, and will conduct tests today and tonight. We’ll go through a complete rehearsal of the execution over the weekend, probably Sunday night, assuming there’s no stay. I have collected the lists of volunteers for the execution team, and I’ll make that determination this afternoon.

“Now, we’re being inundated with requests from the media for all sorts of things. They want to interview Mr. Cayhall, his lawyer, our lawyer, the warden, the guards, other inmates on the row, the executioner, everybody. They want to witness the execution. They want pictures of his cell and the chamber. Typical media silliness. But we must deal with it. There is to be no contact with any member of the press unless I first approve it. That goes for every employee of this institution. No exceptions. Most of these reporters are not from around here, and they get their jollies making us look like a bunch of ignorant rednecks. So don’t talk to them. No exceptions. I’ll issue the appropriate releases when I deem necessary. Be careful with these people. They’re vultures.

“We’re also expecting trouble from the outside. As of about ten minutes ago, the first group of Ku Klux Klansmen arrived at the front gate. They were directed to the usual spot between the

highway and the administration building where the protests take place. We've also heard that other such groups will be here shortly, and it appears as if they plan to protest until this thing is over. We'll watch them closely. They have the right to do this, so long as it's peaceful. Though I wasn't here for the last four executions, I've been told that groups of death penalty supporters usually show up and raise hell. We plan to keep these two groups separated, for obvious reasons."

Nugent couldn't sit any longer, and stood stiffly at the end of the table. All eyes were on him. He studied his notes for a second.

"This execution will be different because of Mr. Cayhall's notoriety. It will attract a lot of attention, a lot of media, a lot of other loonies. We must act professionally at all times, and I will not tolerate any breach of the rules of conduct. Mr. Cayhall and his family are entitled to respect during these last few days. No off-color comments about the gas chamber or the execution. I will not stand for it. Any questions?"

Nugent surveyed the room and was quite pleased with himself. He'd covered it all. No questions. "Very well. We'll meet again in the morning at nine." He dismissed them, and the room emptied hurriedly.

Garner Goodman caught Professor John Bryan Glass as he was leaving his office and headed for a lecture. The class was forgotten as the two stood in the hallway and swapped compliments. Glass had read all of Goodman's books, and Goodman had read most of Glass' recent articles condemning the death penalty. The conversation quickly turned to the Cayhall mess, and specifically to Goodman's pressing need for a handful of trustworthy law students who could assist with a quick research project over the weekend. Glass offered his help, and the two agreed to have lunch in a few hours to pursue the matter.

Three blocks from the Mississippi College School of Law, Goodman found the small and cramped offices of Southern Capital Defense Group, a quasi federal agency with small, cramped offices in every state in the Death Belt. The director was a young, black, Yale-educated lawyer named Hez Kerry, who had forsaken the riches of the big firms and dedicated his life to abolishing the death penalty. Goodman had met him on two prior occasions at conferences. Though Kerry's Group, as it was referred to, did not directly represent every inmate on death row, it did have the responsibility of monitoring every case. Hez was thirty-one years old and aging quickly. The gray hair was evidence of the pressure of forty-seven men on death row.

On a wall above the secretary's desk in the foyer was a small calendar, and across the top of it someone had printed the words BIRTHDAYS ON DEATH ROW. Everybody got a card, nothing more. The budget was tight, and the cards were usually purchased with pocket change collected around the office.

The group had two lawyers working under Kerry's supervision, and only one full-time secretary. A few students from the law school worked several hours a week, for free.

Goodman talked with Hez Kerry for more than an hour. They planned their movements for next Tuesday—Kerry himself would camp out at the clerk's office at the Mississippi Supreme Court. Goodman would stay at the governor's office. John Bryan Glass would be recruited to sit in the Fifth Circuit's satellite office in the federal courthouse in Jackson. One of Goodman's former associates at Kravitz & Bane now worked in Washington, and he had already agreed to wait at the Death Clerk's desk. Adam would be left to sit on the Row with the client and coordinate the last minute calls.

Kerry agreed to participate in Goodman's market analysis project over the weekend.

At eleven, Goodman returned to the governor's office in the state capitol, and handed to Lawyer Larramore a written request for a clemency hearing. The governor was out of the office, very busy these days, and he, Larramore, would see him just after lunch.

Goodman left his phone number at the Millsaps-Buie House, and said he would call in periodically.

He then drove to his new office, now supplied with the finest rental furniture available on two months' lease, cash of course. The folding chairs were leftovers from a church fellowship hall, according to the markings under the seats. The rickety tables too had seen their share of potluck suppers and wedding receptions.

Goodman admired his hastily assembled little hole-in-the-wall. He took a seat, and on a new cellular phone he called his secretary in Chicago, Adam's office in Memphis, his wife at home, and the governor's hotline.

By 4 p.m. Thursday, the Mississippi Supreme Court still had not denied the claim based on Sam's alleged mental incompetence. Almost thirty hours had passed since Adam filed it. He'd made a nuisance of himself calling the court's clerk. He was tired of explaining the obvious—he needed an answer, please. There was not the slightest trace of optimism that the court was actually considering the merits of the claim. The court, in Adam's opinion, was dragging its feet and delaying his rush to federal court. At this point, relief in the state supreme court was impossible, he felt.

He wasn't exactly on a roll in the federal courts either. The U.S. Supreme Court had not ruled on his request to consider the claim that the gas chamber was unconstitutional. The Fifth Circuit was sitting on his ineffectiveness of counsel claim.

Nothing was moving on Thursday. The courts were just sitting there as if these were ordinary lawsuits to be filed and assigned and docketed, then continued and delayed for years. He needed action, preferably a stay granted at some level, or if not a stay then an oral argument, or a hearing on the merits, or even a denial so he could move on to the next court.

He paced around the table in his office and listened for the phone. He was tired of pacing and sick of the phone. The office was littered

with the debris of a dozen briefs. The table was blanketed with disheveled piles of paper. Pink and yellow phone messages were stuck along one bookshelf.

Adam suddenly hated the place. He needed fresh air. He told Darlene he was going for a walk, and left the building. It was almost five, still bright and very warm. He walked to the Peabody Hotel on Union, and had a drink in a corner of the lobby near the piano. It was his first drink since Friday in New Orleans, and although he enjoyed it he worried about Lee. He looked for her in the crowd of conventioners flocking around the registration desk. He watched the tables in the lobby fill up with well-dressed people, hoping that for some reason she would appear. Where do you hide when you're fifty years old and running from life?

A man with a ponytail and hiking boots stopped and stared, then walked over. "Excuse me, sir. Are you Adam Hall, the lawyer for Sam Cayhall?"

Adam nodded.

The man smiled, obviously pleased that he'd recognized Adam, and walked to his table. "I'm Kirk Kleckner with the New York Times." He laid a business card in front of Adam. "I'm here covering the Cayhall execution. Just arrived, actually. May I sit down?"

Adam waved at the empty seat across the small round table. Kleckner sat down. "Lucky to find you here," he said, all smiles. He was in his early forties with a rugged, globe-trotting journalist look—scruffy beard, sleeveless cotton vest over a denim shirt, jeans. "Recognized you from some pictures I studied on the flight down."

"Nice to meet you," Adam said dryly.

"Can we talk?"

"About what?"

"Oh, lots of things. I understand your client will not give interviews."

"That's correct."

"What about you?"

"The same. We can chat, but nothing for the record."

"That makes it difficult."

"I honestly don't care. I'm not concerned with how difficult your job may be."

"Fair enough." A pliant young waitress in a short skirt stopped by long enough to take his order. Black coffee. "When did you last see your grandfather?"

"Tuesday."

"When will you see him again?"

"Tomorrow."

"How is he holding up?"

"He's surviving. The pressure is building, but he's taking it well, so far."

"What about you?"

"Just having a ball."

"Seriously. Are you losing sleep, you know, things like that?"

"I'm tired. Yeah, I'm losing sleep. I'm working lots of hours, running back and forth to the prison. It'll go down to the wire, so the next few days will be hectic."

"I covered the Bundy execution in Florida. Quite a circus. His lawyers went days without sleep."

"It's difficult to relax."

"Will you do it again? I know this is not your specialty, but will you consider another death case?"

"Only if I find another relative on death row. Why do you cover these things?"

"I've written for years on the death penalty. It's fascinating. I'd like to interview Mr. Cayhall."

Adam shook his head and finished his drink. "No. There's no way. He's not talking to anyone."

"Will you ask him for me?"

"No."

The coffee arrived. Kleckner stirred it with a spoon. Adam watched the crowd. "I interviewed Benjamin Keyes yesterday in Washington," Kleckner said. "He said he wasn't surprised that you're now saying he made mistakes at trial. He said he figured it was coming."

At the moment, Adam didn't care about Benjamin Keyes or any of his opinions. "It's standard. I need to run. Nice to meet you."

"But I wanted to talk about—"

"Listen, you're lucky you caught me," Adam said, standing abruptly.

"Just a couple of things," Kleckner said as Adam walked away.

Adam left the Peabody, and strolled to Front Street near the river, passing along the way scores of well-dressed young people very much like himself, all in a hurry to go home. He envied them; whatever their vocations or careers, whatever their pressures at the moment, they weren't carrying burdens as heavy as his.

He ate a sandwich at a delicatessen, and by seven was back in his office.

The rabbit had been trapped in the woods at Parchman by two of the guards, who named him Sam for the occasion. He was a brown cottontail, the largest of the four captured. The other three had already been eaten.

Late Thursday night, Sam the rabbit and his handlers, along with Colonel Nugent and the execution team, entered the Maximum Security Unit in prison vans and pickups. They drove slowly by the front and around the bullpens on the west end. They parked by a square, red-brick building attached to the southwest corner of MSU.

Two white, metal doors without windows led to the interior of the square building. One, facing south, opened to a narrow room, eight feet by fifteen, where the witnesses sat during the execution. They faced a series of black drapes which, when opened, revealed the rear of the chamber itself, just inches away.

The other door opened into the Chamber Room, a fifteen-by-twelve room with a painted concrete floor. The octagonal-shaped gas chamber sat squarely in the middle, glowing smartly from a fresh coat of silver enamel varnish and smelling like the same. Nugent had inspected it a week earlier and ordered a new paint job.

The death room, as it was also known, was spotless and sanitized. The black drapes over the windows behind the chamber were pulled.

Sam the rabbit was left in the bed of a pickup while a small guard, about the same height and weight as Sam Cayhall, was led by two of his larger colleagues into the Chamber Room. Nugent strutted and inspected like General Patton—pointing and nodding and frowning. The small guard was pushed gently into the chamber first, then joined by the two guards who turned him around and eased him into the wooden chair. Without a word or a smile, neither a grin nor a joke, they strapped his wrists first with leather bands to the arms of the chair. Then his knees, then his ankles. Then one lifted his head up an inch or two and held it in place while the other managed to buckle the leather head strap.

The two guards stepped carefully from the chamber, and Nugent pointed to another member of the team who stepped forward as if to say something to the condemned.

“At this point, Lucas Mann will read the death warrant to Mr. Cayhall,” Nugent explained like an amateur movie director. “Then I will ask if he has any last words.” He pointed again, and a designated guard closed the heavy door to the chamber and sealed it.

“Open it,” Nugent barked, and the door came open. The small guard was set free.

“Get the rabbit,” Nugent ordered. One of the handlers retrieved Sam the rabbit from the pickup. He sat innocently in a wire cage which was handed to the same two guards who’d just left the chamber. They carefully placed him in the wooden chair, then went about their task of strapping in an imaginary man. Wrists, knees, ankles, head, and the rabbit was ready for the gas. The two guards left the chamber.

The door was shut and sealed, and Nugent signaled for the executioner, who placed a canister of sulfuric acid into a tube which ran into the bottom of the chamber. He pulled a lever, a clicking sound occurred, and the canister made its way to the bowl under the chair.

Nugent stepped to one of the windows and watched intently. The other members of the team did likewise. Petroleum jelly had been smeared around the edges of the windows to prevent seepage.

The poisonous gas was released slowly, and a faint mist of visible vapors rose from under the chair and drifted upward. At first, the rabbit didn't react to the steam that permeated his little cell, but it hit him soon enough. He stiffened, then hopped a few times, banging into the sides of his cage, then he went into violent convulsions, jumping and jerking and twisting frantically. In less than a minute, he was still.

Nugent smiled as he glanced at his watch. "Clear it," he ordered, and a vent at the top of the chamber was opened, releasing the gas.

The door from the Chamber Room to the outside was opened, and most of the execution team walked out for fresh air or a smoke. It would be at least fifteen minutes before the chamber could be opened and the rabbit removed. Then they had to hose it down and clean up. Nugent was still inside, watching everything. So they smoked and had a few laughs.

Less than sixty feet away, the windows above the hallway of Tier A were open. Sam could hear their voices. It was after ten and the lights were off, but in every cell along the tier two arms protruded from the bars as fourteen men listened in dark silence.

A death row inmate lives in a six-by-nine cell for twenty-three hours a day. He hears everything—the strange clicking sound of a new pair of boots in the hallway; the unfamiliar pitch and accent of a different voice; the faraway hum of a lawn mower or weed eater. And he can certainly hear the opening and closing of the door to the Chamber Room. He can hear the satisfied and important chuckles of the execution team.

Sam leaned on his forearms and watched the windows above the hallway. They were practicing for him out there.

Forty

Between the western edge of Highway 49 and the front lawn of the administrative buildings of Parchman, a distance of fifty yards, there was a grassy strip of land that was smooth and noticeable because it was once a railroad track. It was where the death penalty protestors were corralled and monitored at every execution. They invariably arrived, usually small groups of committed souls who sat in folding chairs and held homemade placards. They burned candles at night and sang hymns during the final hours. They sang hymns, offered prayers, and wept when the death was announced.

A new twist had occurred during the hours preceding the execution of Teddy Doyle Meeks, a child rapist and killer. The somber, almost sacred protest had been disrupted by carloads of unruly college students who suddenly appeared without warning and had a delightful time demanding blood. They drank beer and played loud music. They chanted slogans and heckled the shaken death protestors. The situation deteriorated as the two groups exchanged words. Prison officials moved in and restored order.

Maynard Tole was next, and during the planning of his execution another section of turf on the other side of the main drive was designated for the death penalty proponents. Extra security was assigned to keep things peaceful.

When Adam arrived Friday morning, he counted seven Ku Klux Klansmen in white robes. Three were engaged in some attempt at synchronized protest, a casual walking along the edge of the grassy strip near the highway with posters strung over their shoulders. The other four were erecting a large blue and white canopy. Metal poles and ropes were scattered on the ground. Two ice chests sat next to several lawn chairs. These guys were planning to stay awhile.

Adam stared at them as he rolled to a stop at the front gate of Parchman. He lost track of time as he watched the Kluckers for minutes. So this was his heritage, his roots. These were the brethren of his grandfather and his grandfather's relatives and ancestors. Were some of these figures the same ones who'd been recorded on film and edited by Adam into the video about Sam Cayhall? Had he seen them before?

Instinctively, Adam opened the door of his car and got out. His coat and briefcase were in the rear seat. He began walking slowly in their direction, and stopped near their ice chests. Their placards demanded freedom for Sam Cayhall, a political prisoner. Gas the real criminals, but release Sam. For some reason, Adam was not comforted by their demands.

"What do you want?" demanded one with a sign draped over his chest. The other six stopped what they were doing and stared.

"I don't know," Adam said truthfully.

"Then what are you looking at?"

"I'm not sure."

Three others joined the first, and they stepped together near Adam. Their robes were identical—white and made of a very light fabric with red crosses and other markings. It was almost 9 a.m., and they were already sweating. "Who the hell are you?"

"Sam's grandson."

The other three crowded behind the others, and all seven examined Adam from a distance of no more than five feet. "Then you're on our side," one said, relieved.

"No. I'm not one of you."

"That's right. He's with that bunch of Jews from Chicago," another said for the edification of the rest, and this seemed to stir them up a bit.

"Why are you people here?" Adam asked.

"We're trying to save Sam. Looks like you're not gonna do it."

"You're the reason he's here."

A young one with a red face and rows of sweat on his forehead took the lead and walked even closer to Adam. "No. He's the reason we're here. I wasn't even born when Sam killed those Jews, so you

can't blame it on me. We're here to protest his execution. He's being persecuted for political reasons."

"He wouldn't be here had it not been for the Klan. Where are your masks? I thought you people always hid your faces."

They twitched and fidgeted as a group, uncertain what to do next. He was, after all, the grandson of Sam Cayhall, their idol and champion. He was the lawyer trying to save a most precious symbol.

"Why don't you leave?" Adam asked. "Sam doesn't want you here."

"Why don't you go to hell?" the young one sneered.

"How eloquent. Just leave, okay. Sam's worth much more to you dead than alive. Let him die in peace, then you'll have a wonderful martyr."

"We ain't leavin'. We'll be here till the end."

"And what if Sam asks you to leave? Will you go then?"

"No," he sneered again, then glanced over his shoulders at the others who all seemed to agree that they would, in fact, not leave. "We plan to make a lot of noise."

"Great. That'll get your pictures in the papers. That's what this is about, isn't it? Circus clowns in funny costumes always attract attention."

Car doors slammed somewhere behind Adam, and as he looked around he saw a television crew making a speedy exit from a van parked near his Saab.

"Well, well," he said to the group. "Smile, fellas. This is your big moment."

"Go to hell," the young one snapped angrily. Adam turned his back to them and walked toward his car. A hurried reporter with a cameraman in tow rushed to him.

"Are you Adam Hall?" she asked breathlessly. "Cayhall's lawyer?"

"Yes," he said without stopping.

"Could we have a few words?"

"No. But those boys are anxious to talk," he said, pointing over his shoulder. She walked along beside him while the cameraman fumbled with his equipment. Adam opened his car door, then slammed it as he turned the ignition.

Louise, the guard at the gate, handed him a numbered card for his dashboard, then waved him through.

Packer went through the motions of the obligatory frisk inside the front door of the Row. "What's in there?" he asked, pointing to the small cooler Adam held in his left hand.

"Eskimo Pies, Sergeant. Would you like one?"

"Lemme see." Adam handed the cooler to Packer, who flipped open the top just long enough to count half a dozen Eskimo Pies, still frozen under a layer of ice.

He handed the cooler back to Adam, and pointed to the door of the front office, a few feet away. "Y'all will be meetin' in here from now on," he explained. They stepped into the room.

"Why?" Adam asked as he looked around the room. There was a metal desk with a phone, three chairs, and two locked file cabinets.

"That's just the way we do things. We lighten up some as the big day gets close. Sam gets to have his visitors here. No time limit either."

"How sweet." Adam placed his briefcase on the desk and picked up the phone. Packer left to fetch Sam.

The kind lady in the clerk's office in Jackson informed Adam that the Mississippi Supreme Court had denied, just minutes ago, his client's petition for postconviction relief on the grounds that he was mentally incompetent. He thanked her, said something to the effect that this was what he expected and that it could've been done a day earlier, then asked her to fax a copy of the court's decision to his office in Memphis, and also to Lucas Mann's office at Parchman. He called Darlene in Memphis and told her to fax the new petition to the federal district court, with copies faxed to the Fifth Circuit and to Mr. Richard Olander's rather busy death desk at the Supreme Court in Washington. He called Mr. Olander to inform him it was coming, and was told that the U.S. Supreme Court had just denied cert on Adam's claim that the gas chamber was unconstitutional.

Sam entered the front office without handcuffs while Adam was on the phone. They shook hands quickly, and Sam took a seat. Instead of a cigarette, he opened the cooler and removed an Eskimo Pie. He ate it slowly while listening as Adam talked with Olander. "U.S. Supreme Court just denied cert," Adam whispered to Sam with his hand over the receiver.

Sam smiled oddly and studied some envelopes he'd brought with him.

"The Mississippi Supreme Court also turned us down," Adam explained to his client as he punched more numbers. "But that was to be expected. We're filing it in federal court right now." He was calling the Fifth Circuit to check the status of the ineffective counsel claim. The clerk in New Orleans informed him that no action had been taken that morning. Adam hung up and sat on the edge of the desk.

"Fifth Circuit is still sitting on the ineffectiveness claim," he reported to his client, who knew the law and the procedure and was absorbing it like a learned attorney. "All in all, not a very good morning."

"The Jackson TV station this morning said I've requested a clemency hearing from the governor," Sam said, between bites. "Certainly this can't be true. I didn't approve it."

"Relax, Sam. It's routine."

"Routine my ass. I thought we had an agreement. They even had McAllister on the tube talking about how he was grieving over his decision about a clemency hearing. I warned you."

"McAllister is the least of our problems, Sam. The request was a formality. We don't have to participate."

Sam shook his head in frustration. Adam watched him closely. He wasn't really angry, nor did he really care what Adam had done. He was resigned, almost defeated. The little bit of bitching came naturally. A week earlier he would've lashed out.

"They practiced last night, you know. They cranked up the gas chamber, killed a rat or something, everything worked perfectly and so now everyone's excited about my execution. Can you believe it? They had a dress rehearsal for me. The bastards."

"I'm sorry, Sam."

"Do you know what cyanide gas smells like?"

"No."

"Cinnamon. It was in the air last night. The idiots didn't bother to close the windows on our tier, and I got a whiff of it."

Adam didn't know if this was true or not. He knew the chamber was vented for several minutes after an execution and the gas escaped into the air. Surely it couldn't filter onto the tiers. Maybe Sam had heard stories about the gas from the guards. Maybe it was just part of the lore. He sat on the edge of the desk, casually swinging his feet, staring at the pitiful old man with the skinny arms and oily hair. It was such a horrible sin to kill an aged creature like Sam Cayhall. His crimes were committed a generation ago. He had suffered and died many times in his six-by-nine cell. How would the state benefit by killing him now?

Adam had things on his mind, not the least of which was perhaps their last, gasping effort. "I'm sorry, Sam," he said again, very compassionately. "But we need to talk about some items."

"Were there Klansmen outside this morning? The television had a shot of them here yesterday."

"Yes. I counted seven a few minutes ago. Full uniforms except for the masks."

"I used to wear one of those, you know," he said, much like a war veteran bragging to little boys.

"I know, Sam. And because you wore one, you're now sitting here on death row with your lawyer counting the hours before they strap you in the gas chamber. You should hate those silly fools out there."

"I don't hate them. But they have no right to be here. They abandoned me. Dogan sent me here, and when he testified against me he was the Imperial Wizard of Mississippi. They gave me not one dime for legal fees. They forgot about me."

"What do you expect from a bunch of thugs? Loyalty?"

"I was loyal."

"And look where you are, Sam. You should denounce the Klan and ask them to leave, to stay away from your execution."

Sam fiddled with his envelopes, then placed them carefully in a chair.

"I told them to leave," Adam said.

"When?"

"Just a few minutes ago. I exchanged words with them. They don't give a damn about you, Sam, they're just using this execution because you'll make such a marvelous martyr, someone to rally around and talk about for years to come. They'll chant your name when they burn crosses, and they'll make pilgrimages to your gravesite. They want you dead, Sam. It's great PR."

"You confronted them?" Sam asked, with a trace of amusement and pride.

"Yeah. It was no big deal. What about Carmen? If she's coming, she needs to make travel arrangements."

Sam took a thoughtful puff. "I'd like to see her, but you've gotta warn her about my appearance. I don't want her to be shocked."

"You look great, Sam."

"Gee thanks. What about Lee?"

"What about her?"

"How's she doing? We get newspapers in here. I saw her in the Memphis paper last Sunday, then I read about her drunk driving charge on Tuesday. She's not in jail, is she?"

"No. She's in a rehab clinic," Adam said as if he knew exactly where she was.

"Can she come visit?"

"Do you want her to?"

"I think so. Maybe on Monday. Let's wait and see."

"No problem," Adam said, wondering how in the world he could find her. "I'll talk to her over the weekend."

Sam handed Adam one of the envelopes, unsealed. "Give this to the people up front. It's a list of approved visitors from now until then. Go ahead, open it."

Adam looked at the list. There were four names. Adam, Lee, Carmen, and Donnie Cayhall. "Not a very long list."

"I have lots of relatives, but I don't want them here. They haven't visited me in nine and a half years, so I'll be damned if they'll come

draggin' in here at the last minute to say good-bye. They can save it for the funeral."

"I'm getting all kinds of requests from reporters and journalists for interviews."

"Forget it."

"That's what I've told them. But there's one inquiry that might interest you. There's a man named Wendall Sherman, an author of some repute who's published four or five books and won some awards. I haven't read any of his work, but he checks out. He's legitimate. I talked to him yesterday by phone, and he wants to sit with you and record your story. He seemed to be very honest, and said that the recording could take hours. He's flying to Memphis today, just in case you say yes."

"Why does he want to record me?"

"He wants to write a book about you."

"A romance novel?"

"I doubt it. He's willing to pay fifty thousand dollars up front, with a percentage of the royalties later on."

"Great. I get fifty thousand a few days before I die. What shall I do with it?"

"I'm just relaying the offer."

"Tell him to go to hell. I'm not interested."

"Fine."

"I want you to draw up an agreement whereby I assign all rights to my life story to you, and after I'm gone you do whatever the hell you want with it."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to record it."

"You mean—"

"Talk into a little machine with little tapes. I can get one for you. Sit in your cell and talk about your life."

"How boring." Sam finished the Eskimo Pie and tossed the stick in the wastebasket.

"Depends on how you look at it. Things seem rather exciting now."

"Yeah, you're right. A pretty dull life, but the end was sensational."

“Sounds like a bestseller to me.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Sam suddenly jumped to his feet, leaving the rubber shower shoes under his chair. He loped across the office in long strides, measuring and smoking as he went. “Thirteen by sixteen and a half,” he mumbled to himself, then measured some more.

Adam made notes on a legal pad and tried to ignore the red figure bouncing off the walls. Sam finally stopped and leaned on a file cabinet. “I want you to do me a favor,” he said, staring at a wall across the room. His voice was much lower. He breathed slowly.

“I’m listening,” Adam said.

Sam took a step to the chair and picked up an envelope. He handed it to Adam and returned to his position against the file cabinet. The envelope was turned over so that Adam could not see the writing on it.

“I want you to deliver that,” Sam said.

“To whom?”

“Quince Lincoln.”

Adam placed it to his side on the desk, and watched Sam carefully. Sam, however, was lost in another world. His wrinkled eyes stared blankly at something on the wall across the room. “I’ve worked on it for a week,” he said, his voice almost hoarse, “but I’ve thought about it for forty years.”

“What’s in the letter?” Adam asked slowly.

“An apology. I’ve carried the guilt for many years, Adam. Joe Lincoln was a good and decent man, a good father. I lost my head and killed him for no reason. And I knew before I shot him that I could get by with it. I’ve always felt bad about it. Real bad. There’s nothing I can do now except say that I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure it’ll mean something to the Lincolns.”

“Maybe. In the letter I ask them for forgiveness, which I believe is the Christian way of doing things. When I die, I’d like to have the knowledge that I tried to say I’m sorry.”

“Any idea where I might find him?”

“That’s the hard part. I’ve heard through family that the Lincolns are still in Ford County. Ruby, his widow, is probably still alive. I’m

afraid you'll just have to go to Clanton and start asking questions. They have an African sheriff, so I'd start with him. He probably knows all the Africans in the county."

"And if I find Quince?"

"Tell him who you are. Give him the letter. Tell him that I died with a lot of guilt. Can you do that?"

"I'll be happy to. I'm not sure when I can do it."

"Wait until I'm dead. You'll have plenty of time once this is over."

