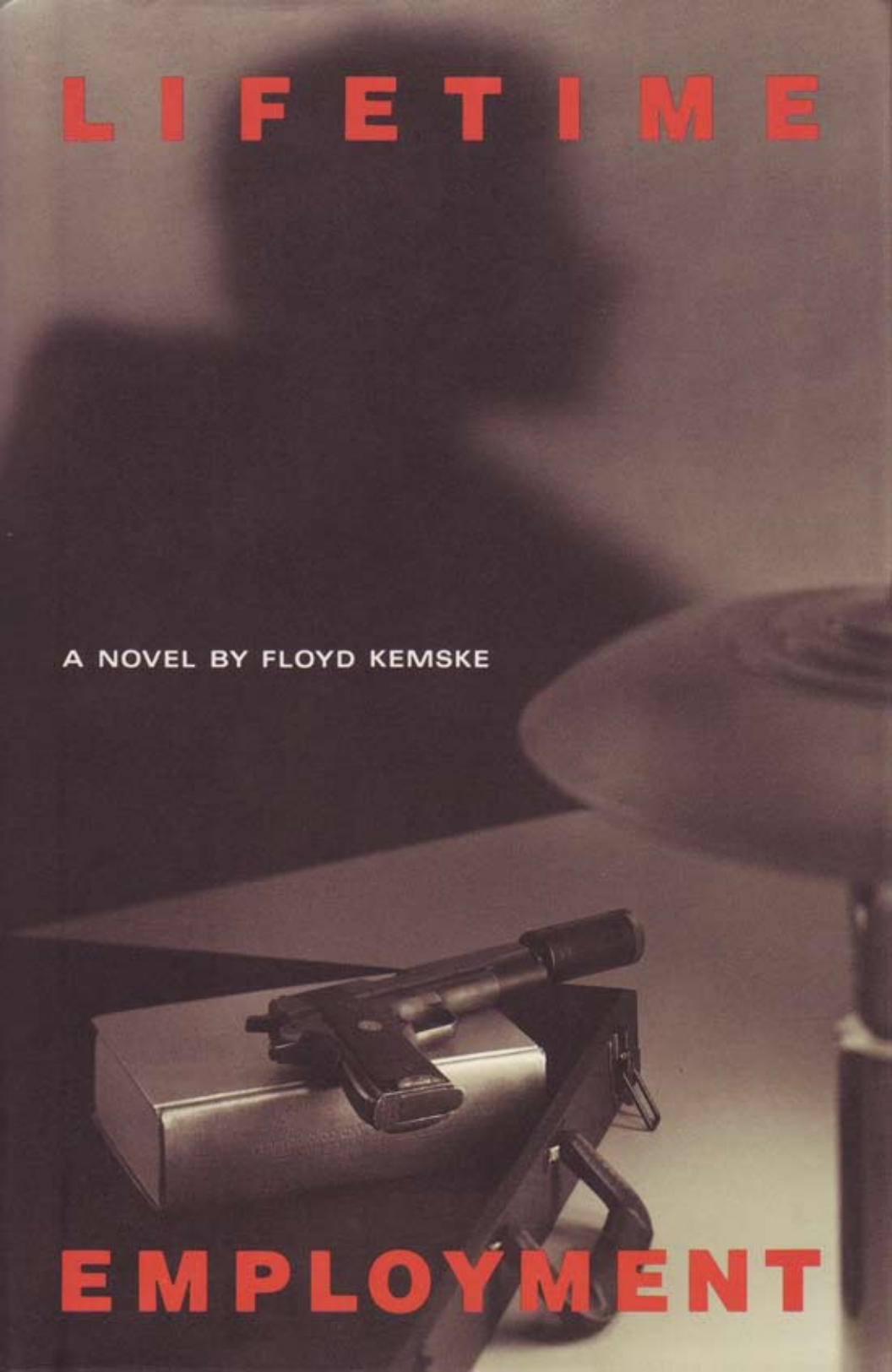


LIFETIME

A dark, moody photograph of a handgun resting on a metal block, with a vinyl record in the background. The scene is dimly lit, creating a somber and gritty atmosphere. The handgun is a semi-automatic, dark-colored, resting on a rectangular metal block. In the background, a vinyl record is visible, slightly out of focus. The overall color palette is dark, with shades of brown, black, and grey, accented by the red text.

A NOVEL BY FLOYD KEMSKE

EMPLOYMENT

Other Novels by Floyd Kemske

Labor Day
The Third Lion
Human Resources
The Virtual Boss

LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT

A Corporate Nightmare by

Floyd Kemske

Catbird Press

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Catbird Press
203-230-2391
www.catbirdpress.com
info@catbirdpress.com

Our books are distributed by
Independent Publishers Group

Kindle ISBN 0-945774-66-4
Sony ISBN 0-945774-67-2
Adobe ISBN 0-945774-68-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kemske, Floyd, 1947-
Lifetime Employment : a novel / by Floyd Kemske.
P. cm.
ISBN 0-945774-18-4 : \$19.95
I. Title
PS3561.E4226L54 1992
813'.54—dc20 92-16716

For
Robert P. Kemske (1919-1990)
who would have laughed
in all the right places

ONE

Gene was troubled by the leakage of other people's lives into his. On Monday evening, when he got home from work, there was a message on his answering machine for Franco. The caller said he was going to have Franco's legs broken if he didn't get the money. The answering machine was an older model, too dumb to know when it had received a wrong-number call, but it did record the caller's number. Given the man's tone of voice, however, Gene wasn't about to call him to tell him about his mistake. Was he now obligated to get in touch with Franco and warn him about his legs?

It wasn't impossible. He could call all the numbers resembling his and ask for Franco. If he stayed with his own exchange and limited himself to different configurations of his telephone number's four-digit suffix, that made four factorial possibilities, or twenty-four—twenty-three numbers to call, if he eliminated his own. Of course, there were other possibilities. Franco's number could be different from his by one digit. But that was only another thirty-six possibilities. If it was the same as his except for having two transposed digits, that only added five possibilities. All in all, he could probably find Franco in something fewer than sixty-four phone calls.

Was it worth his time? He was certain Franco would say yes, but Gene stewed over it for two days. Perhaps Franco's time would run out before Gene could finish making his decision and then the matter would be taken from his hands. Gene didn't mind having decisions made for

him that way. In fact, he usually preferred it to making them himself, regardless of the outcome.

On Wednesday, there was a message from another caller. This one was a man answering a classified ad for a bodyguard. The man had left his number and asked to be called back. Gene thought he should call the man back and tell him about his mistake. But he didn't feel good about the prospect of having a conversation with an out-of-work bodyguard, and he put it off. He had a vague feeling of guilt, as if he were failing Franco, who probably needed a bodyguard.

Gene had no idea how to patch up the leak that had sprung between Franco and him.

He was still thinking about it at work on Thursday, when Cynthia's people came around to the department and took away Lorraine. He had been working in his little office with the door open to the department's reception area. His office had no windows, so he had to keep the door open or it got stuffy. He was only an Assistant Manager. He couldn't get a window without a promotion. And he couldn't get a promotion without risking a great deal more interpersonal leakage than he thought he could tolerate. He had been an Assistant Manager for nearly ten years, and a little bit of stuffiness and a little less privacy were not too much to put up with for the comfort and security of relative anonymity. But some days were worse than others.

He was trying to make sense out of a very large novel, and he was having little success. For one thing, he couldn't keep it out of his mind that the book was over a thousand pages long and he was only on page seven, which was where he had been for the past thirty minutes. As near as he could tell, it was a story about a man having some difficulty getting to sleep, but the author didn't seem to be in any hurry to tell it. Sentences of heroic proportions described him tossing and turning in bed. Gene found he could only understand these great, panoramic sentences by scanning the

paragraph first for terminal punctuation. Once he knew where the sentence was to end, he would seek the subject and the predicate to determine its general drift. Then he would read it all quickly as a unit and step back from it mentally until it resolved itself into a thought.

It was an effective, if tedious, strategy for taking meaning from the book, but it was undermined by the sound of a clerk thumping papers with a rubber stamp out in the reception area. The stamping was just rhythmic enough—five beats to the measure—to keep coherent thought at bay. Thump thump. Thump-thump-thump. It made a base line for the chirping telephones and conversations that wavered in and out of hearing right outside his door.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

Thump.

“No, that refers to. . .” Thump. “. . .five business days.” Thump-thump-thump.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

There was another thousand-page volume to go after this one. Gene wondered what his wife had gotten out of this book and whether reading it all the way through was going to give him any insight into why she left. He hoped the narrator got out of bed before Volume Two. A familiar chime rang and the elevator doors rumbled open. Gene looked up to see a secretary from another department get off the employee elevator and walk toward the desks on the other side. The rubber stamp thumped again. Gene recognized the secretary as being from Finance, and he knew something was going on: support staff didn’t usually come over from Finance to Human Resources.

“Human Resources. Thank you for holding.” Thump.

The visitor passed out of earshot as well as view. Gene thought maybe the novel’s narrator was awake now. He was reliving some moments from his childhood. But it might have been a dream rather than a memory, because Gene couldn’t remember his getting out of bed. The whole book,

on the other hand, seemed to be about memories, so that's what it probably was.

Gene's eyes wandered up from the page, and he saw the visiting secretary get back on the elevator. The rubber stamping had stopped, and it was as if a blanket had been thrown over the department. Suddenly, there was no conversation. Gene had an eerie feeling when he realized the phones had stopped ringing, too. There were no sounds other than the building ventilation.

Then it sounded like everybody was speaking at once. No phones, no stamping, no equipment noises, just human voices, babbling. It sounded like a dozen simultaneous conversations with nothing in common other than their animation and excitement. Gene tried not to listen (they were nonexempts, after all), but as he was trying to figure out whether the narrator was awake or asleep, he picked out the phrase "Lambo's brakes failed."

He remembered that, two years before, Roger, the company's celebrated CEO, had bought himself a Lamborghini to drive his starlets around in. The car (known among the nonexempts as "Rambo the Lambo") figured prominently in a spread done on Roger by a popular magazine, the notoriety of which was resented by an executive staff who would have preferred to cultivate the company's low profile.

Partly because he had never seen Roger in person, Gene had bought the magazine and studied the article closely. There was a two-page photo spread. Roger, a broad smile on his Asian face, his arms crossed in front of him, leaned against the car, which crouched like a predator behind him. He had not looked like a man whose brakes would fail. Gene felt a vague kinship with him and his frank, open expression.

At the thought of Roger being crushed in his Lamborghini out on the highway, Gene felt like he'd lost something, which was a little silly, since he had never known

Roger personally. Still, resentment bubbled in him at the injustice of a random traffic fatality. That was when he realized with the clarity of inspiration that it was less likely Roger's brakes had failed than that he had walked in front of a truck, a truck named Cynthia. Even Gene, who so scrupulously maintained a cocoon of ignorance and indifference, knew the Executive Vice President was building a personal power base that would never appear on the company organization chart.

But the support staff chattering outside his door wouldn't suspect that. To them, "lifetime employment" meant something a lot longer than it meant to anybody on the executive staff. And nobody in management wanted to disabuse them of the idea.

As nonexempts, the support staff couldn't know the twisted mass of metal and rubber out on the highway signaled a change in course for the company. They were, in fact, unlikely to notice it even after the company had changed course. Nonexempts, as a rule, are not given to abstract thought and therefore have no sense of the strategic. Where Gene, as a manager (albeit a junior one), understood departmental goals and tried not to be involved with them, nonexempts were more or less unaware of them.

The elevator chimed, and all conversation out in the reception area stopped again when three men and a woman got off. They were Cynthia's outplacement specialists, bland-looking people, dressed impeccably in the corporate uniform of white shirt, dark gray suit, muted red necktie. They never said a word as they deployed themselves in two pairs across the reception area. One pair, the woman and a man wearing glasses with wire frames and aviator lenses, walked toward the short internal corridor leading to Lorraine's office. Gene was surprised at his desire to get up and go to his doorway to watch them, but he noticed the two remaining men were walking in his direction. He closed his book and slipped it

into the lower left-hand drawer of his desk, then lifted a sheet of paper from his desk to look at until they passed.

But they didn't pass. Staring at his paper, Gene felt them arrive at his doorway. His heartbeat picked up, and he noticed the paper was damp where he was holding it.

He laid the paper down gingerly and looked up slowly. The two men had stepped just inside and stationed themselves on either side of the doorway. They were not looking at him. There was barely enough room in there with Gene and the filing cabinets and the desk. There had never been so many people in his office, and the three of them were nearly as close as they would have been riding the subway together.

"Yes?" said Gene. But his voice cracked, and it came out more like "Yikes?"

Neither of the men answered. Through the doorway Gene caught a glimpse of the two other outplacement specialists and Lorraine. They led her to the elevators, and one of them, the man, carried her coat and briefcase. The reception area was silent.

Lorraine's escort were businesslike and matter-of-fact while they waited for the elevator. The blond woman looked around the department as if she were an interior decorator on holiday. The man in the aviator glasses checked his watch unobtrusively. Lorraine stared at the floor. If she were to look up, she would look right into Gene's doorway. Gene found himself hoping she wouldn't.

After what seemed like a week, the elevator arrived, and one of the outplacement specialists—the man with the aviator glasses—stepped into it. Lorraine, still staring at the floor, started to go in after him, then stopped and turned around. The woman grabbed her by the arm to turn her back toward the elevator. Lorraine looked around the department and when her gaze swept over Gene's doorway, her eyes stopped on him for a moment.

He thought she was about to say something when the outplacement specialist yanked her back around and shoved her into the elevator.

Gene thought he would remember the look on her face as long as he lived. In a way, he was annoyed by it. Why had she looked at him that way? She didn't have anything to say to him. She wasn't his supervisor. She was the Department Director, and in the scheme of things they were separated by another full level of management. What could she possibly have wanted from him in that final moment? Didn't she realize he had his own problems? He still had three books left on his list after he finished the one about the man tossing and turning in bed.

Gene looked from one of his guards to the other. "May I—" His voice cracked again, and he cleared his throat. "May I help you?"

Neither of the men said anything. They stood like impassive twins: pale, opaque eyes, perfect trouser creases, sidearm-sized bulges under their jackets. Gene's heart ran like a semiautomatic weapon. The men acted as if he weren't there, but he didn't want to test them by trying to leave.

The elevator door closed behind Lorraine and the two specialists, and nothing broke the stillness. No chattering from the clerks, no ringing telephones, no ca-chunking drawers of filing cabinets. Even the ventilation system seemed to have stopped. The guards stood at the door as fixed and unmovable as administrative overhead.

Gene's breath came with difficulty. The other elevator chimed. Its doors opened, and Cynthia walked into the reception area—alone—and strode rapidly toward his office. She did not appear to be armed.

Gene's throat began to contract, and he swallowed hard to keep it open. He could not avoid the thought that his employment was about to end, along with Lorraine's.

Cynthia had rich, gray hair with streaks of blond in it. It was full of character, and she wore it like a mane. The

grapevine had it that her hair style was one of the points of contention between her and Roger, who didn't think it very businesslike for an Executive Vice President. Of course, that was a rather minor difference compared to the disparate personal values that were said to divide them. As Cynthia approached, she stared straight at Gene with eyes that were spots of bright blue glaze on flawless ceramic. She smiled with her mouth, but the rest of her kept an attitude of intense concentration.

Gene swallowed again. He looked around for some escape in his windowless office. There was none. He stood slowly and pushed his chair out of the way. That gave him about two feet to his left if he wanted to dodge. But there really wasn't any place he could move to that was out of reach of one of the bland-looking men. There was nothing he could do but wait for events to unfold.

Cynthia radiated a ruthless grace, as if she were the eye of a storm that traveled everywhere she went. Winds of uncertainty died in her presence. He watched her entrance like a mouse hypnotized by a cobra.

She turned to her people and dismissed them with a nod. There was an awkward moment while she and one of the guards stepped in the same direction together once, then again, to make way for each other. She lost some of her grace in this dance, and in the flickering of her power, Gene regained a measure of his will, but not enough to act.

Cynthia finally grabbed the man by the shoulders and held him in place, then stepped out of his way. She did it without self-consciousness. She neither grimaced nor laughed, and her aura of authority filled the tiny office again. Gene had the self-control to continue standing, but emotionally he was being drawn and quartered—to fear, curiosity, helplessness, and (if he dared admit it to himself) a perverse and unprofessional sexual attraction to a woman who stared at him as appraisingly and frankly as if she'd just taken title to him.

She stood up against his desk and extended her hand over it; a warm smile opened her face below the opaque eyes. She was Gene's height, and her mane gave her about two inches on him. In his confused state, he wondered whether they'd be evenly matched in eighteen rounds. She would put him away easily, of course.

"Gene," she said, "I'm Cynthia Price."

"Yes," he said carefully. Her hand was firm; to hold it was to be plugged into her high-voltage confidence. But he yielded to decorum and let it go after a single shake. Her face gave no sign that he left her palm moist.

"I've come to congratulate you on your report," she said.

"Report?"

"Don't repeat me, Gene," she said. "The thing you wrote about ROI on the human asset."

ROI? Ah, return on investment. Gene had always been a little slow on abbreviations and code words. He had submitted that report three years before and had never heard anything. He wasn't aware anybody in the company had read it. Even Lorraine, may she rest in peace, had never said a word. Gene certainly didn't realize anyone had passed it on to the Executive Vice President. Just another sign of how difficult it was to control the leakage.

"I'm going to give you a chance to prove it was more than just managerial masturbation. I'm going to let you implement it."

She stood there staring at him, and he knew he was expected to respond. He wished he were still holding her hand; he wasn't functioning very well on his own power. "I'll need substantial resources," he stammered.

"You'll just have to see to that yourself," she said. "I'm not in a position to increase the Human Resources budget."

Gene realized he was being given responsibility for something, and panic struck him like a blow to the face. If Cynthia noticed he was falling apart, she gave no sign. "I'll

need you at a Department Directors meeting tomorrow morning,” she said.

“Directors?” he said.

“Don’t repeat me, Gene. If you’re a Director, you’ll have to attend Directors meetings.”

Gene didn’t speak, for fear he might repeat her again.

“There are going to be a number of changes in this company,” she said. “Things are going to be different around here from now on. We’re in this together. We’re a family. We have to act like one. Step one is recognition of our people and their achievements.”

Gene realized his shirt was damp against his body.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t thank me,” said Cynthia. “Just go where you’re told to go and do what you’re told to do. If I can count on that as the basis of our relationship, we’ll live happily ever after.”

And then she left. Her two outplacement specialists trailed behind her. Gene took a breath and thought it must be the first he had taken in half an hour.

When the elevator doors closed behind the three of them, Gene went to the Managers’ rest room. He only vomited once. He washed his face and rubbed it hard with a fresh towel. Then he combed his hair and allowed himself to believe he was still alive, a prelude to allowing himself to believe he had been named Department Director. He grabbed a second towel and rubbed his face with that one until it hurt. Adaptability had always been his strong suit, but he had a feeling this might be more than he could handle. This was what the management literature called a challenge. He hated challenges.

He stood in the rest room until his face stopped stinging. He was a Director. He looked in the mirror. His face was red from being rubbed so hard, and his hair stuck out in several places, despite the combing. His white shirt had gone limp and wrinkled from the perspiration. He didn’t

look like a Department Director. He would have to go get his shoes shined today.

A Director. Things in the company were going to be different from now on. The company was a family. What did that mean?

When he came out of the rest room, the clerks, secretaries, and admins were gathered in the reception area. He didn't feel any familial attachment to them. He knew some of them by name, but if he'd been asked to use their names just then, he would have been at a loss. The department's six managers were nowhere to be seen. They would doubtless emerge from their offices, blinking and tentative, only after they were sure the air was clear. Gene realized it would be his duty to convene them for a meeting about the company's new direction. He wished he knew what it was.

He looked around at the nonexempt faces, and he didn't know what to say. They stared at him without moving. They reminded him of antelopes he had once seen in a film about lions. He cleared his throat and looked around the room.

"There's been a reorganization," he croaked.

He thought he discerned a little twitching here and there, but when he looked around, they weren't moving, just staring at him.

"The department has been restructured to emphasize return on investment in the human asset."

Forty-odd pairs of staring eyes.

"I'll let you know the details very soon."

He wondered what they could be thinking.

"Does anyone have any questions?" He looked from one side of the group to the other. There was a hand raised: a young woman dressed like a second-hand-store mannequin, seated at a desk on which were piled two stacks of papers beside a rubber stamp.

"Yes?"

“Are you going to collect our timesheets today?”

The forty-odd pairs of eyes shifted to focus on her.

“Yes,” said Gene.

“Some of us have problems with them,” she said.

Gene could feel the group coalescing behind her, as if she were some kind of spokesperson. He doubted she intended anything of the sort, but groups can be volatile, and Gene suddenly understood he was in a delicate position. He was responsible for these people. The panic returned. He fought it. In the distance, he could hear the young woman elaborating her position on timesheets.

“The bus was a half hour late, and—”

Gene interrupted her. “Why don’t you see me in my office about that,” he yammered. He knew there was panic in his voice; he just wanted to dismiss them and get away before they sniffed it out. The young woman got up from her desk and started to walk toward Lorraine’s office, and as she neared the short corridor, a strange thing happened. He could feel their support for her dissipate, as she changed from a spokesperson to an employee with a personal problem. And then he realized it wasn’t Lorraine’s office she was walking toward. It was his office.

“Have a seat,” he called after her. “I’ll be there in a moment.”

He saw her nod and walk into the little interior corridor. He realized his panic was gone. He was actually in control of the situation. A small, warm orange spot formed in the vicinity of his solar plexus. He had handled his first departmental problem. He was pretty good at this.

“Any more questions?”

A telephone chirped. Someone spoke.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

A file drawer clicked shut. A stapler crunched. The telephone chirped again.

“Human Resources. Please hold.”

Gene shrugged and walked jauntily over to the desk the young woman had just vacated and picked up the rubber stamp that was lying there. He dropped it into the wastebasket.

TWO

Someone once plagiarized Tolstoy by saying happy companies are all alike and every unhappy company is unhappy in its own way. It is no less true for being plagiarized, and the tiny subchapter-S corporation known as Growth Services, Inc. was uniquely unhappy. It had only six employees, but its misery was as great as if it had six hundred.

The night the company landed the Parks Commission contract, Ira Growth, one of the firm's two partners, had the inspiration to write a bonus check for the company's young Sales Manager, Roger Yamada, who had won the contract. Growth was not a man to ponder decisions; when he got the idea, he went directly across the hall from his dingy little office to the dingy little office of his partner to get the company checkbook.

He rarely wrote checks, and he had to look in three desk drawers before he actually found them. He didn't fill out the check stub, and he didn't even look at the balance when he wrote out a check for twelve hundred dollars. Growth was not very good with the details of financial management. He went straight to Yamada's office with the check in his hand.

In Yamada's office, the young Sales Manager was sitting and talking quietly with Kennedy Skinner, the firm's other partner, about the payment provisions of the new contract. Yamada's office was a symphony of the grime, threadbare furniture, and debris so characteristic of low-rent office space, a condition he mitigated by keeping it dark. The only light was the glow of a single desk lamp trained on

the contract itself in the center of the desk. The two men paused in their conversation when Growth appeared in the doorway.

Growth, a man as loud as he was short, joined in the conversation like a howitzer joining in small arms fire. "Why do you keep it so dark in here?" he boomed. He did not wait for an answer, but thrust the check over the desk at Yamada. "Here, Roger."

"What's that, Ira?" said Skinner's soft voice from the darkness beside Yamada's desk.

"It's for Roger," said Growth.

Yamada took the check and looked at it. "What's this for, Ira?" He sat up straight in his chair, which brought him close to eye-level with Growth, and looked directly at him.

Lacking the slightly embarrassed delicacy that fully civilized people have about money, Growth stared back at Yamada frankly. "It's a bonus," he boomed, "for landing the Parks Commission contract." His vest was open, and his necktie was loosened. He reached under the waistband of his trousers and scratched his stomach. "That's a tenth of your salary," he added.

"A bonus?" said Skinner. There was a trace of alarm in his soft voice. He expected some difficulty making the rent that month, and a bonus was something he hadn't planned on.

"That's very generous, Ira," said Yamada. He meant it.

"You deserve it, Roger," said Growth. "We would have gone under without that account."

"We still might," Skinner put in as he rose out of the darkness. He was as tall as he was quiet, and he loomed in the shadows. "May I talk with you for a moment, Ira?"

Growth shrugged and turned to go back to his office; Skinner followed him down the dingy hallway. Skinner shut the door behind him, but only because it made him feel better. It gained them no privacy, since Growth's voice was easily heard through a door.

Skinner threw up his hands. "For God's sake, Ira, I'm going to have to find a way to put off the landlord this month because of that check."

"So put him off," said Growth.

"I get to put people off and take the heat while you get to make grandstand gestures. Is that it?" said Skinner. "We have responsibilities here."

Growth just shook his head and smiled as if he were having a conversation with an idiot.

Skinner pushed gamely on. "To our employees, to our vendors, to our customers, to—"

Growth interrupted the recitation. "—to our community, to our families, to our pets, to our intestinal parasites."

Skinner didn't speak for a moment. Then he began quietly and slowly, as if he were giving Growth the diagnosis of a terminal illness. "We can't afford the payment on the PDP computer this month. This will be the third one we've missed, and the leasing company will probably come to take the machine away. I can't help it. There just isn't enough money."

Growth looked serious. "What are you talking about? We don't have a business without that machine."

"There's only so much money to go around," said Skinner. "It's not my fault. The money you gave Roger would have covered the payment."

"How could it be the third one?" said Growth. "Haven't you been paying those bills?"

"It's not my fault," said Skinner. "You were the one who wrote that check."

It was a little bit of a reach for him, but Growth's right fist shot out and connected with the taller man's nose. There was a cracking sound, and Skinner reeled back and fell into the ancient sofa next to Growth's desk, a jumble of elbows and knees.

“Nobody will take that machine away, Kennedy,” he said.

Skinner was sprawled on the sofa, blood running from his nose onto his shirt. He stared at Growth. “You goddamned barbarian,” he hissed. He took a white handkerchief from the inside breast pocket of his jacket and held it to his nose. It turned red almost immediately.

“Kennedy, I—” Growth stepped toward the taller man.

“Stay away from me,” Skinner said through his handkerchief. He said it with such command that Growth stopped.

Skinner stood up suddenly and left. Growth watched him through the open door. Skinner stormed down the corridor into the little reception area, then disappeared around the corner.

Growth wished he could take back what had just happened, but he could not deny a bubbling excitement deep inside him when he thought about what might happen next.

THREE

Gene had been a manager long enough to realize that few of the nonexempts really cared what happened among the management staff. Herd animals that they were, they accepted occasional reorganizations as a hazard of nature, like a brush fire. They were cautious, momentarily frightened, and then grateful for its passing. Their awareness of what had happened to Lorraine was just below the level of consciousness. And why not? What difference did it make to them where she had gone? That's part of what it meant to be a nonexempt: no leakage. From their standpoint, managers paid themselves large salaries and took their chances. None of it had any effect on the nonexempts except to change the names and faces of the people they worked for.

Gene himself took the same attitude toward reorganizations, until now. This was the first one that ever affected him personally. Before, they blew through the department like tornadoes and randomly took away managers who were out and about. He would take shelter in his office until they'd blown over. Until now.

The young woman with the timesheet problem wanted to explain it to Gene in some detail. She sat across the desk from him and spoke rapidly. "The bus was late," she said. "I don't think I should be penalized for that."

Gene did, but he had other things on his mind. "Is this your timesheet?" he said. He had to stretch in order to reach across the expansive desk and gently pull the paper from her hand.

“Yes,” she said. “See where I wrote in the starting time? I wrote down nine A.M.”

“Fine,” said Gene. He dropped the paper on the desk, took a pen from the holder, and signed his name. The ink flowed easily from the pen, which had a balance and heft that conformed to his grip. Lorraine had obviously furnished the office without cutting corners. He pushed the paper back toward the young woman.

She had to reach a little to retrieve it. She picked it up without looking at it. “I didn’t get here until nine-fifteen,” she said.

“Fine,” said Gene. He pushed himself up against the high back of his leather-covered executive chair. After a couple seconds, small servos whined unobtrusively, and the chair molded itself to his body. Gene could barely remember what it was like being an Assistant Manager.

“But I started thinking about my work at nine,” she said.

“Fine,” said Gene. He glanced at her, but she was dwarfed in his vision by the expanse of desk surface between them and the richness of the appointments around her. “You can go.”

“But I want to finish explaining,” she said.

“It’s not necessary,” said Gene. He glanced over at the sitting room, with its coffee table and two leather-covered sofas, at the other end of the office. This could be a very comfortable place to catch up on one’s reading. “You can go.”

“I really did start thinking about work at nine,” she said. “That’s real work, isn’t it?”

“I believe you,” said Gene.

“I mean, it’s the same thing I would have done here in the office. I just did it on the bus, is all.”

“Please,” said Gene. He gestured toward the thick mahogany door behind her. “I have work to do.”

“I don’t think people should be penalized for things they can’t control,” she said.

Gene, who felt she was one of those things, agreed with her. “Neither do I,” he said.

“It would be one thing if I overslept,” she said, “but the bus was late.”

Gene glanced at the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows (windows!) to his right. “Please go,” he said.

She might have looked hurt, but she was such an unprepossessing item in the midst of the imposing luxury of the office that Gene didn’t really notice. He got up and walked toward the windows, where the sunlight streamed in to brighten the crimson of the oriental rug that lay tastefully angled on the beige carpeting. As he stood next to the cool glass, looking at the company’s campus-like grounds eight floors below, he heard the door click shut. He turned around and realized the young woman was gone.

He hoped he had solved her problem to her satisfaction, but he didn’t really care. He slowly turned himself three hundred and sixty degrees. He had been in Lorraine’s office before, of course, but never as its owner. He hadn’t realized how very large it was.

The leather-covered furniture was Chinese red, the massive desk was polished bobinga. Even with the heavy mahogany door closed, the air remained cool and breathable. He walked around the perimeter of the office, along the windows, along the bookshelves, along a stretch of wall, into the little kitchenette. The kitchenette was larger than his old office had been. It had a sink, a refrigerator, a small stove, and another doorway. He opened the door. There was a bathroom with a toilet, a sink, and a shower. There were some cosmetics in the cabinet over the sink. He flushed the toilet. It was quiet, and it didn’t even make plumbing noises when he walked back into the office and sat down on the sofa in the little sitting area. He put his feet up on the coffee table. The posture was not in keeping with his

position in the organization, so he put them back on the floor.

He sat for a moment, then slapped the palms of his hands on his knees and got up to walk around the room again. He walked past the desk and went to each window and looked out, so he could compare the different views. The drapes were heavy and beige. He pulled the cord and they closed. The room went nearly pitch black. He opened them again, and the sunlight came streaming back. He left them open.

He sat down in the leather-covered chair behind the desk. It had generous arms and a back that came up so high he could rest his head against it. He could lean it back, swivel it around, or push it about on its casters while he was sitting in it. It never made a sound, except for the faint zee-zee-zee it made when it adjusted itself to him. He realized after a moment that when he moved around in the chair, it remained inactive, but that it adjusted itself to his body whenever he remained still for a few moments. This adjustment interval seemed to be the same whenever he moved. It was the most remarkable chair he had ever sat in. They would have to kill him to get him out of it. But then he remembered Lorraine and realized that was indeed the most expedient way to empty it.