Sam again walked to the chair, and this time picked up two envelopes. He handed them to Adam, and began pacing slowly, back and forth across the room. The name of Ruth Kramer was typed on one, no address, and Elliot Kramer on the other. "Those are for the Kramers. Deliver them, but wait until the execution is over."

"Why wait?"

"Because my motives are pure. I don't want them to think I'm doing this to arouse sympathy in my dying hours."

Adam placed the Kramer letters next to Quince Lincoln's—three letters, three dead bodies. How many more letters would Sam crank out over the weekend? How many more victims were out there?

"You're sure you're about to die, aren't you, Sam?"

He stopped by the door and pondered this for a moment. "The odds are against us. I'm getting prepared."

"We still have a chance."

"Sure we do. But I'm getting ready, just in case. I've hurt a lot of people, Adam, and I haven't always stopped to think about it. But when you have a date with the grim reaper, you think about the damage you've done."

Adam picked up the three envelopes and looked at them. "Are there others?"

Sam grimaced and looked at the floor. "That's all, for now."

The Jackson Paper on Friday morning carried a front-page story about Sam Cayhall's request for a clemency hearing. The story

included a slick photo of Governor David McAllister, a bad one of Sam, and lots of self-serving comments by Mona Stark, the governor's chief of staff, all to the effect that the governor was struggling with the decision.

Since he was a real man of the people, a regular servant to all Mississippians, McAllister had installed an expensive telephone hotline system shortly after he was elected. The toll-free number was plastered all over the state, and his constituents were constantly barraged with public service ads to use the People's Hotline. Call the governor. He cared about your opinions. Democracy at its finest. Operators were standing by.

And because he had more ambition than fortitude, McAllister and his staff tracked the phone calls on a daily basis. He was a follower, not a leader. He spent serious money on polls, and had proven adept at quietly discovering the issues that bothered people, then jumping out front to lead the parade.

Both Goodman and Adam suspected this. McAllister seemed too obsessed with his destiny to launch new initiatives. The man was a shameless vote-counter, so they had decided to give him something to count.

Goodman read the story early, over coffee and fruit, and by seven-thirty was on the phone with Professor John Bryan Glass and Hez Kerry. By eight, three of Glass' students were sipping coffee from paper cups in the grungy, temporary office. The marketing analysis was about to begin.

Goodman explained the scheme and the need for secrecy. They were breaking no laws, he assured them, just manipulating public opinion. The cellular phones were on the tables, along with pages of phone numbers Goodman had copied on Wednesday. The students were a little apprehensive, but nonetheless anxious to begin. They would be paid well. Goodman demonstrated the technique with the first call. He dialed the number.

"People's Hotline," a pleasant voice answered.

"Yes, I'm calling about the story in this morning's paper, the one about Sam Cayhall," Goodman said slowly in his best imitation of a drawl. It left a lot to be desired. The students were very amused.

“And your name is?”

“Yes, I’m Ned Lancaster, from Biloxi, Mississippi,” Goodman replied, reading from the phone lists. “And I voted for the governor, a fine man,” he threw in for good measure.

“And how do you feel about Sam Cayhall?”

“I don’t think he should be executed. He’s an old man who’s suffered a lot, and I want the governor to give him a pardon. Let him die in peace up there at Parchman.”

“Okay. I’ll make sure the governor knows about your call.”

“Thank you.”

Goodman pushed a button on the phone, and took a bow before his audience. “Nothing to it. Let’s get started.”

The white male selected a phone number. His conversation went something like this: “Hello, this is Lester Crosby, from Bude, Mississippi. I’m calling about the execution of Sam Cayhall. Yes ma’am. My number? It’s 555-9084. Yes, that’s right, Bude, Mississippi, down here in Franklin County. That’s right. Well, I don’t think Sam Cayhall ought to be sent to the gas chamber. I’m just opposed to it. I think the governor should step in and stop this thing. Yes ma’am, that’s right. Thank you.” He smiled at Goodman, who was punching another number.

The white female was a middle-aged student. She was from a small town in a rural section of the state, and her accent was naturally twangy. “Hello, is this the governor’s office? Good. I’m calling about the Cayhall story in today’s paper. Susan Barnes. Decatur, Mississippi. That’s right. Well, he’s an old man who’ll probably die in a few years anyway. What good will it do for the state to kill him now? Give the guy a break. What? Yes, I want the governor to stop it. I voted for the governor, and I think he’s a fine man. Yes. Thank you too.”

The black male was in his late twenties. He simply informed the hotline operator that he was a black Mississippian, very much opposed to the ideas Sam Cayhall and the Klan promoted, but nonetheless opposed to the execution. “The government does not have the right to determine if someone lives or dies,” he said. He did not favor the death penalty under any circumstances.

And so it went. The calls poured in from all over the state, one after the other, each from a different person with a different logic for stopping the execution. The students became creative, trying assorted accents and novel reasonings. Occasionally, their calls would hit busy signals, and it was amusing to know that they had jammed the hotline. Because of his crisp accent, Goodman assumed the role of the outsider, sort of a traveling death penalty abolitionist who bounced in from all over the country with a dazzling array of ethnic aliases and strange locales.

Goodman had worried that McAllister might be paranoid enough to trace the calls to his hotline, but had decided that the operators would be too busy.

And busy they were. Across town, John Bryan Glass canceled a class and locked the door to his office. He had a delightful time making repeated calls under all sorts of names. Not far from him, Hez Kerry and one of his staff attorneys were also bombarding the hotline with the same messages.

Adam hurried to Memphis. Darlene was in his office, trying vainly to organize the mountain of paperwork. She pointed to a stack nearest his computer. "The decision denying cert is on top, then the decision from the Mississippi Supreme Court. Next to it is the petition for writ of habeas corpus to be filed in federal district court. I've already faxed everything."

Adam removed his jacket and threw it on a chair. He looked at a row of pink telephone messages tacked to a bookshelf. "Who are these people?"

"Reporters, writers, quacks, a couple are other lawyers offering their assistance. One is from Garner Goodman in Jackson. He said the market analysis is going fine, don't call. What is the market analysis?"

"Don't ask. No word from the Fifth Circuit?"

"No."

Adam took a deep breath and eased into his chair.

“Lunch?” she asked.

“Just a sandwich, if you don’t mind. Can you work tomorrow and Sunday?”

“Of course.”

“I need for you to stay here all weekend, by the phone and the fax. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll get a sandwich.”

She left, closing the door behind her. Adam called Lee’s condo, and there was no answer. He called the Auburn House, but no one had heard from her. He called Phelps Booth, who was in a board meeting. He called Carmen in Berkeley and told her to make arrangements to fly to Memphis on Sunday.

He looked at the phone messages, and decided none were worth returning.

At one o’clock Mona Stark spoke to the press loitering around the governor’s office in the capitol. She said that after much deliberation, the governor had decided to grant a clemency hearing on Monday at 10 a.m., at which time the governor would listen to the issues and appeals, and make a fair decision. It was an awesome responsibility, she explained, this weighing of life or death. But David McAllister would do what was just and right.

Forty-one

Packer went to the cell at five-thirty Saturday morning, and didn't bother with the handcuffs. Sam was waiting, and they quietly left Tier A. They walked through the kitchen where the trustees were scrambling eggs and frying bacon. Sam had never seen the kitchen, and he walked slowly, counting his steps, checking the dimensions. Packer opened a door and motioned for Sam to hurry and follow. They stepped outside, into the darkness. Sam stopped and looked at the square brick room to his right, the little building that housed the gas chamber. Packer pulled his elbow, and they walked together to the east end of the row where another guard was watching and waiting. The guard handed Sam a large cup of coffee, and led him through a gate into a recreation yard similar to the bullpens on the west end of the Row. It was fenced and wired, with a basketball goal and two benches. Packer said he would return in an hour, and left with the guard.

Sam stood in place for a long time, sipping the hot coffee and absorbing the landscape. His first cell had been on Tier D, on the east wing, and he'd been here many times before. He knew the exact dimensions—fifty-one feet by thirty-six. He saw the guard in the tower sitting under a light and watching him. Through the fences and over the tops of the rows of cotton, he could see the lights of other buildings. He slowly walked to a bench and sat down.

How thoughtful of these kind people to grant his request to see one final sunrise. He hadn't seen one in nine and a half years, and at first Nugent said no. Then Packer intervened, and explained to the colonel that it was okay, no security risk at all, and what the hell, the man was supposed to die in four days. Packer would take responsibility for it.

Sam stared at the eastern sky, where a hint of orange was peeking through scattered clouds. During his early days on the Row, when his appeals were fresh and unresolved, he had spent hours remembering the glorious humdrum of everyday life, the little things like a warm shower every day, the companionship of his dog, extra honey on his biscuits. He actually believed back then that one day he would again be able to hunt squirrels and quail, to fish for bass and bream, to sit on the porch and watch the sun come up, to drink coffee in town, and drive his old pickup wherever he wanted. His goal during those early fantasies on the Row had been to fly to California and find his grandchildren. He had never flown.

But the dreams of freedom had died long ago, driven away by the tedious monotony of life in a cell, and killed by the harsh opinions of many judges.

This would be his final sunrise, he truly believed that. Too many people wanted him dead. The gas chamber was not being used often enough. It was time for an execution, dammit, and he was next in line.

The sky grew brighter and the clouds dissipated. Though he was forced to watch this magnificent act of nature through a chain-link fence, it was satisfying nonetheless. Just a few more days and the fences would be gone. The bars and razor wire and prison cells would be left for someone else.

Two reporters smoked cigarettes and drank machine coffee as they waited by the south entrance to the capitol early Saturday morning. Word had been leaked that the governor would spend a long day at the office, struggling with the Cayhall thing.

At seven-thirty, his black Lincoln rolled to a stop nearby, and he made a quick exit from it. Two well-dressed bodyguards escorted him to the entrance, with Mona Stark a few steps behind.

“Governor, do you plan to attend the execution?” the first reporter asked hurriedly. McAllister smiled and raised his hands as

if he'd love to stop and chat but things were much too critical for that. Then he saw a camera hanging from the other reporter's neck.

"I haven't made a decision yet," he answered, stopping just for a second.

"Will Ruth Kramer testify at the clemency hearing on Monday?"

The camera was raised and ready. "I can't say right now," he answered, smiling into the lens. "Sorry, guys, I can't talk now."

He entered the building and rode the elevator to his office on the second floor. The bodyguards assumed their positions in the foyer, behind morning newspapers.

Lawyer Larramore was waiting with his updates. He explained to the governor and Ms. Stark that there had been no changes in the various Cayhall petitions and appeals since 5 p.m. yesterday. Nothing had happened overnight. The appeals were becoming more desperate, and the courts would deny them more quickly, in his opinion. He had already spoken with Morris Henry at the AG's office, and, in the learned judgment of Dr. Death, there was now an 80 percent chance that the execution would take place.

"What about the clemency hearing on Monday? Any word from Cayhall's lawyers?" McAllister asked.

"No. I asked Garner Goodman to stop by at nine this morning. Thought we'd talk to him about it. I'll be in my office if you need me."

Larramore excused himself. Ms. Stark was performing her morning ritual of scanning the dailies from around the state and placing them on the conference table. Of the nine papers she monitored, the Cayhall story was on the front page of eight. The announcement of a clemency hearing was of special interest Saturday morning. Three of the papers carried the same AP photo of the Klansmen roasting idly under the fierce August sun outside of Parchman.

McAllister removed his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and began peering over the papers. "Get the numbers," he said tersely.

Mona left the office, and returned in less than a minute. She carried a computer printout, which obviously bore dreadful news.

"I'm listening," he said.

"The calls stopped around nine last night, last one was at nine-o-seven. The total for the day was four hundred and eighty-six, and at least ninety percent voiced strong opposition to the execution."

"Ninety percent," McAllister said in disbelief. He was no longer in shock, though. By noon yesterday, the hotline operators had reported an unusual number of calls, and by one Mona was analyzing printouts. They had spent much of yesterday afternoon staring at the numbers, contemplating the next move. He had slept little.

"Who are these people?" he said, staring through a window.

"Your constituents. The calls are coming from all over the state. The names and numbers appear to be legitimate."

"What was the old record?"

"I don't know. Seems like we had around a hundred one day when the legislature gave itself another pay raise. But nothing like this."

"Ninety percent," he mumbled again.

"And there's something else. There were lots of other calls to various numbers in this office. My secretary took a dozen or so."

"All for Sam, right?"

"Yes, all opposed to the execution. I've talked to some of our people, and everybody got nailed yesterday. And Roxburgh called me at home last night and said that his office had been besieged with calls against the execution."

"Good. I want him to sweat too."

"Do we close the hotline?"

"How many operators work on Saturday and Sunday?"

"Only one."

"No. Leave it open today. Let's see what happens today and tomorrow." He walked to another window and loosened his tie. "When does the polling start?"

"Three this afternoon."

"I'm anxious to see those numbers."

"They could be just as bad."

"Ninety percent," he said, shaking his head.

"Over ninety percent," Mona corrected him.

The war room was littered with pizza boxes and beer cans, evidence of a long day of market analysis. A tray of fresh doughnuts and a row of tall paper coffee cups now awaited the analysts, two of whom had just arrived with newspapers. Garner Goodman stood at the window with a new pair of binoculars, watching the capitol three blocks away, and paying particular attention to the windows of the governor's office. During a moment of boredom yesterday, he'd gone to a mall in search of a bookstore. He'd found the binoculars in the window of a leather shop, and throughout the afternoon they'd had great fun trying to catch the governor pondering through his windows, no doubt wondering where all those damned calls were coming from.

The students devoured the doughnuts and newspapers. There was a brief but serious discussion about some obvious procedural deficiencies in Mississippi's postconviction relief statutes. The third member of the shift, a first-year student from New Orleans, arrived at eight, and the calls started.

It was immediately apparent that the hotline was not as efficient as the day before. It was difficult to get through to an operator. No problem. They used alternate numbers—the switchboard at the governor's mansion, the lines to the cute little regional offices he'd established, amid great fanfare, around the state so that he, a common man, could stay close to the people.

The people were calling.

Goodman left the office and walked along Congress Street to the capitol. He heard the sounds of a loudspeaker being tested, and then saw the Klansmen. They were organizing themselves, at least a dozen in full parade dress, around the monument to Confederate women at the base of the front steps to the capitol. Goodman walked by them, actually said hello to one, so that when he returned to Chicago he could say he talked to some real Kluckers.

The two reporters who'd waited for the governor were now on the front steps watching the scene below. A local television crew arrived

as Goodman entered the capitol.

The governor was too busy to meet with him, Mona Stark explained gravely, but Mr. Larramore could spare a few minutes. She looked a bit frazzled, and this pleased Goodman greatly. He followed her to Larramore's office where they found the lawyer on the phone. Goodman hoped it was one of his calls. He obediently took a seat. Mona closed the door and left them.

"Good morning," Larramore said as he hung up.

Goodman nodded politely, and said, "Thanks for the hearing. We didn't expect the governor to grant one, in light of what he said on Wednesday."

"He's under a lot of pressure. We all are. Is your client willing to talk about his accomplice?"

"No. There's been no change."

Larramore ran his fingers through his sticky hair and shook his head in frustration. "Then what's the purpose of a clemency hearing? The governor is not going to budge on this, Mr. Goodman."

"We're working on Sam, okay. We're talking to him. Let's plan on going through with the hearing on Monday. Maybe Sam will change his mind."

The phone rang and Larramore snatched it angrily. "No, this is not the governor's office. Who is this?" He scribbled down a name and phone number. "This is the governor's legal department." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Yes, yes, I'm sure you voted for the governor." He listened some more. "Thank you, Mr. Hurt. I'll tell the governor you called. Yes, thanks."

He returned the receiver to the phone. "So, Mr. Gilbert Hurt from Dumas, Mississippi, is against the execution," he said, staring at the phone, dazed. "The phones have gone crazy."

"Lots of calls, huh?" Goodman asked, sympathetically.

"You wouldn't believe."

"For or against?"

"About fifty-fifty, I'd say," Larramore said. He took the phone again and punched in the number for Mr. Gilbert Hurt of Dumas, Mississippi. No one answered. "This is strange," he said, hanging up

again. "The man just called me, left a legitimate number, now there's no answer."

"Probably just stepped out. Try again later." Goodman hoped he wouldn't have the time to try again later. In the first hour of the market analysis yesterday, Goodman had made a slight change in technique. He had instructed his callers to first check the phone numbers to make certain there was no answer. This prevented some curious type such as Larramore or perhaps a nosy hotline operator from calling back and finding the real person. Odds were the real person would greatly support the death penalty. It slowed things a bit for the market analysts, but Goodman felt safer with it.

"I'm working on an outline for the hearing," Larramore said, "just in case. We'll probably have it in the House Ways and Means Committee Room, just down the hall."

"Will it be closed?"

"No. Is this a problem?"

"We have four days left, Mr. Larramore. Everything's a problem. But the hearing belongs to the governor. We're just thankful he's granted one."

"I have your numbers. Keep in touch."

"I'm not leaving Jackson until this is over."

They shook hands quickly and Goodman left the office. He sat on the front steps for half an hour and watched the Klansmen get organized and attract the curious.

Forty-two

Though he'd worn a white robe and a pointed hood as a much younger man, Donnie Cayhall kept his distance from the lines of Klansmen patrolling the grassy strip near the front gate of Parchman. Security was tight, with armed guards watching the protestors. Next to the canopy where the Klansmen gathered was a small group of skinheads in brown shirts. They held signs demanding freedom for Sam Cayhall.

Donnie watched the spectacle for a moment, then followed the directions of a security guard and parked along the highway. His name was checked at the guardhouse, and a few minutes later a prison van came for him. His brother had been at Parchman for nine and a half years, and Donnie had tried to visit at least once a year. But the last visit had been two years ago, he was ashamed to admit.

Donnie Cayhall was sixty-one, the youngest of the four Cayhall brothers. All had followed the teachings of their father and joined the Klan in their teens. It had been a simple decision with little thought given to it, one expected by the entire family. Later he had joined the Army, fought in Korea, and traveled the world. In the process, he had lost interest in wearing robes and burning crosses. He left Mississippi in 1961, and went to work for a furniture company in North Carolina. He now lived near Durham.

Every month for nine and a half years, he had shipped to Sam a box of cigarettes and a small amount of cash. He'd written a few letters, but neither he nor Sam were interested in correspondence. Few people in Durham knew he had a brother on death row.

He was frisked inside the front door, and shown to the front office. Sam was brought in a few minutes later, and they were left alone. Donnie hugged him for a long time, and when they released each other both had moist eyes. They were of similar height and

build, though Sam looked twenty years older. He sat on the edge of the desk and Donnie took a chair nearby.

Both lit cigarettes and stared into space.

"Any good news?" Donnie finally asked, certain of the answer.

"No. None. The courts are turning everything down. They're gonna do it, Donnie. They're gonna kill me. They'll walk me to the chamber and gas me like an animal."

Donnie's face fell to his chest. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"I'm sorry too, but, dammit, I'll be glad when it's over."

"Don't say that."

"I mean it. I'm tired of living in a cage. I'm an old man and my time has come."

"But you don't deserve to be killed, Sam."

"That's the hardest part, you know. It's not that I'm gonna die, hell, we're all dying. I just can't stand the thought of these jackasses getting the best of me. They're gonna win. And their reward is to strap me in and watch me choke. It's sick."

"Can't your lawyer do something?"

"He's trying everything, but it looks hopeless. I want you to meet him."

"I saw his picture in the paper. He doesn't resemble our people."

"He's lucky. He looks more like his mother."

"Sharp kid?"

Sam managed a smile. "Yeah, he's pretty terrific. He's really grieving over this."

"Will he be here today?"

"Probably. I haven't heard from him. He's staying with Lee in Memphis," Sam said with a touch of pride. Because of him, his daughter and his grandson had become close and were actually living together peacefully.

"I talked to Albert this morning," Donnie said. "He says he's too sick to come over."

"Good. I don't want him here. And I don't want his kids and grandkids here either."

"He wants to pay his respects, but he can't."

"Tell him to save it for the funeral."

“Come on, Sam.”

“Look, no one’s gonna cry for me when I’m dead. I don’t want a lot of false pity before then.

“I need something from you, Donnie. And it’ll cost a little money.”

“Sure. Anything.”

Sam pulled at the waist of his red jumpsuit. “You see this damned thing. They’re called reds, and I’ve worn them every day for almost ten years. This is what the State of Mississippi expects me to wear when it kills me. But, you see, I have the right to wear anything I want. It would mean a lot if I die in some nice clothes.”

Donnie was suddenly hit with emotion. He tried to speak, but words didn’t come. His eyes were wet and his lip quivered. He nodded, and managed to say, “Sure, Sam.”

“You know those work pants called Dickies? I wore them for years. Sort of like khakis.”

Donnie was still nodding.

“A pair of them would be nice, with a white shirt of some sort, not a pullover but one with buttons on it. Small shirt, small pants, thirty-two in the waist. A pair of white socks, and some kind of cheap shoes. Hell, I’ll just wear them once, won’t I? Go to Wal-Mart or some place and you can probably get the whole thing for less than thirty bucks. Do you mind?”

Donnie wiped his eyes and tried to smile. “No, Sam.”

“I’ll be a dude, won’t I?”

“Where will you be buried?”

“Clanton, next to Anna. I’m sure that’ll upset her peaceful rest. Adam’s taking care of the arrangements.”

“What else can I do?”

“Nothing. If you’ll just get me a change of clothes.”

“I’ll do it today.”

“You’re the only person in the world who’s cared about me all these years, do you know that? Aunt Barb wrote me for years before she died, but her letters were always stiff and dry, and I figured she was doing it so she could tell her neighbors.”

“Who the hell was Aunt Barb?”

“Hubert Cain’s mother. I’m not even sure she’s related to us. I hardly knew her until I arrived here, then she started this awful correspondence. She was just all tore up by the fact that one of her own had been sent to Parchman.”

“May she rest in peace.”

Sam chuckled, and was reminded of an ancient childhood story. He told it with great enthusiasm, and minutes later both brothers were laughing loudly. Donnie was reminded of another tale, and so it went for an hour.

By the time Adam arrived late Saturday afternoon, Donnie had been gone for hours. He was taken to the front office, where he spread some papers on the desk. Sam was brought in, his handcuffs removed, and the door was closed behind them. He held more envelopes, which Adam noticed immediately.

“More errands for me?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yeah, but they can wait until it’s over.”

“To whom?”

“One is to the Pinder family I bombed in Vicksburg. One is to the Jewish synagogue I bombed in Jackson. One is to the Jewish real estate agent, also in Jackson. There may be others. No hurry, since I know you’re busy right now. But after I’m gone, I’d appreciate it if you’d take care of them.”

“What do these letters say?”

“What do you think they say?”

“I don’t know. That you’re sorry, I guess.”

“Smart boy. I apologize for my deeds, repent of my sins, and ask them to forgive me.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Sam stopped and leaned on a file cabinet. “Because I sit in a little cage all day. Because I have a typewriter and plenty of paper. I’m bored as hell, okay, so maybe I want to write. Because I have a

conscience, not much of one, but it's there, and the closer I get to death the guiltier I feel about the things I've done."

"I'm sorry. They'll be delivered." Adam circled something on his checklist. "We have two appeals left. The Fifth Circuit is sitting on the ineffectiveness claim. I expected something by now, but there's been no movement for two days. The district court has the mental claim."

"It's all hopeless, Adam."

"Maybe, but I'm not quitting. I'll file a dozen more petitions if I have to."

"I'm not signing anything else. You can't file them if I don't sign them."

"Yes, I can. There are ways."

"Then you're fired."

"You can't fire me, Sam. I'm your grandson."

"We have an agreement saying I can fire you whenever I want. We put it in writing."

"It's a flawed document, drafted by a decent jailhouse lawyer, but fatally defective nonetheless."

Sam huffed and puffed and began striding again on his row of tiles. He made half a dozen passes in front of Adam, his lawyer now, tomorrow, and for the remainder of his life. He knew he couldn't fire him.

"We have a clemency hearing scheduled for Monday," Adam said, looking at his legal pad and waiting for the explosion. But Sam took it well and never missed a step.

"What's the purpose of the clemency hearing?" he asked.

"To appeal for clemency."

"Appeal to whom?"

"The governor."

"And you think the governor will consider granting me clemency?"

"What's there to lose?"

"Answer the question, smartass. Do you, with all your training, experience, and judicial brilliance, seriously expect this governor to entertain ideas of granting me clemency?"

“Maybe.”

“Maybe my ass. You’re stupid.”

“Thank you, Sam.”

“Don’t mention it.” He stopped directly in front of Adam and pointed a crooked finger at him. “I’ve told you from the very beginning that I, as the client and as such certainly entitled to some consideration, will have nothing to do with David McAllister. I will not appeal to that fool for clemency. I will not ask him for a pardon. I will have no contact with him, whatsoever. Those are my wishes, and I made this very plain to you, young man, from day one. You, on the other hand, as the lawyer, have ignored my wishes and gone about your merry business doing whatever the hell you wanted. You are the lawyer, nothing more or less. I, on the other hand, am the client, and I don’t know what they taught you in your fancy law school, but I make the decisions.”

Sam walked to an empty chair and picked up another envelope. He handed it to Adam, and said, “This is a letter to the governor requesting him to cancel the clemency hearing on Monday. If you refuse to get it canceled, then I will make copies of this and give it to the press. I will embarrass you, Garner Goodman, and the governor. Do you understand?”

“Plain enough.”

Sam returned the envelope to the chair, and lit another cigarette.

Adam made another circle on his list. “Carmen will be here Monday. I’m not sure about Lee.”

Sam eased to a chair and sat down. He did not look at Adam. “Is she still in rehab?”

“Yes, and I’m not sure when she’ll get out. Do you want her to visit?”

“Let me think about it.”

“Think fast, okay.”

“Funny, real funny. My brother Donnie stopped by earlier. He’s my youngest brother, you know. He wants to meet you.”

“Was he in the Klan?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“It’s a simple yes or no question.”

“Yes. He was in the Klan.”

“Then I don’t want to meet him.”

“He’s not a bad guy.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“He’s my brother, Adam. I want you to meet my brother.”

“I have no desire to meet new Cayhalls, Sam, especially ones who wore robes and hoods.”

“Oh, really. Three weeks ago you wanted to know everything about the family. Just couldn’t get enough of it.”

“I surrender, okay? I’ve heard enough.”

“Oh, there’s lots more.”

“Enough, enough. Spare me.”

Sam grunted and smiled smugly to himself. Adam glanced at his legal pad, and said, “You’ll be happy to know that the Kluckers outside have now been joined by some Nazis and Aryans and skinheads and other hate groups. They’re all lined along the highway, waving posters at cars passing by. The posters, of course, demand the freedom of Sam Cayhall, their hero. It’s a regular circus.”

“I saw it on television.”

“They’re also marching in Jackson around the state capitol.”

“This is my fault?”

“No. It’s your execution. You’re a symbol now. About to become a martyr.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Nothing. Just go ahead and die, and they’ll all be happy.”

“Aren’t you an asshole today?”

“Sorry, Sam. The pressure’s getting to me.”

“Throw in the towel. I have. I highly recommend it.”

“Forget it. I’ve got these clowns on the run, Sam. I have not yet begun to fight.”

“Yeah, you’ve filed three petitions, and a total of seven courts have turned you down. Zero for seven. I hate to see what’ll happen when you really get cranked up.” Sam said this with a wicked smile, and the humor found its mark. Adam laughed at it, and both

breathed a bit easier. "I have this great idea for a lawsuit after you're gone," he said, feigning excitement.

"After I'm gone?"

"Sure. We'll sue them for wrongful death. We'll name McAllister, Nugent, Roxburgh, the State of Mississippi. We'll bring in everybody."

"It's never been done," Sam said, stroking his beard, as if deep in thought.

"Yeah, I know. Thought of it all by myself. We might not win a dime, but think of the fun I'll have harassing those bastards for the next five years."

"You have my permission to file it. Sue them!"

The smiles slowly disappeared and the humor was gone. Adam found something else on his checklist. "Just a couple more items. Lucas Mann asked me to ask you about your witnesses. You're entitled to have two people in the witness room, in case this gets that far."

"Donnie doesn't want to do it. I will not allow you to be there. I can't imagine anybody else who'd want to see it."

"Fine. Speaking of them, I have at least thirty requests for interviews. Virtually every major paper and news magazine wants access."

"No."

"Fine. Remember that writer we discussed last time, Wendall Sherman? The one who wants to record your story on tape and—"

"Yeah. For fifty thousand bucks."

"Now it's a hundred thousand. His publisher will put up the money. He wants to get everything on tape, watch the execution, do extensive research, then write a big book about it."

"No."

"Fine."

"I don't want to spend the next three days talking about my life. I don't want some stranger poking his nose around Ford County. And I don't particularly need a hundred thousand dollars at this point in my life."

“Fine with me. You once mentioned the clothing you wanted to wear—”

“Donnie’s taking care of it.”

“Okay. Moving right along. Barring a stay, you’re allowed to have two people with you during your final hours. Typically, the prison has a form for you to sign designating these people.”

“It’s always the lawyer and the minister, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then it’s you, and Ralph Griffin, I guess.”

Adam filled the names in on a form. “Who’s Ralph Griffin?”

“The new minister here. He’s opposed to the death penalty, can you believe it? His predecessor thought we should all be gassed, in the name of Jesus, of course.”

Adam handed the form to Sam. “Sign here.”

Sam scribbled his name and handed it back.

“You’re entitled to a last conjugal visit.”

Sam laughed loudly. “Come on, son. I’m an old man.”

“It’s on the checklist, okay. Lucas Mann whispered to me the other day that I should mention it to you.”

“Okay. You’ve mentioned it.”

“I have another form here for your personal effects. Who gets them?”

“You mean my estate?”

“Sort of.”

“This is morbid as hell, Adam. Why are we doing this now?”

“I’m a lawyer, Sam. We get paid to sweat the details. It’s just paperwork.”

“Do you want my things?”

Adam thought about this for a moment. He didn’t want to hurt Sam’s feelings, but at the same time he couldn’t imagine what he’d do with a few ragged old garments, worn books, portable television, and rubber shower shoes. “Sure,” he said.

“Then they’re yours. Take them and burn them.”

“Sign here,” Adam said, shoving the form under his face. Sam signed it, then jumped to his feet and started pacing again. “I really want you to meet Donnie.”

“Sure. Whatever you want,” Adam said, stuffing his legal pad and the forms into his briefcase. The nitpicking details were now complete. The briefcase seemed much heavier.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” he said to Sam.

“Bring me some good news, okay.”

Colonel Nugent strutted along the edge of the highway with a dozen armed prison guards behind him. He glared at the Klansmen, twenty-six at last count, and he scowled at the brown-shirted Nazis, ten in all. He stopped and stared at the group of skinheads mingling next to the Nazis. He swaggered around the edge of the grassy protest strip, pausing for a moment to speak to two Catholic nuns sitting under a large umbrella, as far away from the other demonstrators as possible. The temperature was one hundred degrees, and the nuns were broiling under the shade. They sipped ice water, their posters resting on their knees and facing the highway.

The nuns asked him who he was and what he wanted. He explained that he was the acting warden for the prison, and that he was simply making sure the demonstration was orderly.

They asked him to leave.

Forty-three

Perhaps it was because it was Sunday, or maybe it was the rain, but Adam drank his morning coffee in unexpected serenity. It was still dark outside, and the gentle dripping of a warm, summer shower on the patio was mesmerizing. He stood in the open door and listened to the splashing of the raindrops. It was too early for traffic on Riverside Drive below. There were no noises from the tugboats on the river. All was quiet and peaceful.

And there wasn't a heckuva lot to be done this day, Day Three before the execution. He would start at the office, where another last minute petition had to be organized. The issue was so ridiculous Adam was almost embarrassed to file it. Then he would drive to Parchman and sit with Sam for a spell.

It was unlikely there would be movement by any court on Sunday. It was certainly possible since the death clerks and their staffs were on call when an execution was looming. But Friday and Saturday had passed without rulings coming down, and he expected the same inactivity today. Tomorrow would be much different, in his untrained and untested opinion.

Tomorrow would be nothing but frenzy. And Tuesday, which of course was scheduled to be Sam's last day as a breathing soul, would be a nightmare of stress.

But this Sunday morning was remarkably calm. He had slept almost seven hours, another recent record. His head was clear, his pulse normal, his breathing relaxed. His mind was uncluttered and composed.

He flipped through the Sunday paper, scanning the headlines but reading nothing. There were at least two stories about the Cayhall execution, one with more pictures of the growing circus outside the prison gate. The rain stopped when the sun came up, and he sat in a

wet rocker for an hour scanning Lee's architectural magazines. After a couple of hours of peace and tranquility, Adam was bored and ready for action.

There was unfinished business in Lee's bedroom, a matter Adam had tried to forget but couldn't. For ten days now, a silent battle had raged in his soul over the book in her drawer. She'd been drunk when she told him about the lynching photo, but it was not the delirious talk of an addict. Adam knew the book existed. There was a real book with a real photo of a young black man hanging by a rope, and somewhere under his feet was a crowd of proud white people, mugging for the camera, immune from prosecution. Adam had mentally pieced the picture together, adding faces, sketching the tree, drawing the rope, adding titles to the space under it. But there were some things he didn't know, he couldn't visualize. Was the dead man's face perceptible? Was he wearing shoes, or barefoot? Was a very young Sam easily recognizable? How many white faces were in the photo? And how old were they? Any women? Any guns? Blood? Lee said he'd been bullwhipped. Was the whip in the photo? He had imagined the picture for days now, and it was time to finally look in the book. He couldn't wait until later. Lee might make a triumphant return. She might move the book, hide it again. He planned to spend the next two or three nights here, but that could change with one phone call. He could be forced to rush to Jackson or sleep in his car at Parchman. Such routine matters as lunch and dinner and sleeping were suddenly unpredictable when your client had less than a week to live.

This was the perfect moment, and he decided that he was now ready to face the lynch mob. He walked to the front door and scanned the parking lot, just to make sure she hadn't decided to drop in. He actually locked the door to her bedroom, and pulled open the top drawer. It was filled with her lingerie, and he was embarrassed for this intrusion.

The book was in the third drawer, lying on top of a faded sweatshirt. It was thick and bound in green fabric—Southern Negroes and the Great Depression. Published in 1947 by Toffler Press, Pittsburgh. Adam clutched it and sat on the edge of her bed.

The pages were immaculate and pristine, as if the book had never been handled or read. Who in the Deep South would read such a book anyway? And if the book had been in the Cayhall family for several decades, then Adam was positive it had never been read. He studied the binder and pondered what set of circumstances brought this particular book into the custody of the Sam Cayhall family.

The book had three sections of photos. The first was a series of pictures of shotgun houses and ramshackle sheds where blacks were forced to live on plantations. There were family portraits on front porches with dozens of children, and there were the obligatory shots of farm workers stooped low in the fields picking cotton.

The second section was in the center of the book, and ran for twenty pages. There were actually two lynching photos, the first a horribly gruesome scene with two robed and hooded Kluckers holding rifles and posing for the camera. A badly beaten black man swung from a rope behind them, his eyes half open, his face pulverized and bloody. KKK lynching, Central Mississippi, 1939, explained the caption under it, as if these rituals could be defined simply by locale and time.

Adam gaped at the horror of the picture, then turned the page to find the second lynching scene, this one almost tame compared to the first. The lifeless body at the end of the rope could be seen only from the chest down. The shirt appeared to be torn, probably by the bullwhip, if in fact one had been used. The black man was very thin, his oversized pants drawn tightly at the waist. He was barefoot. No blood was visible.

The rope that held his body could be seen tied to a lower branch in the background. The tree was large with bulky limbs and a massive trunk.

A festive group had gathered just inches under his dangling feet. Men, women, and boys clowned for the camera, some striking exaggerated poses of anger and manliness—hard frowns, fierce eyes, tight lips, as if they possessed unlimited power to protect their women from Negro aggression; others smiled and seemed to be giggling, especially the women, two of whom were quite pretty; a small boy held a pistol and aimed it menacingly at the camera; a

young man held a bottle of liquor, twisted just so to reveal the label. Most of the group seemed quite joyous that this event had occurred. Adam counted seventeen people in the group, and every single one was staring at the camera without shame or worry, without the slightest hint a wrong had been committed. They were utterly immune from prosecution. They had just killed another human, and it was painfully obvious they had done so with no fear of the consequences.

This was a party. It was at night, the weather was warm, liquor was present, pretty women. Surely they'd brought food in baskets and were about to throw quilts on the ground for a nice picnic around the tree.

Lynching in rural Mississippi, 1936, read the caption.

Sam was in the front row, crouched and resting on a knee between two other young men, all three posing hard for the camera. He was fifteen or sixteen, with a slender face that was trying desperately to appear dangerous—lip curled, eyebrows pinched, chin up. The cocky braggadocio of a boy trying to emulate the more mature thugs around him.

He was easy to spot because someone had drawn, in faded blue ink, a line across the photo to the margin where the name Sam Cayhall was printed in block letters. The line crossed the bodies and faces of others and stopped at Sam's left ear. Eddie. It had to be Eddie. Lee said that Eddie had found this book in the attic, and Adam could see his father hiding in the darkness, weeping over the photograph, identifying Sam by pointing the accusatory arrow at his head.

Lee also had said that Sam's father was the leader of this ragtag little mob, but Adam couldn't distinguish him. Perhaps Eddie couldn't either because there were no markings. There were at least seven men old enough to be Sam's father. How many of these people were Cayhalls? She'd also said that his brothers were involved, and perhaps one of the younger men resembled Sam, but it was impossible to tell for certain.

He studied the clear, beautiful eyes of his grandfather, and his heart ached. He was just a boy, born and reared in a household

where hatred of blacks and others was simply a way of life. How much of it could be blamed on him? Look at those around him, his father, family, friends and neighbors, all probably honest, poor, hardworking people caught for the moment at the end of a cruel ceremony that was commonplace in their society. Sam didn't have a chance. This was the only world he knew.

How would Adam ever reconcile the past with the present? How could he fairly judge these people and their horrible deed when, but for a quirk of fate, he would've been right there in the middle of them had he been born forty years earlier?

As he looked at their faces, an odd comfort engulfed him. Though Sam was obviously a willing participant, he was only one member of the mob, only partly guilty. Clearly, the older men with the stern faces had instigated the lynching, and the rest had come along for the occasion. Looking at the photo, it was inconceivable to think that Sam and his younger buddies had initiated this brutality. Sam had done nothing to stop it. But maybe he had done nothing to encourage it.

The scene produced a hundred unanswered questions. Who was the photographer, and how did he happen to be there with his camera? Who was the young black man? Where was his family, his mother? How'd they catch him? Had he been in jail and released by the authorities to the mob? What did they do with his body when it was over? Was the alleged rape victim one of the young women smiling at the camera? Was her father one of the men? Her brothers?

If Sam was lynching at such an early age, what could be expected of him as an adult? How often did these folks gather and celebrate like this in rural Mississippi?

How in God's world could Sam Cayhall have become anything other than himself? He never had a chance.

Sam waited patiently in the front office, sipping coffee from a different pot. It was strong and rich, unlike the watered-down brew they served the inmates each morning. Packer had given it to him in a large paper cup. Sam sat on the desk with his feet on a chair.

The door opened and Colonel Nugent marched inside with Packer behind. The door was closed. Sam stiffened and snapped off a smart salute.

“Good morning, Sam,” Nugent said somberly. “How you doing?”

“Fabulous. You?”

“Getting by.”

“Yeah, I know you gotta lot on your mind. This is tough on you, trying to arrange my execution and making sure it goes real smooth. Tough job. My hat’s off to you.”

Nugent ignored the sarcasm. “Need to talk to you about a few things. Your lawyers now say you’re crazy, and I just wanted to see for myself how you’re doing.”

“I feel like a million bucks.”

“Well, you certainly look fine.”

“Gee thanks. You look right spiffy yourself. Nice boots.”

The black combat boots were sparkling, as usual. Packer glanced down at them and grinned.

“Yes,” Nugent said, sitting in a chair and looking at a sheet of paper. “The psychiatrist said you’re uncooperative.”

“Who? N.?”

“Dr. Stegall.”

“That big lard-ass gal with an incomplete first name? I’ve only talked to her once.”

“Were you uncooperative?”

“I certainly hope so. I’ve been here for almost ten years, and she finally trots her big ass over here when I’ve got one foot in the grave to see how I’m getting along. All she wanted to do was give me some dope so I’ll be stoned when you clowns come after me. Makes your job easier, doesn’t it.”

“She was only trying to help.”

“Then God bless her. Tell her I’m sorry. It’ll never happen again. Write me up with an RVR. Put it in my file.”

“We need to talk about your last meal.”

“Why is Packer in here?”

Nugent glanced at Packer, then looked at Sam. “Because it’s procedure.”

“He’s here to protect you, isn’t he? You’re afraid of me. You’re scared to be left alone with me in this room, aren’t you, Nugent? I’m almost seventy years old, feeble as hell, half dead from cigarettes, and you’re afraid of me, a convicted murderer.”

“Not in the least.”

“I’d stomp your ass all over this room, Nugent, if I wanted to.”

“I’m terrified. Look, Sam, let’s get down to business. What would you like for your last meal?”

“This is Sunday. My last meal is scheduled for Tuesday night. Why are you bothering me with it now?”

“We have to make plans. You can have anything, within reason.”

“Who’s gonna cook it?”

“It’ll be prepared in the kitchen here.”

“Oh, wonderful! By the same talented chefs who’ve been feeding me hogslop for nine and a half years. What a way to go!”

“What would you like, Sam? I’m trying to be reasonable.”

“How about toast and boiled carrots? I’d hate to burden them with something new.”

“Fine, Sam. When you decide, tell Packer here and he’ll notify the kitchen.”

“There won’t be a last meal, Nugent. My lawyer will unload the heavy artillery tomorrow. You clowns won’t know what hit you.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You’re a lying sonofabitch. You can’t wait to walk me in there and strap me down. You’re giddy with the thought of asking me if I have any last words, then nodding at one of your gophers to lock the door. And when it’s all over, you’ll face the press with a sad face and announce that ‘As of twelve-fifteen, this morning, August 8, Sam Cayhall was executed in the gas chamber here at Parchman, pursuant to an order of the Circuit Court of Lakehead County, Mississippi.’ It’ll be your finest hour, Nugent. Don’t lie to me.”

The colonel never looked from the sheet of paper. "We need your list of witnesses."

"See my lawyer."

"And we need to know what to do with your things."

"See my lawyer."

"Okay. We have numerous requests for interviews from the press."

"See my lawyer."

Nugent jumped to his feet and stormed from the office. Packer caught the door, waited a few seconds, then calmly said, "Sit tight, Sam, there's someone else to see you."

Sam smiled and winked at Packer. "Then get me some more coffee, would you Packer?"

Packer took the cup, and returned with it a few minutes later. He also handed Sam the Sunday paper from Jackson, and Sam was reading all sorts of stories about his execution when the chaplain, Ralph Griffin, knocked and entered.

Sam placed the paper on the desk and inspected the minister. Griffin wore white sneakers, faded jeans, and a black shirt with a white clerical collar. "Mornin', Reverend," Sam said, sipping his coffee.

"How are you, Sam?" Griffin asked as he pulled a chair very near the desk and sat in it.

"Right now my heart's filled with hate," Sam said gravely.

"I'm sorry. Who's it directed at?"

"Colonel Nugent. But I'll get over it."

"Have you been praying, Sam?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"What's the hurry? I have today, tomorrow, and Tuesday. I figure you and I'll be doing lots of praying come Tuesday night."

"If you want. It's up to you. I'll be here."

"I want you to be with me up to the last moment, Reverend, if you don't mind. You and my lawyer. Y'all are allowed to sit with me during the last hours."

"I'd be honored."

“Thanks.”

“What exactly do you want to pray about, Sam?”

Sam took a long drink of coffee. “Well, first of all, I’d like to know that when I leave this world, all the bad things I’ve done have been forgiven.”

“Your sins?”

“That’s right.”

“God expects us to confess our sins to him and ask for forgiveness.”

“All of them? One at a time?”

“Yes, the ones we can remember.”

“Then we’d better start now. It’ll take a while.”

“As you wish. What else would you like to pray for?”

“My family, such as it is. This will be hard on my grandson, and my brother, and maybe my daughter. There won’t be a lot of tears shed for me, you understand, but I would like for them to be comforted. And I’d like to say a prayer for my friends here on the Row. They’ll take it hard.”

“Anyone else?”

“Yeah. I want to say a good prayer for the Kramers, especially Ruth.”

“The family of the victims?”

“That’s right. And also the Lincolns.”

“Who are the Lincolns?”

“It’s a long story. More victims.”

“This is good, Sam. You need to get this off your chest, to cleanse your soul.”

“It’ll take years to cleanse my soul, Reverend.”

“More victims?”

Sam sat the cup on the desk and gently rubbed his hands together. He searched the warm and trusting eyes of Ralph Griffin. “What if there are other victims?” he asked.

“Dead people?”

Sam nodded, very slowly.

“People you’ve killed?”

Sam kept nodding.

Griffin took a deep breath, and contemplated matters for a moment. “Well, Sam, to be perfectly honest, I wouldn’t want to die without confessing these sins and asking God for forgiveness.”

Sam kept nodding.

“How many?” Griffin asked.

Sam slid off the desk and eased into his shower shoes. He slowly lit a cigarette, and began pacing back and forth behind Griffin’s chair. The reverend changed positions so he could watch and hear Sam.

“There was Joe Lincoln, but I’ve already written a letter to his family and told them I was sorry.”

“You killed him?”

“Yes. He was an African. Lived on our place. I always felt bad about it. It was around 1950.”

Sam stopped and leaned on a file cabinet. He spoke to the floor, as if in a daze. “And there were two men, white men, who killed my father at a funeral, many years ago. They served some time in jail, and when they got out, me and my brothers waited patiently. We killed both of them, but I never felt that bad about it, to be honest. They were scum, and they’d killed our father.”

“Killing is always wrong, Sam. You’re fighting your own legal killing right now.”

“I know.”

“Did you and your brothers get caught?”

“No. The old sheriff suspected us, but he couldn’t prove anything. We were too careful. Besides, they were real lowlifes, and nobody cared.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“I know. I always figured they deserved what they got, then I was sent to this place. Life has new meaning when you’re on death row. You realize how valuable it is. Now I’m sorry I killed those boys. Real sorry.”

“Anybody else?”

Sam walked the length of the room, counting each step, and returned to the file cabinet. The minister waited. Time meant nothing right now.

“There were a couple of lynchings, years ago,” Sam said, unable to look Griffin in the eyes.

“Two?”

“I think. Maybe three. No, yes, there were three, but at the first one I was just a kid, a small boy, and all I did was watch, you know, from the bushes. It was Klan lynching, and my father was involved in it, and me and my brother Albert sneaked into the woods and watched it. So that doesn’t count, does it?”

“No.”

Sam’s shoulders sank against the wall. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. “The second one was a regular mob. I was about fifteen, I guess, and I was right in the middle of it. A girl got raped by an African, at least she said it was a rape. Her reputation left a lot to be desired, and two years later she had a baby that was half-African. So who knows? Anyway, she pointed the finger, we got the boy, took him out, and lynched him. I was as guilty as the rest of the mob.”

“God will forgive you, Sam.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“How many murders will he forgive?”

“All of them. If you sincerely ask forgiveness, then he’ll wipe the slate clean. It’s in the Scriptures.”

“That’s too good to be true.”

“What about the other lynching?”

Sam began shaking his head, back and forth, eyes closed. “Now, I can’t talk about that one, preacher,” he said, exhaling heavily.

“You don’t have to talk to me about it, Sam. Just talk to God.”

“I don’t know if I can talk to anybody about it.”

“Sure you can. Just close your eyes one night, between now and Tuesday, while you’re in your cell, and confess all these deeds to God. He’ll instantly forgive you.”

“Just doesn’t seem right, you know. You kill someone, then in a matter of minutes God forgives you. Just like that. It’s too easy.”

“You must be truly sorry.”

“Oh, I am. I swear.”

“God forgets about it, Sam, but man does not. We answer to God, but we also answer to the laws of man. God will forgive you, but you suffer the consequences according to the dictates of the government.”

“Screw the government. I’m ready to check outta here anyway.”

“Well, let’s make sure you’re ready, okay?”

Sam walked to the desk and sat on the corner next to Griffin. “You stick close, okay, Reverend? I’ll need some help. There’s some bad things buried in my soul. It might take some time to get them out.”

“It won’t be hard, Sam, if you’re really ready.”

Sam patted him on the knee. “Just stick close, okay?”

Forty-four

The front office was filled with blue smoke when Adam entered. Sam was puffing away on the desk, reading about himself in the Sunday paper. Three empty coffee cups and several candy wrappers littered the desk. "You've made yourself at home, haven't you?" Adam said, noticing the debris.

"Yeah, I've been here all day."

"Lots of guests?"

"I wouldn't call them guests. The day started with Nugent, so that pretty well ruined things. The minister stopped by to see if I've been praying. I think he was depressed when he left. Then the doctor came by to make sure I'm fit enough to kill. Then my brother Donnie stopped by for a short visit. I really want you to meet him. Tell me you've brought some good news."

Adam shook his head and sat down. "No. Nothing's changed since yesterday. The courts have taken the weekend off."

"Do they realize Saturdays and Sundays count? That the clock doesn't stop ticking for me on the weekends?"

"It could be good news. They could be considering my brilliant appeals."

"Maybe, but I suspect the honorable brethren are more likely at their lake homes drinking beer and cooking ribs. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, you're probably right. What's in the paper?"

"Same old rehash of me and my brutal crime, pictures of those people out front demonstrating, comments from McAllister. Nothing new. I've never seen such excitement."

"You're the man of the hour, Sam. Wendall Sherman and his publisher are now at a hundred and fifty thousand, but the deadline is six o'clock tonight. He's in Memphis, sitting with his tape

recorders, just itching to get down here. He says he'll need at least two full days to record your story."

"Great. What exactly am I supposed to do with the money?"

"Leave it to your precious grandchildren."

"Are you serious? Will you spend it? I'll do it if you'll spend it."

"No. I'm just kidding. I don't want the money, and Carmen doesn't need it. I couldn't spend it with a clear conscience."

"Good. Because the last thing I wanna do between now and Tuesday night is to sit with a stranger and talk about the past. I don't care how much money he has. I'd rather not have a book written about my life."

"I've already told him to forget it."

"Atta boy." Sam eased to his feet and began walking back and forth across the room. Adam took his place on the edge of the desk and read the sports section of the Memphis paper.

"I'll be glad when it's over, Adam," Sam said, still walking, talking with his hands. "I can't stand this waiting. I swear I wish it was tonight." He was suddenly nervous and irritable, his voice louder.

Adam placed the paper to his side. "We're gonna win, Sam. Trust me."

"Win what!" he snapped angrily. "Win a reprieve? Big deal! What do we gain from that? Six months? A year? You know what that means? It means we'll get to do this again someday. I'll go through the whole damned ritual again—counting days, losing sleep, plotting last minute strategies, listening to Nugent or some other fool, talking to the shrink, whispering to the chaplain, being patted on the ass and led up here to this cubbyhole because I'm special." He stopped in front of Adam and glared down at him. His face was angry, his eyes wet and bitter. "I'm sick of this, Adam! Listen to me! This is worse than dying."

"We can't quit, Sam."

"We? Who the hell is we? It's my neck on the line, not yours. If I get a stay, then you'll go back to your fancy office in Chicago and get on with your life. You'll be the hero because you saved your client. You'll get your picture in Lawyer's Quarterly, or whatever you guys read. The bright young star who kicked ass in Mississippi.

Saved his grandfather, a wretched Klucker, by the way. Your client, on the other hand, is led back to his little cage where he starts counting days again.” Sam threw his cigarette on the floor and grabbed Adam by the shoulders. “Look at me, son. I can’t go through this again. I want you to stop everything. Drop it. Call the courts and tell them we’re dismissing all the petitions and appeals. I’m an old man. Please allow me to die with dignity.”

His hands were shaking. His breathing was labored. Adam searched his brilliant blue eyes, surrounded with layers of dark wrinkles, and saw a stray tear ease out of one corner and fall slowly down his cheek until it vanished in the gray beard.

For the first time, Adam could smell his grandfather. The strong nicotine aroma mixed with an odor of dried perspiration to form a scent that was not pleasant. It was not repulsive, though, the way it would have been if radiated by a person with access to plenty of soap and hot water, air conditioning, and deodorant. After the second breath, it didn’t bother Adam at all.

“I don’t want you to die, Sam.”

Sam squeezed his shoulders harder. “Why not?” he demanded.

“Because I’ve just found you. You’re my grandfather.”

Sam stared for a second longer, then relaxed. He released Adam and took a step backward. “I’m sorry you found me like this,” he said, wiping his eyes.

“Don’t apologize.”

“But I have to. I’m sorry I’m not a better grandfather. Look at me,” he said, glancing down at his legs. “A wretched old man in a red monkey suit. A convicted murderer about to be gassed like an animal. And look at you. A fine young man with a beautiful education and a bright future. Where in the world did I go wrong? What happened to me? I’ve spent my life hating people, and look what I have to show for it. You, you don’t hate anybody. And look where you’re headed. We have the same blood. Why am I here?”

Sam slowly sat in a chair, put his elbows on his knees, and covered his eyes. Neither moved or spoke for a long time. The occasional voice of a guard could be heard in the hall, but the room was quiet.

“You know, Adam, I’d rather not die in such an awful way,” Sam said hoarsely with his fists resting on his temples, still looking blankly at the floor. “But death itself doesn’t worry me now. I’ve known for a long time that I would die here, and my biggest fear was dying without knowing anyone would care. That’s an awful thought, you know. Dying and nobody cares. There’s nobody to cry and grieve, to mourn properly at the funeral and burial. I’ve had dreams where I saw my body in a cheap wooden casket lying in the funeral home in Clanton, and not a soul was in the room with me. Not even Donnie. In the same dream, the preacher chuckled through the funeral service because it was just the two of us, all alone in the chapel, rows and rows of empty pews. But that’s different now. I know somebody cares about me. I know you’ll be sad when I die because you care, and I know you’ll be there when I’m buried to make sure it’s done properly. I’m really ready to go now, Adam. I’m ready.”

“Fine, Sam, I respect that. And I promise I’ll be here to the bitter end, and I’ll grieve and mourn, and after it’s over I’ll make sure you’re buried properly. No one’s gonna screw around with you, Sam, as long as I’m here. But, please, look at it through my eyes. I have to give it my best shot, because I’m young and I have the rest of my life. Don’t make me leave here knowing I could’ve done more. It’s not fair to me.”

Sam folded his arms across his chest and looked at Adam. His pale face was calm, his eyes still wet. “Let’s do it this way,” he said, his voice still low and pained. “I’m ready to go. I’ll spend tomorrow and Tuesday making final preparations. I’ll assume it’s gonna happen at midnight Tuesday, and I’ll be ready for it. You, on the other hand, play it like a game. If you can win it, good for you. If you lose it, I’ll be ready to face the music.”