It occurred to him that a promotion was not necessarily a good thing. He had always wanted to be an executive, a secret wish he never shared with anybody since the chance of its fulfillment was so remote. Now that he was one, the reminders of risk were everywhere. Like Lorraine's appointment book. It was open and at a funny angle on the desk, as if she'd been making a note in it when Cynthia's people arrived. Gene looked at the appointment book. There was only one item written on the two-page spread. It was for Tuesday, three weeks hence, at 10:00 A.M. It said "Vet." She would never keep that appointment. Gene shivered.

He walked back to the window and looked out. The hopes and fears of the rest of humanity seemed so remote at this height. Lorraine didn't protect herself. She didn't attach herself to the right person. If she'd been under Cynthia's protection, as Gene was now, she would still be here.

He went through the drawers of the desk. In the lower right-hand one, he found a pair of stockings (taupe) still in the package, and a half box of those softener sheets you put into a dryer with your laundry. He made a mental note to give the stockings to Frannie. He would keep the softener sheets for himself. They're good for taking the static out of your pantlegs on dry winter days. You rub them up and down your over-the-calf socks.

On one of the shelves across from the desk, at eye level to anyone sitting in the chair, was a framed color photo of a cat. Gene thought it must be the creature Lorraine had intended to take to the vet three weeks from now. He thought about it waiting at her house for her to come home. He wondered if he should stop around and feed it or something. More leakage. He stood up and walked over to the photo. He took it, frame and all, from the shelf and tossed it into the wastebasket beside the desk.

* * *

The next morning, when it was time to go up to the ninth floor for the Department Directors meeting, Gene was sitting in the high-backed chair in his spacious office. He had left word with Helen, the senior admin, that he wasn't to be disturbed. He had the enormous novel on his lap. He still hadn't been able to make any real sense out of it, and so now he was amusing himself by changing positions and letting the chair adjust to him. He looked at his watch, which had a second hand, and timed the chair's reactions. He put it through five adjustments, timed each one, and

wrote the results in Lorraine's appointment book. Then he averaged the times. The chair had a mean adjustment interval of four point eight seconds. It was apparently not interested in conforming to any position he adopted more briefly than that. It was a thoughtful strategy: flexible without being fickle. Gene felt he could learn from this chair.

He looked at his watch and saw he had five minutes to get up to the ninth floor for the meeting. His stomach bobbed around inside him like a buoy in a storm. He closed the book and tossed it into his desk drawer, then stood up and checked his coat pockets for things he might need in the meeting: a pen, a calculator, a handkerchief. He grabbed his time-management notebook and left. He would have liked to prepare more, but he didn't know how.

Despite its name, the Directors meeting included Vice Presidents as well as Directors. Cynthia was the only one allowed to bring staff assistants, of which there were two. Gene recognized them: the woman who had manhandled Lorraine the day before and the man with the aviator glasses. They were standing silently at the door when the various Directors arrived at the executive conference room. Gene wondered what kind of job descriptions Cynthia had written for her assistants, and whether they were hourly or exempt staff. Their duties, which seemed to center mostly on personnel intimidation, seemed appropriate for exempt status; it was not the kind of work you could entrust to support staff.

The conference room was so well-appointed that it induced a hush. Conversations ended abruptly at the double-doored threshold as soon as people waded into the sea-blue carpet and looked around at the polished walnut paneling. Paintings with individual halogen lights over them—seascapes, mostly—adorned the walls. There were electrified candle sconces illuminated to a soft setting. The table, of the

size and stability of an aircraft carrier, was surrounded by chairs with velvet upholstery that matched the carpet.

Gene sank into a well-padded chair and looked around. There were seven other participants. A Director for each of the company's other four departments and three Vice Presidents. Eight people, counting himself. Cynthia would always have the tie-breaking vote. Not that anything would ever be put to a vote. Gene doubted the group would even go for consensus on most issues. That wasn't Cynthia's style; besides, she could break a tie with a glance.

Nobody seemed to feel any more at ease than he did. He should have recognized some of the others from the photos in the last annual report, but every face in the room was unfamiliar to him. He wondered if they were all replacements, like him. Cynthia's takeover might well be the biggest reorganization in the history of the company.

One of the staff assistants closed the double doors. The Directors were all sitting around the conference table studying their laps. But there was a movement on the other side of the table, and Gene looked up to see a woman pushing her chair back and standing up unsteadily. Her face was the color of the company's stationery—the special gray stuff that was reserved for letters to new hires and financial auditors. She turned and walked a dozen steps toward the door, where the man in the aviator glasses intercepted her. With the bearing of a secret service operative and the smile of a flight attendant, he said a few words to her. The woman nodded and turned awkwardly around. The specialist took her elbow and helped her back to her chair. He made it all look completely natural.

The woman sank into her chair as if most of her skeletal structure had been removed.

Like everyone else in the room, Gene averted his eyes from the woman. There was a sheet of paper and a pencil on the table in front of him. An agenda. It said there was to be a status report from each department.

Gene realized he was the only one there from the Human Resources department, and he wasn't prepared to give a report.

The staff assistants opened the doors again, and Cynthia walked in. She went directly to the empty chair at the head of the conference table, where a half-dozen papers were already arranged. Gene felt her extraordinary presence.

She brought with her a combination of excitement, fear, and the sort of certainty that seems to outline everything with a heavy black line. It was a feeling he hadn't had since he'd quit going to church at the age of fourteen.

"Good morning, people," she said as she sat down and pulled her chair up to the table. She glanced at her papers as she said it. Even her attitude of bored preoccupation was electrifying.

Anybody else might have spent some time on team-building and on getting the Directors' buy-in for the reorganization, but Cynthia had come up through Finance, where they didn't go in for touchy-feely. She got down to business directly.

"The first phase of our reorganization is complete," she said, "but some positions remain unfilled. I need a summary from each department on personnel and positions. Let's start with Human Resources." She turned toward Gene and stared at him.

Gene started to speak, but realized he had nothing to say. He looked down at the agenda in front of him. There was nothing on it to prompt him.

"We need to know the strength and readiness of your department, Gene," said Cynthia patiently. "How many people do you have down there right now?"

Gene looked up and found everybody in the room staring at him as if they were nonexempts. "We have—" His voice squeaked. He stopped, cleared his throat in the silence, and then started again. "We have forty-three nonexempts and six managers, counting me."

“Note the span of control, people,” said Cynthia. She looked first to one side, then the other. “I want to see every department in this company meet the standard that has been set in Human Resources. Seven point one six. Many of you are averaging three to five subordinates per manager. Gene is the only one here who is really stretching his management staff. Good job, Gene.”

Gene realized that he had not only survived his first departmental report, but that he had been commended by Cynthia. He could feel himself swelling inside. At that moment, he would have done anything the woman asked him to. But she didn’t ask him to do anything. She asked the Director next to him to report on the status of the Marketing Department.

Cynthia questioned some of the Directors closely, so that the reports went on for an hour. Gene noted with satisfaction that none of the other Directors received a commendation, and none of the Vice Presidents ever spoke at all. He was feeling smug by the time Cynthia called on the woman who had tried to leave. She had recovered somewhat. She turned out to be the Director of Information Services.

“Our nonexempt positions are all filled,” she said. “We’ll be needing three Supervisors and a Group Manager in the next month.”

Cynthia consulted some notes. “Does that include the situation in Operations, Sarah?”

“Situation?” Sarah looked cautious.

“Don’t repeat me, Sarah.” Cynthia looked at the notes again. “Operations staff is down fifty percent in the past year. What’s going on down there?”

“Well. . .” Sarah adjusted the knot of her necktie. “. . .we’re going to distributed processing, and—”

“Sarah,” Cynthia interrupted, “don’t answer me with technical mumbo-jumbo. Do you know why you are losing people down there?”

Sarah's eyes fell to the table. "I'll look into it, Cynthia."

"You do that," said Cynthia. "Gene's got enough on his plate without having to recruit a lot of chip heads right now."

The sound of his name passed like a current into Gene's body. He looked over at Sarah. She said nothing. She just stared into her lap.

Cynthia looked at her watch. "Let me just wind this up." She looked around the room, first at Gene, then at each of the seven other managers. "I don't know if any of you realizes just how deep our trouble is. We've been allowed to drift, and our values have eroded. We have forgotten that we are a family here."

She stood up and paced back and forth at the end of the room. "Family," she said, "means we look out for each other. We help each other. Our personal welfare isn't as important as the welfare of the family. We accept each other unconditionally, and each of us is secure in the support of the family. It will not be easy changing our attitudes and our behavior, but I am sure we can do it."

She stopped pacing and looked around the room. She put her hands on the back of her empty chair and leaned against it, looking down and addressing herself, apparently, to its seat. "The first rule of this family is go where you're told to go and do what you're told to do. You master that part and you're more than halfway to success."

She looked up and around in the silence. "OK, people. Let's get this company back on track." Then she turned and walked straight for the door. The man in aviator glasses opened it for her, and as he did so, a soft breeze lifted the corner of one of the sheets of paper that were spread out at the end of the conference table.

When Gene got back to Human Resources, Helen was gone and Frannie had moved into the department's power desk. It was the largest desk in the reception area, it had more open space around it than any of the others, and it was situated near the short corridor to the Director's office.

Gene never failed to be surprised at how effectively the nonexempts adapted to situations without even being told. He wondered what kind of showdown had taken place between Frannie and Helen. It would not have been violent. Nonexempts were never violent. In his mind's eye, he saw Frannie walk up to the desk and stare at Helen while she gathered her things and left. Then he decided he would rather not think about it. He was just glad Frannie had handled the matter on her own, and that his intervention had not been required.

Frannie had been Gene's admin, and his only subordinate, for four years. Even though he was the lowliest manager in the department, she had never tried to attach herself to anyone else. Gene prized her loyalty. As nearly as he could without letting her life leak all over him, he loved her. He had thought, from time to time, about the possibility of intimacy with her and had even invited her to dinner one night a couple months after his wife had left.

They went to a restaurant known for its veal piccata. Through the appetizers, salad, and entree, Frannie explained in painstaking detail her wedding plans. Gene gleaned nothing of these plans beyond the fact she was marrying someone named William. Gene wasn't very good at feigning interest, but Frannie's enthusiasm apparently kept her from noticing. She talked so incessantly he never had the chance to suggest they get a room together for the night. Gene hadn't realized veal piccata was so sour. He didn't like it very much.

Shortly after the dinner, he noticed a series of weepy telephone conversations, but he didn't ask about them. Frannie, for her part, never let them interfere with her work,

and she had the decorum to keep them unobtrusive. He had never tried taking her to dinner again. He didn't want to chance hearing that her wedding had been called off; he thought it would be too painful a story for her to tell. Eventually, she seemed to put it all behind her, but she never quite resumed all her sparkle from the old days.

Frannie looked up when he arrived at her desk.

"Hi, Gene," she said.

It was her habitual greeting with him. Gene no longer laughed at it. He had once asked her if she was saying hello or advising him on dental care, but she had not understood. He explained that the way she said it sounded like "hygiene," but her normal alert expression fogged over ever so slightly, and he just shrugged and dropped it.

"Frannie," he said, "there are going to be a lot of changes around the company, and I am going to be involved. I have to rely on you to keep me organized."

Frannie opened an appointment book and poised herself over it with a pen.

"Good," said Gene. "I'm glad we understand each other. Please contact all the managers in the department and ask them to come to a meeting with me Monday morning. We'll meet in the department conference room."

She pulled a binder from her desk caddy and opened it beside the calendar book.

"Let's make it ten o'clock," said Gene.

Frannie studied the binder. "The conference room is already reserved. Kevin's got it all day for the HMO information meetings."

"Oh," said Gene, chagrined at his loss of momentum. He didn't know what to do.

He walked around her desk, leaned down, and looked at her binder, as if to verify Kevin's meeting. She was, of course, correct. He stood up straight again and noticed she was staring at him expectantly. He hadn't expected to have to make a decision.

“Tell Kevin to change the time of his meeting,” he said with his most decisive-sounding voice. Then he added, “Frannie, I want you at this meeting, too.”

Frannie smiled again, a little warily this time. She was a nonexempt, but she was going to have to get used to interacting with people at the management level. Being able to do so confidently and easily would be important in the months ahead. Besides, Gene didn’t want to have to be alone with the managers.

He turned toward the short corridor that led to his office. He looked down it and saw the nameplate on the door with Lorraine’s name on it. He stopped.

“Frannie, call Maintenance and tell them to come up here and change the nameplate on that door.”

It was, after all, his door.

FOUR

When Gene got home from work that evening, he opened his mailbox and found upwards of thirty direct-mail catalogs. He pulled them awkwardly out of the box, with his briefcase dangling from two free fingers (which was hard on the fingers, owing to the weight of the thousand-page novel in the briefcase). Then he shifted the stack of catalogs from one cradling arm to the other while he tried to keep hold of his briefcase and to maneuver his key into the front door. Twisting the key and pushing the door simultaneously was a complicated procedure with an armload of catalogs and a heavy briefcase. It took four tries, then the door swung open an inch or two just as the catalogs threatened to cascade from his grasp all over his porch. He hugged them closer to him as he stuck a foot in the door, then he waddled, hunched over his armload, through the doorway. His briefcase banged repeatedly against the storm door as he made his way in.

As he pushed the door shut behind him with a hip, the catalogs finally spilled all over the foyer. It was a Friday, his heaviest direct-mail day. He got to his knees and gathered them into a stack to throw them away. He didn't bother looking at them.

Sometimes he wondered what psychographic group the catalog publishers had assigned him to. Not that it mattered. He couldn't remember ever having looked at one.

He quickly riffled through them to make sure he would not be throwing away any other mail with them. There wasn't much chance of that, he knew, but one envelope did slip out. He stared at it where it lay on the floor. It was

addressed to him personally, but it had no return address. He knew it must be from Harvey. He left it on the floor as he got to his feet with the stack of catalogs to take them to the trash. His trash can in the garage was already full of catalogs from the week's mail. He set his stack next to the can. He would have to get a bigger trash can sometime, although it was doubtful he could keep up. He was already up to a thirty-gallon one.

He went back into the foyer to get his briefcase and the letter, both of which he took with him to his little office off the living room. When he set the briefcase on the desk and dropped the letter beside it, he saw that the little light on his telephone answering machine was blinking. He reached down and pressed the play button.

A male voice came from the machine. "The deal's off, Franco," it said. The carton-closing sound of a connection being broken signified the caller was a man of few words. Franco's business seemed to be taking a bad turn, and Gene felt a momentary sympathy. He shook it off. He was glad Franco was a stranger.

He picked up the letter. Harvey always sent his report in an envelope with no return address. Gene thought the practice a little paranoid, but maybe it wasn't so surprising in a man who was paid to follow people and spy on their personal activities.

He opened the letter quickly. It was a book title: *The Cooking of Provincial France*. Gene sighed. He wondered if he could skip this one. Surely he wouldn't learn anything about his wife by reading recipes.

He pulled a composition book from the upper drawer of his desk and carefully wrote the title on the first page, where it joined another dozen titles, three of which he hadn't finished yet. That put him four titles behind. He wondered if this was such a good idea Harvey had. But then, it didn't matter if it was good. It was the *only* idea he had. Harvey had followed Gene's wife for months and had

never been able to report anything more exciting than a trip to the public library, a practice she apparently engaged in constantly. All in all, it was pretty uninformative, and Gene was about to dismiss Harvey when Harvey suggested he could get the record of the transactions on his wife's library card. Gene had to agree that if he read all the books she read, it was bound to offer some clue as to her state of mind. He had no idea how Harvey could get those records. He just hoped it was legal.

Gene sighed again. He knew he wouldn't be able to finish the book about the man in bed this weekend. He had to prepare for his Monday meeting. It was all very frustrating. He wished he had never written that report on human assets.

It wasn't just the preparation time he resented. If he were completely honest with himself—and he always was—he was a little bit afraid of meeting with his managers. He had met with them many times before, of course, but never as their boss. While he would obviously be under Cynthia's protection for a time, it was always possible one of them might want to risk taking him out early, before he was completely established in his Directorship. Besides, he had never run a meeting before.

He went to work on his presentation right after dinner. It turned out to be one of the dullest evenings he had ever spent, although a part of him knew it probably compared favorably to spending an evening reading about a man stuck in bed.

He finished making his notes at ten P.M. He looked them over one more time, then put on his noise cancelers and went to bed.

He lay in bed in the silence created by the noise cancelers, staring at the dark ceiling. It was the first evening in several weeks that he hadn't worked on his reading list. He wondered if he could somehow reverse his promotion and sink back into the security of his Assistant Managership.

Otherwise, he would get further and further behind on his reading list. He fell slowly into a frustrated and fitful sleep.

Gene spent the entire weekend alternating between preparing his remarks and reading about the man in bed. By the time he was ready to retire on Sunday night, he was capable of running the management meeting in his sleep. He put on his noise cancelers, propped his head up with some pillows, and took the large novel from the night table. He opened to a page on which the man was remembering a magic lantern that had been in his bedroom when he was a child. It was confusing because Gene didn't know what a magic lantern was, and he wasn't sure if the story had taken a turn toward the fantastic or if a magic lantern was some kind of artifact from the time the story was written.

He closed the book and turned off the light. It was difficult enough getting to sleep these days without having to worry about this man's insomnia as well.

Gene was unaware of anything until he felt the gentle, periodic shaking of his bed signifying his alarm. He returned to consciousness slowly, but the bed was persistent and doubtless willing to prod him on into the next week if it had to. Groggy, he reached over in the darkness and flicked the switch on top of the little alarm box. He rolled over on his back to lie and think for a minute or two before getting up.

The bed shook again, and he realized it wasn't the alarm but his telephone. He looked at the time display on the box. It read 2:13 A.M. The bed shook again. He slipped the noise cancelers from his ears and down around his neck. Sounds rushed in from everywhere: a creaking from his house's heating system, a car on the street outside, the telephone's pleasant warble. He reached over and picked up the receiver.

"Hello," he whispered.

"You're fucking dead, Franco."

"But I'm—"

The line went dead, so he didn't bother finishing his explanation. He stared at the telephone in the glow of the digital clock for a moment. Then he replaced the receiver and pushed the noise cancelers back up over his ears. He lay back down on the bed. Franco was in trouble now, and the peculiar logic of the dead of night told him the man's difficulties would spill over on him, for good or ill. But he couldn't hold on to the train of thought as he slipped back into oblivion.

In the morning, while he assembled his breakfast, Gene found himself wondering about his relationship with Franco. Was there some cosmic force that tied their fates together, that dragged Gene deeper and deeper into company advancement as a result of Franco's difficulties? He pulled a small bowl from the shelf and took a box of cornflakes from the cabinet.

The morning radio program was refuting another rumor about a consumer product. It was not true, said the announcer, that a job lot of Opaque Gleam toothpaste had been contaminated with cyanide. The announcer was followed by a sound bite from a company spokesman explaining that no one knew how the rumor started, but that it wasn't true. Gene set down his cornflakes and bowl, went into his little office, got his notebook, and wrote in it "Opaque Gleam Toothpaste" and put a check mark next to it. He didn't think all the product contamination rumors were true, only the ones that were refuted on the radio.

He went back into the kitchen, opened the cornflakes box, and began to pour the cereal into his bowl. He heard a clink and looked down at his cornflakes. There was a coin nestled in the cereal. He picked it up and looked at it. It wasn't in particularly good condition, and he could barely read the inscription. It was Mexican, a fifty-centavo piece. He weighed it in his hand. He realized there was a smile on his face. He had found money in his cornflakes.

Gene looked over the cornflakes box thoroughly to see if it said something about a prize inside or a contest promotion. There were a lot of slogans about cornflakes, an extensive list of ingredients (he never realized there was so much stuff in cornflakes), and a recipe for some kind of snack to be made with cornflakes and marshmallows. There was nothing about contests or promotions or Mexican coins. That made it even more special. It was unintentional. It was good luck. There was no accounting for it. It was just good luck.

This was a strange experience for Gene. He slipped the coin into his pants pocket and went back into the bedroom to finish getting dressed. Picking out a white shirt and a red necktie, Gene couldn't help but think about what a strange place the world had become. Franco got death threats and hired a bodyguard, and Gene got promoted and found money in his cornflakes. It was almost as if their destinies were tied together in a sort of inverse symmetry. Gene pulled the big end of the necktie down until the little end was just at the label on the underside. It was hopeless superstition, and Gene was not a superstitious person, but the fifty-centavo piece was a presence in his pants pocket, and it spoke to him of a magical place far away. He hadn't realized his cornflakes were made in Mexico. It didn't say that on the box.

He took his keys, comb, and change holder from the top of his dresser and put them in his left pocket. He left the Mexican coin alone in his right pocket. He skipped breakfast. He didn't particularly want to eat cornflakes made at a factory with such poor quality control that employees could lose their pocket change in the product. But his stomach hardly bothered him, and when he arrived at the office he felt good with the fifty-centavo piece alone in his pants pocket.

He decided to drop into his old office and get a copy of the report that had been responsible for his promotion, if

he could find it. The cubbyhole office was of a size that could be completely searched in thirty minutes; it took him the full half-hour to find the report. It was in a file folder buried under a stack of trade magazines in a basket on his credenza labeled “inactive.” It was with the back-up for his contribution to the department’s annual report from three years before. He sat down with it at his old desk.

He looked at the executive summary, the analytical descriptions, and the pages and pages of tables: analyses of turnover, summaries of recruitment and training costs, calculations of overhead.

Becoming a Director had been the furthest thing from his mind when he wrote these summaries, put together these tables. He had no desire to be a Director. He just wanted to be left alone to do his analyses and write his reports and try to keep up with his wife’s book list. Why did she leave?

He had thought that if he worked hard enough and met his objectives and kept a low profile, he could remain an Assistant Manager for the rest of his life. His position at the bottom of the org chart had been tidy and clean. He’d sat there for a decade, watching the people around him move up and up, their ranks growing thinner as they advanced higher. He knew what kind of struggles they had in the upper levels—the kind of struggle that took Lorraine into the elevator last week.

Gene realized that unless he could reverse this promotion, he would become deeply involved with the company and its people. Directors were the older brothers and sisters of the company family. If you were an Assistant Manager, you could be a retarded cousin or something, but Directors were involved with and consulted on everything. As a Director, you didn’t hide in your office and read novels; you went where you were told to go and did what you were told to do.

He closed the report and got up from the desk. He looked at it in his hand, then tucked it under his arm,

picked up his heavy briefcase, and trudged off to his new office.

* * *

The Human Resources conference room was nothing like the executive conference room on the ninth floor. It was small, and it had a single door going into it and a small square table at its center. But it had been large enough to hold the department's seven managers—uncomfortably. Gene paced back and forth at one end. Frannie sat in the corner, a few feet from the conference table. Nonexempts did not routinely attend Managers meetings, and Frannie seemed nervous.

Gene smiled at the five managers as they filed into the room. They smiled back sullenly. Kevin, in particular, had the look of someone done an injustice. Kevin was the Manager of Compensation and Benefits. Until four days ago, he had been Gene's supervisor.

Gene told himself they weren't angry with him, just loyal to Lorraine—not loyal enough to follow her into the elevator with a pair of corporate clones, but probably loyal enough to drag their feet on any plans he might announce. Gene had spent ten years as an Assistant Manager, so he knew a lot about foot-dragging. Fortunately, he didn't have any plans to announce.

Kevin and Susan sat down at one end of the table. Peter and Annie sat on one side of the table, and Frank sat on the other side, next to the chair Gene used to sit in when he was just an Assistant Manager. He had hated that chair.

Once they were all sitting, Gene took the seat at the head of the table, opposite Kevin and Susan, where he enjoyed the comfort of more than a foot of empty space on either side of him. It made him feel like he was in control of the meeting. He was pleased to find it was not an unpleasant feeling.

“The company’s reorganization is virtually complete,” he said without preamble. “I wanted to talk with you about new directions for Human Resources.” He stopped and looked around the table. Kevin had his hand raised slightly.

Gene felt funny being asked for permission to speak by someone he had the habit of regarding as his supervisor; he simply stared at Kevin for a moment. Kevin stared back at him, but he finally broke it off to speak.

“I have a question, Gene,” he said.

“Uh,” Gene said self-consciously. He wondered where that had come from. Couldn’t he think of anything more intelligent to say than “uh”?

Kevin, at any rate, seemed to take this as permission to ask his question. “The company reorganization started four days ago,” he said. “Why has it taken so long to have this meeting?”

Gene realized the only reason was to give him time to prepare for it, but he didn’t think that would satisfy any of them. “I, uh—”

“Most of us have had our work on hold while we tried to assess what was going on,” interrupted Kevin. “We’re a week behind now.” He studied Gene as if he were a specimen of some kind. “Some of us have had staff reductions.”

Gene’s old position had not yet been filled, so Gene himself was the staff reduction Kevin was talking about. He hadn’t the slightest idea what to say. The only thought in his head was that Kevin had taken control of the meeting.

“Uh—”

“Gene,” said Peter, the Manager of Training, “you signed a timesheet for one of my people. I was building a disciplinary case on that young woman, and it’s worthless now. I have to start all over.”

“Uh—”

Susan, the Manager of Employee Relations, spoke. “We have morale problems in the department, Gene. Helen was

pushed out of her desk. She hasn't been at work in two days."

The managers all seemed to be staring at Gene belligerently. He could think of nothing to say, and he wondered if they could read the helplessness in his face.

"There seems to have been an unsanctioned realignment among the nonexempt staff," continued Susan, who looked pointedly at Frannie in the corner.

Frannie shrank back in her chair. Gene felt as if he'd happened upon someone picking on his younger sister. "Wait a minute," he said with enough force to surprise himself. He pushed his chair back and stood up from the table.

The room went quiet.

"Uh—" said Gene, then caught himself. He cleared his throat and started again. "I'm sorry I didn't call the meeting for Friday," he said. "And I'm sorry we're having to make do with less staff, but we've just been through a reorganization. Things are bound to be in disarray for a little while. We have to work together to get through this transition." He looked around, and they were all looking down, as if he were disciplining them. Then he realized that maybe he *was* disciplining them, and maybe he was now in control of the meeting.

For some reason, an image of Gene's wife flashed in his mind, but he suppressed it and got on with his work. He felt in his pocket for the Mexican coin. The worn designs on its face were in the process of sinking back into the surface of the coin; he found the smoothness of the surface comforting to his fingers. Everyone in the meeting stared at the way his hand churned in his pants pocket. He took it out again and raised it in the air the way he had seen effective speakers do.

"You have certain expectations of me," he said, "and you have a right to them. But I have expectations, too, and I expect a little patience from you." He added emphasis to the last word, and it seemed to ring in the air for a moment;

then the room was silent. Gene thought he liked the feeling of being in control.

With as much authority as he could put into the gesture, he took a stack of papers from the table and handed them to Frank to pass around. "This memo details the new department structure, and it includes your new job descriptions. I've had to make some changes because we are reconfiguring the management side."

They passed the memos around and studied them closely. Gene noticed that Kevin was looking puzzled. "Is something wrong, Kevin?" Gene said firmly.

"There's no Assistant Manager for Compensation and Benefits in this structure."

"We won't be filling that position," Gene said crisply. "You'll see from the job descriptions that the work has been redistributed among you."

Kevin worked his mouth like a goldfish in stale water. "You're cutting the management staff," he said. "How do you expect us to get the work done without sufficient staff?"

Gene hadn't the slightest idea. "I expect you to do it by calling on your superior managerial talent," he said levelly.

Kevin now had the look of a man who had been handcuffed. He began to open his mouth.

"We were a little top-heavy," Gene put in before Kevin could speak.

Kevin recovered himself. "But Lorraine—" He looked at Frannie in her corner with the notepad open in front of her and cut himself off.

Gene looked at Frannie. She was staring at the carpet as if she felt herself an intruder at the meeting. "We have a managerial span of control of seven point one six," said Gene. "I know it stretches you a little to supervise more than seven people, but this is a time for stretching. We are setting a standard for the rest of the company."

Kevin now looked as if someone had turned the gas up under him. "Seven point one six for us," he said, and then

he looked around the table. "Five for you."

He had a point, and Gene hadn't thought of it before. He had the feeling they were all unhappy with the situation. But he knew the woman he reported to did not measure his performance by the happiness of his managers, and he was not going to surrender control of the meeting again. He stared at Kevin as he spoke.

"Frannie," he said, "would you please make a note to call Maintenance and ask them to take the furniture out of that office we were using for the Assistant Manager of Compensation and Benefits. I want them to install shelving in there. We're going to use it for a supply closet."

He glanced at Frannie. She was writing dutifully on her pad, and the thought went through Gene's mind that he could easily get used to being obeyed. The orange spot glowed inside him again. He sat down and splayed his hands on the table in front of him.

"Let's go around the table," he said confidently, "and each of you can give us a short status report on your function."

They moved uneasily in their chairs. Gene knew it was because Lorraine had never done anything like this.

"We just need to know the strength and readiness of your unit." He looked around at them. He could feel their resistance wavering. "Let's start with Compensation and Benefits," he said.

Gene wanted to give Kevin the opportunity to be a power center in the meeting, but the gesture didn't seem to enlist the man's enthusiasm.

"We've got eight nonexempts," said Kevin to the table surface, "and one Manager. And the Manager just found out he'll be doing the same work with fewer people." He pushed Gene's handout away from him across the surface of the table as if it were a second helping when the first had already been too big. Gene felt the rest of the managers begin to coalesce behind Kevin's gesture.

He reached into his pocket and felt for the fifty-centavo piece while Kevin stared at him. He rubbed the surface of the coin between his thumb and finger and wondered how soon it would be before he wore off all the designs. "Thank you, Kevin," he said. "Why don't you see me in my office later this week and we'll discuss your staff shortage."

Like the woman with the timesheet problem last week, Kevin suddenly changed from a focus of injustice to an employee with a personal problem. Gene felt the resistance around the table dissipate. Kevin crossed his arms in front of him, but it had no effect other than to shrink his presence slightly. Gene was pleased.

The rest of the status reports were all as brief as Kevin's, since the managers weren't used to this kind of thing and Gene didn't have any questions prepared. Gene knew it would take them a while to learn to use such opportunities for grand-standing or self-inflation.

By the time the reports were finished, there was a palpable sense in the room that everybody was meeting on Gene's property. The orange spot inside him brightened a little toward yellow.

"I'll let you go in a minute," he said. "I just wanted to give you one parting thought." He stood up again and paced back and forth at the end of the conference room.

He could feel the Mexican coin in his pocket bumping against his leg as he paced. "Things are going to be different around here from now on," he said. "Each of you is an excellent manager. That's why you're here. But the first rule of management is to go where you're told to go and do what you're told to do. If you master that rule, everything else will fall into place." He looked around the room; they were all looking up at him—all except Kevin. He stopped pacing behind his chair, put his hands on its back, and leaned against it. It rolled on its casters, and he had to catch himself to keep from falling. He looked around quickly at

everyone. Their expressions were grave, and he realized they couldn't laugh at him until they understood just what kind of manager he was going to be. "We're a family here," he said. "We support each other."

Somehow it all sounded more convincing when Cynthia said it. But convincing or not, it seemed to have the effect he wanted. Some of them acquired expectant expressions, as if he might have something worthwhile to say. "OK," he said. "Let's get out there and turn this department around."

As the managers all rose to leave, Gene noticed Peter saying something to Annie, who nodded at the remark.

After they had all filed out, Gene walked over to Frannie, the orange ember still warming his insides. "How do you think it went?" he said.

"I don't know, Gene," she said. "How was it supposed to go?"

Gene didn't really know himself.

* * *

Days later, Maintenance had just finished installing a new nameplate on Gene's door when Cynthia sent word via her secretary that she wanted to see him. He said he would be right up.

He grabbed his time-management notebook and put on his jacket. He took a moment to inspect the work on his nameplate, then went out past the reception area and the employee elevators to the atrium elevators, which were the only ones that could reach the ninth floor. He pressed the up-button. It was mid-afternoon—coffee-break time—and both the elevators were busy, so he had to wait for a while. He walked from the elevators over to the balcony railing and looked out into the company's awesome eight-story atrium. The top floor, Cynthia's floor, was sealed off from the atrium, but the other floors all had balconies

overlooking it. He leaned over the railing and gazed eight floors down at the potted plants and scattered sofas in the lobby. It was a clear day, and he could see all the way to the slate floor; on some days there was a kind of weather in the atrium, and you couldn't see down there so clearly. Quite a few people were sitting around on the furniture. Some of them, Gene knew, were sales reps waiting for the chance to represent their goods to various Growth Services managers. But it was coffee-break time, and a good many of them were probably Growth Services employees who had fled their claustrophobic offices for the open air of the lobby. A gentle, warm breeze touched his face. The bell rang to announce the elevator, and he boarded for the ninth floor.

A Vice President and two other Directors were already sitting in Cynthia's outer office. Gene nodded to each of them as he sat down. They each nodded in return. He had no idea what they were doing there, and he doubted they knew what he was doing, either. After the first nod, he didn't look at any of them. He did not wish to risk any kind of attachment.

Cynthia's secretary, a body-building type with the grace of a raptor and the voice of a radio announcer, answered the telephone every couple of minutes and graciously turned away callers. He told some to write letters and connected others with various departments around the company. It seemed to Gene that Cynthia handled nothing she had not put on her own agenda. He opened his notebook and made a note to himself. CONTROL YOUR OWN AGENDA. He looked at his watch to see how long he had been sitting there. The secretary's phone rang again. He picked it up.

"Yes, Cynthia?" he said. "Yes. Fine."

He put the receiver down and looked directly at Gene. "Your turn, Gene."

The others continued to pick lint from their pantlegs or work the buttons on the sleeves of their bespoke suits.

Cynthia was alone. She sat at her desk and filled the room with her presence. He wanted nothing more at that moment than to know more about her as a person, but there was nothing there to fasten on. Her office was as stark as any he had ever seen. She had installed no mementoes or personal things, and had given no more style to her office than you'd find in a field commander's tent. It was all glass and chrome: spacious, spotless, and sterile. It brought to mind a story Gene had once heard about Alexander the Great, who supposedly slept on marble, just for the discipline of it. And yet there was a magic to the place—a byproduct, perhaps, of Cynthia's palpable presence.

He unfastened the center button of his jacket and sat down across from her in the subordinate's chair. It had a seat tilted forward about two degrees, not enough to make the chair look funny, but enough to keep its occupant alert. Gene didn't mind. He didn't care to relax in front of Cynthia. He dropped his notebook on the floor by the chair and placed his hands on his knees to help brace himself from sliding down. He felt the coin in his right pocket slip over the top of his leg and down along its side.

Cynthia's glass desk sat in a corner formed by the two windowed walls. There was nothing on it except a gold fountain pen with silver trim, which lay crossways in front like a barrier, as if Cynthia, behind the desk, were a museum exhibit.

Gene looked at the pen and saw it was monogrammed. It wasn't easy to read, but it certainly wasn't "CP." He didn't feel it was his place to ask Cynthia why she was using somebody else's monogram.

The window blinds were open slightly. The sun was behind her, so that her face was surrounded by a halo of rich silver hair. It occurred to Gene that Cynthia was careful with details. It probably explained her success as an executive. She arranged every encounter, every meeting, every interview.

She always had either bodyguards, the advantage of the terrain, or both. Gene thought she would sit behind the glass desk a good long time, if she kept the numbers up. She had her hands folded in front of her behind the barrier of the pen.

“Gene,” said her silhouetted face, “we’re making this company a family again. We’ve had too much of this hot-shot playboy star-making crap. We’re going to learn to pull together again. I’m starting a new company initiative. It’s called ‘People Are Our Most Important Asset.’ I’m going to need another complete valuation of our human assets. It will be a lot of work.”

Gene was wary. If he wasn’t careful, there could be another promotion in this for him.

“Is something wrong?” said Cynthia.

“No,” Gene said hurriedly, then to prove it he added, “I guess I approve of the direction the company is taking.”

The shadow over Cynthia’s face hid her expression from him. “Well, I wonder whether you’ll approve of this. I need a good manager to run the initiative. You’re going to be in charge of it.”

Gene felt like his necktie was too tight, but he didn’t dare loosen it in front of Cynthia. “Cynthia, I—” He couldn’t think of what to say. “Thank you.”

“Don’t be sentimental, Gene. If I’ve made the right choice, I’ll get all the thanks I want from the quarterly financials.”

“I’ll uh—” Gene’s voice cracked, but he recovered it. “I’ll get to work on it right away.”

“Not right away,” said Cynthia. “We have other matters to attend to first. Our reorganization has stalled at Computer Operations. I’ve examined the situation closely, and I don’t feel we fully own that unit yet. I don’t think the people there have joined the family.”

Gene thought about Sarah, the Director of Information Services, and her dubious responses in the Directors meeting.

"I'm sending you down there," she said. "You're to reorganize the unit and share the management of it with the incumbent. I believe you know Larry."

"Yes, of course." Gene squinted a little into the sun. "We were in training together."

"It's only temporary," said Cynthia. "But we have to get this squared away before we announce the initiative."

Gene's mind raced. He knew what "reorganize" meant, and he almost shuddered at the prospect. Fortunately, he kept himself under control. "Am I to report to Sarah?" he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," sniffed Cynthia. "She's gone." She shifted herself ever so slightly in her chair. "The woman had no family values." Cynthia was quiet for a moment, as if she were thinking. "It turns out she didn't even have any family. Can you imagine that? Take it from me, Gene. You shouldn't trust a manager with no family. A loose cannon. No stabilizing influence." The remark was made softly and quite at odds with Cynthia's usual heavy, firm voice.

Gene thought about Sarah being loaded into a dumpster somewhere across town. At least there would be no one waiting for her to get home from work. He wondered if he could keep Cynthia from finding out his wife had left him.

"Larry's downsized himself twice in the past year," said Cynthia. Her voice had recovered its usual businesslike tone. "We're at risk. I need someone I can trust to help him through this transition. I don't want to be butt-fucked by a gang of techie jocks."

"You can count on me, of course," Gene said. He fought the panic in his voice. "Why uh—" He wished he could stop saying "uh." He coughed dryly. "Why has Larry lost so many reports?"

"It was his idea," said Cynthia. "He's been moving us to a distributed information system, and most of his people have gone out to the line departments."

“Why do you say we’re at risk?”

“Don’t talk like a virgin, Gene. A manager eliminating his own reports is like a goat vowing celibacy.”

If he caught up on his book list, he might somehow be able to talk his wife into coming back before Cynthia realized he had no stabilizing influence.

“Managers have only one drive,” she continued, “and when one renounces it, it’s time to have a close look at him. Go down there and reorganize him. I have to make sure Operations is on our team.”

Gene could feel his heart pounding. “When do I start?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Cynthia’s voice said from the shadow. “I’d like to know what it’s like down there, but I don’t want you running back to me every minute. Be alert to whatever you find. Do whatever needs to be done. Stay in touch, but make your own decisions. This could be tough. But you can handle it.” She unfolded her hands and placed them palms down on the desk in front of her.

The ring on her left hand clicked resonantly against the glass, and Gene’s eyes were drawn to it. She had long fingers with perfect, although short, nails. Her skin was smooth, and she wore no jewelry other than a modest wristwatch and a plain gold wedding band. A trace of moisture fogged an outline of her hand on the surface.

The sun caught the fountain pen near her hand, and it glistened so that the engraving on the monogram seemed to deepen.

“I can handle it,” he said. He took deep breaths as unobtrusively as he could and hoped he didn’t sound as if he’d prefer to run to some corner and read a thousand-page novel about a man tossing and turning in bed. Cynthia looked up at him, and he realized he had repeated her again. He left before she said anything.

He tried not to think about what was expected of him. What was Larry doing down there? Memories of Larry bobbed to the surface of his mind.

Larry had been the lummoX of the training group. He wasn't really stupid. The company didn't take stupid people into its executive training program. He worked hard, and he did well in all the tests. But he never got a good recommendation from any manager or trainer. Never.

His problem was that he simply didn't understand the unwritten stuff. He knew more than anyone else about the company and its procedures, the markets and the work. But Gene remembered him as a tourist among the other trainees. He could not shake anyone's hand, for example, without pumping it, and he actually wore a digital watch with a black plastic band. He carried his papers in a luggage-sized briefcase with a strap closure, and he compounded this error by keeping his lunch in it. His desk was always covered with pending paperwork, and he never learned to size up a requester before granting a favor. But if there was one thing that marked him more clearly than any other, it was that he violated the dress code. The training program had lasted eighteen months, and every day Gene and the other trainees saw the managers and trainers around them wearing dark gray suits, white shirts, and muted red neckties. By the end of the program, everybody had gotten the message and filled their closets at home with gray suits and red neckties. Everybody except Larry. His style ran to a corduroy sport coat and socks he pulled up while he was talking to you. And he was still wearing this outfit the day they got their certificates of completion.

The corduroy sport coat was not only out of place, it accentuated his unusual dimensions. He was a big man—not thick, but wide. He completely blocked a doorway going through it, but if he turned sideways you could easily get past him. With his thick glasses, unevenly cut hair, and

strange clothes, he presented something of an apparition to any encounter.

No wonder the training committee assigned Larry to Computer Operations. They could hardly do otherwise. They couldn't very well have him running around loose in the building in a corduroy sport coat, pulling his socks up in front of nonexempts and customers. In the company family, Larry was the strange uncle they locked in a bedroom when visitors arrived.

Any of the rest of the trainees would have been suicidal over an assignment to Operations, but not Larry. He was as pleased with it as if he'd been given Finance. He insisted that Computer Operations was vital to the company's prosperity and that he viewed his assignment as an honor of some sort. He even hinted that Operations was the fast track, a notion only a guy like Larry could maintain with sincerity.

When the training group broke up, Gene doubted he would ever see Larry again. It was just as well. Personally he liked Larry, but it was better not to hang around with a guy like him too much. You don't want to be seen too much with a loser, and it was best not to make friendships inside the company anyway. So Larry went off to Operations, and Gene, as the top trainee from the group, went to Human Resources.

The company put its best into two departments: Human Resources and Finance. An assignment to Finance might have been considered better for Gene's career, but he was happy to go to HR. Finance, of course, was the most critical of all the company's units, but hiring was the competitive playing field of modern business. Since there were so few competent people now in the entry-level age pool, companies lived or died on their ability to bring in new hires. Besides, in Human Resources Gene had prestige. He was appointed Assistant Manager for Compensation and Benefits. In Finance, the best he could have hoped for was

assistant to an analyst on the staff of one of the assistant controllers, a full rank lower on the org chart. It was all so promising then.

Larry, for his part, had gone on to manage Operations. The incumbent manager, who had been getting along in years anyway, resigned two years after Larry arrived. It was rather unusual. In the context of lifetime employment, managerial resignations were about as common as retirements, which is to say they almost never happened. When the man left, Larry became the acting department head and then was named Manager permanently. Nobody outside the basement subdepartment of Computer Operations could be induced to take it, and Larry was the most experienced manager down there. That's the kind of place it was.

Gene was supposed to have his meeting with Kevin about the staff shortage the last thing that day. When he got into the office, the sunlight streaming in the windows was turning orange, and Kevin was walking about the office, picking things up and fingering them. He did not stop when Gene came in.

"Hi, Gene," he said without looking up from the sterling letter opener he had picked up from the counter. He tapped it softly against the index finger of his left hand. "How's it going?"

"Sit down, please, Kevin." Gene gestured toward the chair across from his desk and lowered himself into the executive chair behind it. He counted silently to four, then felt the chair conform to him. Kevin walked over, sat down, and tapped the letter opener against the side of his leg. He didn't look up, and Gene wondered if he was going to use the letter opener to carve his initials in the bobbing desk. He had never realized how juvenile Kevin was in distress.

The man's distress mirrored Gene's own, but he was a layer lower than Gene in the management and could be more open about it.

Gene wondered if any of Cynthia's subordinates ever sat in front of her pouting and plotting. Of course, he was one of Cynthia's subordinates and he never sat in front of her pouting and plotting. Then he realized that Cynthia must have sat in front of Roger and plotted his downfall. She never would have pouted though; she was not a pouter. He suddenly realized how dangerous it was to have a senior person of questionable loyalty in your organization. Gene might find his brakes failing on the drive home one night.

He wasn't afraid so much as he was resentful. Pressure from above. Pressure from below. A novel he couldn't get through. He had no idea how to deal with any of this. He looked at Kevin. The man stared at the floor sullenly. Gene gazed at the top of his head. His thick brown hair was neatly and stylishly arranged, and Gene was a little envious. He thought about the way his own hair always seemed to stick out at funny angles, and he wished he could have hair like Kevin's. He probably could, if he had the time to get it styled and cut regularly. Kevin must spend an hour or two with his hair stylist every couple of weeks. He couldn't do that if he had Gene's responsibilities. On an inspiration, he decided to give him those responsibilities, at least temporarily.

"Kevin," said Gene, "I'm going to be away on an assignment. I need a strong manager to put in charge while I'm gone. I'm appointing you."

Kevin looked up. "Where are you going?"

"To manage Operations temporarily."

Kevin's face did not soften, but lines appeared on either side of his mouth, as if he'd gone into labor for the delivery of a smile.

"This is an opportunity for some visibility for you," said Gene.

Kevin nodded.

Gene felt he might be making some headway. He gestured expansively around the spacious office. "Why don't

you move in here for the time being?”

It might have been Gene's imagination, but Kevin actually seemed to brighten at the prospect.

“I'm going to try to get back here in the evenings to do some work on a special project,” said Gene, “but you'll be in charge of the day-to-day, so you might as well have the files and the space.”

Kevin said nothing, but he did look around the office, and Gene dared to think for a moment that he might be on the way to solving one of his problems. If Kevin grew comfortable with the responsibility of managing the department, and if he felt he was dependent on Gene for that responsibility, that would give him an interest in Gene's welfare.

“Let me show you some of the things in this office,” said Gene. He got up from the chair.

Kevin got up and laid the letter opener down on the desk. Gene led him over to the kitchenette. “There's a refrigerator and a microwave in here.” Gene tried to keep the pride out of his voice, but he wasn't very successful. “And there's a coffee maker. You can practically live here, if you want to.”

Kevin looked at the appliances and nodded. “Is it OK to use the shower?”

“Of course,” said Gene. “The laundry service keeps the towels fresh.”

Kevin opened the refrigerator and studied its contents.

“I mostly keep cream in there,” said Gene. He didn't use it himself, but Frannie did, and there might also be guests.

“Cream?” Kevin sniffed skeptically. “That's Half and Half.” He shut the refrigerator door. “Just like everything else in this company.”

Gene tried not to feel offended. “You can bring in anything you want.”

“I like real cream,” said Kevin.

Somehow Gene wasn't surprised.

Kevin stepped into the bathroom. "What kind of shampoo do you have here?"

"I don't know," said Gene. The bottle on the counter was Lorraine's. Gene had never used it.

Kevin picked up the bottle. "I'll bring some in from home," he said. "When do I start?"

"Tomorrow morning," said Gene. "Make yourself at home here. All I ask is that you leave the desk relatively clear in the evenings, which is when I will be dropping in to work."

The two of them looked over at the massive desk. Other than the letter opener, a pen set, and an appointment book, it was as clear as a hockey rink—and shinier.

Kevin walked over to the windows on the other side of the room and looked out into the orange sky.

"You can call me in Computer Operations if you need me," said Gene. "But I'm sure you can handle anything that comes up. For questions that are not pressing, you can leave a note here on the desk."

"Thanks, Gene," said Kevin.

"Don't thank me," said Gene. "If I've made the right decision, I'll get all the thanks I need from the quarterly departmental performance reviews."

Kevin actually smiled, then turned and left.

Gene walked over to the desk to pack things up for the evening and switch the chair off. The scuffed and worn pen that he had been using for about five years nestled in the gutter of the appointment book. He picked it up to put it in his pocket, and he remembered the exquisite monogrammed pen he had seen on Cynthia's desk. And he realized the monogram had said "RY."

The next morning, Gene took the employee elevator to the eighth floor as usual. It was early, and Frannie was the only one in the department.

"Hi, Gene."

"Frannie," he said. "You're here early."

"I had some things I wanted to get out of the way while it was quiet."

"Please make sure you take the time off at the other end," said Gene. "I'm not authorized for overtime."

"Actually, Gene," Frannie looked at her hands folded in her lap, "that's sort of what I wanted to talk with you about."

"What is it, Frannie?"

"I was hoping if I put in several early mornings to keep ahead of the work that I might be able to take a personal day at the end of the week."

Gene waited for her to tell him what she wanted the day for, but she didn't. He was disappointed.

She simply stared at him.

"Take what you need, Frannie," he said. "In fact, I don't think you need to come in early for that. I'm leaving the department for a while. I'll be back tomorrow night to do some work on a report, and I'll need you here with me for that. Otherwise, you should take whatever time you need. And please do, because when my current assignment is over, we'll both have a great deal of work to do. Until I get back, I want you to help Kevin out."

Frannie smiled. Nice hair, thought Gene, has a way of making people pleased to work for you.

Gene turned down the short corridor toward his office. He pushed open the mahogany door with his nameplate on it. The inner office was silent. The woodwork gleamed brightly. The tawny leather sofa picked up a minor pattern in the red oriental rug, three shades, more or less, brighter than the blood scarlet of the desk.

He walked in and set the heavy briefcase on his massive desk. He stood at the desk for a moment and tried not to think about his current assignment. Maybe something would happen to Larry, or Cynthia would change her mind and he would get through this without a lot of mess.

He heard a throat clear behind him. He turned and saw a young woman in the doorway. She had short, black hair that stood out from her head uniformly, as if she were a dandelion in negative. Her face was smooth apricot with dark, oblate eyes set in it. There was a sleepy look about her face, which was at odds with the energy and confidence of her step as she strode toward him. "Gene?" She smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Faith, from Operations."

"Did Larry send you?" said Gene. He gripped her hand for an instant. She had a handshake that was more like a caress than anything else. Her soft palm formed itself against his, and her fingers slid gently across the tendons on the back of his hand. Gene withdrew from the handshake first, but he would have liked for it to go on longer.

"He told me you were coming," she said. "It was my idea to walk you down."

"That wasn't necessary."

"I wanted to, Gene, really," she said. "We've never had somebody from the eighth floor down in Operations. This is important for me." She stared at him as if she weren't kidding.

Gene realized what gave her the sleepy look. Just the slightest fold over each eye seemed to lower the lid somewhat. The thought crossed his mind that the young woman might have had cosmetic surgery. He could think of a thousand situations in which it might be advantageous not to appear overly alert.

She had managed a perfectly-centered dimple below the half-Windsor knot in her tie, but otherwise she brought a style to the corporate uniform he had never seen before. Her suit lacked the pleats and tailored angularity favored by

most managers. And she made a white shirt look more like a pillow than a garment. Gene knew he was in strange territory.

"Well, Faith," he said, "it's important for me, too. Let's go." He grabbed his briefcase from his desk.

She smiled as if Gene had said something amusing and turned aside to let him pass. They walked down the hall; Gene could feel the fifty-centavo piece in his pocket bumping his leg as he walked.

Gene nodded to the people they encountered. Faith might have done the same, but he couldn't tell, since she walked quietly two feet behind him.

To get to Computer Operations, they had to go to the employee elevators and board the one all the way over to the left. Faith pressed the button marked "SB."

Between eight and the lower floors, the elevator made four stops. Dark suits got on, dark suits got off, and Faith and Gene finally found themselves alone in the elevator with about two floors left to go.

"Some of us in Operations are glad you're coming, Gene," Faith said in a hushed but confident voice.

"Yeah."

"We need your help, Gene."

"Is something wrong?" Gene wondered if she'd had one of those personal development courses in which they teach you to repeat people's names a lot.

He looked at Faith. Before she answered, her languid eyes searched his face.

Gene felt in his pocket for the Mexican coin. He rubbed it gently with his thumb and forefinger. He saw something stir in the depths of Faith's eyes, and he thought how little appearance has to do with management, despite every manager's preoccupation with it.

"We want you to kill Larry," she said.

The elevator slowed and stopped. The arrival signal chimed, and the doors opened. Faith stared at him

expectantly. “I’ll get back to you on that,” said Gene.

FIVE

Gene and Faith stepped off the elevator into the basement corridor and started toward the Operations department.

Gene disliked the wide windowless corridor with its banks of pipes running along either wall at shoulder height. He disliked the constant, low humming that overlaid the clop-clop of their heels on the concrete floor as they walked. He had to think clearly. He knew what it meant when Cynthia sent him down here to reorganize. He was not required to leave Larry alive. But the situation was more dangerous than he thought. When an employee asks you to kill her manager, you know there must be personnel problems. And if both your boss and your subordinates want you to kill somebody, you'll probably end up having to do it.

"He's cheating the company, Gene." Faith was obviously used to being in this corridor, because she modulated her soft voice perfectly to be heard over the humming.

Gene did not want to believe her. There are hundreds of small-time opportunities for a manager to increase an income at the expense of the company. But Larry? Gene didn't think he was even capable of taking pencils home for his kids.

"How?" said Gene. "Is he taking kickbacks?"

"Worse than that. He's doing something with the computers."

"But you're not sure what it is."

"He's very, very smart about systems."

Gene glanced over at her; she was staring at him seriously. He wished he had called in sick and spent the day reading his novel.

There were other corridors that branched from the main one, taking the pipes with them along the wall when they left and bringing them back on the other side when they returned. Gene didn't know what these pipes did. And he didn't know where the other corridors went, although the last time he had been down here a rough-looking guy in a tee shirt came out of one pushing a dolly loaded with industrial-sized cans of cling peaches. Gene said hello, but the man turned away and mumbled something that sounded like "fucking suit." He was obviously a nonexempt, so Gene didn't pay much attention at the time. That was before he had a reason to care what anybody thought of him.

Larry had apparently allowed his department to become a rat's nest of politics. Gene's intuition told him that Faith, despite her languid appearance, fit perfectly into such an environment. She had a flawlessly soft and lethargic style, but he had the distinct feeling that she put it on every morning with her suit. If he didn't keep himself alert, she could easily fool him into thinking she wasn't on top of the situation there.

"I saw your report on ROI in the human asset, Gene" said Faith, as if she had attended a concert where Gene had played a solo.

Had his report gone into general circulation? "Where did you get it?"

She ignored the question. "Very impressive. I liked the way you structured your arguments, I liked the way you developed the valuation aspect, and I especially liked the way you handled amortization."

Gene laughed a bitter little bark.

Faith smiled, an alluring expression that appropriated the whole of her delicate face into a setting for an

arrangement of full lips and even white teeth. "Is that funny?" she said.

Gene shrugged and tried to act like he hadn't laughed. How had poor, simple Larry gotten tangled up with this young, humorless spider woman?

When they reached the black-and-white laminated sign on the Operations department door, Faith grabbed the handle before Gene could and pulled the door open. It was a gesture she managed to make submissive even while it was controlling. Gene willed himself to pay no attention. He had to think clearly.

He had to keep his wits about him.

When the door closed behind them, it shut out the low humming of the basement.

Everything was very quiet. They walked up a short ramp to get onto the raised floor. The concrete flooring gave way to tile, and they were among a half-dozen cabinets that looked like those small washing machines designed for cramped apartments. Along the walls were more appliances; these looked like refrigerators, except most of them had windows in the tops where their freezer compartments ought to be. In the windows were large tape reels that occasionally spun rapidly but were mostly idle. People worked at scattered terminals. There was no heat or soot, no coal, no muscular bodies hunched over shovels, but it was clear this room drove the entire company.

They walked through the three rooms of softly gurgling machines toward the Manager's office at the back. Along the way were dozens of people typing at terminals, mounting tape reels, and taking readings from their washing machines. In this atmosphere, Faith changed visibly. She greeted people, signaled to them, or ordered them about as if she were the plantation owner back from a tiger hunt.

Gene didn't recognize the name on the office door; he figured it must be the name of the man Larry had replaced when he became Department Manager years ago. "Is Larry

trying to go incognito, or what?" Gene pointed to the nameplate.

"He hasn't changed it since he took over," said Faith. "He says there are more important things to spend money on than nameplates, Gene." The young woman's tone said she couldn't imagine what those more important things might be. Gene sensed Faith's desire to be a respected member of company society and the contempt it bred in her for Larry. Obviously, she considered him a liability and didn't want him killed as much as she wanted him euthanized.

She opened this door for Gene as well, and he saw Larry on the other side of the room, seated behind his secretary's desk, typing. The secretary was nowhere to be seen. Larry's appearance had not changed much in the eight years since Gene had last seen him. He hunched over the computer picking out letters on the keyboard, and Gene realized his knowledge of managerial behavior hadn't changed either.

The sound of the door shutting drew Larry's face in their direction. He squinted at them through thick, pink glasses that looked like they were designed to protect his eyes from radiation. When he recognized Gene, he smiled, started to get up, hesitated, then pushed the chair back from the desk and bent over in it. It took Gene a moment to realize he was pulling up his socks. Then Larry stood up and came around from behind the desk with his pantlegs bunched up from the sock-raising. Gene had nearly forgotten how big Larry was. Sprinting over to shake Gene's hand, he looked like he ought to be festooned with red flags and wear a banner saying "Wide Load."

"Gene, Gene, Gene." He pumped his hand as if Gene's pressure were dangerously low.

"How are you, Larry?" Gene decided it couldn't be the same corduroy sport coat he remembered; Larry had gained a little breadth, if that was possible.

“Welcome to the catacombs,” Larry brayed good-naturedly, as if he’d said something funny.

“It’s good to see you, Larry.” Gene managed to extract his hand from the pumping. Even though his shoulder ached from the exercise, Gene felt good about seeing his former classmate. Larry was exactly the same person he’d been when they were trainees together. The world seemed to stabilize around Gene and to acquire a measure of predictability. “You’ve met Faith, I see.” Larry nodded toward Faith. “Watch out for her, Gene. She’s ambitious. If you’re sharing the management of this department, she’ll be after your job as well as mine.” He began to bray again.

Gene glanced at Faith, who smiled bashfully.

“It’s only temporary, Larry,” Gene said reflexively, wanting to allay any fears Larry might have that he’d been sent there to take him out. Gene had no training for this sort of situation, but his instincts told him to say pleasant things and try to keep the people around him at ease.

“So top management is finally taking an interest in our little world,” said Larry.

It was in Larry’s nature to put the best face on events. He apparently had no fear of being reorganized and had no suspicion anybody wanted to kill him. Gene began to feel a little better about the situation. If he could be confident of Larry’s ignorance, he could reduce the number of variables he would have to manage.

“Larry,” said Gene, “you can always catch somebody’s interest with a four hundred percent increase in productivity.”

Larry blushed and kicked at the linoleum. “We do all right,” he said. He looked at Faith. “I’ve got the crew for it. They’re good people, Gene. I hope you folks on the upper floors recognize that.”

They stood there awkwardly for a second, although it was hard to tell with Larry when he felt awkward, since he already was.

"I've set up a desk for you in Faith's office," said Larry. He pointed toward a door on the other side of the room. "You don't mind sharing with Faith, do you?"

In fact, Gene did mind. He needed some privacy. He needed some place he could go and assume a fetal position on the floor until this whole thing blew over.

"Of course not," he said.

"Let's have a cup of coffee before you get moved in," said Larry. With one hand he gestured toward the closed door of his own inner office, and with the other he touched Gene's shoulder to point him in the right direction. It was a perfectly natural gesture, but there was something in it that completely surprised Gene. He felt in Larry's touch a barely perceptible pressure that spoke to him of confidence and self-possession—a bit of the same kind of feeling he had in Cynthia's presence. It took him completely by surprise, which must have shown in his face, because the barest flicker swept over Larry's weak-looking eyes, and he took his hand away as if Gene's shoulder were incandescent.

"At least I *think* we have some coffee," he said. He looked around like there might be a waiter there in the Operations office. Finding none, he bent down and pulled up his socks.

Gene tried to assimilate what had happened. It wasn't adding up. "I've cleared a desk for you, Gene," Faith said graciously, as if to distract everyone present from Larry's sock-hoisting.

"Thanks," said Gene, grateful to have something practical to address with his mind.

"I'll set you up in it," she said, "then I have to get back to my people." She grabbed Gene's briefcase and left while Larry ushered him into his inner office.

Inside the office was Larry's mess. His furniture consisted of a desk with a chair behind and two facing it. The two chairs across from his desk had stuff on their seats, one a modest-sized report in a navy blue binding and the

other a stack of hardcopy printouts six or eight inches high. Gene couldn't see the desk itself, just the stuff it was supporting: a crooked stack of trade magazines and technical journals, splayed piles of variegated papers, a pad of white lined paper with crabbed notes on it and sheets with curling corners, notes on yellow sticky papers decorating every surface, both vertical and horizontal.

Larry walked over to a counter on the other side of the room, where there was a glass pot on a hot plate, warming a bituminous liquid. He put a thin white plastic cup into a brown cup holder and poured some of the stuff into it.

"Coffee?"

"No, thanks. I just had some," Gene lied.

Larry shook some off-white dust from a brown jar into the liquid and stirred it with a pen so that it turned the color of tailings Gene had once seen in a photograph of a strip mine in Kentucky. He licked drops of it from his pen, replaced the pen in his pocket, and took a sip of the stuff. Gene looked around for a place to sit down.

He warily picked up the report from the seat of the chair and looked at it: *Database Queries: Extracts, Reports, and Live Data*. It claimed authorship by a high-powered management consulting firm. "Hired some consultants?" Gene set the report on the desk.

Larry sat down in his chair and sipped more of his coffee. He did not look at the report and he did not respond to the question. "Do you ever hear anything about anybody else from the training class?" he said.

"No," said Gene.

"It's a shame about Les," said Larry.

"Yeah." An image of Les forced itself into Gene's mind. A self-possessed young man who laughed a lot and took chances.

"He seemed so strong and full of life," said Larry. "To be taken away like that by a heart attack. It makes you think."

Les had made such a name for himself that it had been difficult to avoid hearing about his exploits, even for Gene. He had shaken up the staid and conservative Marketing Department, where he proposed radical pricing and distribution strategies that sometimes paid off handsomely for marginal or failing products. He was idolized by those who reported to him. People began to talk about his eventually becoming Vice President of Marketing, and the Department Director had to let him work on some of the more established products. Success followed success, and he was rewarded with more people reporting to him, many of whom were reassigned to him from other managers. It was an unbalanced situation. An astute manager would have lowered his profile until equilibrium returned, but not Les.