“So you’ll cooperate?”

“No. No clemency hearing. No more petitions or appeals. You have enough junk floating around out there to keep you busy. Two issues are still alive. I’m not signing any more petitions.”

Sam stood, his decrepit knees popping and wobbling. He walked to the door and leaned on it. “What about Lee?” he asked softly,

reaching for his cigarettes.

"She's still in rehab," Adam lied. He was tempted to blurt out the truth. It seemed childish to be lying to Sam in these declining hours of his life, but Adam still held a strong hope that she would be found before Tuesday. "Do you want to see her?"

"I think so. Can she get out?"

"It may be difficult, but I'll try. She's sicker than I first thought."

"She's an alcoholic?"

"Yes."

"Is that all? No drugs?"

"Just alcohol. She told me she's had a problem for many years. Rehab is nothing new."

"Bless her heart. My children didn't have a chance."

"She's a fine person. She's had a rough time with her marriage. Her son left home at an early age and never returned."

"Walt, right?"

"Right," Adam answered. What a heartbroken bunch of people. Sam was not even certain of the name of his grandson.

"How old is he?"

"I'm not sure. Probably close to my age."

"Does he even know about me?"

"I don't know. He's been gone for many years. Lives in Amsterdam."

Sam picked up a cup from the desk and took a drink of cold coffee. "What about Carmen?" he asked.

Adam instinctively glanced at his watch. "I pick her up at the Memphis airport in three hours. She'll be here in the morning."

"That just scares the hell outta me."

"Relax, Sam. She's a great person. She's smart, ambitious, pretty, and I've told her all about you."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Because she wants to know."

"Poor child. Did you tell her what I look like?"

"Don't worry about it, Sam. She doesn't care what you look like."

"Did you tell her I'm not some savage monster?"

“I told her you were a sweetheart, a real dear, sort of a delicate little fella with an earring, ponytail, limp wrist, and these cute little rubber shower shoes that you sort of glide in.”

“You kiss my ass!”

“And that you seemed to be a real favorite of the boys here in prison.”

“You’re lying! You didn’t tell her all that!” Sam was grinning, but half serious, and his concern was amusing. Adam laughed, a bit too long and a bit too loud, but the humor was welcome. They both chuckled and tried their best to seem thoroughly amused by their own wit. They tried to stretch it out, but soon the levity passed and gravity sank in. Soon they were sitting on the edge of the desk, side by side, feet on separate chairs, staring at the floor while heavy clouds of tobacco smoke boiled above them in the motionless air.

There was so much to talk about, yet there was little to say. The legal theories and maneuverings had been beaten to death. Family was a subject they’d covered as much as they’d dared. The weather was good for no more than five minutes of conjecture. And both men knew they would spend much of the next two and a half days together. Serious matters could wait. Unpleasant subjects could be shoved back just a bit longer. Twice Adam glanced at his watch and said he’d best be going, and both times Sam insisted he stay. Because when Adam left, they would come for him and take him back to his cell, his little cage where the temperature was over a hundred. Please stay, he begged.

Late that night, well after midnight, long after Adam had told Carmen about Lee and her problems, and about Phelps and Walt, about McAllister and Wyn Lettner, and the theory of the accomplice, hours after they’d finished a pizza and discussed their mother and father and grandfather and the whole pathetic bunch, Adam said the one moment he’d never forget was the two of them sitting there on the desk, passing time in silence as an invisible clock ticked away,

with Sam patting him on the knee. It was like he had to touch me in some affectionate way, he explained to her, like a good grandfather would touch a small loved one.

Carmen had heard enough for one night. She'd been on the patio for four hours, suffering through the humidity and absorbing the desolate oral history of her father's family.

But Adam had been very careful. He'd hit the peaks and skipped the woeful valleys—no mention of Joe Lincoln or lynchings or sketchy hints of other crimes. He portrayed Sam as a violent man who made terrible mistakes and was now burdened with remorse. He had toyed with the idea of showing her his video of Sam's trials, but decided against it. He would do it later. She could handle only so much in one night. At times, he couldn't believe the things he'd heard in the past four weeks. It would be cruel to hit her with all of it in one sitting. He loved his sister dearly. They had years to discuss the rest of the story.

Forty-five

Monday, August 6, 6 a.m. Forty-two hours to go. Adam entered his office and locked the door.

He waited until seven, then called Slattery's office in Jackson. There was no answer, of course, but he was hoping for a recorded message that might direct him to another number that might lead to someone down there who could tell him something. Slattery was sitting on the mental claim; just ignoring it as if it was simply another little lawsuit.

He called information and received the home number for F. Flynn Slattery, but decided not to bother him. He could wait until nine.

Adam had slept less than three hours. His pulse was pounding, his adrenaline was pumping. His client was now down to the last forty-two hours, and dammit, Slattery should quickly rule one way or the other. It wasn't fair to sit on the damned petition when he could be racing off to other courts with it.

The phone rang and he lunged for it. The Death Clerk from the Fifth Circuit informed him that the court was denying the appeal of Sam's claim of ineffective assistance of counsel. It was the opinion of the court that the claim was procedurally barred. It should've been filed years ago. The court did not get to the merits of the issue.

"Then why'd the court sit on it for a week?" Adam demanded. "They could've reached this nitpicking decision ten days ago."

"I'll fax you a copy right now," the clerk said.

"Thanks. I'm sorry, okay."

"Keep in touch, Mr. Hall. We'll be right here waiting on you."

Adam hung up, and went to find coffee. Darlene arrived, tired, haggard, and early, at seven-thirty. She brought the fax from the Fifth Circuit, along with a raisin bagel. Adam asked her to fax to the U.S. Supreme Court the petition for cert on the ineffectiveness

claim. It had been prepared for three days, and Mr. Olander in Washington had told Darlene that the Court was already reviewing it.

Darlene then brought two aspirin and a glass of water. His head was splitting as he packed most of the Cayhall file into a large briefcase and a cardboard box. He gave Darlene a list of instructions.

Then he left the office, the Memphis branch of Kravitz & Bane, never to return.

Colonel Nugent waited impatiently for the tier door to open, then rushed into the hallway with eight members of his select execution team behind him. They swarmed into the quietness of Tier A with all the finesse of a Gestapo squad—eight large men, half in uniform, half plainclothed, following a strutting little rooster. He stopped at cell six, where Sam was lying on his bed, minding his own business. The other inmates were instantly watching and listening, their arms hanging through the bars.

“Sam, it’s time to go to the Observation Cell,” Nugent said as if he was truly bothered by this. His men lined the wall behind him, under the row of windows.

Sam slowly eased himself from the bed, and walked to the bars. He glared at Nugent, and asked, “Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“But why move me eight doors down the tier? What purpose does it serve?”

“It’s procedure, Sam. It’s in the book.”

“So you don’t have a good reason, do you?”

“I don’t need one. Turn around.”

Sam walked to his sink and brushed his teeth for a long time. Then he stood over his toilet and urinated with his hands on his hips. Then he washed his hands, as Nugent and his boys watched and fumed. Then he lit a cigarette, stuck it between his teeth, and

eased his hands behind his back and through the narrow opening in the door. Nugent slapped the cuffs on his wrists, and nodded at the end of the tier for the door to be opened. Sam stepped onto the tier. He nodded at J. B. Gullitt, who was watching in horror and ready to cry. He winked at Hank Henshaw.

Nugent took his arm and walked him to the end of the hall, past Gullitt and Loyd Eaton and Stock Turner and Harry Ross Scott and Buddy Lee Harris, and, finally, past Preacher Boy, who at the moment was lying on his bed, face down, crying. The tier ran to a wall of iron bars, identical to those on the front of the cells, and the wall had a heavy door in the center of it. On the other side was another group of Nugent's goons, all watching quietly and loving every moment of it. Behind them was a short, narrow hallway which led to the Isolation Room. And then to the chamber.

Sam was being moved forty-eight feet closer to death. He leaned against the wall, puffing, watching in stoic silence. This was nothing personal, just part of the routine.

Nugent walked back to cell six and barked orders. Four of the guards entered Sam's cell and began grabbing his possessions. Books, typewriter, fan, television, toiletries, clothing. They held the items as if they were contaminated and carried them to the Observation Cell. The mattress and bedding were rolled up and moved by a burly plainclothed guard who accidentally stepped on a dragging sheet and ripped it.

The inmates watched this sudden flurry of activity with a saddened curiosity. Their cramped little cells were like additional layers of skin, and to see one so unmercifully violated was painful. It could happen to them. The reality of an execution was crashing in; they could hear it in the heavy boots shuffling along the tier, and in the stern muted voices of the death team. The distant slamming of a door would've barely been noticed a week ago. Now, it was a jolting shock that rattled the nerves.

The officers trooped back and forth with Sam's assets until cell six was bare. It was quick work. They arranged things in his new home without the slightest care.

None of the eight worked on the Row. Nugent had read somewhere in Naifeh's haphazard notes that the members of the execution team should be total strangers to the inmate. They should be pulled from the other camps. Thirty-one officers and guards had volunteered for this duty. Nugent had chosen only the best.

"Is everything in?" he snapped at one of his men.

"Yes sir."

"Very well. It's all yours, Sam."

"Oh thank you, sir," Sam sneered as he entered the cell. Nugent nodded to the far end of the hall, and the door closed. He walked forward and grabbed the bars with both hands. "Now, listen, Sam," he said gravely. Sam was leaning with his back to the wall, looking away from Nugent. "We'll be right here if you need anything, okay. We moved you down here to the end so we can watch you better. All right? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Sam continued to look away, thoroughly ignoring him.

"Very well." He backed away, and looked at his men. "Let's go," he said to them. The tier door opened less than ten feet from Sam, and the death team filed out. Sam waited. Nugent glanced up and down the hall, then stepped from the tier.

"Hey, Nugent!" Sam suddenly yelled. "How 'bout taking these handcuffs off!"

Nugent froze and the death team stopped.

"You dumbass!" Sam yelled again, as Nugent scurried backward, fumbling for keys, barking orders. Laughter erupted along the tier, loud horselaughs and guffaws and boisterous catcalls. "You can't leave me handcuffed!" Sam screamed into the hallway.

Nugent was at Sam's door, gritting his teeth, cursing, finally getting the right key. "Turn around," he demanded.

"You ignorant sonofabitch!" Sam yelled through the bars directly into the colonel's red face, which was less than two feet away. The laughter roared even louder.

"And you're in charge of my execution!" Sam said angrily, and rather loudly for the benefit of others. "You'll probably gas yourself!"

"Don't bet on it," Nugent said tersely. "Now turn around."

Someone, either Hank Henshaw or Harry Ross Scott, yelled out, “Barney Fife!” and instantly the chant reverberated along the tier:

“Barney Fife! Barney Fife! Barney Fife!”

“Shut up!” Nugent yelled back.

“Barney Fife! Barney Fife!”

“Shut up!”

Sam finally turned around and stuck out his hands so Nugent could reach them. The cuffs came off, and the colonel quick-stepped it through the tier door.

“Barney Fife! Barney Fife! Barney Fife!” they chanted in perfect unison until the door clanged shut and the hallway was empty again. Their voices died suddenly, the laughter was gone. Slowly, their arms disappeared from the bars.

Sam stood facing the hall and glared at the two guards who were watching him from the other side of the tier door. He spent a few minutes organizing the place—plugging in the fan and television, stacking his books neatly as if they would be used, checking to see if the toilet flushed and the water ran. He sat on the bed and inspected the torn sheet.

This was his fourth cell on the Row, and undoubtedly the one he would occupy for the briefest period of time. He reminisced about the first two, especially the second, on Tier B, where his close friend Buster Moac had lived next door. One day they came for Buster and brought him here, to the Observation Cell, where they watched him around the clock so he wouldn’t commit suicide. Sam had cried when they took Buster away.

Virtually every inmate who made it this far also made it to the next stop. And then to the last.

Garner Goodman was the first guest of the day in the splendid foyer of the governor’s office. He actually signed the guestbook, chatted amiably with the pretty receptionist, and just wanted the governor to know that he was available. She was about to say something else

when the phone buzzed on her switchboard. She punched a button, grimaced, listened, frowned at Goodman who looked away, then thanked the caller. "These people," she sighed.

"Beg your pardon," Goodman offered, ever the innocent.

"We've been swamped with calls about your client's execution."

"Yes, it's a very emotional case. Seems as if most people down here are in favor of the death penalty."

"Not this one," she said, recording the call on a pink form. "Almost all of these calls are opposed to his execution."

"You don't say. What a surprise."

"I'll inform Ms. Stark you're here."

"Thank you." Goodman took his familiar seat in the foyer. He glanced through the morning papers again. On Saturday, the daily paper in Tupelo made the mistake of beginning a telephone survey to gauge public opinion on the Cayhall execution. A toll-free number was given on the front page with instructions, and, of course, Goodman and his team of market analysts had bombarded the number over the weekend. The Monday edition ran the results for the first time, and they were astounding. Of three hundred and twenty calls, three hundred and two were opposed to the execution. Goodman smiled to himself as he scanned the paper.

Not too far away, the governor was sitting at the long table in his office and scanning the same papers. His face was troubled. His eyes were sad and worried.

Mona Stark walked across the marbled floor with a cup of coffee. "Garner Goodman's here. Waiting in the foyer."

"Let him wait."

"The hotline's already flooded."

McAllister calmly looked at his watch. Eleven minutes before nine. He scratched his chin with his knuckles. From 3 p.m. Saturday until 8 p.m. Sunday, his pollster had called over two hundred Mississippians. Seventy-eight percent favored the death penalty, which was not surprising. However, of the same sample polled, fifty-one percent believed Sam Cayhall should not be executed. Their reasons varied. Many felt he was simply too old to face it. His crime had been committed twenty-three years ago, in a generation

different from today's. He would die in Parchman soon enough anyway, so leave him alone. He was being persecuted for political reasons. Plus, he was white, and McAllister and his pollsters knew that factor was very important, if unspoken.

That was the good news. The bad news was contained in a printout next to the newspapers. Working with only one operator, the hotline received two hundred and thirty-one calls on Saturday, and one hundred and eighty on Sunday. A total of four hundred and eleven. Over ninety-five percent opposed the execution. Since Friday morning, the hotline had officially recorded eight hundred and ninety-seven calls about old Sam, with a strong ninety percent plus opposed to his execution. And now the hotline was hopping again.

There was more. The regional offices were reporting an avalanche of calls, almost all opposed to Sam dying. Staff members were coming to work with stories of long weekends with the phones. Roxburgh had called to say his lines had been flooded.

The governor was already tired. "There's something at ten this morning," he said to Mona without looking at her.

"Yes, a meeting with a group of Boy Scouts."

"Cancel it. Give my apologies. Reschedule it. I'm not in the mood for any photographs this morning. It's best if I stay here. Lunch?"

"With Senator Pressgrove. You're supposed to discuss the lawsuit against the universities."

"I can't stand Pressgrove. Cancel it, and order some chicken. And, on second thought, bring in Goodman."

She walked to the door, disappeared for a minute, and returned with Garner Goodman. McAllister was standing by the window, staring at the buildings downtown. He turned and flashed a weary smile. "Good morning, Mr. Goodman."

They shook hands and took seats. Late Sunday afternoon, Goodman had delivered to Larramore a written request to cancel the clemency hearing, pursuant to their client's rather strident demands.

"Still don't want a hearing, huh?" the governor said with another tired smile.

"Our client says no. He has nothing else to add. We've tried everything." Mona handed Goodman a cup of black coffee.

“He has a very hard head. Always has, I guess. Where are the appeals right now?” McAllister was so sincere.

“Proceeding as expected.”

“You’ve been through this before, Mr. Goodman. I haven’t. What’s your prediction, as of right now?”

Goodman stirred his coffee and pondered the question. There was no harm in being honest with the governor, not at this point. “I’m one of his lawyers, so I lean toward optimism. I’d say seventy percent chance of it happening.”

The governor thought about this for a while. He could almost hear the phones ringing off the walls. Even his own people were getting skittish. “Do you know what I want, Mr. Goodman?” he asked sincerely.

Yeah, you want those damned phones to stop ringing, Goodman thought to himself. “What?”

“I’d really like to talk to Adam Hall. Where is he?”

“Probably at Parchman. I talked to him an hour ago.”

“Can he come here today?”

“Yes, in fact he was planning on arriving in Jackson this afternoon.”

“Good. I’ll wait for him.”

Goodman suppressed a smile. Perhaps a small hole had ruptured in the dam.

Oddly, though, it was on a different, far more unlikely front where the first hint of relief surfaced.

Six blocks away in the federal courthouse, Breck Jefferson entered the office of his boss, the Honorable F. Flynn Slattery, who was on the phone and rather perturbed at a lawyer. Breck held a thick petition for writ of habeas corpus, and a legal pad filled with notes.

“Yes?” Slattery barked, slamming down the phone.

“We need to talk about Cayhall,” Breck said somberly. “You know we’ve got his petition alleging mental incompetence.”

“Let’s deny it and get it outta here. I’m too busy to worry with it. Let Cayhall take it to the Fifth Circuit. I don’t want that damned thing lying around here.”

Breck looked troubled, and his words came slower. “But there’s something you need to take a look at.”

“Aw, come on, Breck. What is it?”

“He may have a valid claim.”

Slattery’s face fell and his shoulders slumped. “Come on. Are you kidding? What is it? We have a trial starting in thirty minutes. There’s a jury waiting out there.”

Breck Jefferson had been the number-two student in his law class at Emory. Slattery trusted him implicitly. “They’re claiming Sam lacks the mental competence to face an execution, pursuant to a rather broad Mississippi statute.”

“Everybody knows he’s crazy.”

“They have an expert who’s willing to testify. It’s not something we can ignore.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“You’d better look at it.”

His Honor massaged his forehead with his fingertips. “Sit down. Let me see it.”

“Just a few more miles,” Adam said as they sped toward the prison. “How you doing?”

Carmen had said little since they left Memphis. Her first journey into Mississippi had been spent looking at the vastness of the Delta, admiring the lushness of its miles of cotton and beans, watching in amazement as crop dusters bounced along the tops of the fields, shaking her head at the clusters of impoverished shacks. “I’m nervous,” she admitted, not for the first time. They had talked briefly about Berkeley and Chicago and what the next years might bring. They had said nothing about their mother or father. Sam and his family were likewise neglected.

“He’s nervous too.”

“This is bizarre, Adam. Rushing along this highway in this wilderness, hurrying to meet a grandfather who’s about to be executed.”

He patted her firmly on the knee. “You’re doing the right thing.” She wore oversized chinos, hiking boots, a faded red denim shirt. Very much the grad student in psychology.

“There it is.” He suddenly pointed ahead. On both sides of the highway, cars had parked bumper to bumper. Traffic was slow as people walked toward the prison.

“What’s all this?” she asked.

“This is a circus.”

They passed three Klansmen walking on the edge of the pavement. Carmen stared at them, then shook her head in disbelief. They inched forward, going slightly faster than the people hurrying to the demonstrations. In the middle of the highway in front of the entrance, two state troopers directed traffic. They motioned for Adam to turn right, which he did. A Parchman guard pointed to an area along a shallow road ditch.

They held hands and walked to the front gate, pausing for a moment to stare at the dozens of robed Klansmen milling about in front of the prison. A fiery speech was being delivered into a megaphone that malfunctioned every few seconds. A group of brownshirts stood shoulder to shoulder, holding signs and facing the traffic. No less than five television vans were parked on the other side of the highway. Cameras were everywhere. A news helicopter circled above.

At the front gate, Adam introduced Carmen to his new pal Louise, the guard who took care of the paperwork. She was nervous and frazzled. There’d been an altercation or two between the Kluckers and the press and the guards. Things were dicey at the moment, and not likely to improve, in her opinion.

A uniformed guard escorted them to a prison van, and they hurriedly left the front entrance.

“Unbelievable,” Carmen said.

“It gets worse each day. Wait till tomorrow.”

The van slowed as they eased along the main drive, under the large shade trees and in front of the neat, white houses. Carmen watched everything.

“This doesn’t look like a prison,” she said.

“It’s a farm. Seventeen thousand acres. Prison employees live in those houses.”

“With children,” she said, looking at bicycles and scooters lying in the front yards. “It’s so peaceful. Where are the prisoners?”

“Just wait.”

The van turned to the left. The pavement stopped and the dirt road began. Just ahead was the Row.

“See the towers there?” Adam pointed. “The fences and the razor wire?” She nodded.

“That’s the Maximum Security Unit. Sam’s home for the past nine and a half years.”

“Where’s the gas chamber?”

“In there.”

Two guards looked inside the van, then waved it through the double gates. It stopped near the front door where Packer was waiting. Adam introduced him to Carmen, who by now was barely able to speak. They stepped inside, where Packer frisked them gently. Three other guards watched. “Sam’s already in there,” Packer said nodding to the front office. “Go on in.”

Adam took her hand and clenched it tightly. She nodded and they walked to the door. He opened it.

Sam was sitting on the edge of the desk, as usual. His feet were swinging under him and he was not smoking. The air in the room was clear and cool. He glanced at Adam, then looked at Carmen. Packer closed the door behind them.

She released Adam’s hand and walked to the desk, looking Sam squarely in the eyes. “I’m Carmen,” she said softly. Sam eased from the desk. “I’m Sam, Carmen. Your wayward grandfather.” He drew her to him and they embraced.

It took a second or two for Adam to realize Sam had shaved his beard. His hair was shorter and looked much neater. His jumpsuit was zipped to the neck.

Sam squeezed her shoulders and examined her face. "You're as pretty as your mother," he said hoarsely. His eyes were moist and Carmen was fighting back tears.

She bit her lip and tried to smile.

"Thanks for coming," he said, trying to grin. "I'm sorry you had to find me like this."

"You look great," she said.

"Don't start lying, Carmen," Adam said, breaking the ice. "And let's stop the crying before it gets outta hand."

"Sit down," Sam said to her, pointing to a chair. He sat next to her, holding her hand.

"Business first, Sam," Adam said as he leaned on the desk. "Fifth Circuit turned us down early this morning. So we're off to greener pastures."

"Your brother here is quite a lawyer," Sam said to Carmen. "He gives me this same news every day."

"Of course, I don't have much to work with," Adam said.

"How's your mother?" Sam asked her.

"She's fine."

"Tell her I asked about her. I remember her as a fine person."

"I will."

"Any word on Lee?" Sam asked him.

"No. Do you want to see her?"

"I think so. But if she can't make it, I'll understand."

"I'll see what I can do," Adam said confidently. His last two phone calls to Phelps had not been returned. Frankly, he didn't have time at the moment to look for Lee.

Sam leaned closer to her. "Adam tells me you're studying psychology."

"That's right. I'm in grad school at Cal Berkeley. I'll—"

A sharp knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Adam opened it slightly, and saw the anxious face of Lucas Mann. "Excuse me for a minute," he said to Sam and Carmen, and stepped into the hall.

"What's up?" he asked.

“Garner Goodman’s looking for you,” Mann said, almost in a whisper. “He wants you in Jackson immediately.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Looks like one of your claims has found its mark.”

Adam’s heart stopped. “Which one?”

“Judge Slattery wants to talk about the mental incompetence. He’s scheduled a hearing for five this afternoon. Don’t say anything to me, because I might be a witness for the state.”

Adam closed his eyes and gently tapped his head against the wall. A thousand thoughts swirled wildly through his brain. “Five this afternoon. Slattery?”

“Hard to believe. Look, you need to move fast.”

“I need a phone.”

“There’s one in there,” Mann said, nodding to the door behind Adam. “Look, Adam, it’s none of my business, but I wouldn’t tell Sam. This is still a long shot, and there’s no sense getting his hopes up. If it was my decision, I’d wait until the hearing is over.”

“You’re right. Thanks, Lucas.”

“Sure. I’ll see you in Jackson.”

Adam returned to the room, where the discussion had drifted to life in the Bay Area. “It’s nothing,” Adam said with a frown and went casually to the phone. He ignored their quiet talk as he punched the numbers.

“Garner, it’s Adam. I’m here with Sam. What’s up?”

“Get your ass down here, old boy,” Goodman said calmly. “Things are moving.”

“I’m listening.” Sam was describing his first and only trip to San Francisco, decades ago.

“First, the governor wants to talk privately with you. He seems to be suffering. We’re wearing his ass out with the phones, and he’s feeling the heat. More importantly, Slattery, of all people, is hung up on the mental claim. I talked with him thirty minutes ago, and he’s just thoroughly confused. I didn’t help matters. He wants a hearing at five this afternoon. I’ve already talked to Dr. Swinn, and he’s on standby. He’ll land in Jackson at three-thirty and be ready to testify.”

"I'm on my way," Adam said with his back to Sam and Carmen.

"Meet me at the governor's office."

Adam hung up. "Just getting the appeals filed," he explained to Sam, who at the moment was totally indifferent. "I need to get to Jackson."

"What's the hurry?" Sam asked, like a man with years to live and nothing to do.

"Hurry? Did you say hurry? It's ten o'clock, Sam, on Monday. We have exactly thirty-eight hours to find a miracle."

"There won't be any miracles, Adam." He turned to Carmen, still holding her hand. "Don't get your hopes up, dear."

"Maybe—"

"No. It's my time, okay. And I'm very ready. I don't want you to be sad when it's over."

"We need to go, Sam," Adam said, touching his shoulder. "I'll be back either late tonight or early in the morning."

Carmen leaned over and kissed Sam on the cheek. "My heart is with you, Sam," she whispered.

He hugged her for a second, then stood by the desk. "You take care, kid. Study hard and all that. And don't think badly of me, okay? I'm here for a reason. It's nobody's fault but mine. There's a better life waiting on me outside this place."

Carmen stood and hugged him again. She was crying as they left the room.

Forty-six

By noon, Judge Slattery had fully embraced the gravity of the moment, and though he tried hard to conceal it, he was enjoying immensely this brief interval in the center of the storm. First, he had dismissed the jury and lawyers in the civil trial pending before him. He had twice talked to the clerk of the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans, then to Justice McNeely himself. The big moment had come a few minutes after eleven when Supreme Court Justice Edward F. Allbright called from Washington to get an update. Allbright was monitoring the case by the hour. They talked law and theory. Neither man was opposed to the death penalty, and both had particular problems with the Mississippi statute in question. They were concerned that it could be abused by any death row inmate who could pretend to be insane and find a wacky doctor to play along.

The reporters quickly learned that a hearing of some type was scheduled, and they not only flooded Slattery's office with calls, but parked themselves in his receptionist's office. The U.S. marshal was called to disperse the reporters.

The secretary brought messages by the minute. Breck Jefferson dug through countless law books and scattered research over the long conference table. Slattery talked to the governor, the Attorney General, Garner Goodman, dozens of others. His shoes were under his massive desk. He walked around it, holding the receiver with a long cord, thoroughly enjoying the madness.

If Slattery's office was hectic, then the Attorney General's was pure chaos. Roxburgh had gone ballistic with the news that one of

Cayhall's shots in the dark had hit a target. You fight these bears for ten years, up and down the appellate ladders, out of one courtroom and into another, battling the creative legal minds of the ACLU and similar outfits, producing along the way enough paperwork to destroy a rain forest, and right when you've got him in your sights, he files a ton of gangplank appeals and one of them gets noticed by a judge somewhere who just happens to be in a tender mood.