It was commonly known that Les wasn't well liked by his peers, but he created a sort of groundswell in the ranks, and his department began to shift perceptibly in the direction of innovation and daring. For a while it really looked as if he might get the old guard to start taking some risks. He created a lot of excitement, but it was just too much, even for him. One day, in a meeting with one of his rival Product Managers, his heart stopped.

It will do that when somebody sticks an ice pick in it.

Several of Les's subordinates were reassigned to the man he'd been meeting with when he died. The others were divvied up among the other Product Managers. Balance was re-established.

Larry was right. It certainly made you stop and think.

"Les was a lot like Faith," said Larry.

"How so?" said Gene. He did not want to talk about Les or about Faith; he wished he were reading the novel.

"She shakes things up the same way." Larry sipped some more of the harsh-looking liquid in his plastic cup. "When she first got here about six years ago, she was always trying to go her own way." He stared at the wall for a moment.

The two of them sat there in silence. Gene wondered how he was ever going to get through this assignment. He got a sick feeling deep inside him. Someone was going to have to be killed, and there were only four choices: Larry, Faith, himself, or some combination thereof. He saw Larry dimly, through the fog of his apprehension.

"I brought her around, though," Larry smiled. "She just needed to be given some real responsibility. A year ago, I gave her her own project team."

"Oh?" said Gene. He wished none of this were happening.

"She proposed this project to me," said Larry. "She wanted to improve the way our databases respond to the software that accesses them. She's spent the last year just studying the patterns of access. It was her idea to bring in the consultants to write that report."

Gene was beginning to understand a little of the situation in spite of himself. "You mean she's been studying our database queries?"

"Yeah," laughed Larry. "She's very, very smart about systems."

"She seems to be smart about a lot of things," Gene said guardedly.

"Yeah," said Larry, and he sipped his coffee again. "I think at this point she must know more about the way decisions are made in this company than anybody else in the department—or in any department for that matter."

* * *

Faith's office was spacious and pleasant. Gene would have preferred one with windows, but after all he was in a basement. The carpeting was deep red, and there was some artwork on the walls. There were half a dozen pictures. One was a theater poster for *Les Misérables*. The others included

a couple still lifes of flowers, obviously painted by the same artist, a landscape with a rustic barn, and a framed sampler. The sampler read, "Abort, Retry or Ignore?" It used to be the standard operating system message for a failed computer command. Stitched on linen, it looked wildly inappropriate. Gene chuckled. Faith hadn't seemed to have a sense of humor. He wondered what else he might discover as he came to know her better. But he really hoped he never would get to know her better. He would rather a safe fell on her.

His briefcase was sitting on the desk. He checked it over and, although it was carefully done, it was clear someone had been through it. Gene wondered how he could have been such a fool as to let Faith carry his briefcase out of his presence. Now she knew he was reading the thousand-page novel. He couldn't imagine what use she would put the knowledge to; he just felt it was too dangerous for her to have any knowledge of his personal life. He fought his panic.

Trying to keep control of himself, he spent a few minutes looking over the desk they had set up for him. It was an older piece of furniture. Several drawers. He checked the whole thing for microphones and movement sensors. There weren't any, but he discovered that the top center drawer was shallow and perfectly adapted for the placement of an explosive charge. He thought it best not to keep anything important there. He took the novel from his briefcase and set it in the drawer.

He was pushing the drawer closed again when the telephone rang.

"Gene," said Cynthia at the other end. "Have you learned anything down there yet?"

Gene's heart pounded, and he had to swallow a dry mass in his throat. "I've only just arrived," he squeaked.

"It's not my intention to put pressure on you," she said, "but I have plans hanging fire, and I'm sweating up

here while you're down there faking orgasms for the Operations staff."

Gene didn't know what she wanted him to come up with. "Do you know anything about an outside consulting firm?"

She didn't answer.

"Cynthia, are you there?"

"I'm here," she said after a moment.

"Larry's had a consulting firm in to draw up a report on queries to the corporate database."

She was silent again.

"Cynthia?"

"Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"He's brought in outsiders?"

"I guess so," said Gene.

"This man has no sense of family," she said. "Get me a copy of the report."

"Sure," said Gene. "I'll go over right now and ask Larry—"

"I don't want him to know I have it," she said.

"That's a little more difficult," he said. "It could take a while."

"Fine. I don't need it right away. Bring it to me this weekend."

"This weekend?"

"Don't repeat me, Gene."

Gene bit his lip. He had wanted to pick up *The Cooking of Provincial France* and try to make some recipes from it this weekend. "Saturday OK, Cynthia?"

"Fine. Meet me at the cottage around lunch time."

He had heard stories about the cottage. It was said to be a beautiful place, sitting isolated on an island that was owned in its entirety by Cynthia's family. It was about a four-hour drive (and boat ride) north. The perfect way to lose an entire day and fall further behind in his reading.

“Bring your wife along, Gene,” said Cynthia. “I don’t want to keep you from your family just because we have a little business to do.”

“Wife?”

“Don’t repeat me, Gene.”

“How do I get there?” he said, but the line was already dead.

If there was anything Gene was certain of, it was that he should not let Cynthia know he was separated from his wife. He remembered his conversation with her about Sarah, the short-lived Director of Information Services, who seemed to be more guilty of having no family than of anything else.

Gene hung up the phone. Did he have to produce a wife for this trip? Would it be one-way for him if he didn’t? He was going to have to do something before Saturday.

SIX

Human beings make decisions to fill their needs. This might well be the only truth of economics. The problem with it—and the reason economics is a dismal failure as well as the dismal science—is that these needs are so diverse and so variable (even from moment to moment) that they can never be quantified. Money, prestige, power, understanding, health, pleasure, pain, idleness, and faith can all be “maximized” by human activity. And while the need at issue can only be fully known by the human being pursuing it, it rarely is. Some people have no need stronger than being needed.

The day Yamada delivered the new software specs to the Parks Commission, Ira Growth stopped in at his darkened office.

Growth shattered the darkness. “Jesus, Roger, let’s have some light,” he said, snapping the switch by the doorway. The aging fluorescent tubes flooded the room. The fixture buzzed and Yamada blinked at the intrusion.

“Roger, I have something to tell you,” thundered Growth.

Yamada put aside the papers he was working on. “Yes?”

“Kennedy is leaving the firm.”

“Is he sick?” said Yamada. He hadn’t seen Skinner once in the past week.

“Nah,” said Growth. “He just doesn’t like it here. Unfortunately, he still has an interest, until I can finish buying him out.”

“What doesn’t he like?” said Yamada.

"I don't know," said Growth. "Frankly, I haven't seen him since the night I gave you that bonus check. I've only talked with his lawyers."

"I'm sorry he's leaving," said Yamada.

"Don't be," boomed Growth. "We can handle this business ourselves. Look, you're better at this than I am. Would you tell the other employees?"

"What do I give as the reason?"

"Tell them the truth," said Growth. "Tell them that the guy is a jerk, that he has no vision, and that he's hung up on a lot of management crap."

"How about if I just tell them there were philosophical differences between you two?"

"That too," said Growth. "Thanks, Roger." He turned to leave, then stopped and turned back to face Yamada.

"I've contacted an accounting firm to take care of the financial stuff. We'll have a bookkeeper in here one day a week. I don't want everybody to know about this, but I can tell you: I think we're going to have some trouble meeting our payments. We'll have to work very hard to keep a lid on expenses for the next six months or so."

Yamada nodded.

Growth started to leave again, then turned back into the doorway.

"Roger," he said, "this isn't an easy thing for me to ask. . . ." Uncharacteristically, his voice sank into nothing.

"What is it, Ira?"

"The bonus check," he said. "Have you spent that money yet?"

"No."

"Would you consider reinvesting it in the firm?"

"Can I get a share in the company for it?" said Yamada.

"You'll get a stock certificate and everything," said Growth.

Yamada looked around at the slumlike quarters and thought about how fulfilled he felt here, in spite of everything. "Done," he said.

"Good," said Growth.

He disappeared back down the hallway, and Yamada got up to turn off the fluorescent lights.

Some people make decisions to fill a need no stronger than being needed. And some people make decisions without even being aware of it.

SEVEN

Gene's hours in Operations were long and excruciatingly dull. He knew he had been sent there to stop the staff shrinkage, and the easiest way to do that would be to kill Larry. But you don't just go into a department and bump off its Manager. You have to establish yourself first. Otherwise, you could create serious morale problems.

His days seemed to revolve around two primary activities: trying to get a copy of the consultants' report without Larry knowing about it and exploring the basement in case he would need to find his way out. He was having trouble getting the report, but he did discover that Larry's constant downsizings had left the department with a great deal of floor space—offices and facilities galore. Half of it was now given over to storage, break areas, and conference rooms. In fact, the department had more or less consolidated itself on one side of the building, east of its geographical center, which was a facility known by the Operations staff as “the glass house.”

The glass house was a large room with walls made entirely of glass; it housed the company's mainframe computer. About the size of the visiting area at a modest penitentiary, it was slightly pressurized by the ventilation system to keep the dust down, and the locked door could be opened only with a magnetic key card. The glass walls made it impossible to do anything to the computer's control panels without the chance of being seen by a passerby. So anyone who wanted to sabotage the system would have to log on at a terminal and do it from the privacy of an office.

When Gene had done his training rotation through Operations ten years before, the glass house was the center of the department's most significant activity. It was a sign of status to have a key card that would get you into it. Now it was dark most of the time. Its chief use was to run programs that maintained, validated, and secured the company's centralized data banks. Because strategy is based on the information of record, control of the mainframe means, ultimately, control of all the company's major decisions.

Gene hardly recognized the glass house when he encountered it the second day of his assignment. He came around a corner and there it was, dark except for two small glowing lights, one at either end. He was shocked at the sight at first and wondered if there hadn't been a power failure or something.

He walked slowly past and stared into the darkness. One of the small lights was eclipsed by some cabinet or piece of machinery, and it made Gene think of astronomical phenomena and the trackless depths of space. At that moment, he had a revelation. The mainframe computer was technologically outmoded. The only reason for its continued existence was political: it was the chief executive's way of controlling data and information. And for that reason, it was likely to continue running as long as space itself.

He shrugged and walked into the west side of the building to look for an empty room. Once he found one, he went in, closed the door, and read in the thousand-page novel. He never thought of himself as reading the book; he thought of himself as reading *in* it. He could read in it for an hour and never feel that he had made any progress. This wasn't like any of the books he had read in school. There wasn't any real information in it, yet it was tiresome. It reminded him of a book he'd had to read in his World Literature class in high school, something about fathers and sons. He hated that book, too. He was glad when he got to

college and he didn't have to read any more books like that. In college, everything he read meant something, contributed something to what he needed to know.

Nor was this like one of those books that made you feel as if you had been someplace. You could read and read and read and never feel as if you had been anyplace but the chair you were sitting in. Gene wasn't exactly sure how, but apparently the memory of tasting a little cake had awakened in the narrator another memory, and now, without the man having even gotten out of bed, he was in the midst of another story based on this memory that he had as a result of the memory of eating the little cake.

Gene was conscious of the story being a memory of a memory and therefore was unable to feel any sort of immediacy in it, but at least it was something different than tossing and turning in bed, an activity he understood well enough without needing to read about it.

He was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea. He was really no closer to understanding why his wife had left than if he'd consulted a ouija board. And the eight hundred-odd pages remaining in Volume One were a constant rebuke to his inability to keep up. Had his wife really read the whole thing?

* * *

It was with great relief that Gene noticed each evening that it was five-thirty, late enough to return to Human Resources to do a little work. He liked getting back to the eighth floor. He liked sitting in his self-adjusting chair and going over the research he would need for his new report.

The night Frannie stayed late, Gene was able to start work on his valuation of the company's human assets. Kevin had been good about keeping the desk clear; Gene could almost pretend the office was entirely his and he hadn't been

banished from his own department. The place was utterly quiet except for the clicking of Frannie's keyboard out in the reception area. It felt good to be back in Human Resources again. And there was a kind of delicious excitement in being alone, although he wasn't really, if he counted Frannie.

Putting together the figures he needed was an involved undertaking, and while Gene was compiling new hire records for each of the departments, he found himself wishing for a cup of coffee. He wanted to finish this step before he broke his train of thought, however. After he had the new hire records, he would pull together terminations, trying not to think about the people they represented. He would have to look in yet another place for promotions and transfers. It was tedious, but Gene found it easy to become completely absorbed in the work. It was, after all, work he understood. It didn't involve computers, and it didn't require killing anyone.

He had just started consolidating the figures for the most difficult department, which was Sales, when he realized Frannie's keyboard had stopped clicking. He looked up and saw her standing in front of his desk.

"Yes, Frannie?"

"Would you like some coffee?"

"That's very kind of you," said Gene.

After four years, he supposed Frannie was nearly capable of reading his mind. And she was by nature a good and generous person. Making a pot of coffee was something few people in business were willing to do.

"There's some in there." He pointed toward the kitchenette.

"I know," she said.

He watched her walk into the kitchenette and realized with a start that he was staring at her bottom. Shame coursed across the back of his neck and up into his ears. He heard the water running and the equipment being assembled for coffee. He felt a strong urge to apologize to her, but he

kept it in check and stared at the notes in front of him. It took him a moment to compose himself and retrieve his thinking.

The turnover in Sales was substantial. The department must have lost four people in the past year. He didn't know what they did to burn those people out so quickly. He suspected poor management.

A few minutes later a timer sounded, and Frannie came out with two cups of coffee. She set one on his desk and went out into the reception area. Gene quickly grabbed a stack of memos and stuck it under the cup before it made a ring on the surface.

"Thanks, Frannie," he called.

She didn't answer, and he wondered if maybe she had felt him staring at her bottom. He felt ashamed again.

He looked over at his coffee. It was steaming. He decided to let it cool for a moment. Frannie's keyboard started to click again. It stopped after a moment, and then he thought he heard her gasp or sigh. He paid no attention. Nonexempts are always making little sounds and gestures. It's better to ignore them.

Gene thought about the four people who were terminated in Sales. They were represented by names and employee numbers. He wondered if any of them suspected they were in trouble. When you put people into high-stress positions with neither preparation nor support, you use them up pretty quickly. And that's what they did in Sales. They didn't train people, they didn't support them, they made no attempt to manage them. They did nothing, really, but throw money at them when they succeeded and show them to the elevator when they didn't. The late Director of Sales and Marketing was an idiot and could conceive of no motivators other than money and fear. The figures showed where that kind of thinking leads. But then, the old Director was gone now, which probably said something about the wages of something. Gene thought he should set up a meeting with

the new Department Director to show him how his department compared to the others.

He realized that he hadn't heard Frannie's keyboard clicking for a couple minutes. Must have gone to the bathroom. It was a good time to take a stroll himself.

He got up and walked around his desk and out into the reception area. It was deserted out there, except for Frannie, who was slumped in her chair.

"Frannie?"

Frannie didn't move. Gene hurried to her. He was hesitant to do anything; it's dangerous to touch a nonexempt. He walked around and knelt down in front of her to try to look up into her face. Her eyes were closed. Her face was lifeless. He took her hand gently and felt the spot on her wrist below her thumb for a pulse. There was none, and he gasped when he realized she was as dead as last year's budget projections. He dropped her lifeless wrist and stepped back from her like it was catching.

Afraid to touch her again, he walked around the desk to where he could reach the telephone and call security for help. He punched the first button and noticed the cup of coffee, three-quarters full, cooling in front of Frannie. He set the phone back in its cradle. He took the cup and looked closely at it.

It held a blond liquid—Frannie always took her coffee with cream—and smelled slightly acrid. He set the cup down and walked into his own office. He leaned down over the steaming cup on his desk and sniffed. The only odor he could detect was coffee. He went into the kitchenette and opened the can of coffee grounds. It smelled of nothing but coffee. He went back to Frannie's desk and sniffed again. He had never smelled anything like it before, and for a moment he wondered if the cream had gone bad.

But Gene did not think that bad cream could be lethal. He realized with a jolt that Frannie had been poisoned. He ran into his little bathroom and threw up in the toilet. He

stood up unsteadily, took a bit of toilet paper from the roll mounted on the wall, and wiped his lips. His hand shook. Maybe he just wasn't cut out for this. Did the other executives spend so much time in the washroom throwing up?

What if he'd been here alone? What if he took cream in his coffee? What if the killer was around here right now? He walked over to the sink and splashed water on his face, hoping to cool down the panic-stricken thoughts racing through his head. He got water in his eyes and he could feel them going bloodshot. He grabbed a towel and rubbed his eyes. That brought him under control, and he carefully brought his mind to bear on the situation.

The poisoner couldn't be around. The whole point of using poison was so you wouldn't have to be around when it worked. Somebody was trying to kill him, but it was a sneak. He was not in immediate danger. In fact, he would be safer for the next few hours than he would be otherwise, since the poisoner would assume he was dead.

Gene looked at his watch: it was a quarter after seven. The cleaning crew usually arrived at the eighth floor around seven-thirty. He walked back out into the reception area and looked at Frannie, slumped over as if she were asleep. If the cleaning crew found her, he would have a situation on his hands. He imagined a rumor racing around the company that nonexempts were being murdered. He imagined the company family being deserted by its children. How was Cynthia going to deal with the situation? She would doubtless find someone to pin it on and make an example of that person to demonstrate to the nonexempts that they were safe at Growth Services, Inc. Who could she find to pin it on?

He realized with a start that he was the easiest and most likely suspect. He had been here alone with Frannie. He had no real friends in the company. He had no family to stick up for him. No matter that he was under Cynthia's

protection. She had advisors much closer to her than he: Vice-Presidential lackeys, bodyguards, other Department Directors unsure of their positions. They would throw him to the wolves, and she would be forced to go along with it. He looked down at Frannie again. Like it or not, she was his responsibility.

He remembered why he had always thought responsibility was so unpleasant.

Gene searched Frannie's desk until he found her purse in a file drawer. He took it back into his office and started looking through it. He didn't have anything particular in mind, just something that might help, maybe some medication that could be used to explain her death.

There was a lot of stuff in there. A half-gone roll of stomach tablets, some movie theater tickets, all kinds of makeup paraphernalia, used tissues, an overstuffed wallet. He had never looked through the personal possessions of a nonexempt before. He wasn't aware that any of them ever took stomach tablets. He stared at the tablets, and the thought crossed his mind that pressure from him was giving her heartburn. But that was more interpersonal leakage than productive thinking, so he shook himself out of it.

There was nothing in the purse that might have stopped her heart. In her wallet he found two worn credit cards, eight dollars in cash, a bunch of miscellaneous IDs, and a photograph torn into four pieces. The sight of Frannie's possessions spread out on the desk before him while she sat dead in the next room gave him a feeling like an icy hand grasping his heart. He had to stop sorting through her stuff while his body shook in his chair, causing the self-adjusting mechanism to whine pitifully. He forced himself to breathe deeply and slowly, and the shaking finally passed.

He laid the four pieces of the torn photograph down on the desk and arranged them. It was a ruggedly handsome man about her age, dressed in cut-off jeans and an open shirt, standing on a beach. Gene judged it was the infamous

William, posed for Frannie's camera during a romantic holiday.

He took everything back to her desk, set the open purse on it, and arranged the pieces of the torn photograph beside it. Then he pushed her chair back. It wheeled heavily with her dead weight in it. He leaned over the keyboard and typed a command into her machine to store the file she had been working on, opened a new file, and typed, "It is not worth it any longer. Nothing is worth it. I'm so very sorry." The message shimmered in the center of her screen. It seemed to him to apply to just about any situation.

Then he made a circuit of the entire department, from one end of the building to the other, to see if anybody else was still on the floor. It was deserted. He walked out to the balcony and looked around the atrium. Three floors below, off to the left, was a cleaning cart with a large trash can and several mops sticking out of it, but it seemed unattended.

Working more on nervous energy than anything else, he went back and got Frannie. He pulled her chair well out from the workstation and turned it around. She listed heavily to one side. Gene knelt before the chair. He stayed that way for a moment before he could bring himself to touch her again. Mustering his courage, he pushed his shoulder up toward her stomach, then pulled her over onto him with his arms. He stood easily with her hanging over his shoulder. She was a slim woman and not very heavy. He had never been so close to her before. Her perfume was pleasant.

As he turned around, he felt someone tap him on the back. He froze, then turned slowly again, looking around Frannie's hip to see who was there. There was no one, and he had a fleeting panicky thought that he was going crazy.

He turned back toward the door to the atrium and felt another tap. Then he realized it was Frannie, whose dangling arm bumped against his back when he moved her. He had to stand still for several moments to let his heart slow. When

he finally started toward the atrium, he stepped too quickly and Frannie tapped him again. It was more comforting than alarming this time, however. It was as affectionate a gesture as she had ever made toward him.

He took her to the balcony overlooking the lobby. It was a good distance, and Frannie bounced against him, step by step. He stopped once to put her in a more comfortable position, but then he realized she was beyond comfort. He wished he hadn't come back to Human Resources. There would have been plenty of time to play with numbers later.

He had to stop and catch his breath when he reached the door out to the balcony. He stood there, breathing hard, not wanting to set Frannie down, wishing he had said something nice to her before she had her coffee. She was a good employee, and he wished he'd told her that before he lost her.

He opened the door and walked out to the railing, then set Frannie down on the floor quickly so he could look around. Frannie sat against the railing, but she kept sagging forward, and he had to keep propping her up while he tried to get a good look around. The atrium seemed to be deserted. There were two people in the lobby, security people most likely, but there was no one about on the balconies. He put his hands in Frannie's armpits and struggled to lift her to a sitting position, more or less, on the railing. He held her that way for an instant and looked into her lifeless face. He was sure no manager had ever failed a subordinate so completely. He held her in position, reached down with his other hand, put it under her heel, and pushed her foot into the air. She went over in a lump, then straightened out and turned end over end, like a baton, as she plummeted toward the lobby floor below. He realized he was holding her shoe. He tossed it after her and hurried back into the office. He took her coffee cup into his little kitchen and poured it into the sink. Then he opened the refrigerator and found the carton of cream. He opened it and smelled. The same smell

as Frannie's coffee, only stronger. He poured it down the drain and rinsed out the carton before he threw it into the trash.

When the security people arrived, he was in the reception area, looking first one way and then another saying, "What's going on? Have you seen my secretary? She was at her desk not ten minutes ago."

* * *

Two security men questioned Gene about Frannie's mood and whether she had said anything strange. He told them the exact truth about everything, right up to the moment he heard her gasp or sigh at her desk. As he hoped, they seemed to think Frannie had thrown herself off the balcony. They wanted to believe it. Cynthia would want to believe it. There was an unstated rule in the company that you should never let the nonexempts get nervous. Everybody knew what the recruiting problems were like these days. The murder of a nonexempt would make them very nervous, but people don't get nervous about suicide, since they usually consider it avoidable.

One of the security men wrote down in a little notebook everything Gene said about Frannie, and the other asked if they might come back and talk with him again about the case. Gene said, of course they could, although he wasn't aware this was a "case." Eventually, hours later, everybody left Gene alone in his office again.

He sat at his desk, staring in front of him and seeing nothing. He was the manager in charge. He should be the one to tell Frannie's family. He should go to her personnel file, get the name of her next of kin, and go call on whoever was identified. He owed it to Frannie. He owed it to her family.

He took the fifty-centavo piece out of his pocket and rubbed it with his fingers. He wondered how Franco was doing. He wondered if anybody had tried to kill him yet or if he had managed to make things right with his business.

Unbidden, an image came to his mind: Frannie turning over and over in the air, like a baton. She had been his best friend here at the company. In fact, she had probably been his best friend in the world. Gene didn't make very deep friendships, not since he had grown up, anyway. He rolled the coin over and over in his hand. He would miss Frannie. And he would never forget the way she turned over and over in the air on her way to the lobby floor.

He had to tell her family. He was the manager in charge.

He looked around the department. He was alone here. The trash cans were still full and the floor unvacuumed. The cleanup crew had used the confusion as an excuse to skip the Human Resources department. They were probably enjoying their time off.

The employee files for this department were kept in Kevin's office. Officially, he was the Office Manager, in addition to his corporate duties. Actually, he delegated most of the responsibility to his admin, but employee files were kept in his office as a sign to the employees of how seriously the managers regarded them.

Gene walked across the department to Kevin's office, taking his master keys out of his pocket along the way. When he opened the office, it was as deserted as everything else. He went in and looked around. Like most company managers, Kevin had few personal effects in his office. Gene looked through the memos on his desk, flipped through the files in his in-basket, examined his calendar. It was all pretty routine business.

Against the back wall were two low, two-drawer files. He opened the drawer marked "G-L" and looked for Frannie's last name, which was Gray. He found the folder,

pulled it out, and took it over to Kevin's desk. He paged through it, glancing over performance reviews he had written, forms Frannie had filled out for her employee benefits, grade reports for courses she'd taken under the tuition reimbursement plan. He found her original application for employment, noted the next of kin (her mother, apparently), and wrote the name on the top sheet of a message pad on Kevin's desk.

The folder was interesting, and Gene continued to page through it. It probably documented a considerable part of Frannie's life. There was a Request for Salary Advance Form from last year when she went away on vacation. There was an Intracompany Application for Employment from the time she had come from Marketing to work for him. He found a W-4 form, signed by Frannie the day she had arrived at the company. He looked at the form and at Frannie's attempt at a businesslike signature. His hand began to shake.

He laid the form back in the file folder and sat down at Kevin's desk. He tried to calm himself, but he continued to shake. Despite all efforts to contain the leakage, he felt a tear form at the side of one eye. He was disappointed with himself. He would have to snap out of this if he was going to deal effectively with the situation. He was the manager in charge.

He took a tissue from the dispenser box on Kevin's desk and dabbed at his eye.

Then he blew his nose in it and tossed it into the full wastebasket. On top of the rest of the trash was a small manila envelope, such as might be used to hold a few coins or some stomach powders. Gene fished it from the trash to look at it, and when it got within a couple of feet of his face, he smelled something familiar.

He opened the little envelope and sniffed at it. The acrid smell from Frannie's coffee, only much much stronger.

EIGHT

It wasn't too awfully late when Gene found the Gray home, about nine P.M. The house was in a southwestern suburb he had never been to before; luckily, he kept a comprehensive street map in the glove compartment of his car. This was, in fact, the first occasion he'd ever had to use it—all the more reason for him to congratulate himself on his foresight in keeping such a map. Because the houses were quite close together and systematically numbered, he had been able to determine from a block away where the Gray house would be.

As he walked up to the double-decker house, Gene wondered if he should have called first. The house was narrow, neat, and well-kept, very much like Frannie herself. He stepped quickly up the stairs. The door had a large glass window in it. It was dark inside, but Gene saw through lace curtains a bluish light flickering off the walls.

He pressed the doorbell. After a moment, the porch light came on overhead. He could no longer see anything of the interior. A voice spoke to him through the door.

"Who are you?"

It was the voice of a woman, an older woman.

"Mrs. Gray?" said Gene.

"Who are you?"

"I'm from Growth Services, the company where Frannie works. May I come in?" Gene felt uncomfortable talking to a door.

"What do you want?"

"I have to talk to you about Frannie," said Gene.

"Do you mean Frances?" said the voice.

“Yes,” said Gene, “I suppose so.” He looked around and saw lights going on in some of the houses round about. He hoped he would be invited in soon, before some neighborhood committee assembled to investigate.

“What do you want?” the voice repeated.

“May I come in?” said Gene. “I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me from there,” said the voice.

Gene looked around. He wasn’t going to tell someone news like this through a door. He felt like he was going to be cheated of a character-building experience, but then he realized it might be more improving to stand out here on this porch and shout it to the poor woman.

“I’m afraid it’s not good news, Mrs. Gray,” Gene said to the door.

There was silence on the other side.

Gene stood on the porch uncertainly. He would have liked to just leave, to go home and go to bed. But he was the manager in charge.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Gray,” Gene said to the door, “but Frannie — Frances is dead.”

There was no reply.

“Mrs. Gray?” said Gene.

The porch light went out.

“Mrs. Gray,” said Gene, “she had been despondent lately.”

There was still no answer, although a light went on in the house next door. Gene stood on the porch and stared at the door. He could see the bluish light again, but he didn’t want to peer into the window; he felt the whole neighborhood was watching him.

“Mrs. Gray?” he said.

He gave her another moment to reply, and when she didn’t he turned, trotted quickly down the porch steps, and got back into his car.

* * *

Gene had just gotten to sleep when the alarm went off. He reached over and turned the switch. The bed stopped shaking, and he took off his noise cancelers and went into the bathroom to shower and shave. He felt as if nonexempts had beaten him with two-by-fours.

His shower refreshed him. While he was getting dressed in his closet, he looked down at the baseboard and saw the faint line that was the edge of a removable piece of board. He bent over, with his untied necktie dangling in front of him, and pried away the board with his fingertips. It came out easily, and he laid it aside on the closet floor.

He reached into the hole there and pulled out a small bundle wrapped in plastic. He walked back into the bedroom and peeled away the fastening tape. He unwrapped the plastic, tore away the paper, and laid his sidearm on the bed.

He put on a pair of trousers and took the wrappings and everything in the package to the kitchen table, where he laid it out. He sat down, as if to breakfast, before a spread of a thirty-eight automatic, a silencer, a magazine, and a half dozen bullets. He was too keyed up to eat. The handful of bullets were all that was left of the single box of ammunition he'd bought with the weapon. He'd shot away the rest at firing ranges. He sighed; that was a long time ago. He hefted the piece and sighted it all around his apartment. He took the empty magazine and slid it up into the grip until it clicked into place. He went into his bedroom with the automatic and retrieved the fifty-centavo piece from the top of his dresser. He slipped it into his pocket. He was going to have a talk with Kevin about Frannie.

Gene telephoned Larry and told him he wouldn't be coming into Operations that day. Given the situation, he said, he thought he should be at Human Resources.

Larry understood. "Such a tragedy. I'm sorry."

"Thanks, Larry," said Gene. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Gene put on a shoulder holster, then tried nearly every one of his jackets to find one that didn't show the bulge of the gun. There was a Brooks Brothers that was pretty boxy and hid it fairly well. He looked at himself in the mirror in his bedroom. With the gray jacket buttoned, it was not apparent that he was armed, although he couldn't really say he looked good. He took off the jacket again and threw it on the bed. He was proud of his trim body, and this particular suit made him look a size larger than he was. But when you have a job to do, you can't always care about the way you look.

What job was it he had to do? Was he going to talk with Kevin? Did he have the courage to take him out if necessary? Or would this wind up like the episode with his boss four years ago? He took the automatic out of the holster and walked back into the kitchen with it. He sat down with the weapon on the table in front of him. Was he prepared to kill? More so, he thought grimly, than he was prepared to die. He began to push rounds, one by one, into the magazine.

When he got to the office, he went to the eighth floor and called a department-wide meeting.

"Where's Kevin?" he said to the crowd in front of him.

"He's meeting with the Production department, off-site," said Kevin's admin. "They're discussing the new benefits package."

They stirred restively, forty-some nonexempts and four managers.

"I'm sure you've all heard about Frannie," said Gene. "This is the saddest day of my life. This is sad for all of us. Frannie deserves more than rumors. I think you should hear the correct story from me."

They stopped stirring.

“Frannie had not been herself lately. We didn’t talk about it, but I think she had some personal problems. Last night we were working here on a special assignment. I was in my office, and Frannie was out here. The next thing I knew, she was gone.” Gene looked around the office and relived the experience of the night before. “Apparently, she threw herself from the balcony into the atrium.”

Gene felt his throat dry up. He choked back a sob.

“I think the best thing we can do for her,” he said, “is remember what a fine employee and good person she was.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, and the room seemed dead. Finally he looked up.

“The department will be closed at one o’clock today,” he said. “Are there any questions?”

He saw a hand raised: a woman wearing a patchwork of styles and garments as if she’d just emerged from a Goodwill pickup bin. The same one he’d spoken with a few days ago. “What should we write on our timesheets?” she said.

“Ask your supervisor,” said Gene.

“Kevin’s my supervisor. He’s not here.”

“Talk to him tomorrow,” said Gene.

“Timesheets are due today,” she said.

“Don’t write anything on your timesheet,” said Gene. “Just leave it on my desk.”

Another hand was raised.

“Yes?”

“Do you want the rest of us to do that, too?”

“Those of you whose supervisors are in attendance today, confer with them. Those of you who report to Kevin, leave your timesheets on my desk.”

“What about if we were scheduled to take off some personal time already today?” somebody said.

“What about it?” said Gene.

“If we were already going to take personal time, do we have to mark personal time on the timesheet, since you’re

closing the department at one o'clock?"

* * *

Gene would have liked to tell his department the truth, but there was a great deal at stake here—not just the company's new initiative, but also his role in it.

He found Kevin at the suburban hotel to which the admin directed him. Kevin was running an open discussion on benefits for the Production department. The Production department tended to be ignored by the rest of the company. They dressed strangely, and they spent their days "getting product out the door." Very eccentric.

But Kevin handled them well. From the doorway Gene watched Kevin walk up and down the aisles among them, answering questions, listening soberly to their comments, and writing their suggestions on a large pad at the front of the room. He was good at making employees feel like they had some choice in their benefits. Gene was glad, in spite of himself, that he had Kevin to do this. After a moment, Kevin saw Gene in the doorway, but he never faltered, and none of the meeting participants turned around. Gene watched for a while; eventually Kevin set the participants to filling out forms.

He came to speak with Gene in the doorway. "What's going on?"

Gene nodded down the corridor, toward the men's room. He felt like grabbing Kevin by the jacket and pushing him around, but it's never a good idea for a manager to get physical with a subordinate.

Kevin didn't move. He just stood still.

Gene pulled the flap of his jacket open, so Kevin could see the automatic.

Kevin's eyes grew wide, and he turned shakily toward the men's room.

Inside, Gene went from stall to stall and looked under the doors to make sure they were alone. His heart pounded like a jackhammer, but he willed himself to act calmly. He pulled the automatic from the holster and began to attach the silencer. "I haven't decided what to say to you," he said, "except maybe you failed."

"At what?" said Kevin. He looked panicky. "For Christ's sake, Gene, what's going on?"

"You didn't kill me," said Gene.

"Kill you? My God, was I trying to? This is just a joke, right?"

Gene had the feeling this was all happening to someone else. He felt like he was watching a television show about two men in a restroom.

"Frannie's dead," said the actor with the automatic. He flipped the safety to off. "She used the cream."

"Frannie?" The actor playing Kevin looked like he'd taken a blow to the stomach. The color drained from his face. He leaned against the sink and gasped for breath.

Gene thought that one of the actors was distinctly better than the other.

"Frannie," said Kevin. "My God. My God."

"Didn't you realize somebody could get hurt?" Gene watched the actor with the automatic pull its slide back from the barrel in order to push a round into the firing chamber.

Kevin's lip trembled and tears began to spill from his eyes. He coughed, and it came out like a whoop that reverberated from the tiles.

Gene admired the ability of the actor playing Kevin.

"When did it happen?" Kevin sobbed.

"Last night," said Gene. "You knew I would be working late. Frannie was with me, and she made some coffee for us."

"My God," sobbed Kevin. He stepped to the wall, and mashed his face and pounded his fist against the tile.

Gene watched in fascination. Kevin could break his hand with such behavior. The actor with the automatic apparently didn't want to upstage the man with the fist, so he waited patiently for him to turn around again.

Finally Kevin turned to Gene. "OK," he cried. "Go ahead." He sank to his knees. Tears were running from his eyes. He lowered his face and Gene saw some of them drip on the tile floor.

Gene suddenly realized why Kevin's performance was so dramatic. "Don't tell me you had a relationship with a nonexempt."

"Oh, shut up," whined Kevin, still staring at the floor.

"That's disgusting," said Gene. Gene saw the actor with the automatic point it at Kevin's head. He wondered what would happen next.

"She was just furniture to you," said Kevin.

"That's not true," said Gene. He pointed the automatic at Kevin's temple. Then he seemed to forget his lines. He stood for some time with the automatic pointing at Kevin.

Gene realized the actor who had been playing him had come to the end of the script. He had to improvise now. "She was a good employee, and I'm lost without her," he said.

"So am I," said Kevin. He looked up slowly and stared into the muzzle of Gene's weapon. Tears were running down his face, but he had control of himself and his voice was clear. "Go ahead."

Gene suddenly understood that he had to make a decision. He had to decide whether to pull the trigger and blow Kevin's brains out. "Don't you know better than to have sex with nonexempts?" he said.

"Just shut up and do it," said Kevin.

Gene stared into Kevin's contemptuous expression for several long seconds. He could squeeze the trigger. A hole would open in Kevin's head. Blood would splash out like water. Kevin would collapse to the floor. But the actor had

already taken his bows and left. Gene would be the one to have to live with the vision of Kevin lying on the tiles with his life gushing out of him.

Gene lowered the automatic. He unscrewed the silencer and put it back in his jacket pocket, then reholstered the weapon up under his arm. "Go home. I'll dismiss your meeting."

"Gene, you have no guts," said Kevin.

Gene didn't say anything. He turned away so Kevin wouldn't see the shame in his face. Then he hurried toward the door. As he was leaving, Kevin spoke again.

"I didn't do it, you know."

Gene knew, but he wished he'd had the nerve to kill him anyway.

* * *

Gene drove to the beach that night. It wasn't beach weather, but he wanted to be alone.

He parked the car at the foot of the pier. Nobody was around. He climbed out of the car into the darkness and walked out onto the pier. The wind threw his necktie up over his shoulder and made the sides of his jacket flap. He could feel the cold against him, but it was not uncomfortable. He wanted to feel miserable, but he just felt strange.

He put his right hand into his pocket, where it came upon the fifty-centavo piece. He got to the end of the pier. He could barely hear himself think over the noise of the surf. It was dark and cold, the same dark and cold of the night four years ago when he had locked himself into his Assistant Manager's position.

The man who was Manager of Compensation and Benefits two people before Kevin was an affable man. He wasn't a bad boss, he just wasn't particularly charismatic,

and Gene had never gotten attached to him. Gene had been at the company for six years and he realized that if he didn't get a promotion soon, he'd never get one. So he had singled out his boss for termination. It would leave the man's position open, Gene would be the logical person to move into it, and then he would be off and running toward a career as an executive.

He stalked his boss for a week. He followed him discreetly when he left the building each day about an hour after quitting time. He dogged his car as the man went around running errands, picking up groceries or prescriptions, going to his health club three days a week. It was winter, and Gene would sit in his own car and shiver while his windows fogged up. He had never been quite so uncomfortable in his life, but he thought at the time a little discomfort was acceptable in the cause of advancing his career. It was after the man had retrieved a package of snapshots from a Fotomat that Gene had his best opportunity.

The mall parking lot was crowded with cars, but it was dark and there was no activity near the Fotomat booth. Gene sat and watched his boss walk up to his car, which was in the next row and six cars down from Gene's. His breath emerged into the air under the lights of the parking lot in little clouds. He opened the door and climbed in. A family, dressed in matching ski jackets and apparently late for a movie showing at the mall, hurried past them. When they had gone out of hearing range, the area around them was completely deserted. Gene climbed out of his car holding his automatic, fitted with a silencer, in his hand under his jacket. He flicked the safety off and made a wide circle among the cars to approach the man from the passenger's side. The cold grabbed at his chest where his jacket was open.

He crept slowly to within three cars and looked up over the hood of a late model station wagon to assess his

path to the passenger's side door. His idea was that he could run up, open the door, climb in beside him, and shoot him at close range. He tried to stay low as he approached; he was afraid his boss would see his cloudy breath.

But then he saw he needn't have worried. His boss was seated behind the wheel of his car, going through his snapshots. The light from the large lamps overhead was uneven, and he turned the photographs at funny angles to examine them. He had an expression of both concentration and delight, and Gene realized with a flash of intuition that he was looking at pictures of his family.

Gene knew he should not think about the man's family. His duty was to approach him, stick the muzzle of the automatic in his eye, and blow his brains out. He had his own responsibilities, to himself, to his wife. It was his duty to move himself up in the organization, and to move up, he had to kill this man.

Something about the funny angles at which the man held the photographs and studied them immobilized Gene. He tried to visualize himself walking up to the car, climbing in beside the man, pointing the automatic at his head, and squeezing the trigger. But the vision wouldn't form in his mind. And he knew he would not be able to make it happen. The man might bleed all over him or, worse, he might say something to him before Gene was able to pull the trigger. "Please don't" or "Take care of my kids."

Gene shivered in the cold. It was the first time he realized he was incapable of making a major decision.

He went back to his car, took the magazine out of the automatic, and detached the silencer. He drove home without even knowing he was doing it.

His wife was habitually understanding about his late hours, and she didn't think it unusual for him to come straggling in at nine. Nor did she ask him why he spent the rest of the evening prying the baseboard away from the wall in his bedroom closet. It was not their style, after all, to

discuss such personal activities. Gene was glad she didn't try to get him to talk.

They would probably spend the rest of their lives on his Assistant Manager's salary, and he wasn't ready to tell her that yet.

Two months later, Gene's boss was shot to death by the Assistant Manager for Safety and Training, who was then made Manager of Compensation and Benefits over Gene. Gene was actually somewhat relieved: he might have killed his boss just to open the position for someone else. But deep inside, he knew he was rationalizing, so he just stopped thinking about it. It wasn't hard.

No one at the company could have known about Gene's failure in the mall parking lot that night, but somehow they sensed it. Slowly, Gene came to understand that he was regarded as harmless. He wasn't exactly shunned, but he was left alone, more or less. Eventually, his subordinates drifted off to report to other managers, all except Frannie. Nobody explained it to him. They simply stopped asking him what to do and gradually began to take direction from other, more powerful managers, who were all glad to accept responsibility for additional reports. Nonexempts are mostly incapable of abstract thought, but they can be remarkably shrewd about assessing where the voltage runs highest.

The department systematically emasculated him, and he accepted it. His wife sensed something as well, because it was about that time she had begun to act strangely and read a lot of books. Gene often wondered if she somehow knew he had failed her.

Now she was gone. His old boss was gone. Even the man who killed him was gone.

But Gene was still incapable of making a major decision. Why hadn't he shot Kevin? Even though he wasn't behind the poisoning, it still would have been much more convenient and safe to run the department without him.

His world was in chaos, and nothing in Gene's experience told him how to deal with it. He took the automatic from his shoulder holster and screwed the silencer on the muzzle. The surf roared around him, and he realized how little difference there was between killing another person and killing himself. There was an inexorable logic to it. Either act was an attempt to control fate. Suicide, he realized, was the final decision, the last follow-up. It was an exercise of control more complete than anything else a manager could do.

He looked straight into the dark surf. Then he looked at the weapon in his hand.

He grasped the automatic by the silencer and flung it, spinning, as far into the night as he could. It disappeared into the darkness almost as soon as it left his hand. He never heard it splash. The surf was too loud.

When he went home that night, there were no messages on his answering machine.

He slept without noise cancelers.

* * *

In the morning, when he woke up, he felt as if he'd never slept so soundly. He slipped his fifty-centavo piece into his pants pocket and walked out to the kitchen for breakfast. Passing through the living room, he saw the message indicator flashing on his answering machine. Apparently, he had slept right through a telephone call. He played it back. A male voice, the same one that had called so often for Franco, spoke briefly.

"It ain't what you think," it said.

Gene reached in his pocket while he was listening to the tape and rubbed his coin. The message didn't say much.

NINE

Gene spent the morning in Larry's office with him. He pretended to drink coffee while he tried to find out about the department and Larry's relationship with Faith. Every time he tried to ask him about some project, procedure, or activity, Larry would say, "You'll have to ask Faith about that."

And when Gene tried to question him about Faith herself, all he got was, "Gene, she's my strong right arm. She has a great future with the company." It was clear to Gene she was running rings around Larry. She knew the department inside-out and knew everything there was to know about Larry as well. What Larry knew about her could be written on the back of his business card and still leave room for a moderately-sized Gantt chart. Gene learned less about Faith in half an hour of discussing her with Larry than he could learn in five minutes of walking around her office.

A diploma hung on the wall beside her desk, hidden from view. Gene actually had to get down on all fours beside her desk to read it slantwise. He wondered why she had put up a diploma in her office, but he approved of the unobtrusive style in which she'd done it. He looked at it quite closely.

It had a tasteful, polished wood frame and announced the completion, *summa cum laude*, of a business curriculum at a small, mediocre women's college. One of those places that is more or less despised but manages to convince its students (and their parents) it is among the elect. No matter that the workplace treats its graduates like dirt.

Hardly a day passed that Gene didn't think of his own college days. It had been the most important time of his life. There was nothing he couldn't do in college. He had astounded his teachers and friends with his ease in picking up knowledge, his ability to grapple with an idea, his analytical insight, his memory. His voracious and omnivorous interests took him into every aspect of the business curriculum. Marketing, finance, management, even economics—he had a reputation for being a Renaissance man. He was on the Dean's List six semesters out of eight.

It had been a grand time to be alive. It had been the high point of his life.

He was already married when he graduated, so he had to go straight to work. He and his wife could not afford for him to go to graduate school. Fortunately, he had lots of job offers. Dozens of firms wanted to hire him. He had the good sense to be less confident of his ability to succeed in a company than he was of his ability to succeed in school, so he chose the one that promised lifetime employment. He had a wife to look out for, maybe a family someday soon. And he had to admit that he liked the security of his knowledge that Growth Services, Inc. would not ever let him go.

On the job, he began to understand how little he had learned in four years of eagerly soaking up every bit of knowledge he touched. Financial management, pricing techniques, micro-economic theory, organization development—they meant nothing here. He learned soon enough that nothing mattered but one's skill in bending other people to his will, and nobody had taught any of that in college. He tried to learn to be an effective manager. He bought a gun and practiced with it at a local firing range. He told his wife he was working late, which she accepted. If she smelled the cordite on him when he arrived home in the evenings, she never said anything about it. He was obviously under a certain amount of stress, and he didn't want to talk about it.

It occurred to him that he never found out how she felt about his career. By the time he had dropped out of the competition and secreted himself in a position of low visibility, he didn't know how to talk about such things. They had never had a single conversation about his failure. He wondered if she would be impressed to see him now in his Department Director's position.

He got up from the floor, where he had been looking at Faith's diploma, and went off to an empty office to read. But he was acutely conscious that the book was giving him nothing that might get his wife back and, besides, he had too much on his mind to make any progress with it. He found himself wondering if Faith had had to struggle with her student loan payments the way he had. More leakage. He put the big book back in his briefcase, stood up, reached into his pocket, and stroked the fifty-centavo piece. He decided he would tell Faith to get a copy of the consultants' report for him.

One of the data entry people told him he could find Faith in the department's small conference room on the other side of the glass house. The Mexican coin bumped softly against Gene's leg as he walked, and he found himself thinking about how he might deal with the empty space when he began reorganizing the department. He had decided he was going to accomplish the reorganization without killing anybody. He was going to find a way to show both Larry and Faith how close they had come to being killed. They would, of course, be so grateful that they would help him stop the staff shrinkage and put in a new reporting structure. He would convince Cynthia that he was maintaining productivity and keeping costs in line. She couldn't possibly object to the plan, especially if it generated the increased loyalty he expected. He just had to do this all very carefully and present it to his various constituencies—his boss, his subordinates, his fellow Directors, the

nonexempts—with the appropriate packaging and strategy. He might well start a new era at the company.

He went through the door at the end of a short entry hallway into the deserted side of the department. The door clicked shut behind him, closing out the sounds of human habitation with it. It gave him a funny feeling, like diving into a pool. There was no sound other than the thump of his shoes against the carpeted floor.

He was not leaving a lot of noise behind. The Operations department as a whole was a pretty quiet place. But there was always something: doors opening and closing, machinery running, people talking. In this section, Gene couldn't hear a thing.

He didn't know how long he stood in the darkened corridor absorbing that feeling—just a moment or two, probably. But he didn't want to disturb the place, so he took his shoes off and carried them as he walked from corridor to corridor, looking for the conference room. He was walking so quietly that he heard a door click behind him in the distance. He realized he was being followed. He wasn't afraid. He was, after all, doing Cynthia's work, which put him under her protection. But he realized there were aspects to life at the executive level that took some getting used to.

The door to the conference room was ajar, and he heard Faith long before he saw her. He approached closely enough to make out the words, then stopped. He looked back down the dim corridor and saw a human shape approaching. The follower was making no effort to hide himself, but he approached as quietly as Gene had, even though he was still wearing his shoes. Faith was talking with an employee, and the conversation was so amiable it took Gene a moment to understand she was conducting a disciplinary interview.

"How is everything going, Owen?" said Faith.

"I'm doing OK," said the employee.

There was a pause, and some papers shuffled.

“Owen,” said Faith, “can you explain the incident with the service calls file?”

Gene remembered how annoying it was to hear his own name over and over when talking with Faith. He looked back down the corridor, and the human shape resolved itself into the man with aviator glasses. The man stopped when he was in listening distance as well. He smiled at Gene with even, white teeth as he leaned against the wall, just as if he was supposed to be there listening to the disciplinary interview. Gene looked down at the shoes in his hand. He smiled back at the man and tried to look like an executive.

“Everybody’s trying to lay that off on me,” said Owen.

Gene felt uncomfortable. You don’t change nonexempt behavior with friendly conversation, or by using the employee’s name over and over. This young man was going to walk all over Faith, and the manager in charge was going to look like he was running his department as an encounter group. He glanced at the man in aviator glasses again. The man was still smiling.

“Tell me this, Owen,” said Faith. “What do you think would have happened if we didn’t have a backup for that file?”

“It’s just one lousy file,” said Owen.

There was another pause.

Gene wondered if Faith’s course also taught you to pause a lot in conversations. He looked up at the man in aviator glasses, who nodded as if he and Gene were sharing something delightful. The man reached down and slipped off his shoes, one after the other. Gene was surprised at how silently he did it. He felt a little sick.

“We would have lost those records, wouldn’t we, Owen?”

There was a barely audible response Gene couldn’t quite make out.

“I didn’t hear you, Owen,” said Faith.

“I said, ‘Who cares?’” he said more loudly.

“Don’t you think the people who depend on those records, the people who depend on your best efforts, care?” said Faith.

The employee didn’t answer.

“Do you feel your co-workers don’t support you, Owen?” said Faith.

“I don’t know,” said Owen.

There was another pause, and Gene realized Faith was becoming even gentler. He looked over at the man in aviator glasses, who imitated Owen. With a shoe in each hand, the man shrugged his shoulders elaborately and looked helpless. Gene was not really inclined to laugh, but he smiled as if he thought it was funny.

Gene wondered how closely the man in aviator glasses would remember this conversation. Would he be able to repeat it word for word? He should not have allowed the interview to get this far. He looked at the man and smiled with what he hoped was the look of an indulgent parent. But he was afraid he looked more like a manager who had allowed his department to degenerate into an encounter group. So he screwed up his courage and walked into the conference room.

He was carrying his shoes, but Faith and Owen didn’t seem as surprised at that as they were by his mere presence.

“Gene?” said Faith. She looked at him, looked at the shoes in his hand, looked at Owen. She recovered quickly, however, and became her usual businesslike self.

“Well, then,” she said to the employee, “I’m glad we understand each other.”

“Understand each other?” said Gene, gesturing rhetorically with his shoes.

The color drained from the employee’s face.

“Have you put critical files at risk?” said Gene, acutely aware of the man in the corridor.

The employee looked down at the floor. “Maybe I accidentally formatted a volume,” he said.

Gene pointed at Faith with his shoes. "Faith is going to check the integrity of the volumes daily," he said. "From now on, you'll be held personally responsible for the condition of the service calls file."

The young man nodded.

"If you don't trust your co-workers to respect this responsibility," said Gene, "then I suggest you get here on time to protect your work."

The employee looked up at Gene, then looked at Faith.

Faith smiled and gestured toward Gene. "Owen," she said, "this is Gene. He's been named Co-Director of Operations with Larry."

"May I go back to work now?" said Owen.

"Go ahead," said Faith.

Owen got up and left quickly.

Gene watched Owen disappear out the door.

"Nice socks, Gene," said Faith.

"They told me I could find you in here," said Gene.

"Just a disciplinary interview," she said pleasantly.

The lack of windows was beginning to get on Gene's nerves. The beige walls and indirect lighting of the conference room didn't help very much. The door stood ajar, and Gene wondered if the young man had run into the man in aviator glasses on his way out.

"It didn't sound to me like you were getting anywhere." Gene sat down awkwardly in the chair across from her and leaned down to put on his shoes. He could feel the warmth left on the seat by the employee.

"I believe consensus is the first step to effective performance." Faith jogged a stack of manila folders against the table.

Gene felt stupid. He had interrupted a disciplinary interview. He had allowed a subordinate, and a subordinate's subordinate, to see him in his socks. He adopted a no-nonsense tone of voice. "Faith, let me give you a little advice."

“Oh, yes, Gene,” she said, looking at him guilelessly, as if he might have the answer to all her problems.

“Don’t treat nonexempts as if they were professional staff. They don’t understand cooperation and consensus.”

“Always glad to get advice from the senior people,” said Faith, and she gave him a self-effacing smile.

“Did you really expect that young man to care about the opinion of his co-workers?” said Gene.

“Yes, I did, in fact,” said Faith. “This is the third time I’ve called him on the carpet.” She opened one of the manila folders to a line chart, which she began to trace with her finger. “I’ve been studying his behavior for six weeks. Despite what he says, he’s a classic affiliation-seeker. I thought I had the right approach this time.”

Gene finished tying his shoes and pulled up his socks through his pants.

“I made him personally responsible for that file three months back,” said Faith. “It was formatted on him ten days ago. My investigation showed he didn’t do it, but I haven’t been able to get him to say who did.”

Gene’s face burned. “You have goals to meet,” he said. “You can’t spend all your time in therapeutic discussions with nonexempts.”

“I’m sure,” said Faith.

“Be decisive,” he said. It sounded louder than he anticipated. “Do you really think you can convince that young man that he has some interest in the integrity of the service calls file?”

“He doesn’t need to have an interest in the file if he understands how much his co-workers depend on it. That’s his core motivation.”

It occurred to Gene that he could learn something from Faith. She obviously had more supervisory experience than he, and she seemed to know a lot about it. He wondered if he looked as stupid as he felt. “Well then. Take advantage of it.”

Faith looked at him, and he had the fleeting impression that she saw right through him—and right through the wall, and right through the man in aviator glasses out in the corridor, and right through the foundation of the building and the bedrock it was embedded in. He wondered what it was like to be her subordinate. She made one of her face-filling smiles, and the impression vanished. She was a young manager in training again. “Would you do something for me?” he said. “I want you to get a copy of a report from Larry.”

“The consulting firm’s report on our data systems?”

“How did you know?”

She smiled. “Do you want it bound or loose?”

“That doesn’t matter.” Gene was not used to such responsiveness in a subordinate. He felt himself warming to her. “I just need it by the end of the day. And I don’t need Larry to know I have it.”

“I understand.” She closed her manila folders and jogged the stack again. “I’ll leave it on your desk before I go home tonight.”

“Fine.” Gene felt the confidence of having given an assignment to someone who will get it done right. He rose to go. He was in the doorway when she called to him.

“Gene,” she said. “When are you going to start your reorganization?”

Fortunately, he was into the corridor and could pretend he hadn’t heard her. The man in aviator glasses was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

At home that evening, he decided he had better call his wife and see if he could get her to go to Cynthia’s island with him. He paced around his living room like a teenager trying to get up the nerve to call a girl for a date. He paced for a

half hour. Then, to distract himself, he made dinner. He got a colorful box out of the freezer and expertly extracted a “personal pizza” to prepare it for microwaving. He broke the cellophane and rearranged the package flap in the specified manner. The procedure was somewhat complicated, but he didn’t need to read the directions. He had done it once a week or more for years. He entered the sequence on the keypad and started the pizza on its way to becoming edible; within minutes the pleasant odor of pepperoni and cardboard filled the kitchen. He had a vision of his wife standing at the microwave and watching a frozen pizza through the window. She had never been able to let the pizza take care of itself but had to study it as it cooked. He supposed the urge came from some need to be involved in the process. She was hopeless in the kitchen; microwaved pizza had been her best dish. She probably had it every night now that she was alone. Heaven knows, Gene had it too often himself.

Gene felt better with hot, greasy pizza in his stomach. Thus fortified, he went to the telephone. He knew his wife would be in when he called. Harvey’s reports had said she habitually stayed home in the evenings. His heart pounded as he tapped out the numbers on the telephone keypad. The phone rang only once at the other end before his wife answered it. Her voice sounded the same way it had the last time he’d talked with her, a year ago.

“Harvey, where are you?”

“This isn’t Harvey,” said Gene.

“Gene?” Her voice betrayed surprise, but she recovered herself quickly. “Gene, I’ve got a collapsed souffle here, and I’m expecting an important call. Could we talk some other time?”

“Sure.” Gene hung up without saying good-bye.

TEN

Gene did not dream often, but that night he dreamed about Cynthia's cottage. In his dream, the cottage was about the size of an airplane hangar, and it had no furniture. He was there with his wife. The two of them walked across the hangar to the far corner, where Cynthia was waiting. It was a long walk, during which they did not speak. This did not seem unusual to Gene; he and his wife had never spoken much. When they arrived at the other corner, Cynthia sent him and his wife to the room she had prepared for them. "Go to your room and have sex," she said.

Gene remembered that he was supposed to go where he was told to go and do what he was told to do, so when a bedroom sprang up around them, he turned to embrace his wife, but she had turned into Cynthia. The bedroom was dark, but she was luminous. She wore no clothes, and she moved with the flexibility of a gymnast. He felt no need for any explanation of how a woman Cynthia's age would have the body of a twenty-year-old. She was Cynthia, after all. He looked down at himself, and he was naked, too. He had an erection that loomed up out of the darkness and seemed to belong to somebody else.

She reached for him. "I am your mentor," she said.

Then she vanished, and Gene was alone in the dark room, and he realized he was awake. Gene looked around in the dark, surprised to be alone. Her words echoed in his mind as his erection slowly subsided. Of course she was his mentor. That was the point. Despite its embarrassing sexual imagery, his dream was trying to tell him something. For the first time since he had come to work there, he was not alone

in the company. He had a mentor. He lay back down on his pillow and enjoyed the warm feeling inside.

In the morning, when Gene was getting together his things for the trip to Cynthia's island, he put the thousand-page novel alongside the photocopy of the consultants' report. He didn't know if he might not wind up waiting someplace for a while and have the opportunity to make some headway in the novel. He picked it up and looked at it on end. His bookmark was considerably less than a quarter of the way into the book. This wasn't reading material; this was a habit. He walked into the garage and tossed the book into the trash with the direct-mail catalogs.

He reached into his pocket and rubbed the fifty-centavo piece as he walked back to the bedroom to get the consultants' report. He had a strange feeling: he realized he had made a decision. Another warm feeling. Of course, it had to start happening sooner or later. His mentor was easily the most decisive person in the entire company. And she was his mentor.

* * *

Cynthia's island was due north through a thicket of hand-painted signs advertising lobster prices. The prices were all identical, which raised some question as to why everybody advertised them, but Gene assumed they knew what they were doing. These communities had obviously been feeding lobsters to tourists for a lot longer than Growth Services, Inc. had even existed. The road curved up along the coast, and Gene caught glimpses of the icy ocean through gaps in the lobster signage. Occasional picturesque seaside towns with well-used boats moored at ancient docks tried to attract travelers and tourists to little craft stores propping up elaborate and well-kept nineteenth-century houses.

The drive took about four hours, and in the brief intervals between calls, he wondered what it had been like before car phones, when people took long drives alone with themselves. It was Saturday, and the console telephone summoned him from his thoughts every fifteen minutes or so to try to sell him things: European vacations, beachfront condos, cars, investment opportunities.

He knew the first half of the drive quite well. He and his wife had vacationed in the area a number of times. When they vacationed up here, they would rent a cottage on the water for a week, as far north as they could afford, which was just over two hours' drive. During the days, she explored, collected shells on the beach, and went to yard sales. That was before she started reading books.

Gene couldn't remember what he did on those vacations. He remembered driving up to the cottage, and he remembered driving back, but he couldn't remember the inside of the cottage, and he couldn't remember what he did while she was out exploring. For all he knew, he explored with her. But he might as easily have stayed in the cottage and napped. He wasn't sure. Maybe he didn't exist while she was out exploring. Come to think of it, he had often felt that way about their marriage: that he didn't exist and she traveled through life on her own. He smiled ruefully at how thoroughly he had misread the way things were. It really was over. It was too bad, but it wasn't the end of the world. His life was taking a new direction now. He had a successful career.

Cynthia had seen the executive ability lurking inside him when no one else did. He owed her a lot. And now she had invited him to her home. He felt like a man who faced no limits. Perhaps he could change the way the company conducted its reorganizations. Step one was to prove, with the Operations department, that there was another way.

He had a lot to mull over. Without even thinking about it, he set the ringer cutoff on the telephone. It was a stupid

thing to do. He knew some of the high-end automated selling systems were sophisticated enough to determine when a call was being placed to a car telephone, and some were even good enough to know when the car was moving. One of them must have caught him and reported him when its call went unanswered. Just north of Portland, a local police car pulled him over. The policeman cited him for operating an illegal ringer cutoff.

The fine was a hundred and fifty dollars, but he was more worried about the time than the money. He didn't want to be late for a meeting with Cynthia.

Fortunately, it was one of those mail-in tickets, and the process only took about ten minutes. The policeman told him the Federal Communications Commission would send someone around within thirty days to make sure he had removed the cutoff, and he warned Gene against using it again before having it taken out. He pointed out that just having it was a misdemeanor. Gene took the ticket and went on his way.

As soon as he was back on the road, the calls started again. After about twelve calls, he decided to buy something just so the pitching systems would see it on his account and leave him alone for a couple hours. The next pitch after his decision was for a CATscan, to be used at his convenience. He turned it down. It wasn't the expense—he was due for a raise, after all—he just couldn't anticipate a real need for it.

But then the phone chirped, and there was a pitch for a fountain pen: gold with silver trim, and monogrammed. It was a week's pay, and it was not the kind of purchase Gene was used to making. But it was only a week's pay of his current salary, which might well increase in a matter of hours. He remembered the pen lying on Cynthia's glass desk, and he felt a thrill when he realized he was going to buy one just like it.