He had stormed down the hall to the office of Morris Henry, Dr. Death himself, and together they hastily had assembled a team of their best criminal boys. They met in a large library with rows and stacks of the latest books. They reviewed the Cayhall petition and the applicable law, and they plotted strategy. Witnesses were needed. Who had seen Cayhall in the last month? Who could testify about the things he said and did? There was no time for one of their doctors to examine him. He had a doctor, but they didn't. This was a significant problem. To get their hands on him with a reputable doctor, the state would be forced to ask for time. And time meant a stay of execution. A stay was out of the question.

The guards saw him every day. Who else? Roxburgh called Lucas Mann, who suggested that he talk to Colonel Nugent. Nugent said he'd seen Sam just hours earlier, and, yes, of course, he would be happy to testify. Son of a bitch wasn't crazy. He was just mean. And Sergeant Packer saw him every day. And the prison psychiatrist, Dr. N. Stegall, had met with Sam, and she could testify. Nugent was anxious to help. He also suggested the prison chaplain. And he would think about others.

Morris Henry organized a hit squad of four lawyers to do nothing but dig for dirt on Dr. Anson Swinn. Find other cases he'd been involved in. Talk to other lawyers around the country. Locate transcripts of his testimony. The guy was nothing but a hired mouthpiece, a professional testifier. Get the goods to discredit him.

Once Roxburgh had the attack planned and others doing the work, he rode the elevator to the lobby of the building to chat with the press.

Adam parked in a vacant spot on the grounds of the state capitol. Goodman was waiting under a shade tree with his jacket off and sleeves rolled up, his paisley bow tie perfect. Adam quickly introduced Carmen to Mr. Goodman.

"The governor wants to see you at two. I just left his office, for the third time this morning. Let's walk to our place," he said, waving toward downtown. "It's just a coupla blocks."

"Did you meet Sam?" Goodman asked Carmen.

"Yes. This morning."

"I'm glad you did."

"What's on the governor's mind?" Adam asked. They were walking much too slow to suit him. Relax, he told himself. Just relax.

"Who knows? He wants to meet with you privately. Maybe the market analysis is getting to him. Maybe he's planning a media stunt. Maybe he's sincere. I can't read him. He does look tired, though."

"The phone calls are getting through?"

"Splendidly."

"No one's suspicious?"

"Not yet. Frankly, we're hitting them so fast and so hard I doubt they have time to trace calls."

Carmen shot a blank look at her brother, who was too preoccupied to see it.

"What's the latest from Slattery?" Adam asked as they crossed a street, pausing for a minute in silence to watch the demonstration under way on the front steps of the capitol.

"Nothing since ten this morning. His clerk called you in Memphis, and your secretary gave him my number here. That's how they found me. He told me about the hearing, and said Slattery wants the lawyers in his chamber at three to plan things."

"What does this mean?" Adam asked, desperate for his mentor to say that they were on the brink of a major victory.

Goodman sensed Adam's anxiety. "I honestly don't know. It's good news, but no one knows how permanent it is. Hearings at this stage are not unusual."

They crossed another street and entered the building. Upstairs, the temporary office was buzzing as four law students rattled away on cordless phones. Two were sitting with their feet on the table. One stood in the window and talked earnestly. One was pacing along the far wall, phone stuck to her head. Adam stood by the door and tried to absorb the scene. Carmen was hopelessly confused.

Goodman explained things in a loud whisper. "We're averaging about sixty calls an hour. We dial more than that, but the lines stay jammed, obviously. We're responsible for the jamming, and this keeps other people from getting through. It was much slower over the weekend. The hotline used only one operator." He delivered this summary like a proud plant manager showing off the latest in automated machinery.

"Who are they calling?" Carmen asked.

A law student stepped forward and introduced himself to Adam, and then to Carmen. He was having a ball, he said.

"Would you like something to eat?" Goodman asked. "We have some sandwiches." Adam declined.

"Who are they calling?" Carmen asked again.

"The governor's hotline," Adam replied, without explanation. They listened to the nearest caller as he changed his voice and read a name from a phone list. He was now Benny Chase from Hickory Flat, Mississippi, and he had voted for the governor and didn't think Sam Cayhall should be executed. It was time for the governor to step forward and take care of this situation.

Carmen cut her eyes at her brother, but he ignored her.

"These four are law students at Mississippi College," Goodman explained further. "We've used about a dozen students since Friday, different ages, whites and blacks, male and female. Professor Glass has been most helpful in finding these people. He's made calls too. So have Hez Kerry and his boys at the Defense Group. We've had at least twenty people calling."

They pulled three chairs to the end of a table and sat down. Goodman found soft drinks in a plastic cooler, and sat them on the table. He continued talking in a low voice. "John Bryan Glass is doing some research as we speak. He'll have a brief prepared by

four. Hez Kerry is also at work. He's checking with his counterparts in other death states to see if similar statutes have been used recently."

"Kerry is the black guy?" Adam said.

"Yeah, he's the director of the Southern Capital Defense Group. Very sharp."

"A black lawyer busting his butt to save Sam."

"It makes no difference to Hez. It's just another death case."

"I'd like to meet him."

"You will. All these guys will be at the hearing."

"And they're working for free?" Carmen asked.

"Sort of. Kerry is on salary. Part of his job is to monitor every death case in this state, but since Sam has private lawyers Kerry is off the hook. He's donating his time, but it's something he wants to do. Professor Glass is on salary at the law school, but this is definitely outside the scope of his employment there. We're paying these students five bucks an hour."

"Who's paying them?" she asked.

"Dear old Kravitz & Bane."

Adam grabbed a nearby phonebook. "Carmen needs to get a flight out of here this afternoon," he said, flipping to the yellow pages.

"I'll take care of it," Goodman said, taking the phonebook. "Where to?"

"San Francisco."

"I'll see what's available. Look, there's a little deli around the corner. Why don't you two get something to eat? We'll walk to the governor's office at two."

"I need to get to a library," Adam said, looking at his watch. It was almost one o'clock.

"Go eat, Adam. And try to relax. We'll have time later to sit down with the brain trust and talk strategy. Right now, you need to relax and eat."

"I'm hungry," Carmen said, anxious to be alone with her brother for a few minutes. They eased from the room, and closed the door behind them.

She stopped him in the shabby hallway before they reached the stairs. "Please explain that to me," she insisted, grabbing his arm.

"What?"

"That little room in there."

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"Is it legal?"

"It's not illegal."

"Is it ethical?"

Adam took a deep breath and stared at the wall. "What are they planning to do with Sam?"

"Execute him."

"Execute, gas, exterminate, kill, call it what you want. But it's murder, Carmen. Legal murder. It's wrong, and I'm trying to stop it. It's a dirty business, and if I have to bend a few ethics, I don't care."

"It stinks."

"So does the gas chamber."

She shook her head and held her words. Twenty-four hours earlier she'd been eating lunch with her boyfriend at a sidewalk café in San Francisco. Now, she wasn't sure where she was.

"Don't condemn me for this, Carmen. These are desperate hours."

"Okay," she said, and headed down the stairs.

The governor and the young lawyer were alone in the vast office, in the comfortable leather chairs, their legs crossed and feet almost touching. Goodman was rushing Carmen to the airport to catch a flight. Mona Stark was nowhere in sight.

"It's strange, you know, you're the grandson, and you've known him for less than a month." McAllister's words were calm, almost tired. "But I've known him for many years. In fact, he's been a part of my life for a long time. And I've always thought that I'd look forward to this day. I've wanted him to die, you know, to be punished for killing those boys." He flipped his bangs and gently rubbed his eyes. His words were so genuine, as if two old friends

were catching up on the gossip. “But now I’m not so sure. I have to tell you, Adam, the pressure’s getting to me.”

He was either being brutally honest, or he was a talented actor. Adam couldn’t tell. “What will the state prove if Sam dies?” Adam asked. “Will this be a better place to live when the sun comes up Wednesday morning and he’s dead?”

“No. But then you don’t believe in the death penalty. I do.”

“Why?”

“Because there has to be an ultimate punishment for murder. Put yourself in Ruth Kramer’s position, and you’d feel differently. The problem you have, Adam, and people like you, is that you forget about the victims.”

“We could argue for hours about the death penalty.”

“You’re right. Let’s skip it. Has Sam told you anything new about the bombing?”

“I can’t divulge what Sam’s told me. But the answer is no.”

“Maybe he acted alone, I don’t know.”

“What difference would it make today, the day before the execution?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. But if I knew that Sam was only an accomplice, that someone else was responsible for the killings, then it would be impossible for me to allow him to be executed. I could stop it, you know. I could do that. I’d catch hell for it. It would hurt me politically. The damage could be irreparable, but I wouldn’t mind. I’m getting tired of politics. And I don’t enjoy being placed in this position, the giver or taker of life. But I could pardon Sam, if I knew the truth.”

“You believe he had help. You’ve told me that already. The FBI agent in charge of the investigation believes it too. Why don’t you act on your beliefs and grant clemency?”

“Because we’re not certain.”

“So, one word from Sam, just one name thrown out here in the final hours, and, bingo, you take your pen and save his life?”

“No, but I might grant a reprieve so the name could be investigated.”

“It won’t happen, Governor. I’ve tried. I’ve asked so often, and he’s denied so much, that it’s not even discussed anymore.”

“Who’s he protecting?”

“Hell if I know.”

“Perhaps we’re wrong. Has he ever given you the details of the bombing?”

“Again, I can’t talk about our conversations. But he takes full responsibility for it.”

“Then why should I consider clemency? If the criminal himself claims he did the crime, and acted alone, how am I supposed to help him?”

“Help him because he’s an old man who’ll die soon enough anyway. Help him because it’s the right thing to do, and deep down in your heart you want to do it. It’ll take guts.”

“He hates me, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. But he could come around. Give him a pardon and he’ll be your biggest fan.”

McAllister smiled and unwrapped a peppermint. “Is he really insane?”

“Our expert says he is. We’ll do our best to convince Judge Slattery.”

“I know, but really? You’ve spent hours with him. Does he know what’s happening?”

At this point, Adam decided against honesty. McAllister was not a friend, and not at all trustworthy. “He’s pretty sad,” Adam admitted. “Frankly, I’m surprised any person can keep his mind after a few months on death row. Sam was an old man when he got there, and he’s slowly wasted away. That’s one reason he’s declined all interviews. He’s quite pitiful.”

Adam couldn’t tell if the governor believed this, but he certainly absorbed it.

“What’s your schedule tomorrow?” McAllister asked.

“I have no idea. It depends on what happens in Slattery’s court. I had planned to spend most of the day with Sam, but I might be running around filing last minute appeals.”

“I gave you my private number. Let’s keep in touch tomorrow.”

Sam took three bites of pinto beans and some of the corn bread, then placed the tray at the end of his bed. The same idiot guard with the blank face watched him through the bars of the tier door. Life was bad enough in these cramped cubicles, but living like an animal and being watched was unbearable.

It was six o'clock, time for the evening news. He was anxious to hear what the world was saying about him. The Jackson station began with the breaking story of a last minute hearing before federal Judge F. Flynn Slattery. The report cut to the outside of the federal courthouse in Jackson where an anxious young man with a microphone explained that the hearing had been delayed a bit as the lawyers wrangled in Slattery's office. He tried his best to briefly explain the issue. The defense was now claiming that Mr. Cayhall lacked sufficient mental capacity to understand why he was being executed. He was senile and insane, claimed the defense, which would call a noted psychiatrist in this last ditch effort to stop the execution. The hearing was expected to get under way at any moment, and no one knew when a decision might be reached by Judge Slattery. Back to the anchorwoman, who said that, meanwhile, up at the state penitentiary at Parchman, all systems were go for the execution. Another young man with a microphone was suddenly on the screen, standing somewhere near the front gate of the prison, describing the increased security. He pointed to his right, and the camera panned the area near the highway where a regular carnival was happening. The highway patrol was out in force, directing traffic and keeping a wary eye on an assemblage of several dozen Ku Klux Klansmen. Other protestors included various groups of white supremacists and the usual death penalty abolitionists, he said.

The camera swung back to the reporter, who now had with him Colonel George Nugent, acting superintendent for Parchman, and the man in charge of the execution. Nugent grimly answered a few questions, said things were very much under control, and if the

courts gave the green light then the execution would be carried out according to the law.

Sam turned off the television. Adam had called two hours earlier and explained the hearing, so he was prepared to hear that he was senile and insane and God knows what else. Still, he didn't like it. It was bad enough waiting to be executed, but to have his sanity slandered so nonchalantly seemed like a cruel invasion of privacy.

The tier was hot and quiet. The televisions and radios were turned down. Next door, Preacher Boy softly sang "The Old Rugged Cross," and it was not unpleasant.

In a neat pile on the floor against the wall was his new outfit—a plain white cotton shirt, Dickies, white socks, and a pair of brown loafers. Donnie had spent an hour with him during the afternoon.

He turned off the light and relaxed on the bed. Thirty hours to live.

The main courtroom in the federal building was packed when Slattery finally released the lawyers from his chamber for the third time. It was the last of a series of heated conferences that had dragged on for most of the afternoon. It was now almost seven.

They filed into the courtroom and took their places behind the appropriate tables. Adam sat with Garner Goodman. In a row of chairs behind them were Hez Kerry, John Bryan Glass, and three of his law students. Roxburgh, Morris Henry, and a half dozen assistants crowded around the state's table. Two rows behind them, behind the bar, sat the governor with Mona Stark on one side and Larramore on the other.

The rest of the crowd was primarily reporters—no cameras were allowed. There were curious spectators, law students, other lawyers. It was open to the public. In the back row, dressed comfortably in a sports coat and tie, was Rollie Wedge.

Slattery made his entrance and everyone stood for a moment. "Be seated," he said into his microphone. "Let's go on the record," he

said to the court reporter. He gave a succinct review of the petition and the applicable law, and outlined the parameters of the hearing. He was not in the mood for lengthy arguments and pointless questions, so move it along, he told the lawyers.

“Is the petitioner ready?” he asked in Adam’s direction. Adam stood nervously, and said, “Yes sir. The petitioner calls Dr. Anson Swinn.”

Swinn stood from the first row and walked to the witness stand where he was sworn in. Adam walked to the podium in the center of the courtroom, holding his notes and pushing himself to be strong. His notes were typed and meticulous, the result of some superb research and preparation by Hez Kerry and John Bryan Glass. The two, along with Kerry’s staff, had devoted the entire day to Sam Cayhall and this hearing. And they were ready to work all night and throughout tomorrow.

Adam began by asking Swinn some basic questions about his education and training. Swinn’s answers were accented with the crispness of the upper Midwest, and this was fine. Experts should talk differently and travel great distances in order to be highly regarded. With his black hair, black beard, black glasses, and black suit, he indeed gave the appearance of an ominously brilliant master of his field. The preliminary questions were short and to the point, but only because Slattery had already reviewed Swinn’s qualifications and ruled that he could in fact testify as an expert. The state could attack his credentials on cross-examination, but his testimony would go into the record.

With Adam leading the way, Swinn talked about his two hours with Sam Cayhall on the previous Tuesday. He described his physical condition, and did so with such relish that Sam sounded like a corpse. He was quite probably insane, though insanity was a legal term, not medical. He had difficulty answering even basic questions like What did you eat for breakfast? Who is in the cell next to you? When did your wife die? Who was your lawyer during the first trial? And on and on.

Swinn very carefully covered his tracks by repeatedly telling the court that two hours simply was not enough time to thoroughly

diagnose Mr. Cayhall. More time was needed.

In his opinion, Sam Cayhall did not appreciate the fact that he was about to die, did not understand why he was being executed, and certainly didn't realize he was being punished for a crime. Adam gritted his teeth to keep from wincing at times, but Swinn was certainly convincing. Mr. Cayhall was completely calm and at ease, clueless about his fate, wasting away his days in a six-by-nine cell. It was quite sad. One of the worst cases he'd encountered.

Under different circumstances, Adam would've been horrified to place on the stand a witness so obviously full of bull. But at this moment, he was mighty proud of this bizarre little man. Human life was at stake.

Slattery was not about to cut short the testimony of Dr. Swinn. This case would be reviewed instantly by the Fifth Circuit and perhaps the U.S. Supreme Court, and he wanted no one from above second-guessing him. Goodman suspected this, and Swinn had been prepped to ramble. So with the court's indulgence, Swinn launched into the likely causes of Sam's problems. He described the horrors of living in a cell twenty-three hours a day; of knowing the gas chamber is a stone's throw away; of being denied companionship, decent food, sex, movement, plenty of exercise, fresh air. He'd worked with many death row inmates around the country and knew their problems well. Sam, of course, was much different because of his age. The average death row inmate is thirty-one years old, and has spent four years waiting to die. Sam was sixty when he first arrived at Parchman. Physically and mentally, he was not suited for it. It was inevitable he would deteriorate.

Swinn was under Adam's direct examination for forty-five minutes. When Adam had exhausted his questions, he sat down. Steve Roxburgh strutted to the podium, and stared at Swinn.

Swinn knew what was coming, and he was not the least bit concerned. Roxburgh began by asking who was paying for his services, and how much he was charging. Swinn said Kravitz & Bane was paying him two hundred dollars an hour. Big deal. There was no jury in the box. Slattery knew that all experts get paid, or they couldn't testify. Roxburgh tried to chip away at Swinn's professional

qualifications, but got nowhere. The man was a well-educated, well-trained, experienced psychiatrist. So what if he decided years ago he could make more money as an expert witness. His qualifications weren't diminished. And Roxburgh was not about to argue medicine with a doctor.

The questions grew even stranger as Roxburgh began asking about other lawsuits in which Swinn had testified. There was a kid who was burned in a car wreck in Ohio, and Swinn had given his opinion that the child was completely mentally disabled. Hardly an extreme opinion.

"Where are you going with this?" Slattery interrupted loudly.

Roxburgh glanced at his notes, then said, "Your Honor, we're attempting to discredit this witness."

"I know that. But it's not working, Mr. Roxburgh. This court knows that this witness has testified in many trials around the country. What's the point?"

"We are attempting to show that he is willing to state some pretty wild opinions if the money is right."

"Lawyers do that every day, Mr. Roxburgh."

There was some very light laughter in the audience, but very reserved.

"I don't want to hear it," Slattery snapped. "Now move on."

Roxburgh should've sat down, but the moment was too rich for that. He moved to the next minefield, and began asking questions about Swinn's examination of Sam. He went nowhere. Swinn fielded each question with a fluid answer that only added to his testimony on direct examination. He repeated much of the sad description of Sam Cayhall. Roxburgh scored no points, and once thoroughly trounced, finally went to his seat. Swinn was dismissed from the stand.

The next and last witness for the petitioner was a surprise, though Slattery had already approved him. Adam called Mr. E. Garner Goodman to the stand.

Goodman was sworn, and took his seat. Adam asked about his firm's representation of Sam Cayhall, and Goodman briefly outlined the history of it for the record. Slattery already knew most of it.

Goodman smiled when he recalled Sam's efforts to fire Kravitz & Bane.

"Does Kravitz & Bane represent Mr. Cayhall at this moment?" Adam asked.

"Indeed we do."

"And you're here in Jackson at this moment working on the case?"

"That's correct."

"In your opinion, Mr. Goodman, do you believe Sam Cayhall has told his lawyers everything about the Kramer bombing?"

"No I do not."

Rollie Wedge sat up a bit and listened intensely.

"Would you please explain?"

"Certainly. There has always been strong circumstantial evidence that another person was with Sam Cayhall during the Kramer bombing, and the bombings which preceded it. Mr. Cayhall always refused to discuss this with me, his lawyer, and even now will not cooperate with his attorneys. Obviously, at this point in this case, it is crucial that he fully divulge everything to his lawyers. And he is unable to do so. There are facts we should know, but he won't tell us."

Wedge was at once nervous and relieved. Sam was holding fast, but his lawyers were trying everything.

Adam asked a few more questions, and sat down. Roxburgh asked only one. "When was the last time you spoke with Mr. Cayhall?"

Goodman hesitated and thought about the answer. He honestly couldn't remember exactly when. "I'm not sure. It's been two or three years."

"Two or three years? And you're his lawyer?"

"I'm one of his lawyers. Mr. Hall is now the principal lawyer on this case, and he's spent innumerable hours with the client during the last month."

Roxburgh sat down, and Goodman returned to his seat at the table.

"We have no more witnesses, Your Honor," Adam said for the record.

“Call your first witness, Mr. Roxburgh,” Slattery said.

“The state calls Colonel George Nugent,” Roxburgh announced. Nugent was found in the hallway, and escorted to the witness stand. His olive shirt and pants were wrinkle-free. The boots were gleaming. He stated for the record who he was and what he was doing. “I was at Parchman an hour ago,” he said, looking at his watch. “Just flew down on the state helicopter.”

“When did you last see Sam Cayhall?” Roxburgh asked.

“He was moved to the Observation Cell at nine this morning. I spoke with him then.”

“Was he mentally alert, or just drooling over in the corner like an idiot?”

Adam started to jump and object, but Goodman grabbed his arm.

“He was extremely alert,” Nugent said eagerly. “Very sharp. He asked me why he was being moved from his cell to another one. He understood what was happening. He didn’t like it, but then Sam doesn’t like anything these days.”

“Did you see him yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“And was he able to speak, or just lying around like a vegetable?”

“Oh, he was quite talkative.”

“What did you talk about?”

“I had a checklist of things I needed to cover with Sam. He was very hostile, even threatened me with bodily harm. He’s a very abrasive person with a sharp tongue. He settled down a bit, and we talked about his last meal, his witnesses, what to do with his personal effects. Things such as that. We talked about the execution.”

“Is he aware he is about to be executed?”

Nugent burst into laughter. “What kind of question is that?”

“Just answer it,” Slattery said without a smile.

“Of course he knows. He knows damned well what’s going on. He’s not crazy. He told me the execution would not take place because his lawyers were about to unload the heavy artillery, as he put it. They’ve planned all this.” Nugent waved both hands at the entire courtroom.

Roxburgh asked about prior meetings with Sam, and Nugent spared no details. He seemed to remember every word Sam had uttered in the past two weeks, especially the biting sarcasm and caustic remarks.

Adam knew it was all true. He huddled quickly with Garner Goodman, and they decided to forgo any cross-examination. Little could be gained from it.

Nugent marched down the aisle and out of the courtroom. The man had a mission. He was needed at Parchman.

The state's second witness was Dr. N. Stegall, psychiatrist for the Department of Corrections. She made her way to the witness stand as Roxburgh conferred with Morris Henry.

"State your name for the record," Slattery said.

"Dr. N. Stegall."

"Ann?" His Honor asked.

"No. N. It's an initial."

Slattery looked down at her, then looked at Roxburgh who shrugged as if he didn't know what to say.

The judge eased even closer to the edge of his bench, and peered down at the witness stand. "Look, Doctor, I didn't ask for your initial, I asked for your name. Now, you state it for the record, and be quick about it."

She jerked her eyes away from his, cleared her throat, and reluctantly said, "Neldeen."

No wonder, thought Adam. Why hadn't she changed it to something else?

Roxburgh seized the moment and asked her a rapid series of questions about her qualifications and training. Slattery had already deemed her fit to testify.

"Now, Dr. Stegall," Roxburgh began, careful to avoid any reference to Neldeen, "when did you meet with Sam Cayhall?"

She held a sheet of paper which she looked at. "Thursday, July 26."

"And the purpose of this visit?"

"As part of my job, I routinely visit death row inmates, especially those with executions approaching. I provide counseling and

medication, if they request it.”

“Describe Mr. Cayhall’s mental condition?”

“Extremely alert, very bright, very sharp-tongued, almost to the point of being rude. In fact, he was quite rude to me, and he asked me not to come back.”

“Did he discuss his execution?”

“Yes. In fact, he knew that he had thirteen days to go, and he accused me of trying to give him medication so he wouldn’t be any trouble when his time came. He also expressed concern for another death row inmate, Randy Dupree, who Sam thinks is deteriorating mentally. He was most concerned about Mr. Dupree, and chastised me for not examining him.”

“In your opinion, is he suffering from any form of decreased mental capacity?”

“Not at all. His mind is very sharp.”

“No further questions,” Roxburgh said, and sat down.

Adam walked purposefully to the podium. “Tell us, Dr. Stegall, how is Randy Dupree doing?” he asked at full volume.

“I, uh, I haven’t had a chance to see him yet.”

“Sam told you about him eleven days ago, and you haven’t bothered to meet with him.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“How long have you held your present job?”

“Four years.”

“And in four years how many times have you talked to Sam Cayhall?”

“Once.”

“You don’t care much for the death row inmates, do you, Dr. Stegall?”

“I certainly do.”

“How many men are on death row right now?”

“Well, uh, I’m not sure. Around forty, I think.”

“How many have you actually talked to? Give us a few names.”

Whether it was fear or anger or ignorance, no one could tell. But Neldeen froze. She grimaced and cocked her head to one side, obviously trying to pull a name from the air, and obviously unable

to do so. Adam allowed her to hang for a moment, then said, "Thank you, Dr. Stegall." He turned and walked slowly back to his chair.

"Call your next witness," Slattery demanded.

"The state calls Sergeant Clyde Packer."

Packer was fetched from the hallway and led to the front of the courtroom. He was still in uniform, but the gun had been removed. He swore to tell the truth, and took his seat on the witness stand.

Adam was not surprised at the effect of Packer's testimony. He was an honest man who simply told what he'd seen. He'd known Sam for nine and a half years, and he was the same today as he was when he first arrived. He typed letters and law papers all day long, read many books, especially legal ones. He typed writs for his buddies on the Row, and he typed letters to wives and girlfriends for some of the guys who couldn't spell. He chain-smoked because he wanted to kill himself before the state got around to it. He loaned money to friends. In Packer's humble opinion, Sam was as mentally alert now as he'd been nine and a half years earlier. And his mind was very quick.

Slattery leaned a bit closer to the edge of the bench when Packer described Sam's checkers games with Henshaw and Gullitt.

"Does he win?" His Honor asked, interrupting.

"Almost always."

Perhaps the turning point of the hearing came when Packer told the story of Sam wanting to see a sunrise before he died. It happened late last week when Packer was making his rounds one morning. Sam had quietly made the request. He knew he was about to die, said he was ready to go, and that he'd like to sneak out early one morning to the bullpen on the east end and see the sun come up. So Packer took care of it, and last Saturday Sam spent an hour sipping coffee and waiting for the sun. Afterward, he was very grateful.

Adam had no questions for Packer. He was excused, and left the courtroom.

Roxburgh announced that the next witness was Ralph Griffin, the prison chaplain. Griffin was led to the stand, and looked

uncomfortably around the courtroom. He gave his name and occupation, then glanced warily at Roxburgh.

“Do you know Sam Cayhall?” Roxburgh asked.

“I do.”

“Have you counseled him recently?”

“Yes.”

“When did you last see him?”

“Yesterday. Sunday.”

“And how would you describe his mental state?”

“I can’t.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“I said I can’t describe his mental condition.”

“Why not?”

“Because right now I’m his minister, and anything he says or does in my presence is strictly confidential. I can’t testify against Mr. Cayhall.”

Roxburgh stalled for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. It was obvious neither he nor his learned underlings had given any thought to this situation. Perhaps they’d just assumed that since the chaplain was working for the state, then he’d cooperate with them. Griffin waited expectantly for an assault from Roxburgh.

Slattery settled the matter quickly. “A very good point, Mr. Roxburgh. This witness should not be here. Who’s next?”

“No further witnesses,” the Attorney General said, anxious to leave the podium and get to his seat.

His Honor scribbled some notes at length, then looked at the crowded courtroom. “I will take this matter under advisement and render an opinion, probably early in the morning. As soon as my decision is ready, we will notify the attorneys. You don’t need to hang around here. We’ll call you. Court’s adjourned.”

Everyone stood and hurried for the rear doors. Adam caught the Reverend Ralph Griffin and thanked him, then he returned to the table where Goodman, Hez Kerry, Professor Glass, and the students were waiting. They huddled and whispered until the crowd was gone, then left the courtroom. Someone mentioned drinks and dinner. It was almost nine.

Reporters were waiting outside the door to the courtroom. Adam threw out a few polite no-comments and kept walking. Rollie Wedge eased behind Adam and Goodman as they inched through the crowded hallway. He vanished as they left the building.

Two groups of cameras were ready outside. On the front steps, Roxburgh was addressing one batch of reporters, and not far away on the sidewalk, the governor was holding forth. As Adam walked by, he heard McAllister say that clemency was being considered, and that it would be a long night. Tomorrow would be even tougher. Would he attend the execution? someone asked. Adam couldn't hear the reply.

They met at Hal and Mal's, a popular downtown restaurant and watering hole. Hez found a large table in a corner near the front and ordered a round of beer. A blues band was cranked up in the back. The dining room and bar were crowded.

Adam sat in a corner, next to Hez, and relaxed for the first time in hours. The beer went down fast and calmed him. They ordered red beans and rice, and chatted about the hearing. Hez said he'd performed wonderfully, and the law students were full of compliments. The mood was optimistic. Adam thanked them for their help. Goodman and Glass were at the far end of the table, lost in a conversation about another death row case. Time passed slowly, and Adam attacked his dinner when it arrived.

"This is probably not a good time to bring this up," Hez said out of the corner of his mouth. He wanted no one to hear but Adam. The band was even louder now.

"I guess you'll go back to Chicago when this is over," he said, looking at Goodman to make sure he was still engaged with Glass.

"I guess so," Adam said, without conviction. He'd had little time to think past tomorrow.

"Well, just so you'll know, there's an opening in our office. One of my guys is going into private practice, and we're looking for a new

lawyer. It's nothing but death work, you know."

"You're right," Adam said quietly. "This is a lousy time to bring it up."

"It's tough work, but it's satisfying. It's also heartbreaking. And necessary." Hez chewed on a bite of sausage, and washed it down with beer. "The money is lousy, compared with what you're making with the firm. Tight budget, long hours, lots of clients."

"How much?"

"I can start you at thirty thousand."

"I'm making sixty-two right now. With more on the way."

"I've been there. I was making seventy with a big firm in D.C. when I gave it up to come here. I was on the fast track to a partnership, but it was easy to quit. Money's not everything."

"You enjoy this?"

"It grows on you. It takes strong moral convictions to fight the system like this. Just think about it."

Goodman was now looking their way. "Are you driving to Parchman tonight?" he asked loudly.

Adam was finishing his second beer. He wanted a third, but no more. Exhaustion was rapidly setting in. "No. I'll wait until we hear something in the morning."

They ate and drank and listened to Goodman and Glass and Kerry tell war stories of other executions. The beer flowed, and the atmosphere went from optimism to outright confidence.

Sam lay in the darkness and waited for midnight. He'd watched the late news and learned that the hearing was over, and that the clock was still ticking. There was no stay. His life was in the hands of a federal judge.

At one minute after midnight, he closed his eyes and said a prayer. He asked God to help Lee with her troubles, to be with Carmen, and to give Adam the strength to survive the inevitable.

He had twenty-four hours to live. He folded his hands over his chest, and fell asleep.

Forty-seven

Nugent waited until exactly seven-thirty to close the door and start the meeting. He walked to the front of the room, and surveyed his troops. "I just left MSU," he said somberly. "The inmate is awake and alert, not at all the blithering zombie we read about in the paper this morning." He paused and smiled and expected everyone to admire his humor. It went undetected.

"In fact, he's already had his breakfast, and is already bitching about wanting his recreation time. So at least something is normal around here. There's no word from the federal court in Jackson, so this thing is on schedule unless we hear otherwise. Correct, Mr. Mann?"

Lucas was sitting at the table across the front of the room, reading the paper and trying to ignore the colonel. "Right."

"Now, there are two areas of concern. First is the press. I've assigned Sergeant Moreland here to handle these bastards. We're gonna move them to the Visitors Center just inside the front gate, and try to keep them pinned down there. We're gonna surround them with guards, and just dare them to venture about. At four this afternoon, I'll conduct the lottery to see which reporters get to watch the execution. As of yesterday, there were over a hundred names on the request list. They get five seats.

"The second problem is what's happening outside the gate. The governor has agreed to assign three dozen troopers for today and tomorrow, and they'll be here shortly. We have to keep our distance from these nuts, especially the skinheads, sumbitches are crazy, but at the same time we have to maintain order. There were two fights yesterday, and things could've deteriorated rapidly if we hadn't been watching. If the execution takes place, there could be some tense moments. Any questions?"

There were none.

“Very well. I’ll expect everyone to act professionally today, and carry this out in a responsible manner. Dismissed.” He snapped off a smart salute, and proudly watched them leave the room.

Sam straddled the bench with the checkerboard in front of him, and waited patiently for J. B. Gullitt to enter the bullpen. He sipped the stale remains of a cup of coffee.

Gullitt stepped through the door, and paused as the handcuffs were removed. He rubbed his wrists, shielded his eyes from the sun, and looked at his friend sitting alone. He walked to the bench and took his position across the board.

Sam never looked up.

“Any good news, Sam?” Gullitt asked nervously. “Tell me it won’t happen.”

“Just move,” Sam said, staring at the checkers.

“It can’t happen, Sam,” he pleaded.

“It’s your turn to go first. Move.”

Gullitt slowly lowered his eyes to the board.

The prevailing theory of the morning was that the longer Slattery sat on the petition, the greater the likelihood of a stay. But this was the conventional wisdom of those who were praying for a reprieve. No word had come by 9 a.m., nothing by 9:30.

Adam waited in Hez Kerry’s office, which had become the operations center during the past twenty-four hours. Goodman was across town supervising the relentless hounding of the governor’s hotline, a task he seemed to savor. John Bryan Glass had parked himself outside Slattery’s office.

In the event Slattery denied a stay, they would immediately appeal to the Fifth Circuit. The appeal was completed by nine, just

in case. Kerry had also prepared a petition for cert to the U.S. Supreme Court if the Fifth Circuit turned them down. The paperwork was waiting. Everything was waiting.

To occupy his mind, Adam called everyone he could think of. He called Carmen in Berkeley. She was asleep and fine. He called Lee's condo, and, of course, there was no answer. He called Phelps' office and talked to a secretary. He called Darlene to tell her he had no idea when he might return. He called McAllister's private number, but got a busy signal. Perhaps Goodman had it jammed too.

He called Sam and talked about the hearing last night, with special emphasis on the Reverend Ralph Griffin. Packer had testified too, he explained, and told only the truth. Nugent, typically, was an ass. He told Sam he would be there around noon. Sam asked him to hurry.

By eleven, Slattery's name was being cursed and defamed with righteous fervor. Adam had had enough. He called Goodman and said he was driving to Parchman. He said farewell to Hez Kerry, and thanked him again.

Then he raced away, out of the city of Jackson, north on Highway 49. Parchman was two hours away if he drove within the speed limit. He found a talk radio station that promised the latest news twice an hour, and listened to an interminable discussion about casino gambling in Mississippi. There was nothing new on the Cayhall execution at the eleven-thirty newsbreak.

He drove eighty and ninety, passing on yellow lines and on curves and over bridges. He sped through speed zones in tiny towns and hamlets. He was uncertain what drew him to Parchman with such speed. There wasn't much he could do once he got there. The legal maneuverings had been left behind in Jackson. He would sit with Sam and count the hours. Or maybe they would celebrate a wonderful gift from federal court.

He stopped at a roadside grocery near the small town of Flora for gas and fruit juice, and he was driving away from the pumps when he heard the news. The bored and listless talk show host was now filled with excitement as he relayed the breaking story in the Cayhall case. United States District Court Judge F. Flynn Slattery

had just denied Cayhall's last petition, his claim to be mentally incompetent. The matter would be appealed to the Fifth Circuit within the hour. Sam Cayhall had just taken a giant step toward the Mississippi gas chamber, the host said dramatically.

Instead of punching the accelerator, Adam slowed to a reasonable speed and sipped his drink. He turned off the radio. He cracked his window to allow the warm air to circulate. He cursed Slattery for many miles, talking vainly at the windshield and dragging up all sorts of vile names. It was now a little past noon. Slattery, in all fairness, could've ruled five hours ago. Hell, if he had guts he could've ruled last night. They could be in front of the Fifth Circuit already. He cursed Breck Jefferson also, for good measure.

Sam had told him from the beginning that Mississippi wanted an execution. It was lagging behind Louisiana and Texas and Florida, even Alabama and Georgia and Virginia were killing at a more enviable rate. Something had to be done. The appeals were endless. The criminals were coddled. Crime was rampant. It was time to execute somebody and show the rest of the country that this state was serious about law and order.

Adam finally believed him.

He stopped the swearing after a while. He finished the drink and threw the bottle over the car and into a ditch, in direct violation of Mississippi laws against littering. It was difficult to express his present opinions of Mississippi and its laws.

He could see Sam sitting in his cell, watching the television, hearing the news.

Adam's heart ached for the old man. He had failed as a lawyer. His client was about to die at the hands of the government, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

The news electrified the army of reporters and cameramen now sprawled about the small Visitors Center just inside the front gate. They gathered around portable televisions and watched their

stations in Jackson and Memphis. At least four shot live segments from Parchman while countless others milled around the area. Their little section of ground had been cordoned off by ropes and barricades, and was being watched closely by Nugent's troops.

The racket increased noticeably along the highway when the news spread. The Klansmen, now a hundred strong, began chanting loudly in the direction of the administration buildings. The skinheads and Nazis and Aryans hurled obscenities at anyone who would listen to them. The nuns and other silent protestors sat under umbrellas and tried to ignore their rowdy neighbors.

Sam heard the news as he was holding a bowl of turnip greens, his final meal before his last meal. He stared at the television, watched the scenes switch from Jackson to Parchman and back again. A young black lawyer he'd never heard of was talking to a reporter and explaining what he and the rest of the Cayhall defense team would do next.

His friend Buster Moac had complained that there were so damned many lawyers involved with his case in the last days that he couldn't keep up with who was on his side and who was trying to kill him. But Sam was certain Adam was in control.

He finished the turnip greens, and placed the bowl on the tray at the foot of his bed. He walked to the bars and sneered at the blank-faced guard watching him from behind the tier door. The hall was silent. The televisions were on in every cell, all turned low and being watched with morbid interest. Not a single voice could be heard, and that in itself was extremely rare.

He pulled off his red jumpsuit for the last time, wadded it up and threw it in a corner. He kicked the rubber shower shoes under his bed, never to see them again. He carefully placed his new outfit on the bed, arranged it just so, then slowly unbuttoned the short-sleeved shirt and put it on. It fit nicely. He slid his legs into the stiff work khakis, pulled the zipper up and buttoned the waist. The pants were two inches too long, so he sat on the bed and turned them up into neat, precise cuffs. The cotton socks were thick and soothing. The shoes were a bit large but not a bad fit.

The sensation of being fully dressed in real clothes brought sudden, painful memories of the free world. These were the pants he'd worn for forty years, until he'd been incarcerated. He'd bought them at the old dry goods store on the square in Clanton, always keeping four or five pair in the bottom drawer of his large dresser. His wife pressed them with no starch, and after a half dozen washings they felt like old pajamas. He wore them to work and he wore them to town. He wore them on fishing trips with Eddie, and he wore them on the porch swinging little Lee. He wore them to the coffee shop and to Klan meetings. Yes, he'd even worn them on that fateful trip to Greenville to bomb the office of the radical Jew.

He sat on his bed and pinched the sharp creases under his knees. It had been nine years and six months since he had worn these pants. Only fitting, he guessed, that he should now wear them to the gas chamber.

They'd be cut from his body, placed in a bag, and burned.

Adam stopped first at Lucas Mann's office. Louise at the front gate had given him a note saying it was important. Mann closed the door behind him and offered a seat. Adam declined. He was anxious to see Sam.

"The Fifth Circuit received the appeal thirty minutes ago," Mann said. "I thought you might want to use my phone to call Jackson."

"Thanks. But I'll use the one at the Row."

"Fine. I'm talking to the AG's office every half hour, so if I hear something I'll give you a call."

"Thanks." Adam was fidgeting.

"Does Sam want a last meal?"

"I'll ask him in a minute."

"Fine. Give me a call, or just tell Packer. What about witnesses?"

"Sam will have no witnesses."

"What about you?"

"No. He won't allow it. We agreed on it a long time ago."

“Fine. I can’t think of anything else. I have a fax and a phone, and things may be a bit quieter in here. Feel free to use my office.”

“Thanks,” Adam said, stepping from the office. He drove slowly to the Row and parked for the last time in the dirt lot next to the fence. He walked slowly to the guard tower and placed his keys in the bucket.

Four short weeks ago he had stood there and watched the red bucket descend for the first time, and he’d thought how crude but effective this little system was. Only four weeks! It seemed like years.

He waited for the double gates, and met Tiny on the steps.

Sam was already in the front office, sitting on the edge of the desk, admiring his shoes. “Check out the new threads,” he said proudly when Adam entered.

Adam stepped close and inspected the clothing from shoes to shirt. Sam was beaming. His face was clean-shaven. “Spiffy. Real spiffy.”

“A regular dude, aren’t I?”

“You look nice, Sam, real nice. Did Donnie bring these?”

“Yeah. He got them at the dollar store. I started to order some designer threads from New York, but what the hell. It’s only an execution. I told you I wouldn’t allow them to kill me in one of those red prison suits. I took it off a while ago, never to wear one again. I have to admit, Adam, it was a good feeling.”

“You’ve heard the latest?”

“Sure. It’s all over the news. Sorry about the hearing.”

“It’s in the Fifth Circuit now, and I feel good about it. I like our chances there.”

Sam smiled and looked away, as if the little boy was telling his grandfather a harmless lie. “They had a black lawyer on television at noon, said he was working for me. What the hell’s going on?”

“That was probably Hez Kerry.” Adam placed his briefcase on the desk and sat down.

“Am I paying him too?”

“Yeah, Sam, you’re paying him at the same rate you’re paying me.”

“Just curious. That screwball doctor, what’s his name, Swinn? He must’ve done a number on me.”

“It was pretty sad, Sam. When he finished testifying, the entire courtroom could see you floating around your cell, scratching your teeth and peeing on the floor.”

“Well, I’m about to be put out of my misery.” Sam’s words were strong and loud, almost defiant. There was not a trace of fear. “Look, I have a small favor to ask of you,” he said, reaching for yet another envelope.

“Who is it this time?”

Sam handed it to him. “I want you to take this to the highway by the front gate, and I want you to find the leader of that bunch of Kluckers out there, and I want you to read it to him. Try and get the cameras to film it, because I want people to know what it says.”

Adam held it suspiciously. “What does it say?”

“It’s quick and to the point. I ask them all to go home. To leave me alone, so that I can die in peace. I’ve never heard of some of those groups, and they’re getting a lot of mileage out of my death.”

“You can’t make them leave, you know.”

“I know. And I don’t expect them to. But the television makes it appear as if these are my friends and cronies. I don’t know a single person out there.”

“I’m not so sure it’s a good idea right now,” Adam said, thinking out loud.

“Why not?”

“Because as we speak, we’re telling the Fifth Circuit that you’re basically a vegetable, incapable of putting together thoughts like this.”

Sam was suddenly angry. “You lawyers,” he sneered. “Don’t you ever give up? It’s over, Adam, stop playing games.”

“It’s not over.”

“As far as I’m concerned it is. Now, take the damned letter and do as I say.”

“Right now?” Adam asked, looking at his watch. It was one-thirty.

“Yes! Right now. I’ll be waiting here.”

Adam parked by the guardhouse at the front gate, and explained to Louise what he was about to do. He was nervous. She gave a leery look at the white envelope in his hand, and yelled for two uniformed guards to walk over. They escorted Adam through the front gate and toward the demonstration area. Some reporters covering the protestors recognized Adam, and immediately flocked to him. He and the guards walked quickly along the front fence, ignoring their questions. Adam was scared but determined, and more than a little comforted by his newly found bodyguards.

He walked directly to the blue and white canopy which marked the headquarters for the Klan, and by the time he stopped, a group of white-robos was waiting for him. The press encircled Adam, his guards, the Klansmen. "Who's in charge here?" Adam demanded, holding his breath.

"Who wants to know?" asked a burly young man with a black beard and sunburned cheeks. Sweat dripped from his eyebrows as he stepped forward.

"I have a statement here from Sam Cayhall," Adam said loudly, and the circle compressed. Cameras clicked. Reporters shoved microphones and recorders into the air around Adam.

"Quiet," someone yelled.

"Get back!" one of the guards snapped.

A tense group of Klansmen, all in matching robes but most without the hoods, packed tighter together in front of Adam. He recognized none of them from his last confrontation on Friday. These guys did not look too friendly.

The racket stopped along the grassy strip as the crowd pushed closer to hear Sam's lawyer.

Adam pulled the note from the envelope and held it with both hands. "My name is Adam Hall, and I'm Sam Cayhall's lawyer. This is a statement from Sam," he repeated. "It's dated today, and addressed to all members of the Ku Klux Klan, and to the other groups demonstrating on his behalf here today. I quote: 'Please

leave. Your presence here is of no comfort to me. You're using my execution as a means to further your own interests. I do not know a single one of you, nor do I care to meet you. Please go away immediately. I prefer to die without the benefit of your theatrics.' "

Adam glanced at the stern faces of the Klansmen, all hot and dripping with perspiration. "The last paragraph reads as follows, and I quote: 'I am no longer a member of the Ku Klux Klan. I repudiate that organization and all that it stands for. I would be a free man today had I never heard of the Ku Klux Klan.' It's signed by Sam Cayhall." Adam flipped it over and thrust it toward the Kluckers, all of whom were speechless and stunned.

The one with the black beard and sunburned cheeks lunged at Adam in an attempt to grab the letter. "Gimme that!" he yelled, but Adam yanked it away. The guard to Adam's right stepped forward quickly and blocked the man, who pushed the guard. The guard shoved him back, and for a few terrifying seconds Adam's bodyguards scuffled with a few of the Kluckers. Other guards had been watching nearby, and within seconds they were in the middle of the shoving match. Order was restored quickly. The crowd backed away.

Adam smirked at the Kluckers. "Leave!" Adam shouted. "You heard what he said! He's ashamed of you!"

"Go to hell!" the leader yelled back.

The two guards grabbed Adam and led him away before he stirred them up again. They moved rapidly toward the front gate, knocking reporters and cameramen out of the way. They practically ran through the entrance, past another line of guards, past another swarm of reporters, and finally to Adam's car.

"Don't come back up here, okay?" one of the guards pleaded with him.

McAllister's office was known to have more leaks than an old toilet. By early afternoon, Tuesday, the hottest gossip in Jackson was that

the governor was seriously considering clemency for Sam Cayhall. The gossip spread rapidly from the capitol to the reporters outside where it was picked up by other reporters and onlookers and repeated, not as gossip, but as solid rumor. Within an hour of the leak, the rumor had risen to the level of near-fact.

Mona Stark met in the rotunda with the press and promised a statement by the governor at a later hour. The courts were not finished with the case, she explained. Yes, the governor was under tremendous pressure.

Forty-eight

It took the Fifth Circuit less than three hours to bump the last of the gangplank appeals along to the U.S. Supreme Court. A brief telephone conference was held at three. Hez Kerry and Garner Goodman raced to Roxburgh's office across from the state capitol building. The Attorney General had a phone system fancy enough to hook up himself, Goodman, Kerry, Adam and Lucas Mann at Parchman, Justice Robichaux in Lake Charles, Justice Judy in New Orleans, and Justice McNeely in Amarillo, Texas. The three-judge panel allowed Adam and Roxburgh to make their arguments, then the conference was disbanded. At four o'clock, the clerk of the court called all parties with the denial, and faxes soon followed. Kerry and Goodman quickly faxed the appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Sam was in the process of receiving his last physical exam when Adam finished his short chat with the clerk. He slowly hung up the phone. Sam was scowling at the young, frightened doctor who was taking his blood pressure. Packer and Tiny stood nearby, at the request of the doctor. With five people present, the front office was crowded.

"Fifth Circuit just denied," Adam said solemnly. "We're on our way to the Supreme Court."

"Not exactly the promised land," Sam said, still staring at the doctor.

"I'm optimistic," Adam said halfheartedly for the benefit of Packer.

The doctor quickly placed his instruments in his bag. "That's it," he said heading for the door.

"So I'm healthy enough to die?" Sam asked.

The doctor opened the door and left, followed by Packer and Tiny. Sam stood and stretched his back, then began pacing slowly

across the room. The shoes slipped on his heels and affected his stride. "Are you nervous?" he asked with a nasty smile.

"Of course. And I guess you're not."

"The dying cannot be worse than the waiting. Hell, I'm ready. I'd like to get it over with."

Adam almost said something trite about their reasonable chances in the Supreme Court, but he was not in the mood to be rebuked. Sam paced and smoked and was not in a talkative mood. Adam, typically, got busy with the telephone. He called Goodman and Kerry, but their conversations were brief. There was little to say, and no optimism whatsoever.

Colonel Nugent stood on the porch of the Visitors Center and asked for quiet. Assembled before him on the lawn was the small army of reporters and journalists, all anxiously awaiting the lottery. Next to him on a table was a tin bucket. Each member of the press wore an orange, numbered button dispensed by the prison administration as credentials. The mob was unusually quiet.

"According to prison regulations, there are eight seats allotted to members of the press," Nugent explained slowly, his words carrying almost to the front gate. He was basking in the spotlight. "One seat is allotted to the AP, one to the UPI, and one to the Mississippi Network. That leaves five to be selected at random. I'll pull five numbers from this bucket, and if one of them corresponds to your credentials, then it's your lucky day. Any questions?"

Several dozen reporters suddenly had no questions. Many of them pulled at their orange badges to check their numbers. A ripple of excitement went through the group. Nugent dramatically reached into the bucket and pulled out a slip of paper. "Number four-eight-four-three," he announced, with all the skill of a seasoned bingo caller.

"Here you go," an excited young man called back, tugging at his lucky badge.

“Your name?” Nugent yelled.

“Edwin King, with the Arkansas Gazette.”

A deputy warden next to Nugent wrote down the name and paper. Edwin King was admired by his colleagues.

Nugent quickly called the other four numbers and completed the pool. A noticeable ebb of despair rolled through the group as the last number was called out. The losers were crushed. “At exactly eleven, two vans will pull up over there.” Nugent pointed to the main drive. “The eight witnesses must be present and ready. You will be driven to the Maximum Security Unit to witness the execution. No cameras or recorders of any type. You will be searched once you arrive there. Sometime around twelve-thirty, you will reboard the vans and return to this point. A press conference will then be held in the main hall of the new administration building, which will be opened at 9 p.m. for your convenience. Any questions?”

“How many people will witness the execution?” someone asked.

“There will be approximately thirteen or fourteen people in the witness room. And in the Chamber Room, there will be myself, one minister, one doctor, the state executioner, the attorney for the prison, and two guards.”

“Will the victims’ family witness the execution?”

“Yes. Mr. Elliot Kramer, the grandfather, is scheduled to be a witness.”

“How about the governor?”

“By statute, the governor has two seats in the witness room at his discretion. One of those seats will go to Mr. Kramer. I have not been told whether the governor will be here.”

“What about Mr. Cayhall’s family?”

“No. None of his relatives will witness the execution.”

Nugent had opened a can of worms. The questions were popping up everywhere, and he had things to do. “No more questions. Thank you,” he said, and walked off the porch.

Donnie Cayhall arrived for his last visit a few minutes before six. He was led straight to the front office, where he found his well-dressed brother laughing with Adam Hall. Sam introduced the two.

Adam had carefully avoided Sam's brother until now. Donnie, as it turned out, was clean and neat, well groomed and dressed sensibly. He also resembled Sam, now that Sam had shaved, cut his hair, and shed the red jumpsuit. They were the same height, and though Donnie was not overweight, Sam was much thinner.

Donnie was clearly not the hick Adam had feared. He was genuinely happy to meet Adam and proud of the fact that he was a lawyer. He was a pleasant man with an easy smile, good teeth, but very sad eyes at the moment. "What's it look like?" he asked after a few minutes of small talk. He was referring to the appeals.

"It's all in the Supreme Court."

"So there's still hope?"

Sam snorted at this suggestion.

"A little," Adam said, very much resigned to fate.

There was a long pause as Adam and Donnie searched for less sensitive matters to discuss. Sam really didn't care. He sat calmly in a chair, legs crossed, puffing away. His mind was occupied with things they couldn't imagine.

"I stopped by Albert's today," Donnie said.

Sam's gaze never left the floor. "How's his prostate?"

"I don't know. He thought you were already dead."

"That's my brother."

"I also saw Aunt Finnie."

"I thought she was already dead," Sam said with a smile.

"Almost. She's ninety-one. Just all tore up over what's happened to you. Said you were always her favorite nephew."

"She couldn't stand me, and I couldn't stand her. Hell, I didn't see her for five years before I came here."

"Well, she's just plain crushed over this."

"She'll get over it."

Sam's face suddenly broke into a wide smile, and he started laughing. "Remember the time we watched her go to the outhouse

behind Grandmother's, then peppered it with rocks? She came out screaming and crying."

Donnie suddenly remembered, and began to shake with laughter. "Yeah, it had a tin roof," he said between breaths, "and every rock sounded like a bomb going off."

"Yeah, it was me and you and Albert. You couldn't have been four years old."

"I remember though."

The story grew and the laughter was contagious. Adam caught himself chuckling at the sight of these two old men laughing like boys. The one about Aunt Finnie and the outhouse led to one about her husband, Uncle Garland, who was mean and crippled, and the laughs continued.

Sam's last meal was a deliberate snub at the fingerless cooks in the kitchen and the uninspired rations they'd tormented him with for nine and a half years. He requested something that was light, came from a carton, and could be found with ease. He had often marveled at his predecessors who'd ordered seven-course dinners—steaks and lobster and cheesecake. Buster Moac had consumed two dozen raw oysters, then a Greek salad, then a large rib eye and a few other courses. He'd never understood how they summoned such appetites only hours before death.

He wasn't the least bit hungry when Nugent knocked on the door at seven-thirty. Behind him was Packer, and behind Packer was a trustee holding a tray. In the center of the tray was a large bowl with three Eskimo Pies in it, and to the side was a small thermos of French Market coffee, Sam's favorite. The tray was placed on the desk.

"Not much of a dinner, Sam," Nugent said.

"Can I enjoy it in peace, or will you stand there and pester me with your idiot talk?"

Nugent stiffened and glared at Adam. "We'll come back in an hour. At that time, your guest must leave, and we'll return you to the Observation Cell. Okay?"

"Just leave," Sam said, sitting at the desk.

As soon as they were gone, Donnie said, "Damn, Sam, why didn't you order something we could enjoy? What kind of a last meal is this?"

"It's my last meal. When your time comes, order what you want." He picked up a fork and carefully scraped the vanilla ice cream and chocolate covering off the stick. He took a large bite, then slowly poured the coffee into the cup. It was dark and strong with a rich aroma.

Donnie and Adam sat in the chairs along a wall, watching Sam's back as he slowly ate his last meal.

They'd been arriving since five o'clock. They came from all over the state, all driving alone, all riding in big four-door cars of varied colors with elaborate seals and emblems and markings on the doors and fenders. Some had racks of emergency lights across the roof. Some had shotguns mounted on the screens above the front seats. All had tall antennas swinging in the wind.