The pitch voice was male. It was smooth and mature, about what Cynthia would have sounded like if she were a

man. Gene pictured a man in a tailored shirt and suit—white hair, clear eyes.

“The nib is solid gold and designed to deliver a uniform line regardless of pressure. European design and workmanship at its best. Whether you’re writing a memo, a novel, or a check, you deserve this fine writing instrument.”

Gene agreed. He deserved it. When the pitch system finished the description, Gene punched ‘1’ to say he wanted to buy. He waited for the system to prompt him for his credit card number, then he went through a rather complicated procedure to enter the initials for the monogram on the telephone keypad. It was rather interesting the way they narrowed it down, but he had to press a dozen buttons in three stages to give them his three initials to use.

“Thank you for your order. Your pen will be delivered on the next business day.”

Gene pictured himself in meetings with Cynthia, where he would pull out his gold fountain pen to make notes. He imagined himself writing memos for Frannie to type. That hurt momentarily, when he realized Frannie was gone, but he shook it off. He couldn’t bring her back, so it wasn’t much use thinking about her.

The seacoast towns became less frequent, and the lobster signs gave way altogether. He was leaving tourist country. The population was sparser north of the lobster signs, and it seemed to consist of two classes: poor people and intruders. The poor people were the most visible. They lived in small, clean frame houses and trailers set close by the road.

Cynthia’s family did not live close by the road. Gene knew they had come to the area when Cynthia was still a girl (although he had some difficulty imagining Cynthia as a girl) and had bought their island as a vacation spot. Cynthia’s father was CEO of a minicomputer company, and Gene suspected his island refuge saved his sanity during the repeated brutal shakeouts of the mid-range market. The

company went bankrupt and never managed to reorganize its debts. Gene thought he remembered some scandal about whether or not the bankruptcy was justified. Whether or not it was, the company provided Cynthia's father with a lavish retirement. Gene understood he lived in good health to an advanced age, tending the family's investments.

Following the directions he'd gotten from Cynthia's secretary, Gene began to look along the side of the road for a small sign saying "Price Landing." He would have missed it if he hadn't been looking for it. It was that small. And the road it marked was unpaved.

At the end of the dirt lane, he parked his car in a small gravel lot. A pair of four-wheel-drive utility vehicles took up about a quarter of the lot. At the end of the parking lot, guarding a small wooden dock, there was a sort of little gate house.

Inside the gate house was a guest book and a telephone. There was a chain with nothing on the end of it dangling next to the book, and Gene wondered why somebody didn't steal the book as well as the pen. He used his own pen to sign the guest book. He thought again how nice it would be when his new pen was delivered and he could throw this one away. Then he picked up the telephone. It had no buttons, but as soon as he picked it up, it began to ring at the other end.

"Hello," said a child's voice.

Gene had no idea how to talk to a child. This had always been a problem for him. Whomever the child belonged to, it was unlikely to address Cynthia by her first name, so he couldn't ask for her that way. If he asked for "Ms. Price," the child wouldn't know whom he was talking about. And if he said, "Is your Mommy there?" who knows what kind of answer he'd get.

"Yes," he said. "I uh— That is— My name—" His stumbling was interrupted by Cynthia's voice. "Gene?"

"Yes," he said.

“You’re late. The boat will be there in ten minutes.”

He went back to his car to get his windbreaker and the copy of the report. Then he walked out on the little dock and shivered. It was a clear day, and he could see an island on the horizon, but he couldn’t make out any details. The wind stung Gene’s face and eyes. He was giving some thought to stuffing the data systems report down the front of his pants to warm up a little when he saw something else on the horizon and realized it was a boat. It grew quickly from a small, dark shape to a runabout maybe fifteen feet long moving fast and making inordinate noise. It arrived at the dock in the gurgling GWA GWA GWA GWA of a powerful engine backing down from high rpms. The driver didn’t toss him a line or anything; he just walked over from the wheel to the gunwale, reached out, and grabbed a piling with both arms. He was a healthy tan color, and he had gray hair, about like Cynthia’s, that peeked out from under a red knit cap. There were pleasant laugh lines on his face, and he wore a wheat-colored sweater.

“Gene?” he shouted above the roar of the engine.

“Hop in.”

When Gene did as he was told, the man let go of the piling and pushed it away with both hands. “I’m Fraser Anderson,” he said, offering his right hand. “Cynthia’s husband.” Gene knew that. He’d seen Anderson’s picture in magazines, with Cynthia. The two of them were darlings of the media for having stayed married for over twenty years, despite coming from the disparate backgrounds of old and new money (Fraser Anderson’s ancestors were five generations of shipping magnates). Gene had read all the stories closely, trying to understand what it is that keeps people married.

Fraser turned back to the wheel, engaged the engine, and pushed the accelerator forward. The boat stood up a little in the water and began to race out to sea. Gene could

imagine nothing he and Fraser might have to talk about, but that seemed to make no difference to the man.

"How was the drive up?" he shouted over the engine. "Any problems?"

"Very nice." Gene shouted back. He didn't want to tell his boss's husband that he had gotten a ticket for disabling his telephone. He walked over and stood next to him in the cockpit, turning so he could face him and keep his back to the wind.

"Your first time up here?" Fraser shouted into the wind.

"I've been up here a few times, but usually a little further south."

"How do you like it north of the lobster signs?" Fraser yelled.

Gene laughed. "Much nicer than tourist country."

"Do you work for Lorraine?"

It was an unusual setting in which to be reminded of the woman who had been taken into the elevator by Cynthia's operatives a few days before. It brought Gene up short, a little.

"No," he shouted. "I replaced her."

"Oh," said Fraser. Gene thought he looked surprised, but he wasn't sure. He couldn't think why Cynthia's husband would be particularly surprised at changes among her managers, especially right after a major reorganization. Perhaps Cynthia didn't talk business at the dinner table. "Congratulations," Fraser said after a moment.

"Thank you. Did you know Lorraine?"

"I met her once at a company dinner," said Fraser. "She was very funny. Great sense of humor."

Gene had never thought of Lorraine as having a sense of humor, but then he had never met her on the terms Fraser had. He wondered why Fraser remarked on that, unless it was because he was used to humorless women. Gene was

glad he had his back to the wind, because he could see it was beginning to make Fraser's eyes water.

After a couple minutes, Fraser pointed out ahead at their destination. Gene turned into the wind and saw the island had grown considerably larger. The runabout approached it from the mainland side, where there was a small cove. Fraser slowed the boat when they entered the cove, and it sat down again in the calm water, the only swell being the wake they had created, which overtook them and lifted the stern momentarily. There was a sailboat with two masts moored on one side of the bay, a small plane with pontoons moored on the other. Fraser looked over at the sailboat as if he wished he were on it.

The house was a marvel of soaring cathedral windows, clerestories, and decks. It was sheltered at the back by tall pine trees, and there was a broad lawn facing the cove.

"How old is this house?" said Gene.

"We built it five years ago," said Fraser, watching the dock. "Do you think you can catch the piling with that line?"

Gene saw they were approaching a dock. There was a dinghy tied at the end of it, presumably to ferry people back and forth to the sailboat or the seaplane.

Gene never realized how many boats you have to maintain to live on an island. He grabbed the rope Fraser was pointing to. It had a large loop on the end, so it was simple to throw it over the piling. It took only moments to finish securing the boat. Fraser switched off the engine, and quiet sprang up. Gene could hear the water lapping the boat and the dock. Surf crashed in the distance.

"The old one was a restored Victorian. It took a long time to tear down," Fraser said with obvious pride.

A flagstone walk ran up to the house. Gene saw a small microwave dish pointed toward the mainland, and he guessed that was for the telephone connection. He wondered

if it carried any other communication traffic or if Cynthia tried to leave the company behind when she came here.

The two men walked through a living room that reminded Gene of a Dallas hotel. Colorful tapestries hung from the vaulted ceiling, and everything was trimmed in brass and pink granite. There were several potted plants as tall as a person. Sliding doors opened into a solarium, where a structure of chaotically piled stonework cascaded water continually into a small pool. The opposite wall held an elaborate arrangement of javelins, assegais, and cowhide shields.

The spear tips and blades all seemed to be made of stainless steel. Gene wondered what protection a cowhide shield would be against stainless steel.

After seeing Cynthia's spartan office at the company, Gene wasn't really prepared for such excess. It was fascinating to him that she had so much life outside the company, more so that she would want it. Cynthia was one of those layered people. You get past one layer and find a whole other person beneath it.

There was a broad stairway whose breathtaking sweep was lost to the figure of an elephant that stood at the foot of it. The elephant, about four feet high and covered with embroidery and sequins, was positioned at the middle of the staircase, apparently to separate ascenders from descenders as they mounted or landed. Its trunk was down, which made it more approachable but also invoked a vague memory in Gene about good luck and bad luck. Unfortunately, he couldn't remember which was supposed to be which. He felt in his pocket for his fifty-centavo piece, and his heart jumped into his mouth when he realized it was gone.

He stopped in the center of the room, staring stupidly at the elephant and feeling for the coin. Fraser stopped then and turned to look at him.

"Are you OK, Gene?"

“Uh, sure,” croaked Gene, and he knew he could not ask to stop and search for the coin, not with Cynthia waiting in the next room.

Fraser turned aside and motioned Gene through the doorway. Gene took his hand from his pocket and walked into the next room feeling as if he were naked. It was a bright dining room dominated by an arrangement—about the size of a refrigerator—of exotic flowers. There was a dinner table made of an irregular polished marble slab resting on what appeared to be shortened Doric columns. One wall was all windows overlooking the ocean.

Four people sat around the table at seven places: yellow placemats under navy blue plates. The plates had scraps on them, as if the people were all finished eating. The people consisted of a couple who seemed to be in their twenties and Cynthia with a child on her lap. Of the three empty places, two were clean and unused and the other, apparently Fraser’s, had just been abandoned.

Fraser walked up to Cynthia and kissed the cheek she presented. Even relaxed among her family, Cynthia seemed to radiate a presence that surrounded everyone. She was wearing a denim shirt so old that the blue had faded to white. But it was perfectly pressed, and on Cynthia it looked appropriate for a board meeting. Gene remembered how taut and trim her naked body had been, and he felt embarrassed for her that she’d been seen that way by an employee. And then he realized it was the memory of a dream and that he should be embarrassed for himself instead of her.

The child squirmed in her lap. Fraser went back out the way he and Gene had come in, and Gene heard a door close at the other side of the house. Cynthia turned toward Gene. “Where’s your wife?”

Gene hoped his fear didn’t show on his face. “She’s sick, Cynthia.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

Gene said the first thing that came into his mind:
“Bacterial meningitis.”

“My God,” said Cynthia, “why aren’t you home caring for her?”

“The doctor says she’ll be all right,” said Gene.

“It’s tricky, Gene,” she said. “If I were you, I’d care for the woman night and day, and I wouldn’t trust the doctors.”

Gene realized that bacterial meningitis could be more serious than he had thought.

“She’ll be out of danger by tomorrow,” Gene said lamely.

“Did the doctors tell you that, Gene? They don’t know anything. Let me call my personal physician for you.”

“No, please, Cynthia.” Gene tried to keep the panic from his voice. “I’m sure she will be all right. I’m sure of it.”

Cynthia gazed at him ceramically for a time, and Gene knew she was on to him. But she was friendly when she finally spoke. “Sit down and have some lunch,” she said.

There were three different kinds of salads in bowls, a basket of baguettes, a platter of two kinds of cold meat. Gene was hungry after his drive. “No, thanks,” he said. He didn’t like to eat in front of an audience.

“I made these salads myself.”

“May I change my mind?” Gene realized he hadn’t seen any servants anywhere.

Cynthia, with both arms around the child, nodded toward the young couple. “My daughter, Alice. Her husband, Jack.”

Alice and Jack, who looked as well-dressed and groomed as if they’d just finished taping a commercial for the hotel in the next room, both nodded and smiled at Gene.

“How do you do?” he said.

“And this is Claudia.” Cynthia nuzzled the child on the neck. The little girl giggled.

“They were all just leaving,” said Cynthia. She shifted herself out from under the child, who laughed and ran out of the room. Alice and Jack got up and left without saying a word.

As soon as they were alone, Gene laid the photocopy on the table beside her. “Here’s the report.”

“Gene,” she said, “would you please relax. You’re as tight as an accountant’s vest.”

It sounded heartfelt, and a little orange spot of satisfaction lit up in Gene’s chest. He had an unaccountable feeling of homecoming.

“You’re not going to be much good to me if you start fraying around the edges,” said Cynthia. “Sit down and relax. And eat something.”

Gene sat down at one of the unused places while she began to flip through the report. It was a homey arrangement: Gene and his mentor.

“This is interesting,” she said. “I don’t like having outsiders snooping around in our family affairs, but they’ve certainly found some patterns I hadn’t thought of.”

Gene helped himself to the salads and a baguette. The food was extraordinary. Everything—the vegetables, the fruit, the smoked beef—seemed so fresh and firm and yet it just came apart in his mouth when he ate it. He had never taken much of an interest in food, but he’d never had any that was prepared like this, either. He guessed he shouldn’t have expected any less from Cynthia. He enjoyed it so much that he began to lose his self-consciousness about eating in front of her.

Cynthia closed the report and watched him chew a mouthful of cheese tortellini salad with a look he almost thought matronly. “Gene, when are you going to quit stepping on your dick and do your job?” she said. Those delft eyes were trained on him, and at first he didn’t know whether she was joking. But she wasn’t smiling as she waited for him to finish his mouthful of food.

"I beg—" he managed to get out, then he had to swallow. "I beg your pardon?"

"You were told to reorganize Operations," she said quietly. "Are you going to take care of the situation or not?"

"I'm working on my plan," he stammered. He found it difficult to look at those eyes and, like a schoolboy, he lowered his gaze to the table.

"Are you going to let the situation fester while you work on your plan?"

He thought the question rhetorical, so he just sat silently, staring at the polished gray surface.

She waited a couple of beats, then spoke again. Her voice was even, almost kindly. "What did you say, Gene? I didn't hear you."

He looked up at her. He realized that he had not met her expectations. "I'll be making a decision as soon as I have all the information I need," he said.

"What in the fuck are you talking about?" said Cynthia, suddenly strident. "Do you think this company can afford to sit on its ass while you're waiting for information?"

The force of her question threw him off balance, but he righted himself immediately. "I'm determined to make a quality decision," he said.

"Bullshit," she said. "The only thing you're determined to do is not make any decision at all."

It was the most dangerous situation he had been in since the day Cynthia came to his office. He reminded himself that Cynthia was a dangerous person. "I need a little time to understand conditions in Operations," he said. He wondered if she could hear the erratic beating of his heart.

"I didn't send you down there to understand conditions," she said. "I sent you down there to reorganize the place and fix things. I thought I sent somebody who could handle the job. But instead, you're down there setting

up a little boys' club, interrupting disciplinary interviews, and browbeating young women."

"I acted to deal with an untenable situation in regard to the nonexempt staff," he said.

"Don't talk to me like a management handbook, Gene. You interfered with a supervisor's management of one of her subordinates."

He was starting to open his mouth when she spoke again. He didn't try to contend with her for air time, since he really didn't have anything to say. "There's only one thing that's untenable in this company, Gene: crap. So cut the crap and get some fucking work done."

Gene stared at the table surface.

"Well?" she said. She seemed to be working herself into a state. "Look at me, Gene," she said. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

Gene looked at her. He was consumed with shame, but a tiny part of him remained intact, and that part admired her stage presence. She was magnificently angry. Her face was flushed, her mouth was tight, and her forehead furrowed down over plunging eyebrows. Her blue, opaque eyes, however, looked the same as ever. Gene had the strange feeling that beneath this amazing outburst she was calm, that she was using her anger as some kind of management tool. He spoke slowly.

"I guess I overstepped myself," he said. "What I heard made it sound like there was a disciplinary problem that could go on forever if somebody didn't deal with it."

"Oh, I see," she said with exaggerated deference. "A disciplinary problem. Let me ask you something. Do you think I pay you an executive salary to conduct disciplinary interviews?"

Gene didn't know how to answer, but she wouldn't have let him anyway. She plowed ahead.

"Our competitors are chewing us up out there. Our investors are crawling down our throats. Let me tell you

something: there are people out there who want to tear our family apart. It's the same motivation of the housebreaker who tries to rape your wife. What do you say to that?"

"I just assumed—" began Gene.

"You just assumed," she interrupted. "Wake up, Gene. Have you noticed that we are making some changes in this company's structure? We are delayering. We now have a structure with accountability and a CEO capable of making decisions. I took an Assistant Manager of Human Resources and made him a Director. Apparently, this was a mistake."

Gene wished he were back in Human Resources and that he had never been given the assignment in Operations.

"You're not going back to Human Resources, Gene. I've corrected my mistake and eliminated your position there."

"My position?" he said.

"Don't repeat me, Gene," she said. "I've restructured your department. Kevin can take care of things now."

"Kevin?" It slipped out before he could stop it.

"Don't repeat me, Gene. In case it has escaped your notice, you are a manager in this company. Haven't you mastered the part about going where you're told to go and doing what you're told to do?"

Gene did not speak.

"I want you to clear out your desk in Human Resources as soon as possible. Go in and do it during the evening, when nobody's around. I don't need you in there disrupting morale."

Gene stared at the table surface and nodded. He knew that if he looked at her, he would cave in. Maybe go into the next room, grab a spear from the wall display, and fall on it. He could see himself doing that. He could see himself excusing himself, pushing the chair back from the table, and slowly walking into the next room. He would not hesitate over his choice of spear; he would simply grab the nearest

assegai. You need something fairly short if you're going to fall on it.

He would say, "At least I went where I was told to go."

He would take the spear with both hands, point the stainless steel blade toward his solar plexus, and then Cynthia would stop him.

"Gene, stop," she would say. She would get up from the table and walk over beside him. "Let me do it," she would say. "You're incapable of doing this correctly."

And before he could protest, she would take the spear and plunge it deep into the center of him. Cynthia was not one to waste her time on disciplinary problems.

Gene's fantasy dissolved into the half-eaten food that lay on the plate in front of him. He realized Cynthia was speaking to him.

"One more thing, Gene."

Her voice was softer. He wondered what could possibly come next. He didn't look up. He knew she was bearing down on him with those hard, painted-on eyes. He stared at a tortellini he'd mutilated.

"You're a member of the family. As long as you keep the family values, you'll be protected. Take care of your problem in Operations and you'll be made Manager of the department. I'm leaving the Director of Information Services position open for a while. You'll have a clear shot at it."

Gene remembered the unfortunate Sarah, who was "gone." He wondered if she had been surprised when the man in aviator glasses visited her.

"Do you know anything about Finance?" said Cynthia.

He realized she had asked him a question. "A little," he said.

"When you've mastered Information Services, you will be considered for an executive position in Finance."

Gene continued to think about Sarah, who was no doubt in a dumpster somewhere back in town.

“But if you don’t take care of your problem in Operations by Monday, you had better forget about planning for the long term. Have I made myself clear?”

Gene didn’t have to answer. At that moment, the door opened and the little girl, Claudia, ran in.

As soon as Cynthia saw her, she changed completely. “Good,” she said, smiling and spreading her hands on the table surface. Her voice assumed a kind of singsong, babytalk tone. “I’m glad we got things straightened out.”

Claudia ran up and climbed into Cynthia’s lap. Cynthia hugged her.

“Everything’s going to be perfect now,” she said.

Gene didn’t know whether she was talking to him or to the child. Then Cynthia’s voice hardened just a little. “I’ll be up here for a week,” she said. “When I get back to the office, I expect to find a changed Operations department.”

ELEVEN

Anyone who has ever been promoted at a corporation knows the secret. Promotion is neither honor nor reward, and it has very little to do with employee skills or company requirements. Promotion is a reallocation of resources to accomplish something a particular manager doesn't want to do. Like any other misfortune, it can strike the employee whose only error is to be walking down the hallway at the wrong time. The damage is multiplied a hundredfold, however, when it happens to a person willing to do what is required.

Margaret, the bookkeeper who had been sent over once a week by the accounting firm, came to Yamada's office carrying the oversized checkbook in front of her like a serving tray.

"There's not enough money to meet payroll next week," she said.

Yamada was entering completion dates on a list of deliverables for the Parks Commission project. He did not look up at her.

"Tell Ira," he said, paging through a sheaf of papers until he found the cover sheet for the detailed specifications.

"I did," she said, staring down at the checkbook in her hands.

Yamada found the cover sheet he was looking for, checked the date, and turned to his deliverables list. He said nothing.

"He went into the computer room," she said. "He told me I should come to you."

Yamada sighed heavily. He didn't know anything about payrolls. Even so, he probably knew more than Growth. If it wasn't a do-loop or a subroutine, Growth would never understand it. Yamada probably could figure something out.

He had never in his life grasped a problem without looking at a piece of paper, so he laid the deliverables list on top of the draft specifications and gestured for Margaret to put the checkbook on his desk. "How much are we short?"

Margaret set her serving tray in front of him. "A little over nine hundred dollars."

Yamada opened up the checkbook and began to examine it. It was the first time he had ever actually looked at the company's checkbook. He found the five November paychecks and the withholding payment, which were all together in a group, and he quickly added up the amounts in his head. Then he found the November check to Kennedy Skinner. At eight thousand dollars, Skinner's check was more than the payroll, more than any other obligation the firm had.

Eight thousand dollars a month was a punishing payment schedule, and it would have been difficult to understand why any responsible person in charge of a business this size would have agreed to it. Except that the business was not being run by any responsible person; it was being run by Ira Growth.

Yamada examined the stub of every check Margaret had prepared for Growth's signature over the past three months, and even to his unpracticed eye the situation looked hopeless now. The company had more going out, by about eight thousand a month, than it had coming in.

Yamada retrieved Growth from the computer room. In Yamada's office, Growth picked up the Yellow Pages from a shelf along the wall. He walked around behind Yamada's desk and dropped the Yellow Pages on the floor in front of Yamada's chair, then he sat down and rested his feet on the book. He pulled his loosened necktie further from his open

collar, unfastened two more buttons of his shirt, and scratched his chest. "What's up, Roger?"

Yamada hesitated a moment, said nothing, then finally sat heavily in the chair beside the desk, an ancient swivel chair with padding so well used that it conformed perfectly to the human anatomy. Unfortunately, it was the anatomy of someone long gone, and Yamada shifted uncomfortably over the bumps and creases. "We can't meet our next payroll," he said.

"What's going on?" said Growth, rocking forward as if he were ready to step up on the Yellow Pages. "Why hasn't Margaret managed this?"

"She's a bookkeeper, Ira. She's not a financial manager."

"Don't start on me, Roger," said Growth, still poised to mount the telephone book. "Kennedy gave me enough crap about titles and job descriptions to last me a lifetime."

"Never mind," said Yamada. "It's not important what she is. The best accountant in the world would not be able to make our income exceed our expenses. The company is seriously strapped, Ira. As long as you're making those payments to Kennedy, we can't make it."

"If I don't make those payments, he'll come back," said Growth.

"Ira," said Yamada, "you might have no other choice. We can't do without electricity. We can't stop paying the rent."

"Can't we just put them off?" said Growth.

"We'll just have the problem again next month," said Yamada. "There are two streams of money here: one going out and one coming in. Right now the one going out is bigger than the one coming in. We have to either reduce one or raise the other."

"Don't talk to me like that, Roger. I'm not a simpleton."

"I'm sorry," Yamada said quietly. "But I've had to reduce it to those terms to understand it myself. You turned the problem over to me, remember?"

"And I know you'll do a great job," shouted Growth, suddenly sunny again. He smiled and started to get up to leave.

"Wait, Ira," said Yamada. "We still have to do something about this. I think it's time to get a loan."

Growth laughed, but Yamada stared at him levelly until he stopped. "You're serious?" said Growth.

"Yes, of course."

"You want me to bring in a pack of sharks to eat our guts?"

"I want you to get a loan to tide us over until the Parks Commission project starts to generate some cash."

"I don't deal with sharks, Roger."

Yamada was silent for a moment, then he spoke again, softly but firmly. "You don't have any choice, Ira."

"You can't force me to," said Growth.

Yamada was beginning to feel exasperated with him. "I'm telling you what you have to do to keep the business solvent."

"I've dealt with sharks before, Roger. Believe me, it's not the right thing to do."

"It's the only thing to do, Ira."

"You're beginning to sound like Skinner," said Growth.

Yamada didn't say anything. He sat in silence, determined to force Growth to make the choice. They sat that way for a minute or more in a quiet punctuated by the occasional pinging of the steam radiator near Yamada's desk.

"I can't get a loan," Growth said to the Yellow Pages at his feet.

"You have to, Ira," repeated Yamada.

"I just told you I can't." Growth looked up at him. "I can't get past the credit check."

Yamada didn't know what to say.

"I have a problem with credit," said Growth. "In the early days we needed equipment, and I bought some of it on a credit card. Do you know what kind of interest the sharks take out of you on a credit card? I wouldn't pay it."

The confession reversed their relationship for a moment and made Yamada the boss and Growth the subordinate. It made Yamada feel funny. "I didn't know," he said.

"It's not even worth the time to try for a loan," said Growth. "I know. I've been around to banks. I've taken their abuse. Damn sharks."

They sat in silence again for a long time. Finally Yamada spoke. "Then the best thing I can think of is to let the PDP unit go."

"That's crazy, Roger," said Growth, pushing himself back in the chair and laughing. "How will we stay in business without the PDP unit?"

"We're trying to get out of time-sharing anyway," said Yamada. "Don't you see? We can complete the Parks Commission contract by buying time on someone else's machine."

Growth stopped laughing and stared at Yamada so intensely that the younger man was afraid for a moment. When he finally spoke, Growth's voice was uncharacteristically low, almost soft, ironically emphasizing his point in a way his usual roar never would. "We will not give up the PDP unit," he said. "We will sacrifice anything else before we give up that machine." Something ugly moved inside Growth's eyes; Yamada tried to scare it off with a joke.

"Well then, all that's left is the payroll," said Yamada.

Growth brightened. "I'm touched, Roger," he thundered, his dangling feet doing a little dance on the Yellow Pages. "Look, I'll give up my salary, but there's no reason for you to give up yours. Not all of it, anyway. Why don't you just defer half of it for a while, just until we reach dry land?"

Yamada decided in that instant never to make a joke again.

"That still won't be enough," he said. "We would have to lay off Tracy, Alex, and Phil, too."

"Fine," said Growth. "That's settled, then." He got up from the chair. "I'll never forget this, Roger. Believe me, I'll make it up to you someday."

With no paper to refer to, Yamada was unable to get his mind around the problem.

"Please tell them I wish them luck," Growth bellowed. He stopped as he passed Yamada's chair, and he put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Roger, I think it's time to change your title," he shouted. "From now on, you're Executive Vice President." Then he left, taking his din down the hallway.

"Thanks," Yamada said to the empty space Growth had left behind the desk.

TWELVE

Gene sat at the table in front of Cynthia waiting for the air to clear from her withering tirade. He crawled slowly from under his shame. He almost felt like checking to see if he was in one piece.

“Gene,” said Cynthia, “you’ll find Fraser out on the dock. He’ll take you back to the landing.”

He might have been standing up from his chair at that point, or he might have been sliding off Cynthia’s lap. He was concentrating so hard on keeping himself together that he didn’t know for certain who he was. He might have been Gene, but he might have been Claudia, the child. It hardly mattered. Cynthia’s attitude toward both of them seemed basically the same, even though she showed it by hugging one of them and scolding the other. Another time, she might hug him and scold her.

As he zipped up his windbreaker, however, he realized he was Gene. That meant he hadn’t sat on Cynthia’s lap, which was too bad. He envied Claudia the experience.

Outside, the sky had begun to darken and the cold intensified. Gene shivered in the boat. Fraser had donned a warm jacket over his wheat-colored sweater. Even so, he looked uncomfortable. The two of them didn’t say a word all the way to the mainland. Gene stooped in the boat with his hands in his pockets, trying to keep them warm. There was still no fifty-centavo piece there.

A tear formed in Gene’s right eye. It must be the wind whipping his face. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and wondered what had happened to the coin. Another tear formed in his eye, and he turned away from the wind.

Another tear formed. He pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket, blew his nose wetly, and coughed several times. The effort needed to contain his shame seemed to be growing. Fraser probably noticed him coughing and blowing his nose, but he said nothing and concentrated on driving the boat.

It had started to rain by the time Fraser dropped him off at the dock. Gene got out of the boat and turned to look at Fraser. Fraser didn't wave; he looked sad as the raindrops pelted him. He turned the boat about in the pock-marked water and roared away. Gene walked heavily toward the car. He was soaked by the time he reached it.

He fumbled the key into the lock, opened the door, and climbed into the dry warmth of the car. He sat behind the wheel, listening to the noise of the rain all around him and thinking about his chances of remaining alive for the next week or so. A grotto, fetid and stinking, formed in the neighborhood of his diaphragm. The grotto turned into a large bubble and rose within him, threatening to force its way out through the openings in his face.

Gene coughed and wiped his face with his wet hands. This gesture forced the stinking bubble back down, but he could still feel it deep inside him. He yanked open the glove compartment and grabbed his flashlight, then climbed out of the car into the rain. He walked around to the front of the car, opened the hood, and examined the ignition wires. Drops panged against the car's hood as he bent over the engine, and water splashed off it all around him. The ignition wires were all in place and hadn't been touched. He straightened up, shut the hood with a resounding thud, and walked around back to open the trunk. He looked around in it, then checked all its inner compartments, even pulling the spare tire out of its well to look under it. The effort of a bomb check is never wasted, even when you find nothing.

He thought he heard a faint crying sound when he had his head in the trunk. But when he rose from the trunk and

stood behind the car listening, he couldn't hear anything over the splashing of the rain. He put his head back in the trunk and thought he heard it again. He finished his check, stood up, and closed the trunk. He grimaced only a little as he lay down on his back on the wet gravel and studied the undercarriage with his light. The crying was louder. He shined the flashlight around the undercarriage again, and when the beam swept across the rear it passed a kitten. The creature was crouched under the car next to the left rear wheel, crying and looking desolate.

Gene reached the kitten with his free hand. It didn't try to get away when he grasped it. He got to his knees with the kitten in his hand and held it out in front of him, to get a good look at it, while the rain soaked its fur. It was black with a white spot on its chest and another covering its left front foot. Wet, it looked as if it had been fashion-gelled.

Gene studied the kitten. It mewed in anger when a raindrop hit it in the eye. Gene opened his mouth, then thought better of it. He had never spoken to an animal in his life; he wasn't going to start now. He stood up, opened the car door with his flashlight hand, and tossed the kitten over the driver's seat into the warm, dry car. He climbed in behind the wheel, soaked and muddy.

He put the key into the ignition, and the kitten mewed again. He swung around to see what it wanted. It didn't want anything. It was just feeling sorry for itself. Shrinking labor pool or not, it's always a mistake to hire on impulse. That's the way to make bad personnel decisions.

"Pull yourself together." Gene put his arm up on the back of the seat and leaned his chin against it. "Act like a professional, for God's sake. Don't just sit there mewing. Get a grip on yourself and do something about it."