They were the sheriffs, each elected in his own county to protect the citizenry from lawlessness. Most had served for many years, and most had already taken part in the unrecorded ritual of the execution dinner.

A cook named Miss Mazola prepared the feast, and the menu never varied. She fried large chickens in animal fat. She cooked black-eyed peas in ham hocks. And she made real buttermilk biscuits the size of small saucers. Her kitchen was in the rear of a small cafeteria near the main administration building. The food was always served at seven, regardless of how many sheriffs were present.

Tonight's crowd would be the largest since Teddy Doyle Meeks was put to rest in 1982. Miss Mazola anticipated this because she read the papers and everybody knew about Sam Cayhall. She expected at least fifty sheriffs.

They were waved through the front gates like dignitaries, and they parked haphazardly around the cafeteria. For the most part they were big men, with earnest stomachs and voracious appetites. They were famished after the long drive.

Their banter was light over dinner. They ate like hogs, then retired outside to the front of the building where they sat on the hoods of their cars and watched it grow dark. They picked chicken from their teeth and bragged on Miss Mazola's cooking. They listened to their radios squawk, as if the news of Cayhall's death would be transmitted at any moment. They talked about other executions and heinous crimes back home, and about local boys on the Row. Damned gas chamber wasn't used enough.

They stared in amazement at the hundreds of demonstrators near the highway in front of them. They picked their teeth some more, then went back inside for chocolate cake.

It was a wonderful night for law enforcement.

Forty-nine

Darkness brought an eerie quiet to the highway in front of Parchman. The Klansmen, not a single one of whom had considered leaving after Sam asked them to, sat in folding chairs and on the trampled grass, and waited. The skinheads and like-minded brethren who'd roasted in the August sun sat in small groups and drank ice water. The nuns and other activists had been joined by a contingent from Amnesty International. They lit candles, said prayers, hummed songs. They tried to keep their distance from the hate groups. Pick any other day, another execution, another inmate, and those same hateful people would be screaming for blood.

The calm was broken momentarily when a pickup load of teenagers slowed near the front entrance. They suddenly began shouting loudly and in unison, "Gas his ass! Gas his ass! Gas his ass!" The truck squealed tires and sped away. Some of the Klansmen jumped to their feet, ready for battle, but the kids were gone, never to return.

The imposing presence of the highway patrol kept matters under control. The troopers stood about in groups, watching the traffic, keeping close watch on the Klansmen and the skinheads. A helicopter made its rounds above.

Goodman finally called a halt to the market analysis. In five long days, they had logged over two thousand calls. He paid the students, confiscated the cellular phones, and thanked them profusely. None of them seemed willing to throw in the towel, so they walked with him to the capitol where another candlelight vigil was under way on

the front steps. The governor was still in his office on the second floor.

One of the students volunteered to take a phone to John Bryan Glass, who was across the street at the Mississippi Supreme Court. Goodman called him, then called Kerry, then called Joshua Caldwell, an old friend who'd agreed to wait at the Death Clerk's desk in Washington. Goodman had everyone in place. All the phones were working. He called Adam. Sam was finishing his last meal, Adam said, and didn't wish to talk to Goodman. But he did want to say thanks for everything.

When the coffee and ice cream were gone, Sam stood and stretched his legs. Donnie had been quiet for a long time. He was suffering and ready to go. Nugent would come soon, and he wanted to say good-bye now.

There was a spot where Sam had spilled ice cream on his new shirt, and Donnie tried to remove it with a cloth napkin. "It's not that important," Sam said, watching his brother.

Donnie kept wiping. "Yeah, you're right. I'd better go now, Sam. They'll be here in a minute."

The two men embraced for a long time, patting each other gently on the backs. "I'm so sorry, Sam," Donnie said, his voice shaking. "I'm so sorry."

They pulled apart, still clutching each other's shoulders, both men with moist eyes but no tears. They would not dare cry before each other. "You take care," Sam said.

"You too. Say a prayer, Sam, okay?"

"I will. Thanks for everything. You're the only one who cared."

Donnie bit his lip and hid his eyes from Sam. He shook hands with Adam, but could not utter a word. He walked behind Sam to the door, then left them.

"No word from the Supreme Court?" Sam asked out of nowhere, as if he suddenly believed there was a chance.

“No,” Adam said sadly.

He sat on the desk, his feet swinging beneath him. “I really want this to be over, Adam,” he said, each word carefully measured. “This is cruel.”

Adam could think of nothing to say.

“In China, they sneak up behind you and put a bullet through your head. No last bowl of rice. No farewells. No waiting. Not a bad idea.”

Adam looked at his watch for the millionth time in the past hour. Since noon, there had been gaps when hours seemed to vanish, then suddenly time would stop. It would fly, then it would crawl. Someone knocked on the door. “Come in,” Sam said faintly.

The Reverend Ralph Griffin entered and closed the door. He’d met with Sam twice during the day, and was obviously taking this hard. It was his first execution, and he’d already decided it would be his last. His cousin in the state senate would have to find him another job. He nodded at Adam and sat by Sam on the desk. It was almost nine o’clock.

“Colonel Nugent’s out there, Sam. He said he’s waiting on you.”

“Well, then, let’s not go out. Let’s just sit here.”

“Suits me.”

“You know, preacher, my heart has been touched these past few days in ways I never dreamed possible. But, for the life of me, I hate that jerk out there. And I can’t overcome it.”

“Hate’s an awful thing, Sam.”

“I know. But I can’t help it.”

“I don’t particularly like him either, to be honest.”

Sam grinned at the minister and put his arm around him. The voices outside grew louder, and Nugent barged into the room. “Sam, it’s time to go back to the Observation Cell,” he said.

Adam stood, his knees weak with fear, his stomach in knots, his heart racing wildly. Sam, however, was unruffled. He jumped from the desk. “Let’s go,” he said.

They followed Nugent from the front office into the narrow hallway where some of the largest guards at Parchman were waiting

along the wall. Sam took Adam by the hand, and they walked slowly together with the reverend trailing behind.

Adam squeezed his grandfather's hand, and ignored the faces as they walked by. They went through the center of the Row, through two sets of doors, then through the bars at the end of Tier A. The tier door closed behind them, and they followed Nugent past the cells.

Sam glanced at the faces of the men he'd known so well. He winked at Hank Henshaw, nodded bravely at J. B. Gullitt who had tears in his eyes, smiled at Stock Turner. They were all leaning through the bars, heads hung low, fear stamped all over their faces. Sam gave them his bravest look.

Nugent stopped at the last cell and waited for the door to be opened from the end of the tier. It clicked loudly, then rolled open. Sam, Adam, and Ralph entered, and Nugent gave the signal to close the door.

The cell was dark, the solitary light and television both off. Sam sat on the bed between Adam and the reverend. He leaned on his elbows with his head hanging low.

Nugent watched them for a moment, but could think of nothing to say. He'd be back in a couple of hours, at eleven, to take Sam to the Isolation Room. They all knew he was coming back. It seemed too cruel at this moment to tell Sam he was leaving, but that he would return. So he stepped away and left through the tier door where his guards were waiting and watching in the semidarkness. Nugent walked to the Isolation Room where a foldaway cot had been installed for the prisoner's last hour. He walked through the small room, and stepped into the Chamber Room where final preparations were being made.

The state executioner was busy and very much in control. He was a short, wiry man named Bill Monday. He had nine fingers and would earn five hundred dollars for his services if the execution took place. By statute, he was appointed by the governor. He was in a tiny closet known simply as the chemical room, less than five feet from the gas chamber. He was studying a checklist on a clipboard. Before him on the counter was a one-pound can of sodium cyanide

pellets, a nine-pound bottle of sulfuric acid, a one-pound container of caustic soda, a fifty-pound steel bottle of anhydrous ammonia, and a five-gallon container of distilled water. To his side on another, smaller counter were three gas masks, three pair of rubber gloves, a funnel, hand soap, hand towels, and a mop. Between the two counters was an acid mixing pot mounted on a two-inch pipe that ran into the floor, under the wall, and resurfaced next to the chamber near the levers.

Monday had three checklists, actually. One contained instructions for mixing the chemicals: the sulfuric acid and distilled water would be mixed to obtain approximately a 41 percent concentration; the caustic soda solution was made by dissolving one pound of caustic soda in two and a half gallons of water; and there were a couple of other brews that had to be mixed to clean the chamber after the execution. One list included all the necessary chemicals and supplies. The third list was the procedure to follow during an actual execution.

Nugent spoke to Monday; all was proceeding as planned. One of Monday's assistants was smearing petroleum jelly around the edges of the chamber's windows. A plainclothed member of the execution team was checking the belts and straps on the wooden chair. The doctor was fiddling with his EKG monitor. The door was open to the outside, where an ambulance was already parked.

Nugent glanced at the checklists once more, though he'd memorized them long ago. In fact, he'd even rewritten one other checklist, a suggested chart to record the execution. The chart would be used by Nugent, Monday, and Monday's assistant. It was a numbered, chronological list of the events of the execution: water and acid mixed, prisoner enters chamber, chamber door locked, sodium cyanide enters acid, gas strikes prisoner's face, prisoner apparently unconscious, prisoner certainly unconscious, movements of prisoner's body, last visible movement, heart stopped, respiration stopped, exhaust valve opened, drain valves opened, air valve opened, chamber door opened, prisoner removed from chamber, prisoner pronounced dead. Beside each was a blank line to record the time elapsed from the prior event.

And there was an execution list, a chart of the twenty-nine steps to be taken to begin and complete the task. Of course, the execution list had an appendix, a list of the fifteen things to do in the step-down, the last of which was to place the prisoner in the ambulance.

Nugent knew every step on every list. He knew how to mix the chemicals, how to open the valves, how long to leave them open, and how to close them. He knew it all.

He stepped outside to speak to the ambulance driver and get some air, then he walked back through the Isolation Room to Tier A. Like everyone else, he was waiting for the damned Supreme Court to rule one way or the other.

He sent the two tallest guards onto the tier to close the windows along the top of the outside wall. Like the building, the windows had been there for thirty-six years and they did not shut quietly. The guards pushed them up until they slammed, each one echoing along the tier. Thirty-five windows in all, every inmate knew the exact number, and with each closing the tier became darker and quieter.

The guards finally finished and left. The Row was now locked down—every inmate in his cell, all doors secured, all windows closed.

Sam had begun shaking with the closing of the windows. His head dropped even lower. Adam placed an arm around his frail shoulders.

“I always liked those windows,” Sam said, his voice low and hoarse. A squad of guards stood less than fifteen feet away, peering through the tier door like kids at the zoo, and Sam didn’t want his words to be heard. It was hard to imagine Sam liking anything about this place. “Used to, when it came a big rain the water would splash on the windows, and some of it would make it inside and trickle down to the floor. I always liked the rain. And the moon. Sometimes, if the clouds were gone, I could stand just right in my cell and catch a glimpse of the moon through those windows. I always wondered why they didn’t have more windows around here. I mean, hell, sorry preacher, but if they’re determined to keep you in a cell all day, why shouldn’t you be able to see outdoors? I never understood that. I guess I never understood a lot of things. Oh well.” His voice trailed off, and he didn’t speak again for a while.

From the darkness came the mellow tenor of Preacher Boy singing “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” It was quite pretty.

“Just a closer walk with Thee,

Grant it, Jesus, is my plea,

Daily walking close to Thee ...”

“Quiet!” a guard yelled.

“Leave him alone!” Sam yelled back, startling both Adam and Ralph. “Sing it, Randy,” Sam said just loud enough to be heard next door. Preacher Boy took his time, his feelings obviously wounded, then began again.

A door slammed somewhere, and Sam jumped. Adam squeezed his shoulder, and he settled down. His eyes were lost somewhere in the darkness of the floor.

“I take it Lee wouldn’t come,” he said, his words haunted.

Adam thought for a second, and decided to tell the truth. “I don’t know where she is. I haven’t talked to her in ten days.”

“Thought she was in a rehab clinic.”

“I think she is too, but I just don’t know where. I’m sorry. I tried everything to find her.”

“I’ve thought about her a lot these past days. Please tell her.”

“I will.” If Adam saw her again, he would struggle to keep from choking her.

“And I’ve thought a lot about Eddie.”

“Look, Sam, we don’t have long. Let’s talk about pleasant things, okay?”

“I want you to forgive me for what I did to Eddie.”

“I’ve already forgiven you, Sam. It’s taken care of. Carmen and I both forgive you.”

Ralph lowered his head next to Sam’s, and said, “Perhaps there are some others we should think about too, Sam.”

“Maybe later,” Sam said.

The tier door opened at the far end of the hallway, and footsteps hurried toward them. Lucas Mann, with a guard behind him, stopped at the last cell and looked at the three shadowy figures huddled together on the bed. "Adam, you have a phone call," he said nervously. "In the front office."

The three shadowy figures stiffened together. Adam jumped to his feet, and without a word stepped from the cell as the door opened. His belly churned violently as he half-ran down the tier. "Give 'em hell, Adam," J. B. Gullitt said as he raced by.

"Who is it?" Adam asked Lucas Mann, who was beside him, step for step.

"Garner Goodman."

They weaved through the center of MSU and hurried to the front office. The receiver was lying on the desk. Adam grabbed it and sat on the desk. "Garner, this is Adam."

"I'm at the capitol, Adam, in the rotunda outside the governor's office. The Supreme Court just denied all of our cert petitions. There's nothing left up there."

Adam closed his eyes and paused. "Well, I guess that's the end of that," he said, and looked at Lucas Mann. Lucas frowned and dropped his head.

"Sit tight. The governor's about to make an announcement. I'll call you in five minutes." Goodman was gone.

Adam hung up the phone and stared at it. "The Supreme Court turned down everything," he reported to Mann. "The governor's making a statement. He'll call back in a minute."

Mann sat down. "I'm sorry, Adam. Very sorry. How's Sam holding up?"

"Sam is taking this much better than I am, I think."

"It's strange, isn't it? This is my fifth one, and I'm always amazed at how calmly they go. They give up when it gets dark. They have their last meal, say good-bye to their families, and become oddly placid about the whole thing. Me, I'd be kicking and screaming and crying. It would take twenty men to drag me out of the Observation Cell."

Adam managed a quick smile, then noticed an open shoe box on the desk. It was lined with aluminum foil with a few broken cookies in the bottom. It had not been there when they left an hour earlier. "What's that?" he asked, not really curious.

"Those are the execution cookies."

"The execution cookies?"

"Yeah, this sweet little lady who lives down the road bakes them every time there's an execution."

"Why?"

"I don't know. In fact, I have no idea why she does it."

"Who eats them?" Adam asked, looking at the remaining cookies and crumbs as if they were poison.

"The guards and trustees."

Adam shook his head. He had too much on his mind to analyze the purpose of a batch of execution cookies.

For the occasion David McAllister changed into a dark navy suit, freshly starched white shirt, and dark burgundy tie. He combed and sprayed his hair, brushed his teeth, then walked into his office from a side door. Mona Stark was crunching numbers.

"The calls finally stopped," she said, somewhat relieved.

"I don't want to hear it," McAllister said, checking his tie and teeth in a mirror. "Let's go."

He opened the door and stepped into the foyer where two bodyguards met him. They flanked him as he walked into the rotunda where bright lights were waiting. A throng of reporters and cameras pressed forward to hear the announcement. He stepped to a makeshift stand with a dozen microphones wedged together. He grimaced at the lights, waited for quiet, then spoke.

"The Supreme Court of the United States has just denied the last appeals from Sam Cayhall," he said dramatically, as if the reporters hadn't already heard this. Another pause as the cameras clicked and the microphones waited. "And so, after three jury trials, after nine

years of appeals through every court available under our Constitution, after having the case reviewed by no less than forty-seven judges, justice has finally arrived for Sam Cayhall. His crime was committed twenty-three years ago. Justice may be slow, but it still works. I have been called upon by many people to pardon Mr. Cayhall, but I cannot do so. I cannot overrule the wisdom of the jury that sentenced him, nor can I impose my judgment upon that of our distinguished courts. Neither am I willing to go against the wishes of my friends the Kramers.” Another pause. He spoke without notes, and it was immediately obvious he’d worked on these remarks for a long time. “It is my fervent hope that the execution of Sam Cayhall will help erase a painful chapter in our state’s tortured history. I call upon all Mississippians to come together from this sad night forward, and work for equality. May God have mercy on his soul.”

He backed away as the questions flew. The bodyguards opened a side door, and he was gone. They darted down the stairs and out the north entrance where a car was waiting. A mile away, a helicopter was also waiting.

Goodman walked outside and stood by an old cannon, aimed for some reason at the tall buildings downtown. Below him, at the foot of the front steps, a large group of protestors held candles. He called Adam with the news, then he walked through the people and the candles and left the capitol grounds. A hymn started as he crossed the street, and for two blocks it slowly faded away. He drifted for a while, then walked toward Hez Kerry’s office.

Fifty

The walk back to the observation cell was much longer than before. Adam made it alone, by now on familiar terrain. Lucas Mann disappeared somewhere in the labyrinth of the Row.

As Adam waited before a heavy barred door in the center of the building, he was immediately aware of two things. First, there were many more people hanging around now—more guards, more strangers with plastic badges and guns on their hips, more stern-faced men with short-sleeved shirts and polyester ties. This was a happening, a singular phenomenon too thrilling to be missed. Adam speculated that any prison employee with enough pull and enough clout just had to be on the Row when Sam's death sentence was carried out.

The second thing he realized was that his shirt was soaked and the collar was sticking to his neck. He loosened his tie as the door clicked loudly then slid open under the hum of a hidden electric motor. A guard somewhere in the maze of concrete walls and windows and bars was watching and punching the right buttons. He stepped through, still pulling on the knot of his tie and the button under it, and walked to the next barrier, a wall of bars leading to Tier A. He patted his forehead, but there was no sweat. He filled his lungs with muggy, dank air.

With the windows shut, the tier was now suffocating. Another loud click, another electric hum, and he stepped into the thin hallway, which Sam had told him was seven and a half feet wide. Three dingy sets of fluorescent bulbs cast dim shadows on the ceiling and floor. He pushed his heavy feet past the dark cells, all filled with brutal murderers, each one now praying or meditating, a couple even crying.

"Good news, Adam?" J. B. Gullitt pleaded from the darkness.

Adam didn't answer. Still walking, he glanced up at the windows with their various shades of paint splattered around the ancient panes, and was struck by the question of how many lawyers before him had made this final walk from the front office to the Observation Cell to inform a dying man that the last thin shred of hope was now gone. This place had a rich history of executions, and so he concluded that many others had suffered along this trail. Garner Goodman himself had carried the final news to Maynard Tole, and this gave Adam a much needed shot of strength.

He ignored the curious stares of the small mob standing and gawking at him at the end of the tier. He stopped at the last cell, waited, and the door obediently opened.

Sam and the reverend were still sitting low on the bed, heads nearly touching in the darkness, whispering. They looked up at Adam, who sat next to Sam and placed his arm around his shoulders, shoulders that now seemed even frailer. "The Supreme Court just denied everything," he said very softly, his voice on the verge of cracking. The reverend exhaled a painful moan. Sam nodded as if this was certainly expected. "And the governor just denied clemency."

Sam tried to raise his shoulders bravely, but power failed him. He slumped even lower.

"Lord have mercy," Ralph Griffin said.

"Then it's all over," Sam said.

"There's nothing left," Adam whispered.

Excited murmurings could be heard from the death squad squeezed together at the end of the tier. This thing would happen after all. A door slammed somewhere behind them, in the direction of the chamber, and Sam's knees jerked together.

He was silent for a moment—one minute or fifteen, Adam couldn't tell. The clock was still lurching and stopping.

"I guess we oughta pray now, preacher," Sam said.

"I reckon so. We've waited long enough."

"How do you wanna do it?"

"Well, Sam, just exactly what do you want to pray about?"

Sam pondered this for a moment, then said, "I'd like to make sure God's not angry with me when I die."

"Good idea. And why do you think God might be angry with you?"

"Pretty obvious, isn't it?"

Ralph rubbed his hands together. "I guess the best way to do this is to confess your sins, and ask God to forgive you."

"All of them?"

"You don't have to list them all, just ask God to forgive everything."

"Sort of a blanket repentance."

"Yeah, that's it. And it'll work, if you're serious."

"I'm serious as hell."

"Do you believe in hell, Sam?"

"I do."

"Do you believe in heaven?"

"I do."

"Do you believe that all Christians go to heaven?"

Sam thought about this for a long time, then nodded slightly before asking, "Do you?"

"Yes, Sam. I do."

"Then I'll take your word for it."

"Good. Trust me on this one, okay?"

"It seems too easy, you know. I just say a quick prayer, and everything's forgiven."

"Why does that bother you?"

"Because I've done some bad things, preacher."

"We've all done bad things. Our God is a God of infinite love."

"You haven't done what I've done."

"Will you feel better if you talk about it?"

"Yeah, I won't ever feel right unless I talk about it."

"I'm here, Sam."

"Should I leave for a minute?" Adam asked. Sam clutched his knee. "No."

"We don't have a lot of time, Sam," Ralph said, glancing through the bars.

Sam took a deep breath, and spoke in a low monotone, careful that only Adam and Ralph could hear. "I killed Joe Lincoln in cold blood. I've already said I was sorry."

Ralph was mumbling something to himself as he listened. He was already in prayer.

"And I helped my brothers kill those two men who murdered our father. Frankly, I've never felt bad about it until now. Human life seems a whole lot more valuable these days. I was wrong. And I took part in a lynching when I was fifteen or sixteen. I was just part of a mob, and I probably couldn't have stopped it if I'd tried. But I didn't try, and I feel guilty about it."

Sam stopped. Adam held his breath and hoped the confessional was over. Ralph waited and waited, and finally asked, "Is that it, Sam?"

"No. There's one more."

Adam closed his eyes and braced for it. He was dizzy and wanted to vomit.

"There was another lynching. A boy named Cletus. I can't remember his last name. A Klan lynching. I was eighteen. That's all I can say."

This nightmare will never end, Adam thought.

Sam breathed deeply and was silent for several minutes. Ralph was praying hard. Adam just waited.

"And I didn't kill those Kramer boys," Sam said, his voice shaking. "I had no business being there, and I was wrong to be involved in that mess. I've regretted it for many years, all of it. It was wrong to be in the Klan, hating everybody and planting bombs. But I didn't kill those boys. There was no intent to harm anyone. That bomb was supposed to go off in the middle of the night when no one would be anywhere near it. That's what I truly believed. But it was wired by someone else, not me. I was just a lookout, a driver, a flunky. This other person rigged the bomb to go off much later than I thought. I've never known for sure if he intended to kill anyone, but I suspect he did."

Adam heard the words, received them, absorbed them, but was too stunned to move.

“But I could’ve stopped it. And that makes me guilty. Those little boys would be alive today if I had acted differently after the bomb was planted. Their blood is on my hands, and I’ve grieved over this for many years.”

Ralph gently placed a hand on the back of Sam’s head. “Pray with me, Sam.” Sam covered his eyes with both hands and rested his elbows on his knees.

“Do you believe Jesus Christ was the son of God; that he came to this earth, born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was persecuted, and died on the cross so that we might have eternal salvation? Do you believe this, Sam?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“And that he arose from the grave and ascended into heaven?”

“Yes.”

“And that through him all of your sins are forgiven? All the terrible things that burden your heart are now forgiven. Do you believe this, Sam?”

“Yes, yes.”

Ralph released Sam’s head, and wiped tears from his eyes. Sam didn’t move, but his shoulders were shaking. Adam squeezed him even tighter.

Randy Dupree started whistling another stanza of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” His notes were clear and precise, and they echoed nicely along the tier.

“Preacher,” Sam said as his back stiffened, “will those little Kramer boys be in heaven?”

“Yes.”

“But they were Jews.”

“All children go to heaven, Sam.”

“Will I see them up there?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot about heaven we don’t know. But the Bible promises that there will be no sorrow when we get there.”

“Good. Then I hope I see them.”

The unmistakable voice of Colonel Nugent broke the calm. The tier door clanged, rattled, and opened. He marched five feet to the

door of the Observation Cell. Six guards were behind him. "Sam, it's time to go to the Isolation Room," he said. "It's eleven o'clock."

The three men stood, side by side. The cell door opened, and Sam stepped out. He smiled at Nugent, then he turned and hugged the reverend. "Thanks," he said.

"I love you, brother!" Randy Dupree yelled from his cell, not ten feet away.

Sam looked at Nugent, and asked, "Could I say good-bye to my friends?"

A deviation. The manual plainly said that the prisoner was to be taken directly from the Observation Cell to the Isolation Room, with nothing being mentioned about a final promenade down the tier. Nugent was dumbstruck, but after a few seconds rallied nicely. "Sure, but make it quick."

Sam took a few steps and clasped Randy's hands through the bars. Then he stepped to the next cell and shook hands with Harry Ross Scott.

Ralph Griffin eased past the guards and left the tier. He found a dark corner and wept like a child. He would not see Sam again. Adam stood in the door of the cell, near Nugent, and together they watched Sam work his way down the hallway, stopping at each cell, whispering something to each inmate. He spent the most time with J. B. Gullitt, whose sobs could be heard.

Then he turned and walked bravely back to them, counting steps as he went, smiling at his pals along the way. He took Adam by the hand. "Let's go," he said to Nugent.

There were so damned many guards packed together at the end of the tier that it was a tight squeeze just to get by them. Nugent went first, then Sam and Adam. The mass of human congestion added several degrees to the temperature and several layers to the stuffy air. The show of force was necessary, of course, to subdue a reluctant prisoner, or perhaps to scare one into submission. It seemed awfully silly with a little old man like Sam Cayhall.

The walk from one room to another took only seconds, a distance of twenty feet, but Adam winced with every painful step. Through the human tunnel of armed guards, through the heavy steel door,

into the small room. The door on the opposite wall was shut. It led to the chamber.

A flimsy cot had been hauled in for the occasion. Adam and Sam sat on it. Nugent closed the door, and knelt before them. The three of them were alone. Adam again placed his arm around Sam's shoulders.

Nugent was wearing a terribly pained expression. He placed a hand on Sam's knee, and said, "Sam, we're gonna get through this together. Now—"

"You goofy fool," Adam blurted, amazed at this remarkable utterance.

"He can't help it," Sam said helpfully to Adam. "He's just stupid. He didn't even realize it."

Nugent felt the sharp rebuke, and tried to think of something proper to say. "I'm just trying to get through this, okay?" he said to Adam.

"Why don't you just leave?" Adam said.

"You know something, Nugent?" Sam asked. "I've read tons of law books. And I've read pages and pages of prison regulations. And nowhere have I read anything that requires me to spend my last hour with you. No law, statute, regulation, nothing."

"Just get the hell out of here," Adam said, ready to strike if necessary.

Nugent jumped to his feet. "The doctor will enter through that door at eleven-forty. He'll stick a stethoscope to your chest, then leave. At eleven fifty-five, I will enter, also through that door. At that time, we'll go into the Chamber Room. Any questions?"

"No. Leave," Adam said, waving at the door. Nugent made a quick exit.

Suddenly, they were alone. With an hour to go.

Two identical prison vans rolled to a stop in front of the Visitors Center, and were boarded by the eight lucky reporters and one lone

sheriff. The law allowed, but did not require, the sheriff of the county where the crime was committed to witness the execution.

The man who was the sheriff of Washington County in 1967 had been dead for fifteen years, but the current sheriff was not about to miss this event. He had informed Lucas Mann earlier in the day that he fully intended to invoke the power of the law. Said he felt like he owed it to the people of Greenville and Washington County.

Mr. Elliot Kramer was not present at Parchman. He had planned the trip for years, but his doctor intervened at the last moment. His heart was weak and it was just too risky. Ruth Kramer had never thought seriously of witnessing the execution. She was at home in Memphis, sitting with friends, waiting for it to end.

There would be no members of the victims' family present to witness the killing of Sam Cayhall.

The vans were heavily photographed and filmed as they left and disappeared on the main drive. Five minutes later, they stopped at the gates of MSU. Everyone was asked to step outside, where they were checked for cameras and recorders. They reboarded the vans and were cleared through the gates. The vans drove through the grass along the front of MSU, then around the bullpens on the west end, then stopped very near the ambulance.

Nugent himself was waiting. The reporters stepped from the vans and instinctively began looking wildly around, trying to grasp it all to record later. They were just outside a square red-brick building that was somehow attached to the low, flat structure that was MSU. The little building had two doors. One was closed, the other was waiting for them.

Nugent was not in the mood for nosy reporters. He hurriedly guided them through the open door. They stepped into a small room where two rows of folding chairs were waiting, facing an ominous panel of black drapes.

"Take a seat please," he said rudely. He counted eight reporters, one sheriff. Three seats were empty. "It is now eleven-ten," he said dramatically. "The prisoner is in the Isolation Room. Before you here, on the other side of these curtains, is the Chamber Room. He will be brought in at five minutes before twelve, strapped in, the

door locked. The curtains will be opened at exactly midnight, and when you see the chamber the prisoner will already be inside it, less than two feet from the windows. You will see only the back of his head. I didn't design this, okay? It should take about ten minutes before he is pronounced dead, at which time the curtains will be closed and you'll return to the vans. You'll have a long wait, and I'm sorry this room has no air conditioning. When the curtains open, things will happen quickly. Any questions?"

"Have you talked to the prisoner?"

"Yes."

"How's he holding up?"

"I'm not getting into all that. A press conference is planned at one, and I'll answer those questions then. Right now I'm busy." Nugent left the witness room and slammed the door behind him. He walked quickly around the corner, and entered the Chamber Room.

"We have less than an hour. What would you like to talk about?" Sam asked.

"Oh, lots of things. Most of it unpleasant, though."

"It's kinda hard to have an enjoyable conversation at this point, you know."

"What are you thinking right now, Sam? What's going through your mind?"

"Everything."

"What are you afraid of?"

"The smell of the gas. Whether or not it's painful. I don't want to suffer, Adam. I hope it's quick. I want a big whiff of it, and maybe I'll just float away. I'm not afraid of death, Adam, but right now I'm afraid of dying. I just wish it was over. This waiting is cruel."

"Are you ready?"

"My hard little heart is at peace. I've done some bad things, son, but I feel like God might give me a break. I certainly don't deserve one."

“Why didn’t you tell me about the man who was with you?”

“It’s a long story. We don’t have much time.”

“It could’ve saved your life.”

“No, nobody would’ve believed it. Think about it. Twenty-three years later I suddenly change my story and blame it all on a mystery man. It would’ve been ridiculous.”

“Why’d you lie to me?”

“I have reasons.”

“To protect me?”

“That’s one of them.”

“He’s still out there, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He’s close by. In fact, he’s probably out front with all the other loonies right now. Just watching. You’d never see him, though.”

“He killed Dogan and his wife?”

“Yes.”

“And Dogan’s son?”

“Yes.”

“And Clovis Brazelton?”

“Probably. He’s a very talented killer, Adam. He’s deadly. He threatened me and Dogan during the first trial.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Not really. I wouldn’t tell you anyway. You can never breathe a word of this.”

“You’re dying for someone else’s crime.”

“No. I could’ve saved those little boys. And God knows I’ve killed my share of people. I deserve this, Adam.”

“No one deserves this.”

“It’s far better than living. If they took me back to my cell right now and told me I’d stay there until I died, you know what I’d do?”

“What?”

“I’d kill myself.”

After spending the last hour in a cell, Adam couldn’t argue with this. He could not begin to comprehend the horror of living twenty-three hours a day in a tiny cage.

"I forgot my cigarettes," Sam said, patting his shirt pocket. "I guess this is a good time to quit."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Yeah."

"It's not working."

"Did Lee ever show you the book with my lynching picture in it?"

"She didn't show it to me. She told me where it was, and I found it."

"You saw the picture."

"Yes."

"A regular party, wasn't it?"

"Pretty sad."

"Did you see the other picture of the lynching, one page over?"

"Yes. Two Kluckers."

"With robes and hoods and masks."

"Yes, I saw it."

"That was me and Albert. I was hiding behind one of the masks."

Adam's senses were beyond the point of shock. The gruesome photograph flashed through his mind, and he tried to purge it. "Why are you telling me this, Sam?"

"Because it feels good. I've never admitted it before, and there's a certain relief in facing the truth. I feel better already."

"I don't want to hear any more."

"Eddie never knew it. He found that book in the attic, and somehow figured out I was in the other party photo. But he didn't know I was one of the Kluckers."

"Let's not talk about Eddie, okay?"

"Good idea. What about Lee?"

"I'm mad at Lee. She skipped out on us."

"It would've been nice to see her, you know. That hurts. But I'm so glad Carmen came."

Finally, a pleasant subject. "She's a fine person," Adam said.

"A great kid. I'm very proud of you, Adam, and of Carmen. Y'all got the good genes from your mother. I'm so lucky to have two wonderful grandchildren."

Adam listened and didn't try to respond. Something banged next door, and they both jumped.

"Nugent must be playing with his gadgets in there," Sam said, his shoulders vibrating again. "You know what hurts?"

"What?"

"I've been thinking a lot about this, really flogging myself the last couple of days. I look at you, and I look at Carmen, and I see two bright young people with open minds and hearts. You don't hate anybody. You're tolerant and broad-minded, well educated, ambitious, going places without the baggage I was born with. And I look at you, my grandson, my flesh and blood, and I ask myself, Why didn't I become something else? Something like you and Carmen? It's hard to believe we're actually related."

"Come on, Sam. Don't do this."

"I can't help it."

"Please, Sam."

"Okay, okay. Something pleasant." His voice trailed off and he leaned over. His head was low and hanging almost between his legs.

Adam wanted an in-depth conversation about the mysterious accomplice. He wanted to know it all—the real details of the bombing, the disappearance, how and why Sam got caught. He also wanted to know what might become of this guy, especially since he was out there, watching and waiting. But these questions would not be answered, so he let them pass. Sam would take many secrets to his grave.

The arrival of the governor's helicopter created a stir along the front entrance of Parchman. It landed on the other side of the highway where another prison van waited. With a bodyguard on each elbow and Mona Stark racing behind, McAllister scampered into the van. "It's the governor!" someone yelled. The hymns and prayers stopped momentarily. Cameras raced to film the van, which raced through the front gate and disappeared.

Minutes later, it stopped near the ambulance behind MSU. The bodyguards and Ms. Stark remained in the van. Nugent met the governor and escorted him into the witness room where he took a seat in the front row. He nodded at the other witnesses, all sweating profusely by now. The room was an oven. Black mosquitoes bounced along the walls. Nugent asked if there was anything he could fetch for the governor.

“Popcorn,” McAllister cracked, but no one laughed. Nugent frowned and left the room.

“Why are you here?” a reporter asked immediately.

“No comment,” McAllister said smugly.

The ten of them sat in silence, staring at the black drapes and anxiously checking their watches. The nervous chatter had ended. They avoided eye contact, as if they were ashamed to be participants in such a macabre event.

Nugent stopped at the door of the gas chamber and consulted a checklist. It was eleven-forty. He told the doctor to enter the Isolation Room, then he stepped outside and gave the signal for the guards to be removed from the four towers around MSU. The odds of escaping gas injuring a tower guard after the execution were minuscule, but Nugent loved the details.

The knock on the door was faint indeed, but at the moment it sounded as if a sledgehammer were being used. It cracked through the silence, startling both Adam and Sam. The door opened. The young doctor stepped in, tried to smile, dropped to one knee, and asked Sam to unbutton his shirt. A round stethoscope was stuck to his pale skin, with a short wire left hanging to his belt.

The doctor’s hands shook. He said nothing.

Fifty-one

At eleven-thirty, Hez Kerry, Garner Goodman, John Bryan Glass, and two of his students stopped their idle talk and held hands around the cluttered table in Kerry's office. Each offered a silent prayer for Sam Cayhall, then Hez voiced one for the group. They sat in their seats, deep in thought, deep in silence, and said another short one for Adam.

The end came quickly. The clock, sputtering and braking for the last twenty-four hours, suddenly roared ahead.

For a few minutes after the doctor left, they shared a light, nervous chatter as Sam walked twice across the small room, measuring it, then leaned on the wall opposite the bed. They talked about Chicago, and Kravitz & Bane, and Sam couldn't imagine how three hundred lawyers existed in the same building. There was a jittery laugh or two, and a few tense smiles as they waited for the next dreaded knock.

It came at precisely eleven fifty-five. Three sharp raps, then a long pause. Nugent waited before barging in.

Adam immediately jumped to his feet. Sam took a deep breath, and clenched his jaws. He pointed a finger at Adam. "Listen to me," he said firmly. "You can walk in there with me, but you cannot stay."

"I know. I don't want to stay, Sam."

"Good." The crooked finger dropped, the jaws slackened, the face sank. Sam reached forward and took Adam by the shoulders. Adam pulled him close and hugged him gently.

“Tell Lee I love her,” Sam said, his voice breaking. He pulled away slightly and looked Adam in the eyes. “Tell her I thought about her to the very end. And I’m not mad at her for not coming. I wouldn’t want to come here either if I didn’t have to.”

Adam’s head nodded quickly, and he struggled not to cry. Anything, Sam, anything.

“Say hello to your mom. I always liked her. Give my love to Carmen, she’s a great kid. I’m sorry about all this, Adam. It’s a terrible legacy for you guys to carry.”

“We’ll do fine, Sam.”

“I know you will. I’ll die a very proud man, son, because of you.”

“I’ll miss you,” Adam said, the tears now running down his cheeks.

The door opened and the colonel stepped in. “It’s time now, Sam,” he said sadly.

Sam faced him with a brave smile. “Let’s do it!” he said strongly. Nugent went first, then Sam, then Adam. They stepped into the Chamber Room, which was packed with people. Everyone stared at Sam, then immediately looked away. They were ashamed, thought Adam. Ashamed to be here taking part in this nasty little deed. They wouldn’t look at Adam.

Monday, the executioner, and his assistant were along the wall next to the chemical room. Two uniformed guards were crowded next to them. Lucas Mann and a deputy warden were near the door. The doctor was busy to the immediate right, adjusting his EKG and trying to appear calm.

And in the center of the room, now surrounded by the various participants, was the chamber, an octagonal-shaped tube with a gleaming fresh coat of silver paint. Its door was open, the fateful wooden chair just waiting, a row of covered windows behind it.

The door to the outside of the room was open, but there was no draft. The room was like a sauna, everyone was drenched with sweat. The two guards took Sam and led him into the chamber. He counted the steps—only five of them from the door to the chamber—and suddenly he was inside, sitting, looking around the men to find Adam. The men’s hands moved rapidly.

Adam had stopped just inside the door. He leaned on the wall for strength, his knees spongy and weak. He stared at the people in the room, at the chamber, at the floor, the EKG. It was all so sanitary! The freshly painted walls. The sparkling concrete floors. The doctor with his machines. The clean, sterile little chamber with its glowing luster. The antiseptic smell from the chemical room. Everything so spotless and hygienic. It should've been a clinic where people went to get themselves healed.

What if I vomit on the floor, right here at the feet of the good doctor, what would that do for your disinfected little room, Nugent? How would the manual treat that, Nugent, if I just lost it right here in front of the chamber? Adam clutched his stomach.

Straps on Sam's arms, two of them for each, then two more for the legs, over the shiny new Dickies, then the hideous head brace so he wouldn't hurt himself when the gas hit. There now, all buckled down, and ready for the vapors. All neat and tidy, spotless and germ-free, no blood to be shed. Nothing to pollute this flawless, moral killing.

The guards backed out of the narrow door, proud of their work.

Adam looked at him sitting in there. Their eyes met, and for an instant Sam closed his.

The doctor was next. Nugent said something to him, but Adam couldn't hear the words. He stepped inside and rigged the wire running from the stethoscope. He was quick with his work.

Lucas Mann stepped forward with a sheet of paper. He stood in the door of the chamber. "Sam, this is the death warrant. I'm required by law to read it to you."

"Just hurry," Sam grunted without opening his lips.

Lucas lifted the piece of paper, and read from it: "Pursuant to a verdict of guilty and a sentence of death returned against you by the Circuit Court of Washington County on February 14, 1981, you are hereby condemned to die by lethal gas in the gas chamber at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. May God have mercy on your soul." Lucas backed away, then reached for the first of two phones mounted on the wall. He called his office to see if there were any miraculous last minute delays. There were none. The second

phone was a secured line to the Attorney General's office in Jackson. Again, all systems were go. It was now thirty seconds after midnight, Wednesday, August 8. "No stays," he said to Nugent.

The words bounced around the humid room and crashed in from all directions. Adam glanced at his grandfather for the last time. His hands were clenched. His eyes were closed tightly, as if he couldn't look at Adam again. His lips were moving, as if he had just one more quick prayer.

"Any reason why this execution should not proceed?" Nugent asked formally, suddenly craving solid legal advice.

"None," Lucas said with genuine regret.

Nugent stood in the door of the chamber. "Any last words, Sam?" he asked.

"Not for you. It's time for Adam to leave."

"Very well." Nugent slowly closed the door, its thick rubber gasket preventing noise. Silently, Sam was now locked up, and buckled down. He closed his eyes tightly. Just please hurry.

Adam eased behind Nugent, who was still facing the chamber door. Lucas Mann opened the door to the outside, and both men made a quick exit. Adam glanced back at the room for the last time. The executioner was reaching for a lever. His assistant was inching to the side to catch a glimpse. The two guards were jockeying for position so they could watch the old bastard die. Nugent and the deputy warden and the doctor were crowded along the other wall, all inching closer, heads bobbing up and over, each fearful he might miss something.

The ninety-degree heat outside seemed much cooler. Adam walked to the end of the ambulance and leaned on it for a second.

"Are you all right?" Lucas asked.

"No."

"Just take it easy."

"You're not gonna witness it?"

"No. I've seen four. That's enough for me. This one's especially difficult."

Adam stared at the white door in the center of the brick wall. Three vans were parked nearby. A group of guards smoked and

whispered by the vans. "I'd like to leave," he said, afraid that he was about to be sick.

"Let's go." Lucas grabbed his elbow and led him to the first van. He said something to a guard, who jumped into the front seat. Adam and Lucas sat on a bench in the center of it.

Adam knew at that precise moment his grandfather was in the chamber gasping for breath, his lungs seared with burning poison. Just over there, in that little red-brick building, right now, he's sucking it in, trying to swallow as much as possible, hoping to simply float away to a better world.

He began to cry. The van moved around the recreation yards and through the grass in front of the Row. He covered his eyes, and cried for Sam, for his suffering at this moment, for the despicable way he was being forced to die. He looked so pitiful sitting there in his new clothes being tied down like an animal. He cried for Sam and the last nine and a half years he'd spent staring through bars, trying to catch a glimpse of the moon, wondering if anyone out there cared about him. He cried for the whole wretched Cayhall family and their miserable history. And he cried for himself, for his anguish at this moment, for the loss of a loved one, for his failure to stop this madness.

Lucas patted him gently on the shoulder and the van rolled and stopped, then rolled and stopped again. "I'm sorry," he said more than once.

"This your car?" Lucas asked, as they stopped outside the gate. The dirt parking lot was filled to capacity. Adam yanked the door handle and stepped out without a word. He could say thanks later.

He sped along the gravel trail, between the rows of cotton, until he came to the main drive. He drove quickly to the front entrance, slowing only briefly as he weaved around two barricades, then stopped at the front gate so a guard could check his trunk. To his left was the swarm of reporters. They were on their feet, waiting anxiously for word from the Row. Mini-cams were ready.

There was no one in his trunk, and he was waved around another barricade, almost hitting a guard who wasn't moving fast enough. He stopped at the highway, and paused to look at the candlelight

vigil under way to his right. Hundreds of candles. And a hymn in progress somewhere down the way.

He sped away, past state troopers loitering about, enjoying the break in the action. He sped past cars parked on the shoulders for two miles, and soon Parchman was behind him. He pushed the turbo, and was soon doing ninety.

He headed north for some reason, though he had no intention of going to Memphis. Towns like Tutwiler, Lambert, Marks, Sledge, and Crenshaw flew by. He rolled the windows down and the warm air swirled around the seats. The windshield was peppered with large bugs and insects, the plague of the Delta, he'd learned.

He just drove, with no particular destination. This trip had not been planned. He'd given no thought to where he would go immediately after Sam died, because he never truly believed it would happen. Maybe he'd be in Jackson now, drinking and celebrating with Garner Goodman and Hez Kerry, getting plastered because they'd pulled a rabbit out of the hat. Maybe he'd be at the Row, still on the phone trying desperately to get the details of a last minute stay which would later become permanent. Maybe a lot of things.

He wouldn't dare go to Lee's, because she might actually be there. Their next meeting would be a nasty one, and he preferred to postpone it. He decided to find a decent motel. Spend the night. Try and sleep. Figure things out tomorrow after the sun was up. He raced through dozens of hamlets and towns, none with a room for rent. He slowed considerably. One highway led to another. He was lost but didn't care. How can you be lost when you don't know where you're going? He recognized towns on road signs, turned this way then that way. An all-night convenience store caught his attention on the outskirts of Hernando, not far from Memphis. There were no cars parked in front. A middle-aged lady with jet-black hair was behind the counter, smoking, smacking gum, and talking on the phone. Adam went to the beer cooler and grabbed a six-pack.

"Sorry, hon, can't buy beer after twelve."

"What?" Adam demanded, reaching into his pocket.

She didn't like his snarl. She carefully laid the phone next to the cash register. "We can't sell beer here after midnight. It's the law."

"The law?"

"Yes. The law."

"Of the State of Mississippi?"

"That's correct," she said smartly.

"Do you know what I think of the laws of this state right now?"

"No, dear. And I honestly don't care."

Adam flipped a ten-dollar bill on the counter and carried the beer to his car. She watched him leave, then stuck the cash in her pocket and went back to the phone. Why bother the cops over a six-pack of beer?

He was off again, going south on a two-lane highway, obeying the speed limit and gulping the first beer. Off again in pursuit of a clean room with a free continental breakfast, pool, cable, HBO, kids stay free.

Fifteen minutes to die, fifteen minutes to vent the chamber, ten minutes to wash it down with ammonia. Spray the lifeless body, deader than hell, according to the young doctor and his EKG. Nugent pointing here and there—get the gas masks, get the gloves, get those damned reporters back on the vans and out of here.

Adam could see Sam in there, head fallen to one side, still strapped under those enormous leather buckles. What color was his skin now? Surely not the pale whiteness of the past nine and a half years. Surely the gas turned his lips purple and his flesh pink. The chamber is now clear, all is safe. Enter the chamber, Nugent says, unbuckle him. Take the knives. Cut off the clothing. Did his bowels loosen? Did his bladder leak? They always do. Be careful. Here, here's the plastic bag. Put the clothes in here. Spray the naked body.

Adam could see the new clothes—the stiff khakis, the oversized shoes, the spotless white socks. Sam had been so proud to wear real clothes again. Now they were rags in a green garbage sack, handled like venom and soon to be burned by a trustee.

Where are the clothes, the blue prison pants and white tee shirt? Get them. Enter the chamber. Dress the corpse. No shoes are necessary. No socks. Hell, he's just going to the funeral home. Let

the family worry about dressing him for a decent burial. Now the stretcher. Get him out of there. Into the ambulance.

Adam was near a lake somewhere, over a bridge, through a bottom, the air suddenly damp and cool. Lost again.

Fifty-two

The first glint of sunrise was a pink halo over a hill above Clanton. It strained through the trees, and was soon turning to yellow, then to orange. There were no clouds, nothing but brilliant colors against the dark sky.

There were two unopened beers sitting in the grass. Three empty cans had been tossed against a nearby headstone. The first empty can was still in the car.

The dawn was breaking. Shadows fell toward him from the rows of other gravestones. The sun itself was soon peeking at him from behind the trees.

He'd been there for a couple of hours, though he'd lost track of time. Jackson and Judge Slattery and Monday's hearing were years ago. Sam had died minutes ago. Or was he dead? Had they already done their dirty act? Time was still playing games.

He hadn't found a motel, not that he'd looked very hard. He'd found himself near Clanton, then was drawn here where he'd located the headstone of Anna Gates Cayhall. Now he rested against it. He'd drunk the warm beer and thrown the cans at the largest monument within range. If the cops found him here and took him to jail, he wouldn't care. He'd been in a cell before. "Yeah, just got out of Parchman," he'd tell his cell mates, his rap partners. "Just walked out of death row." And they'd leave him alone.

Evidently, the cops were occupied elsewhere. The graveyard was secure. Four little red flags had been staked out next to his grandmother's plot. Adam noticed them as the sun rose to the east. Another grave to be dug.

A car door closed somewhere behind him, but he didn't hear it. A figure walked toward him, but he didn't know it. It moved slowly, searching the cemetery, cautiously looking for something.

The snapping of a twig startled Adam. Lee was standing beside him, her hand on her mother's headstone. He looked at her, then looked away.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, too numb to be surprised.

She gently lowered herself first to her knees, then she sat very close to him, her back pressed to her mother's engraved name. She wrapped her arm around his elbow.

"Where the hell have you been, Lee?"

"In treatment."

"You could've called, dammit."

"Don't be angry, Adam, please. I need a friend." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I'm not sure I'm your friend, Lee. What you did was terrible."

"He wanted to see me, didn't he?"

"He did. You, of course, were lost in your own little world, self-absorbed as usual. No thought given to others."

"Please, Adam, I've been in treatment. You know how weak I am. I need help."

"Then get it."

She noticed the two cans of beer, and Adam quickly tossed them away. "I'm not drinking," she said, pitifully. Her voice was sad and hollow. Her pretty face was tired and wrinkled.

"I tried to see him," she said.

"When?"

"Last night. I drove to Parchman. They wouldn't let me in. Said it was too late."

Adam lowered his head and softened considerably. He would accomplish nothing by cursing her. She was an alcoholic, struggling to overcome demons he hoped he would never meet. And she was his aunt, his beloved Lee. "He asked about you at the very end. He asked me to tell you he loved you, and that he wasn't angry because you didn't come see him."

She started crying very quietly. She wiped her cheeks with the backs of her hands, and cried for a long time.

"He went out with a great deal of courage and dignity," Adam said. "He was very brave. He said his heart was right with God, and

that he hated no one. He was terribly remorseful for the things he'd done. He was a champ, Lee, an old fighter who was ready to move on."

"You know where I've been?" she asked between sniffles, as if she'd heard nothing he said.

"No. Where?"

"I've been to the old home place. I drove there from Parchman last night."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to burn it. And it burned beautifully. The house and the weeds around it. One huge fire. All up in smoke."

"Come on, Lee."

"It's true. I almost got caught, I think. I might've passed a car on the way out. I'm not worried, though. I bought the place last week. Paid thirteen thousand dollars to the bank. If you own it, then you can burn it, right? You're the lawyer."

"Are you serious?"

"Go look for yourself. I parked in front of a church a mile away to wait for the fire trucks. They never came. The nearest house is two miles away. No one saw the fire. Drive out and take a look. There's nothing left but the chimney and a pile of ashes."

"How—"

"Gasoline. Here, smell my hands." She shoved them under his nose. They bore the acrid, undeniable smell of gasoline.

"But why?"

"I should've done it years ago."

"That doesn't answer the question. Why?"

"Evil things happened there. It was filled with demons and spirits. Now they're gone."

"So they died with Sam?"

"No, they're not dead. They've gone off to haunt someone else."

It would be pointless to pursue this discussion, Adam decided quickly. They should leave, maybe return to Memphis where he could get her back into recovery. And maybe therapy. He would stay with her and make sure she got help.

A dirty pickup truck entered the cemetery through the iron gates of the old section, and pattered slowly along the concrete path through the ancient monuments. It stopped at a small utility shed in a corner of the lot. Three black men slowly scooted out and stretched their backs.

"That's Herman," she said.

"Who?"

"Herman. Don't know his last name. He's been digging graves here for forty years."

They watched Herman and the other two across the valley of tombstones. They could barely hear their voices as the men deliberately went about their preparations.

Lee stopped the sniffing and crying. The sun was well above the treeline, its rays hitting directly in their faces. It was already warm. "I'm glad you came," she said. "I know it meant a lot to him."

"I lost, Lee. I failed my client, and now he's dead."

"You tried your best. No one could save him."

"Maybe."

"Don't punish yourself. Your first night in Memphis, you told me it was a long shot. You came close. You put up a good fight. Now it's time to go back to Chicago and get on with the rest of your life."

"I'm not going back to Chicago."

"What?"

"I'm changing jobs."

"But you've only been a lawyer for a year."

"I'll still be a lawyer. Just a different kind of practice."

"Doing what?"

"Death penalty litigation."

"That sounds dreadful."

"Yes, it does. Especially at this moment in my life. But I'll grow into it. I'm not cut out for the big firms."

"Where will you practice?"

"Jackson. I'll be spending more time at Parchman."

She rubbed her face and pulled back her hair. "I guess you know what you're doing," she said, unable to hide the doubt.

"Don't bet on it."

Herman was walking around a battered yellow backhoe parked under a shade tree next to the shed. He studied it thoughtfully while another man placed two shovels in its bucket. They stretched again, laughed about something, and kicked the front tires.

“I have an idea,” she said. “There’s a little café north of town. It’s called Ralph’s. Sam took me—”

“Ralph’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Sam’s minister was named Ralph. He was with us last night.”

“Sam had a minister?”

“Yes. A good one.”

“Anyway, Sam would take me and Eddie there on our birthdays. Place has been here for a hundred years. We’d eat these huge biscuits and drink hot cocoa. Let’s go see if it’s open.”

“Now?”

“Yeah.” She was excited and getting to her feet. “Come on. I’m hungry.”

Adam grabbed the headstone and pulled himself up. He hadn’t slept since Monday night, and his legs were heavy and stiff. The beer made him dizzy.

In the distance, an engine started. It echoed unmuffled through the cemetery. Adam froze. Lee turned to see it. Herman was operating the backhoe, blue smoke boiling from the exhaust. His two co-workers were in the front bucket with their feet hanging out. The backhoe lunged in low gear, then started along the drive, very slowly past the rows of graves. It stopped and turned.

It was coming their way.

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I was a lawyer once, and represented people charged with all sorts of crimes. Fortunately, I never had a client convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death. I never had to go to death row, never had to do the things the lawyers do in this story.

Since I despise research, I did what I normally do when writing a novel. I found lawyers with expertise, and I befriended them I called them at all hours and picked their brains. And it is here that I thank them.

Leonard Vincent has been the attorney for the Mississippi Department of Corrections for many years, and he opened his office to me. He helped me with the law, showed me his files, took me to death row, and toured me around the vast state penitentiary known simply as Parchman. He told me many stories that somehow found their way into this one. Leonard and I are still struggling with the moral perplexities of the death penalty, and I suspect we always will. Thanks also to his staff, and to the guards and personnel at Parchman.

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JOHN GRISHAM has written twenty-one novels, including the recent #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *The Associate* and *The Appeal*, as well as one work of nonfiction, *The Innocent Man*. He lives in Virginia and Mississippi. His new book from Doubleday is *Ford County: Stories*.

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