The kitten mewed louder.

"Listen," he said. "I think we need more structure in this organization. I'm the CEO. I am naming you Vice President in Charge of Self-Pity and Whining Noises."

The cat cried like it was the only cold and wet kitten in the world. Gene had never delegated responsibility so effectively in his life. The grotto in his abdomen shrunk, leaving a numbness behind.

He drove without thinking. His mind was wrapped in flannel, and he could bring it to bear on nothing. The effort of managing his shame had left him enervated. The console phone rang, and when he picked it up a pitching system said it was soliciting donations to an organization committed to defending open weapons policy. The voice droned on about freedom and rights and self-protection. Gene punched in his credit card sequence without thinking. He barely heard the voice thank him when he hung up. He needed some time to himself. He didn't want to think about weapons policies. He didn't want to think about anything.

He wasn't conscious of time passing, and it seemed strange when he found himself amidst the lobster signs again. The landscape slowly began to acquire some familiarity, and he understood from a distance, as if he were watching this all in a movie, that he was back in the area where he had once vacationed with his wife, back in tourist country.

Gene was so numb he almost forgot to stop at a convenience store for cat food. He was reminded when a car pulled out of one right into his path, and he had to make a panic stop on a wet roadway in the dark. His car came within inches of striking the other car, which then drove on as if Gene had stopped to yield right of way. His car sat stopped for a moment or two, while he gripped the wheel and listened to his pounding heart.

He turned and looked at the back seat. The kitten wasn't there. His heart sank. He heard a mewling and looked lower. The kitten had been pitched from the seat and was looking up at him reproachfully.

"I should have known you weren't going to get out," said Gene.

The kitten mewed accusingly.

“What did you want me to do? Hit him?”

The kitten scrambled back up onto the seat and stared at him.

“Just wait until it’s time for performance reviews.”

The car behind him honked its horn angrily, and he looked up into the rearview mirror to see its headlights glaring at him. He turned back to face the road, took his foot off the brake, and started the car moving slowly in the wet darkness.

He could see the cars bunching up behind him, until he felt his car to be the head of a large, winding snake. Gene was uncomfortable with the responsibility for so much traffic. He pulled into the lot of the very next convenience store he saw. He remembered stopping at this store for suntan lotion on a vacation about a hundred years ago. Its parking lot was nearly full, which he didn’t like. But he did need cat food, and he wanted to let the traffic he had created get past. He stopped the car, switched off the ignition, and turned back toward the kitten again.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

The kitten was apparently still disappointed in him for the sudden stop and didn’t speak.

“Nobody likes sullenness in the workplace,” said Gene. He climbed out of the car into air filled with the sluicing roar of heavy traffic on wet pavement.

The store had changed considerably in the last hundred years. Gene found himself staring at a rack of pistols next to the dairy case. There were several different kinds—black metal and composite plastic formed into elegant statements of malice. Gene backed away from the display and bumped into a shopping cart. He turned around and saw a man studying a selection of canned vegetables and boxed ammunition. The man had thick-lensed glasses, and he wore an Irish walking hat and a trenchcoat over a tweed sport jacket. He looked like a college professor. The man didn’t

seem to notice his cart had been bumped into. The cart contained a selection of gas canisters and monogrammed ammunition.

"Excuse me," said Gene.

At the sound of his voice, the man turned and looked at Gene. His eyes were large behind the lenses of his glasses.

"I'm sorry," said Gene.

"Don't worry about it," said the man. He took a slim pink pistol from the rack and laid it in his shopping cart. Then he bent down and pulled up his socks.

Gene stood for a moment, looking at the racks of weaponry and trying to get his bearings. He was only gradually emerging from his numbness, and he felt disoriented. He walked over to the counter, where there were two displays of impulse items: air fresheners shaped like pine trees and .22 caliber rounds in eight bright colors.

"Enameled coating," said the sign. "Won't nick or scratch. Make an ammunition statement." There was a clean-cut young clerk in shirtsleeves and necktie behind the counter. He wore a small, plastic name badge that said "Bud."

"I need a weapon," said Gene.

Bud said nothing, but he nodded in a way that was not overly hostile.

"What do you have in a thirty-eight automatic with a sound suppressor?"

Gene had found that a forty-five had too much recoil; he was more comfortable with a thirty-eight. To his credit, Bud made no jokes about ladies' weapons.

Bud reached into the display counter and brought out an efficient-looking piece, very similar to the one Gene had tossed into the ocean the night before. He pulled the slide back from the barrel to let Gene look into the firing chamber, which was empty, then handed him the gun. Gene hefted it, worked the action a few times, and sighted it on a display of brass knuckles at the other side of the store.

"Do you have a sound suppressor for this?"

“Sure,” said the young man, pulling a dark metal cylinder from the display case and laying it on the counter.

The gun and sound suppressor were new models. The technology had improved since Gene had bought his last weapon. He couldn’t get the sound suppressor mounted. He handed it to Bud, who assembled it with a single push-twist motion and handed it back to Gene.

Gene studied it. He unfastened and refastened the silencer a few times. It was an ingenious cam-based fastener, very secure and yet very simple.

“Do you have some place I could try it?” said Gene.

“There’s a firing range in the cellar,” said Bud. “You’ll have to buy ammunition first.”

“That’s fine,” said Gene. He laid the automatic on the counter, took out his wallet, and handed the young man a credit card.

“Hollow point?”

“Plain vanilla,” said Gene. He disliked exotic ammunition. Hollow points tended to rip the target apart, jacketed rounds were overkill. How often do you meet someone wearing bullet-proofing?

Bud handed him a heavy little box of a hundred rounds. “I’ll hold on to this for you,” he said, holding up Gene’s credit card. “I’ll write up the ammunition but leave it open in case you want to purchase the weapon.”

He took Gene down a wide stairway into a comfortable-looking little lobby. From a cabinet, he took out a pair of safety glasses and a pair of noise cancelers. There was a faint cracking from the other side of the door. Bud let Gene through the door, and the faint cracking sound resolved itself into the din of a half dozen different kinds of firearm being discharged repeatedly. Gene quickly donned the noise cancelers. They were well-used and some of the circuitry must have been wearing out, because he caught muffled, random sounds through the insulation. He put on the safety glasses and walked along an aisle behind a bank

of stalls in which people were firing weapons at targets at the other end of a surprisingly wide room. He passed by one firing station where a woman was blasting away at a paper target. He glanced over her shoulder and saw there wasn't much paper left to shoot at. But he didn't linger. It is not good manners to watch another person at a firing range.

He found himself an empty station, took the magazine out of the automatic, and began to push rounds into it. Then he shoved the magazine into the handle of the gun, aimed it with both hands, and rapidly squeezed off nine shots at the target. He hit the switch to make the overhead trolley bring the target in close for inspection. He could see as the target approached him that he had put all nine rounds within the outline of the man on the paper, but the automatic obviously drifted a little to the left.

He sent the target back before it arrived, and he reloaded the magazine while it moved back into position. Then he repeated the process of shooting the pistol empty and retrieving the target. He noted with satisfaction that he had moved the pattern of holes more toward the center this time. He brought the target back all the way and removed it from the clamp. There was a pad of unused targets on the wall of the cubicle. He tore one off and fastened it into place. He sent it back into position and reloaded the magazine.

Gene lost count of the number of magazines he loaded and shot away. He stopped retrieving the target after the third one. He simply reloaded each time and fired away, taking satisfaction in the discharge of each round but caring little at that point whether it struck anything. Eventually, there was nothing left of the target, and he decided the gun had performed well.

The ammunition box was considerably lighter when he left the firing range, dropped off the safety glasses and noise cancelers, and went back upstairs. He had to wait while a man completed the purchase of a hunting rifle.

“That will be seventy-nine ninety-five,” Bud said to the man.

“Don’t wrap it,” said the man. “I’m going to use it on the way home.”

“Come back soon,” said Bud as the man hurried out. He looked up at Gene. “How did she do for you?”

“Fine,” said Gene. “I’ll take it.” He disliked Bud’s use of the feminine gender for the pistol. Gene had never personified tools and appliances. He frowned on such attachments.

The clerk turned and retrieved Gene’s credit card and a sales slip from a shelf behind the counter. He wrote up the sales slip and put the automatic in a box, which he then dropped into a plastic shopping bag, along with Gene’s ammunition box and sales receipt.

Gene climbed into the car and put his purchases on the passenger seat beside him. The kitten woke briefly, watched him with one eye, and went back to sleep.

He started the car and drove back out onto the road. The rain had stopped, and the traffic had thinned considerably.

Gene couldn’t go anywhere in Finance until he had finished reorganizing Operations. He had to make some decisions he had been putting off. Cynthia was right: he was trying not to decide. But he was capable. He knew it, and she knew it. That was why she had been so harsh with him. He deserved it. But it was also her way of developing him for better things. He should be grateful to her for making him face up to his responsibilities. Now he would face up to them. He was going to kill Larry. It was the first rung on a career ladder that would land him in Finance.

He thought about himself as the head of Finance. He would get an office twice as big as the one in Human Resources. He would pose with Cynthia for the photo in the annual report. He would have a hundred people reporting to him. He would sign memos with his new pen.

* * *

It was fairly late when Gene and the kitten got home.

While the cat carefully examined each room of his apartment, Gene went to the freezer for something they could microwave. The signal light was blinking on his answering machine, but he didn't feel like checking it.

He began stripping his new piece while the dinner cooked. When the dinner was ready, he set it out on the kitchen table and spooned it into two plates: one for him, one for the kitten. He stared at the parts of the sidearm, which were lying on the kitchen table, while he chewed soft, warm, flavorless mouthfuls. He didn't notice what he was eating. Something with pasta and mushrooms from a red-and-white package. He was disappointed in himself that he had forgotten to get the cat food after all, but the kitten seemed to think the mess he put out for it was the best it could hope for.

To his dismay, Gene discovered that he had only one round left in the ammunition box. He banged the kitchen table with his fist, which made the kitten jump. "That damned Bud," said Gene. "What kind of customer service is that? You would think he'd ask me if I had enough ammunition left."

The cat went back to its eating. It hunkered down over its dish, gouging mouthfuls of the mess like a tiny, furry steam shovel. It finished its dinner before Gene.

Gene chewed the last mouthful of whatever it was and swallowed. "We can't wait on this," he said. "I don't know where to find a twenty-four-hour ammunition shop, but I've got one round and, at close range, I'm sure that's enough."

The cat looked at him questioningly.

"We're going to have to take out Larry," he said, "but first we're going to do a supervisor in his department. We're going to neutralize a woman named Faith. It's unfortunate

for her, I guess, but she's come to the attention of my manager, and she's compromised my effectiveness. I know you're thinking that I'm acting out of personal animosity, but that's not true. There's nothing personal in it. It's just a business decision."

The kitten came over to Gene and batted at the laces of his running shoes. He reached down and picked it up. He put it on the kitchen table and it began to lick little bits of sauce from his dinner plate.

"I'm a manager, you see," said Gene. "In my current assignment, I am responsible for the assets of the Computer Operations department. And the productivity of the department's biggest asset, which is me, is at risk. My supervisor has lost confidence in my ability to handle one of my subordinates, which is, I am sure you understand, an untenable situation. My freedom of movement is restricted. Taking her out will restore the structure. This kind of independent decision and implementation is the sign of an effective manager."

The kitten mewed a cautious agreement.

"That's right," said Gene. "Cynthia might not be happy about this. But sometimes you have to make decisions that you know your boss won't like in order to get the job done."

Gene put the dishes in the sink. The cat went into the bedroom and hopped up on the bed, where it curled up on his pillow. Gene followed it in and made sure it was comfortable for the night, then went back to the kitchen to clean and oil the parts of his sidearm. It was an excellent piece of equipment, and he was satisfied with his purchase. He reassembled the piece and checked the mechanism.

Then he found a cardboard box, which he filled with shredded newspaper and set down in the kitchen for the cat. He spent the rest of the night dry-shooting his new gun and looking in his car and apartment for the fifty-centavo piece.

When the sun came up Sunday morning, he checked the message on the answering machine. It was another short one.

“Did you get the money, Franco?”

THIRTEEN

In any endeavor, from sports to entertainment to business, what distinguishes the outstanding performers from the ordinary people is the capacity to rehearse. Stars have a highly-developed fantasy life, and it centers on success, which they imagine in rich, loving detail well in advance of the event. Even ordinary people understand the power of advance rehearsal, and they can often be found imagining the outcome of a successful performance before it happens. What separates the star, however, is that he doesn't imagine the outcome of a successful performance, he imagines the successful performance itself. The other is just dreaming.

Yamada stood with his back against the building and his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. "All of you are excessed," he said.

His voice was carried away on the wind, but that hardly mattered. He had said it so many times in the past ten minutes, looking for just the right intonation, that it had become a kind of incantation. It was no longer possible to make it sound right. He tried once more.

"All of you are excessed," he said, more loudly against the wind.

"What?"

A passerby, a well-dressed business type, had stopped in front of him. The man was holding the brim of his hat and staring through the wind at him.

"What did you say?"

"I was talking to someone else," shouted Yamada.

The man pulled his head around by his hat brim to look behind him. There was nobody there. He turned back

to Yamada again. His expression became nervous, and he walked on.

Yamada sighed and looked at his watch, which showed he was already five minutes late for the meeting. He turned and entered the ancient building through the retrofitted glass-and-aluminum door. It was not a well-heated building, but the grimy lobby was toasty compared to the street. He reached into his pocket, took out a handkerchief, and wiped his eyes and then his nose. Then he made his way slowly up the worn marble steps to the second floor. He felt like he was on his way to an execution—as the executioner.

On the second floor he walked past the photographer's studio, already closed for the day, and the office of Madam Flora, spiritual advisor, to the door that said "Growth Services, Inc." on the window. He had lettered it himself, scraping away the name of the dermatologist who had had the space before Ira and Kennedy took it over. The company had posed as an antiquated dermatological clinic for six months before Yamada arrived; it was one of the mysteries of the modern world how a dermatologist had gone broke and lost his quarters downtown. But then Growth Services, Inc. was not located on a street known for skin problems, or at least not a street known for people with enough income to manage their skin problems.

Nobody was sitting at Tracy's receptionist desk. Yamada walked past it into the interior corridor. In the dim light at the end of the hallway, the three employees, Tracy, Alex, and Phil, lounged in front of his office.

Alex left off complaining as Yamada approached.

"Hi, Roger," said Alex.

"Hi," said Yamada, loosening the paisley scarf from his throat as he approached them. "Tracy, did you ask the service to pick up the phone?"

"Yes, Roger," said Tracy, as graciously as if the reminder had been necessary.

"Thank you," said Yamada.

He threaded his way through the young people, and they gathered at the darkened threshold of his office while he entered to switch on the desk lamp. It made a small shaft of light on the desk and left the rest of the room dark.

"Come in," he said, and then he doffed his coat and sat down behind his desk in what appeared to be a single motion.

The three employees hesitated on the threshold.

"Please," said Yamada, gesturing into the darkness first toward the swivel chair and then toward the two other chairs he had brought into the office before his rehearsal.

Alex and Phil each stepped aside to let Tracy go in first, which might have seemed courteous, but was actually indicative of fear. None of the three of them had ever been in Yamada's office before. None of the three of them, in fact, had any real understanding of what Yamada's job was. That was understandable, since today Yamada hardly knew himself.

FOURTEEN

On his way to Faith's apartment, Gene thought about Franco.

"Did you get the money, Franco?" It didn't have to be a threat. It could be that one of Franco's customers had sent him a payment and was checking on it. Franco's business might have turned around. Maybe his life had turned around. Maybe things were really getting better for him. But Gene had more important matters to think about than Franco's business affairs.

He made a mental note to get his telephone number changed. He had had about enough of Franco.

The sun had been up for a few minutes when he tapped on Faith's door. He looked down at the sidearm in his hand. The safety was off. He had one round, and he was going to have to shoot Faith at close range. He knew he should feel nervous, but he just felt irritated—irritated with Bud for not suggesting more ammunition, irritated with Faith for living in an apartment complex, irritated with himself for having forgotten to feed the cat. It was only dawn, but it was shaping up to be a very bad day. He reached down with his free hand and pulled the slide back to cock the automatic for its single shot.

He stood just outside the view of the fisheye lense. When the door began to open, he shoved it hard and went in after it. The door thumped against something, which then gave way, and when he got inside the apartment he realized it was Faith. She was sprawled in front of him wearing a satin, rose-colored nightgown, which had bunched up nearly

to her waist. He was taken aback by the vision of bare legs and flowered panties.

Despite her sleepy-looking eyes, she had the alert look of a morning person, which was exaggerated by the way her hair stood straight out from her head, as if she'd eaten a firecracker. Her feet were bare, so he could see that her toenails were painted bright red—the only makeup he'd seen her wear. She was already wearing earrings, dangling gold hoops that looked as if they might be uncomfortably heavy. She propped herself up on her elbows, which tightened the nightgown fetchingly against her breasts. She looked up at him with her languid eyes.

“Oh, it's you, Gene,” she said, sitting up. “Please come right in.”

Gene had no direct experience of such things, but he had thought he knew how people were supposed to act when they think you're going to kill them. Some beg you not to, some put up a fight, some can't believe it's happening to them. But nobody is supposed to look up at you and say, “Oh, it's you, Gene. Please come right in.”

The confidence with which she said it threw him off momentarily and almost made him wonder why he had come. Oh, yes: to shoot her. It was too bad. She really had the potential to be an effective manager.

He had obviously hurt her knee with the door; she gazed at him steadily while she rubbed it. Her jaw was set, but the skin over it rippled once, like she was swallowing or something. He hadn't noticed before how close her cheekbones were to the surface of her face. “I'm sorry about your knee,” he said.

“It's nothing.”

He pointed the gun at the small flat place between her breasts.

“How was your meeting with Cynthia?” she asked.

Hot shame blossomed at the back of Gene's neck and swept up over his ears and head like a glowing cowl. He

nearly relived the humiliation in Cynthia's dining room. Through his shame, he thought he detected a glimmer of sympathy in Faith's eyes.

"Our bosses don't always understand what we're up against," she said.

Gene thought she had hit upon one of life's universal truths. He looked down at the automatic in his hand, which was still pointed at her.

"You'll make the right decision," said Faith. "You're far better at decisions than anybody gives you credit for."

Gene felt he was in the presence of the most competent person he'd ever met.

"You look tired, Gene."

He was tired. Suddenly, he felt he needed a vacation. He reached down and released the slide of the automatic, then pushed the safety on.

"Sit down." Faith nodded toward an overstuffed chair. Then she stood up slowly, favoring her bruised knee. "You look like you've been up all night. You're very tense."

It was the first time anyone had ever noticed.

"Sit down," she said again. "I'll go make some coffee."

Gene sat down heavily in the chair. He set the automatic on an end table and watched Faith walk into the kitchen. Her limp, from the bruised knee, was very slight; he watched her bottom shift back and forth under the nightgown.

He heard cups clinking and water running in the kitchen. The sound was domestic and relaxing, but Gene didn't relax.

Faith called to him from the kitchen. "Do you take cream or anything?"

"No."

A moment later, she came into the room carrying a tray full of coffee things. Her limp was completely gone now. She set the tray on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "You

look like you've had a hard night. Are you getting enough sleep, Gene?"

"Not much, these days," he admitted.

She sat down on the sofa catty-corner, poured a cup of coffee, and handed it to Gene. He took it and set it in front of him. She poured herself a cup, dribbled some cream into it from a little pitcher, and took a sip. Faith watched Gene the whole time.

"You can drink it," she said.

Gene picked up the cup of steaming liquid and took a sip. It was the first sip of coffee he'd taken since Frannie's death, but he didn't let it show on his face.

"Would you relax, Gene. You're not going to be much good to me if you start fraying around the edges."

"Good to you?" said Gene.

Faith looked at the weapon lying on the end table. "Do you always use a sound suppressor?"

"What do you mean by 'good to you'?"

"Do you know Justin?" said Faith. "One of Cynthia's whackers. Wears aviator glasses and works with a blond woman."

Gene thought of the man who took Lorraine into the elevator, who escorted Sarah back to her seat at the Directors meeting, who followed Gene to Faith's disciplinary interview.

"What do you mean by 'good to you'?"

"Did you know the man who managed Operations before Larry?"

"No," said Gene.

"They didn't let him resign, you know. Cynthia's people took him out. Justin and some others. They gunned him down at home, in his own driveway, the same day he resigned. It was just about the time I came to work here."

Gene saw a man being shot to death in a driveway in front of a suburban house.

"He was Larry's mentor," said Faith.

Gene knew what it was like to have a mentor. He unzipped his windbreaker. He felt sorry for Larry.

"I think he knew they would do him," said Faith. "But it didn't make any difference. He resigned because he felt it was the right thing to do. Can you imagine that?"

"How can you make coffee for me?" said Gene. "I came here to kill you."

"That's what you think." Faith poured from a small cream pitcher into her cup. "You're not capable of killing anybody."

"If you think that, why did you ask me to kill Larry?"

"A test."

"What if I'd done it?" he said.

"You didn't, did you?"

Gene shifted harmlessly in the chair.

"Have you ever heard the name Kennedy Skinner?"

Gene shook his head.

"Kennedy Skinner," said Faith, "is the principal investor behind the group Cynthia is fronting for. Believe it or not, he was originally a partner in the firm. This was a long time ago. He and Ira Growth started Growth Services, Inc. together but, not long after they started it, old man Growth bought him out. It was not an amicable divorce. Skinner has devoted the last thirty years to putting together enough investors to get control of us. He's been using, or thinks he's been using, Cynthia. But as you may know, Cynthia uses. She doesn't get used."

Gene took another sip of coffee. It had cooled a little.

"Yamada wouldn't let Skinner invest," said Faith. "It was a sort of psychological thing with him. He resisted out of loyalty to Ira Growth."

Gene noticed that she referred to the late CEO by his last name. Everybody else in the company called him Roger. It sounded strange to hear him called Yamada.

"You see," Faith continued, "Yamada and Growth went through a great deal together, including a whole year after

they'd laid everybody off and the two of them were the only employees in the firm. Yamada returned the company to profitability, but it marked him in a funny way. After a year of doing nearly all the company's work, he was never again able to delegate."

Not an unusual pattern. Many managers never learn to delegate properly.

"Yamada," said Faith, "was a terrible manager. Does that surprise you?"

In fact, it did. Gene had always thought Roger was one of the best.

"He didn't even know how things got done in the company. He assumed that because the people around him were loyal they were doing everything the way he wanted it done."

Gene thought how ridiculous it was for an executive to be sitting and drinking coffee with a subordinate in a rose-colored nightgown, who was giving him a briefing on corporate politics.

"They weren't even loyal to him." She smiled humorlessly and shook her head; the gold hoop earrings hung in place as if gimbaled. "The poor jerk."

"You mean Roger?"

"Yeah," said Faith. "His ineptitude set the tone for our corporate culture. In a way, he made us the way we are."

"How are we?" said Gene.

"Not only are we closed to the outside world," she said, "we're closed to each other. No department knows what any other department is doing. It's not surprising, because no employee knows what any other employee is doing. We are all driven by a desire to not know what is going on. It's not very healthy."

"I don't see what's unhealthy about minding your own business," said Gene.

Faith ignored his remark. "Did you know the company is owned, nearly in its entirety, by Cynthia? Her

arrangement with Yamada was that, in the event of his death, she would be allowed to buy in. She killed him, and she was able to exercise the option, with Kennedy Skinner's money. Did you know Cynthia has no money of her own?"

"No."

"Her father frittered her inheritance away. Her husband has never had much, although his family puts up a good front."

"Who did she buy it from?" Gene was suddenly curious about the organization that had dominated his life for the past decade.

"Yamada's estate," said Faith. "It was a bargain price."

"Who's Roger's estate?"

"That's not important," said Faith. "The important thing is the culture we have developed in this closed little society."

Gene had never thought of the company as a closed society before. He had never thought of it as having a culture either, but it was an interesting idea.

"There's a life cycle for organizations." Faith sipped her coffee.

"You mean like childhood and adolescence and so on?"

"And decrepitude and senility," she said.

"Are you saying the company is decrepit?"

"Think about it, Gene. What are the most important departments in our company?"

The answer was easy. "Finance and Human Resources," he said.

"OK," she said. "Now tell me quickly, what is the company's principal business?"

"We're in business to make profits."

"Of course," she said. "But how do we make profits? What goods do we produce? What services do we perform?"

"We make software."

Faith slammed her coffee cup down on the table. "We haven't delivered a software package in two years, Gene."

You don't know what business the company is in, and you're one of its top managers!"

Her vehemence startled him.

"Don't you think it's strange you're one of the company's top managers and you don't have a clear idea of its business?"

"What's your point?" Gene said cautiously.

Suddenly the vehemence and the forcefulness vanished, and Faith became businesslike, which seemed even stranger than forcefulness in a woman wearing a rose-colored nightgown and gold hoop earrings. "It's time for you to learn about the business, Gene."

Gene sensed responsibility lurking somewhere in all of this. He shifted uneasily in the chair.

"Over the past year," Faith continued, "Larry and I have shifted most of the company's computer applications to desktop and departmental machines. Our goal is to pull the plug on the mainframe and decentralize the company's information services. This will inevitably decentralize its decision-making." She sipped at her coffee again. "We need to make our case to Cynthia, and we need help from someone close to her."

"Are you saying you want me involved in this?"

"She's your mentor, Gene. I don't know if she's inclined to listen to you, but I know she won't listen to any of us. We are capable of neutralizing her flunkies and bodyguards, but we still need a way to get her to listen to us. That's where you come in."

If he was bewildered by this plan, he was dumbfounded by what came next.

"If you've finished your coffee," said Faith, "let's go have sex."

FIFTEEN

Gene was no stranger to sex. In the privacy of his thoughts, he described himself as “not a monk by any means.”

The talk-show host in his mind says, “So, Gene. Would you consider yourself sexually active?” In Gene’s mind, the talk-show host always emphasizes the last word in the question.

Gene smiles self-effacingly. “I’m not a monk by any means,” he says.

When his wife was still around, the two of them had sex regularly—not exactly frequently, but regularly.

Gene continued to be sexually active after she left. Several months after she was gone, he went out and picked up a woman. It took a half dozen tries over several nights before he found one in a bar who was willing to take him home. He had never picked up a woman before, and he was surprised to discover how much it was like hiring, both in the difficulty and in the constant feeling he was doing it improperly somehow. But once he found the right candidate, everything began to move very rapidly.

Back at her place, they got into her bed and had sex almost immediately. It was satisfactory, as such things go. As soon as they were finished, Gene climbed out of bed, went into her bathroom, and washed himself thoroughly. When he walked back in the bedroom, she was staring at him strangely.

“Why are you in such a hurry to clean up?”

Gene had the feeling he’d done something offensive, and he felt guilty. “I didn’t want to drip all over your sheets,” he lied.

“Get out,” she said.

The second time he picked up a woman, he was able to get one in fewer tries as a result of the practice he got with the first one. This one insisted they go back to Gene’s house. Gene didn’t like it, but it was apparent he wouldn’t get the sex if they didn’t.

She turned out not to care if he went to the bathroom to wash himself immediately afterward, as long as he paid her. He liked her much better than the first one, even though she had a rather nonexempt approach to the matter. “Is this what you want?” she would say, or “How’s this?” “Do you want to be on top?” and so forth. She left him exhausted, not so much from the sex as from the constant decision-making. He would have liked her to offer a little more guidance, especially in light of her broader experience, but she never gave him the chance to suggest it. She just badgered him for direction. When it was over and she was gone, he decided against putting her name and number in his rolodex file. He didn’t like the idea of tying himself to a single-source vendor.

Faith’s unexpected invitation to sex seemed to bring Gene’s sexual history into focus. He realized how unsatisfactory and inadequate it had been.

He thought involuntarily of his wife. She never suggested they have sex; she always waited for him to suggest it, which he did only rarely, as he was reluctant to be ordered about by his glands. Faith actually wanted to have sex with him. No poses, no games, no tricks. She wanted him. Nobody ever had before, and he was disarmed by it.

She stood up from the sofa, turned, and walked from the room. Gene followed her.

They went into a bedroom. Gene took very little note of the room, other than the bed, which appeared to be the size of the main lobby in the company’s headquarters building. But then Gene was a little disoriented by the events

of the past hour and not a very good judge. The bed was nicely made with bedclothes that matched the rose of Faith's nightgown.

Faith unfastened one of her gold hoop earrings and set it on a dresser. Gene stood in front of the bed and watched her, not knowing quite what to do.

She turned to him, then she pushed him down on the large bed and applied herself to removing his clothes. She pulled the laces of his running shoes, popping first one knot, then the other. She jerked the shoes off his feet and threw them across the room. Then she took his socks off. She grabbed his windbreaker at the waistband and yanked it upward so that it turned inside out over his head.

"I want all your clothes off," she said.

She grabbed the front of his shirt and jerked it open so that the buttons popped off and scattered on the floor and the bed. She looked at his shoulder holster and how it fastened over his shirt, then shrugged and just let the halves of the shirt fall where they were. Alarmed at her speed and efficiency, Gene began to sit up, but she planted a hand on his chest and pushed him back down, then unbuckled his belt and yanked open his pants. She pulled those off, then tugged the waistband of his underwear toward his ankles and dragged them off as well. He lay on her bed wearing nothing but a shoulder holster over a shirt with no buttons.

Faith jumped off the bed and pulled a strap of her rose-colored nightgown down over one shoulder. Then she pulled the other down and let the nightgown fall to the floor. She stepped out of it toward the bed. Gene couldn't take his eyes off her round breasts and their pointed nipples. She slipped out of her panties. She was lean and athletic-looking, with a perfectly even apricot color over her entire body. She jumped back on the bed and straddled him.

"I like to be on top," she said. "I feel so supported."

He was already hard. She took hold with one hand and put the other between her legs to guide him into place. She

felt wet and warm, and Gene was no longer tired or tense.

She grabbed his shoulders with her hands and squeezed as she wriggled herself down onto him. The broad strap of the shoulder holster bit into his left armpit as she rocked back and forth to find an angle on him that she liked. She stared into his face with her sleepy-looking eyes, the single earring dangling from her left ear. She began to work herself to a climax. If he hadn't been so closely involved, he would hardly have known when she achieved it. She closed her eyes for just a moment, the only outward sign. Gene had one shortly after, a shuddering spasm that pushed the entire universe into the background and suppressed his awareness of everything beyond his groin. Faith never slowed down. Finally his whole body shook out of control, while she continued to undulate on top of him. The pleasure slipped over into discomfort, as she continued working her hips on him. Depleted, he groaned.

"Faith, stop," he said. "You're killing me."

"Probably not," she said. She nevertheless pulled herself off and leaned over to kiss him. She lay down beside him, on the side away from the holster, with her arms around him, and worked her face into the side of his neck.

She might have said something, but the world closed in on him as suddenly and quickly as if he'd been two days without sleep. But then, he had.

* * *

He woke hours later, aching and sore, alone in that large bed. It took him a moment to collect himself, just because he was so tired.

His shoulders and back ached, and he struggled to shrug himself out of the shoulder holster, which hurt like a wrestling hold. He remembered the sex with her. If anything, she had been even more self-confident and goal-oriented in

sex than in management. Gene felt he could learn a lot from Faith. In his open, buttonless shirt, he got up to look around the room.

There was a low dresser, mounted with a mirror, of the type they call a vanity. It had a chair in front of it with a dark red necktie draped over the back. It had a linen mat on it, and there was a selection of perfumes, two bottles of nail polish, a hairbrush, and a jewelry box arranged on it. A gold hoop earring lay by itself, away from the other things. There was a bud vase with a pair of strange-looking flowers in it just in front of the mirror. Gene looked at the hairbrush and imagined Faith sitting in the chair and staring at herself in the mirror as she did whatever it was that made her hair all stick straight out from her head. The image made him feel close to her, and the feeling thrilled him.

He opened the door to a closet. It had nearly a dozen identical gray business suits hanging in it, as well as a rack of neckties—a dozen different shades of red with a dozen different subtle designs. A bag with pockets in it was mounted on the inside of the door. The shoes in it were all very sensible. There was a rack of white Brooks Brothers shirts on hangers and, at the end of the rack, an off-white suit of coarse fabric that looked a little like pajamas and had a brown belt draped over it. Faith apparently practiced one of the martial arts and was sufficiently adept to wear a brown belt. Gene wondered what brown signified and whether Faith could teach him some esoteric method of self-defense that would be useful at Growth Services, Inc.

There were three dresses, all black. There were two satin nightgowns like the one she had been wearing, one black and one lavender. On the floor was a single pair of black high-heeled shoes with narrow straps.

His pants were on the floor by the bed, where she had dropped them. He picked them up and walked around the bedroom with them draped over his arm, looking for anything else that might help him get a better understanding

of this woman. On the wall were a photograph and two more framed diplomas, like the one he'd seen in her office but for different schools. Faith didn't seem to go in much for decoration. He remembered the sampler in her office: "Abort, Retry or Ignore?" It didn't seem quite so humorous now that he knew her better. It seemed less like a joke and more like a philosophy of life. How many colleges had she gone to?

The diplomas announced her completion of degree programs in theater arts and computer science, each at a different university and both with high honors. He wondered how her family had ever paid for her extended studies.

The photograph showed Faith posing with Roger Yamada; Faith looked very pretty. Her hair was longer and lay down on her head. She was wearing a dress, so he knew the picture wasn't taken at a company function.

He was studying the picture when he was startled by an arm slipping around his waist.

"That was two years ago," said Faith, resting her chin against his shoulder.

They stood there like that for a time, studying the photograph. She finally let go, and Gene turned to look at her. She was wearing a kimono with a dark blue pattern on it. It fell open when she picked up her brush from the vanity and stroked her hair with it. Her hair popped up straight as the bristles went through it, and the brush made a delicate little scratching sound against her scalp. No woman had ever brushed her hair in front of him before. It seemed an intimate gesture, but Faith had little self-consciousness about it.

Gene pointed to the photo. "Were you lovers?"

"You want something to eat?" she said.

And Gene realized that Faith must have been close to Roger. "Don't want to talk about it?"

"You should eat," she said. "You'll need your strength." She winked at him.

“Sure.” Gene wasn’t particularly hungry, but eating seemed another intimate thing he could do with her.

“I’ll call the catering service.” She turned and started toward the living room. “I know how to cook, but there are better ways to use the time.”

Gene put his pants on and followed her.

Faith made some more coffee. Then they sat in the living room to chat and wait for the food. Gene had never chatted with anyone before, and he didn’t know how to do it. He had often wished he had that skill, to be able to look around the room and say things like, “That’s nice wallpaper. Did you choose it yourself?”

He looked around the room. The furniture all seemed to belong together, with colors that looked right to him against the walls and the rug. The effect was both comfortable and civilized, as if it had been furnished by someone who knew it would be used and cared how. It seemed to him genial, a word he’d never had occasion to use, but which seemed appropriate in this case.

“That’s nice wallpaper,” he said. “Did you choose it yourself?”

“It’s not paper,” she said. “It’s stenciled.”

“Nice,” said Gene.

Faith did not seem to want to chat. “Yamada was born in an internment camp,” she said. “His parents were second-generation and spoke little Japanese. He spoke none at all. His two sisters didn’t speak any either.”

“Did he talk with you about his past much?”

“He didn’t talk about anything much.” Faith sipped her coffee.

“You sound like you know a lot about him.”

Faith shrugged. “It’s part of my research.”

Just then the doorbell rang. Faith didn’t have a belt on her kimono, so Gene went over and looked out the fisheye lens. The man from the catering service stood there with a stack of take-out containers. Gene opened the door and took

them from him. He gave him all the money he had in his pocket without counting it. The young man looked pleased, and he offered to come in and set it up for them. Gene thanked him and shut the door on him.

Faith took the stuff from him and began opening containers and spooning omelette and fried potatoes onto plates. They sat down at a table in the dining area right off the living room, Faith at one end, Gene at the other.

“What kind of research are you doing?” he said.

“I go through company records when I get the chance. I study government documents: vital records, records from the camps, stuff like that.”

“The records of the internment camps were published?”

“Congress studied them for a long time before writing the restitution bill. There were hearings, and a lot of material was read into the record. You can get some other stuff under Freedom of Information.” Faith speared a chunk of potato with her fork.

“They must have had it rough there,” said Gene.

“Yamada was one of those children born with a lot of allergies: to nuts, to wheat flour, to milk. It was hard for his family to find the proper food for him. But they managed to find a steady supply of soy flour and meal, which was practically all he could eat.”

“How can you find special food under those conditions?”

Faith shrugged again. “The family would have done anything for him. He was the only boy. The family had a lot of superstitions about the value of male children.”

Listening to Faith’s story, Gene hardly noticed he was eating.

“After the camps were closed and the inmates freed, the family moved to Ohio. Their property was confiscated or sold before the internment, so one place seemed as good as another to them. In Ohio they held themselves together by working as gardeners for the well-to-do. Eventually,

Yamada's father was able to put together the capital to start a small landscaping firm.

"Yamada studied finance in college. When he graduated, he came East and got a job in leasing. That was about the time his parents died."

"He must have been something of a pioneer in leasing." Gene set his fork down and poured himself another cup of coffee from the carafe on the table.

"Yes," said Faith. "It was still a young field, and the firms that needed it were all over the leasing companies to get in on it." She poured herself a cup of coffee with her left hand without setting down the fork in her right. She handled it gracefully, and Gene realized she was ambidextrous.

"Yamada worked as hard as a draft animal, as shrewdly as a wolf," continued Faith. "He sold leases on tank cars, jet planes, earth-moving equipment, nuclear fuel, anything with an expected lifespan of more than a financial quarter or two."

"It's a strange business," said Gene.

"It's just another information business. The leasing firm owns nothing, and it sells anything and everything, or at least the use of it. It borrows money to buy the building or the vehicle or whatever it is leasing, collateralizing the loan with the leased property itself. Then it rents the property to the customer for the cost of financing plus a profit. As often as not, it buys the property from the firm to which it then turns around to lease it. Companies use the lease-back to design their own numbers for financial reports."

Gene realized just how little he knew about finance.

Faith set down her fork and toyed with her coffee cup. "It generates a great deal of money without the mess and bother of productive activity. And it made a lot of money for Yamada. He was just out of college, and within five years he had a net worth of five hundred thousand."

"That was a lot of money in those days," said Gene. "He could do what he wanted."

“What he wanted,” said Faith, “was to take a brief retirement. He felt leasing was not spiritual. He wanted to contribute something more to civilization than designer numbers.”

“Did he drop out?”

“No.” Faith shook her head. “He got married.”

“I didn’t know he’d ever been married,” said Gene. “I thought he just dated starlets.”

“It didn’t last long,” said Faith. “Just a couple of years. Yamada didn’t have Cynthia’s domestic impulse. That’s one of the reasons she hated him. No family values. He even abandoned his child.”

“To his wife?”

“Yes.” Faith took a sip of coffee. She set her fork down and pushed the plate a couple inches away. “That seems to have been part of the problem with the marriage: he wanted a son. After they had a daughter, he became convinced his wife couldn’t have a boy.”

“Isn’t that a little stupid?” said Gene.

Faith shrugged. “Yamada had his blind spots, like everyone else.”

“What happened then?”

“He went to work for Ira Growth and Kennedy Skinner.”

“Which brings us to the point of the story,” said Gene.

“Which brings us to the point of having sex again,” said Faith. She pushed back her chair, stood up, and walked around the table to him. He began to stand up, but she put a hand on his shoulder and a finger to her lips. He never got out of the chair.

SIXTEEN

Gene stayed at Faith's apartment for the rest of the day. They napped and, when they woke up, they took a bath together. They climbed out of the bathtub and dried each other with large, fluffy towels, then got into Faith's bed and lay on their backs side by side. They were staring at the ceiling when Faith asked him a personal question.

"Why are you reading Proust?"

She pronounced the name to rhyme with "boost." Gene thought it was supposed to rhyme with "joust," but he didn't try to correct her.

"I'm not reading it anymore," he said. "I decided to quit." He realized it was the first time he had ever described a decision he had made.

"Why did you even start?" she said. "It's not the kind of book an executive usually carries around."

"It was on my reading list," he said. He hoped she would not pursue it any deeper.

"Are you taking a course or something?"

"Yeah," said Gene.

They lay there without speaking for a moment.

"And?" said Faith.

"And what?"

"What course is it?"

"Why do you want to know?"

She rolled onto her side, propped her head up with one hand, and began to trace a circle on his chest with a fingernail of the other.

"There are a lot of things I want to know about you," she said.

Once again, Gene was disarmed by the depth of her interest in him, but he tried to keep his wits about him.

"Why?" he said.

"You're part of my plans. The more I know about you, the better use I can make of you."

In all his years at the company, Gene had never met anyone so honest. In fact, he had never met anyone so honest anywhere.

The circle she was tracing began to narrow around his right nipple.

"What use are you going to make of me?"

"Did you know Lorraine was a supporter of Cynthia?"

"I guess not," said Gene. "I thought she was one of Roger's boosters. I thought that was why Cynthia got rid of her."

"No," said Faith, "she was a Cynthia loyalist. Every manager in your department knew it except you. Lorraine was loyal to Cynthia, and all the managers in your department were loyal to Lorraine, which is why they are suspicious of Cynthia. That's one of the reasons you're having such a difficult time winning them over."

"I wasn't aware I was having such a difficult time," sniffed Gene.

"You can be such a jerk, Gene. Why do you think Kevin tried to kill you?"

"He didn't."

Faith laughed. "Are you kidding? Of course he did."

"No he didn't," insisted Gene.

"Are you saying all the evidence doesn't point to Kevin?"

"Maybe it does," said Gene, "but I know he didn't do it."

"How do you know?"

Gene suddenly realized that he might have trusted Faith too much. He started to roll away, but Faith grabbed his

shoulder and held him where he was. "How do you know, Gene?"

"He told me," said Gene.

"He told you?" Faith released his shoulder. "You're a bigger jerk than I thought you were."

"If I'm such a jerk," said Gene, "then why do you want me involved in your plan?"

"Everybody in your department was against Yamada. You're the only nonaligned manager there. We need at least one personnel man."

"Human resources," corrected Gene.

"What?"

"Human resources," said Gene. "You said 'personnel.'"

"Resources shmesources," said Faith. "They only started calling it that because nobody could remember how many n's there are in personnel."

"Could we have some lunch?" he said.

Faith shrugged, and they both got out of bed. She went into the kitchen and, from the living room, Gene watched her open a bottle of wine. He had never realized before how seductive a woman in an open kimono can look when she uncorks a bottle of wine. She put the bottle between her legs and pulled hard on the corkscrew until the cork came out with a pop. She glanced up with the corkscrew and impaled cork in her hand, and she saw him looking at her.

"I don't know if I want to be involved in this plan," he said.

"I know," she said.

Gene was uncomfortable with the way she understood his thoughts and feelings, better than he did himself.

"You don't like being responsible," she said. She brought two glasses and the open wine bottle to the dining room table. She poured the wine and then they sat down.

"It's not that," said Gene, knowing full well it was.

"You think you know me pretty well, don't you?" With his first sip of wine, he knew it would dull his judgment.

“Gene,” said Faith, “did you see it when Cynthia’s people came and took Lorraine away?”

“Yes.”

“Did you try to stop them?”

“What would be the sense of that?” said Gene. He sipped more wine and felt his defenses lowering.

“Did you hate her or what?” said Faith.

“No, of course I didn’t hate her.”

“Did you like her?”

Gene shrugged. “I guess she was all right. She wasn’t a bad director. Better than some we’ve had.”

“Did it cross your mind to say anything while they were taking her away?”

“No,” he said. He sipped his wine. He was a little surprised now that he hadn’t thought to speak.

“How did you feel about it, seeing her hauled off that way?”

Gene remembered the feeling distinctly. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Yes you do.”

“All right,” said Gene. He took another sip of wine. “I was a little resentful, OK? She looked at me just before they shoved her in the elevator. Like it was my fault or something.”

“You felt guilty, didn’t you?”

“Of course not,” he said. “Lorraine was none of my concern. She wasn’t even my supervisor. She knew the risk.”

“Does that make it right Cynthia had her killed?”

“What’s right got to do with it?” he said.

* * *

Gene studied Faith’s hair where it met the pillow. When she wasn’t lying down, it looked very stiff. But when she was in bed, it was completely flattened out wherever her head met

the pillow. He wondered if it would stay that way for a little while when she lifted her head again.

“What are you looking at?” she said.

“Is it difficult to make your hair stick out like that?” said Gene.

“No,” she said. She sat up a little and propped herself with her elbows behind her. The sheet slipped down and revealed her breasts. Her hair once again stood out uniformly from her head. Gene was disappointed he hadn’t been alert enough to see it spring back.

“Why are you reading Proust?” she said.

Gene looked at her breasts. He reached over and caressed one lightly along its side. “My wife’s been reading it.”

“Your wife?”

“Ex-wife,” said Gene. “She left almost two years ago.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why,” he said.

Faith moved closer to him. She searched his face and stroked the side of it with her hand.

“It’s difficult to lose someone close to you,” she said.

“I suppose,” said Gene.

“So the two of you still talk about books?”

“No,” said Gene, picking at the sheet. “I hired a private investigator to follow her. I just wanted to know how she was doing. She doesn’t do anything interesting except go to the library. My investigator said he could report to me on what books she was reading.”

“Have you learned anything from reading the books?”

Gene shrugged. “Not from Proust,” he said. He pronounced it to rhyme with boost; he didn’t want her to feel bad about her pronunciation.

She stroked the side of his face again.

“You’re very gentle,” she said.

Gene didn’t particularly want to talk about it, but he found his mouth moving and sounds coming out, as if he

couldn't help himself. "I think maybe that's why," he said.

"Is that what she said?"

"No," said Gene. "It was the timing of it."

Faith said nothing, but she looked at him so deeply and searchingly that he went on with his explanation.

"When I think back about it," said Gene, "I realize she changed right after I missed my first promotion." He was surprised at this new insight, even as he explained it to Faith. It was the first time he had ever talked about it with anyone, and he was hearing his own explanation for the first time. What struck him as particularly odd was that he never had it in his mind before it came out of his mouth. It was as if a part of him understood everything but had never told the rest of him.

"Three years ago," he went on, "I stalked my supervisor for a couple weeks. I wanted to terminate him and get his job, but when it came time to actually do it, I backed down. I couldn't do it."

"Did she criticize you for that?" said Faith.

"Oh no," said Gene. "I never even talked with her about it. I kept it a secret from her. I couldn't risk talking with her about it or she would know we were at a dead end. So I tried to act like nothing had happened. But she knew. I could see it whenever she looked at me. She tried to get me to talk all the time. She would say, 'Is something bothering you, Gene?' or 'I just can't touch you, Gene.'" Faith reached over and touched him.

Gene shrugged. "She had never really been a very big one for touching anyway. I knew if I ever told her I had failed, she would have every right to leave me. After a while, she stopped trying to get me to talk and started reading lots of books. And then she left. I guess she was justified. I failed us both."

"Is that what she said?"

"She didn't have to," said Gene. He was amazed at the depth of his insight. He was amazed to be sharing himself

with another person. He'd never done anything like this before. He wondered if Faith was as impressed as he was with this new insight.

But all she did was tempt him into sex again. He didn't need much tempting.

* * *

Gene had never had another person show as much interest in him as Faith did. He knew that Faith could get him to do anything she wanted. He wanted to be on his guard, but he found being exposed and vulnerable a surprisingly exhilarating feeling.

He had a lot of thinking to do. But he didn't have the time or the desire to do it.

It was night when he woke up again. He had a stale taste in his mouth, and his hair was catching at his eyes. Faith was standing over him. She was dressed in a dark, lumpy sweatsuit that gave her the figure of a bagful of grenades. She could have had almost anything inside the suit with her. Her sleepy-looking eyes had a drawn look, and her face had a slight shine, but she was beautiful. She touched his shoulder, and the pressure of her hand made him feel maybe sharing his feelings had not been a mistake.

"It's time for us to go," she said.

"What?"

"We're going to have a talk with Justin."

"Can't we just stay here?" said Gene, reaching up and pulling her down on him.

She didn't laugh as he expected her to. She lay against him and smiled in a way that seemed both thoughtful and sad. She pushed his hair out of his eyes. "You want to know who killed Frannie, don't you? If you don't believe Kevin did it, we're going to have to ask Justin."

Gene thought of Frannie turning end over end like a baton. He thought about standing on her mother's porch and telling the poor woman through the door. Despite events at Cynthia's cottage, he felt he was still the manager in charge.

"We don't have much time," said Faith. She stroked his cheek and stood up. Gene swung his legs out of the bed.

"You can take a shower if you want," she said. "Then I want you to put on this warm-up suit." She dropped a pile of dark clothing on the bed beside him. "We're going to run an errand and then meet Justin in the park. Hurry." She looked at her watch. "We have to leave in fifteen minutes."

Gene did as he was told. The shower cleared his head. He did want to know who killed Frannie. Was it Justin? It couldn't be. Why would Justin poison his coffee when all he had to do was take him into the elevator? Besides, Justin would have only done it on orders from Cynthia, and he was sure Cynthia wasn't trying to kill him. She'd had too many opportunities that she hadn't used. He pulled on the warm-up suit and walked out into the living room where Faith was waiting.

"There are no pockets in this suit," he said. "I don't have any place to put my wallet or anything."

"We'll just be a little while," she said. "I don't think you'll need your wallet." She grabbed a car key from the table, and they went out to the street.

They took Faith's car. It seemed to Gene that she was a skilled driver; she handled the gears and the rpms well.

"You're a good driver," said Gene.

"It's not as much fun as some cars I've driven," said Faith. She pulled the gearshift into fourth. She smiled. "I used to race cars."

Before he could ask her about the sort of cars she'd raced, she slowed the car and pulled off onto a side street. Someone carrying a gym bag ran up to the car, opened the back door, threw the bag on the seat, and climbed in after

it. The car settled heavily on that side. The new passenger was Larry.

"You ready, Larry?" said Faith.

"More than you could know," said Larry. He smiled at Gene. He winked, and Gene had a feeling he hadn't known since he was a boy. It was the feeling he had when he went away on a Boy Scout camping trip: the belonging, the sensation of being accepted, the premonition of mischief.

Faith turned around and pulled slowly back onto the main road. The telephone rang.

"Get that, would you, Gene?" she said.

Gene picked up the telephone. A synthetic voice asked him if he had taken the proper measures to protect himself and his family.

"It's a pitch," said Gene.

"Here, let me have it," said Larry, reaching over the seat.

Gene handed him the receiver.

Larry took the receiver, then let it dangle over the seat back while he searched the pockets of his windbreaker for something.

Gene could hear the telephone receiver heedlessly pitching: "Please respond at the tone. Would you like to feel safer in your own home?"

"It must be selling firearms," said Faith.

"Aren't these things tiresome?" said Gene.

The telephone made a tone signal.

"Ah, here it is," said Larry, pulling something from an inside pocket the size and shape of a debit card.

"Please answer," said the telephone receiver. "The tone will sound again. Please respond. Would you like to feel safer in your own home?"

"What is it?" said Gene.

"Watch," said Larry. He picked up the receiver and held his device up to the mouthpiece. It made a brief whining sound. He smiled. "That should take care of it."

“What did you do?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Larry. He handed the receiver back to Gene. “It’s safe. It’s brand new, and they haven’t caught on to it yet. It transmits a bit of code that creates a signal emulating the purchase signal. So all the systems tied into the network will think Faith bought something and leave her alone for a while.”

“Where did you get it?”

“My boss designed it before they took him out,” said Larry. “I worked on it for over a year.”

“Is it legal?”

Faith laughed. “Hardly. In fact, it’s quite risky. You see, in addition to the emulation signal, it sends a bit of time-delayed destructive code.”

“You mean it damages the pitching program?”

“More like destroys it completely,” put in Larry. “The vendor can’t do anything but format all storage devices after this code finishes rewriting things.”

Gene thought about the damage to all that software and almost shivered with wicked delight. He had forgotten, since he had grown up, the satisfaction of vandalism.

“We wanted to bring it to market through the company,” said Faith, “but we couldn’t get it past the product development committee.”

“Probably worried about retaliation,” said Gene. “What a bunch of wimps.”

“Nah,” said Larry. “They said the market life was too short.”

“They were wrong,” said Faith. “It would take the vendors a year to institute protective measures. By then, we could have turned a fair profit and developed something else.”

Gene looked at Faith, who handled the car so skillfully. Then he looked back at Larry, who was smiling with self-satisfaction. He felt closer to them than he had felt to anyone since his youth. He smiled broadly in the darkness.

After a few more minutes of driving around on residential streets, Faith pulled the car to a stop. They were at the curb, at a spot between street lights and houses.

Faith turned to Larry. "OK."

Larry opened the door, jumped out of the car, and ran across the street with his gym bag. He ran down the street about thirty yards, toward a house with a dark, nondescript sedan parked in the driveway.

"Who lives there?" said Gene.

"Terry," said Faith.

"Who's that?"

"You know her, I'm sure. She's one of Cynthia's people. Blond woman, works with Justin. She was with him when he took out Lorraine."

Gene remembered the woman who had come to Human Resources that morning with the three men, who had stood at the door of the conference room during the Directors meeting. A dangerous-looking woman. He looked out the window and tried to watch Larry, but he disappeared into the shadows. He and Faith sat in the car without speaking. Gene enjoyed her presence. After a time that seemed too brief, the rear door of the car opened, and Larry climbed in again.

"What were you doing?" said Gene.

"Don't ask and you won't have anything to worry about," said Larry. He grinned.

Gene didn't worry. He trusted the two of them.

Faith started the car, stepped on the gas, and they drove away. Gene was excited at the way events were playing themselves out. He felt close to Faith and Larry. He felt he was part of something.

They stopped at a suburban park, where they left the car in the street. Faith led the two men to a spot in the park, away from the lamps that lit the jogging path. It seemed dangerous to be standing around in the park at

night, away from the lamps, and the excitement of it made Gene's heart race.

Faith glanced at her watch again, then she pulled up her sweatshirt, drew something out of her waistband, and handed it to Larry. Gene bent closer and saw it was his automatic.

"This one has a sound suppressor," she said.

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

"We're going to encourage Justin to tell us the truth," said Larry.

Gene admired the sense of purpose and the assurance that animated both Faith and Larry. A threat with a weapon was doubtless the thing Justin would best understand. A moment later, as if he were keeping an appointment, Justin came running along the path. He was alone. Larry stepped out into the path in front of him when he was only about five paces away and pointed the automatic at him. He stopped suddenly. He was breathing hard from his run.

"Larry?" he said, gasping.

"Get off the path," said Larry. He waved the automatic toward the dark spot where Gene and Faith were waiting.

Justin walked slowly into the darkness, and Larry followed, pointing the automatic at the center of his back. He glanced back at Larry, and the lamplight glinted off one lens of his aviator glasses. He almost ran into Faith.

"Faith?" said Justin. He peered into the darkness. Then he noticed Gene. "You, too, Gene? I didn't think you'd be involved in this, after Frannie."

"Involved in what?" said Gene.

"Nothing," said Larry. He stepped up close.

Gene heard Larry speak, but his voice seemed to be coming from somewhere else while the scene played itself out in front of him.

"He doesn't know anything," said Larry's voice.

Then he slowly raised the automatic toward Justin's face and put the sound suppressor up against the right lens

of his glasses. Justin seemed unsurprised, even pleased, by the turn of events. He smiled with the look of a man who has something better than life, like a man whose opinion is validated by events. He seemed, Gene thought, like a motorist who gleefully insists on his right of way against a semi-trailer.

The automatic gave a little cough, a filagree of shattered glass formed around a hole in the center of his lens. Justin crumpled to the ground, inch by inch, it seemed to Gene.

At first Gene thought Larry and Justin had acted out some kind of scene, that they were putting on an elaborate joke. He looked at Justin's body. He backed away. "You killed him, Larry."

"See that wallet fastened around his ankle, Gene?" said Larry. "Take it along. It will look like a robbery."

"Do I have to?" said Gene.

"Don't argue, Gene," said Faith. "Just get the wallet."

Gene reached toward Justin's foot. It gave an inhuman twitch, and he backed off. He felt numb.

"Shit, Gene," said Larry. He pushed Gene aside, stepped up to the body, and grabbed the foot, which stopped twitching. Gene turned away again. He heard the velcro give way as Larry peeled the wallet from the ankle. He remembered the night he went home without killing his boss.

He was aware of a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Gene," said Faith gently. "We should get out of here."

"Did you have to kill him?"

"Come on, come on, come on," said Larry.

Faith's hand left his shoulder, and Gene heard their retreating steps. He forced himself to stumble after them. He didn't know what else to do.

Larry opened the passenger-side door and tossed Justin's wallet over the roof to Gene while Faith climbed in behind the wheel.

“Take out the credit cards,” said Larry, “and throw the rest of it into the trash can there.”

Gene was too numb to do anything else. When he came back from the trash can, he saw Faith was sitting at the wheel, waiting. He climbed in.

“Give me the credit cards,” she said.

Gene handed them to her, and she opened the console between the seats and dropped them in.

She started the car, checked for oncoming traffic, put it in gear, and pulled slowly away from the curb. Gene watched her go calmly through the motions, wondering at her self-control. Then he began to shake.

“Relax,” said Faith. “If you fight it, the shaking gets worse.”

“Larry, you killed the man.” Gene’s voice wavered from his shaking.

“He spent his whole career doing people,” said Faith. “He knew he would be done himself some day.” She paused in thought. “Justin knew the risks, Gene.”

It was the same thing Gene had said about Lorraine. He was confused. He had thought he could deal with all this, but that was before any of it had happened right in front of him.

Gene’s shaking subsided slowly, into occasional spasms. After a time, he got control of himself, but he knew he would never get control of the situation.

“Shit, Gene,” said Larry. “You act like you’ve never seen anybody get whacked before.”

“He hasn’t,” said Faith.

“What are you talking about?” said Larry. “He’s a successful manager. He couldn’t have gotten this far without whacking at least a few people.”

“He never has,” said Faith.

Gene sat there while they talked about him. He had about as much interest in their discussion as he would have in a conversation between two strangers.

“That’s one of the reasons Cynthia picked him. Isn’t it, Gene?” said Faith.

Gene had no idea and could care less.

Faith stared straight ahead as she spoke to Larry. “Cynthia wants directors who are no threat to her. She doesn’t want to end up like Yamada.”

Faith and Larry continued talking, and Gene remembered he’d had a question about Roger earlier that day. It seemed like a year ago now. He remembered looking at the photo of Faith and Roger. Faith had said so much about Roger, but she hadn’t answered his question.

“You and Roger were lovers, weren’t you,” he said.

Faith stopped talking, then glanced over at Gene. She looked back at the road and laughed. “That’s good. That’s funny.”

Larry started to laugh in the back seat as well.

Gene hadn’t intended to be funny.

“He was my father, Gene” said Faith.

Gene felt so stupid he wanted to smack himself on the forehead. Of course. The lowered eyelids, the sleepy look. It wasn’t plastic surgery; it was the whisper of Asian ancestry.

“Gene,” said Larry, “you’re so out of it, you’re almost dangerous.” His laughter trailed off, and he finally spoke seriously to Faith again. “Why did Cynthia send such an inexperienced manager down to Operations to kill me?” said Larry.

Gene tried to assimilate that Faith was Roger’s daughter. He looked at her in the darkness, watched oncoming headlights wash over her face, and tried to understand what went on inside her. He remembered her telling him that Roger had wished he had a son and that he had left his wife and daughter when he didn’t. “Yamada had his blind spots,” she had said, “like everyone else.”

Gene wondered what it was like to be abandoned. It would probably do strange things to you psychologically,

make you vulnerable to all sorts of opportunistic people and forces.

"Cynthia didn't care whether he came back from Operations alive," Faith said to Larry.

"That's not true," put in Gene. "Cynthia is my mentor. Things began to go right only when she took an interest in me." But when he said it, he knew it sounded ridiculous.

Larry laughed. "I hope she never takes an interest in me."

"Gene," Faith said gently, "I know you've been trying not to think about this, but did you see any familiar faces at the Department Directors meeting?"

"No."

"Of course not," said Faith. "They were all as new as you were."

Gene knew she was right. He'd thought the same thing himself. He wished none of this was happening.

"Counting Yamada," continued Faith, "Cynthia took out nine people in a matter of a couple of hours. What you might call a massive reorganization. Each of the eight new Directors represents a vacated position somewhere, which means at least one other whacking and maybe two to three. Look what happened in your department. You already lost an admin. That's just the beginning. Cynthia doesn't even know how many people will get it before the ripples die down. She doesn't really know what she's done. But she doesn't care either."

At first it seemed preposterous. But then Gene remembered the hard look on Cynthia's face when she talked about "delayering" and the merciless way she handled his disciplinary interview. And he realized she wasn't any shrewder than anybody else, just meaner. The killing might go on until there was nobody left but nonexempts. "Why did you have to kill Justin?"

"I told you," said Faith, "we have to talk with Cynthia. That's where we're headed now. Do you think we

could ever talk with her as long as her closest operatives are alive? One of them would kill us before letting us get near her.”

“So we stabilized them,” Larry put in from the back seat.

Gene wished he were an Assistant Manager again.

“So here we are,” said Larry. “We’ve started decentralizing the information system. We’ve got the backing and the smarts, the plan and the people. And the incumbent Director we’ve chosen as our point person has never killed anybody.”

“Gene will do all right when the time comes,” said Faith.

The dark landscape swept past them. Gene stared out the window and wondered how he had gotten into this. How could he have believed he had a career? He laughed. This car was a metaphor for his life. Driven by one of his subordinates, it carried him, helpless, toward a confrontation with his supervisor.

“What are you laughing at?” said Faith.

“Me.”

Faith turned to him again, and he saw her eyes glint in the darkness. There was a glow on her face from the car’s instruments. “It’s time to get serious now, Gene. You’re either with us or you’re against us. And if you’re against us, I’ll kill you.”

SEVENTEEN

It was very late, and the traffic was light. They drove on through the night, and nobody spoke for a long time. The landscape was familiar and Gene remembered, once again, vacationing in this area so long ago with his wife. Then he remembered speaking to her on the telephone not three days ago. If it hadn't happened to him directly, it would have been funny that she mistook him for Harvey. At least now he knew how Harvey was able to tell him what books she was reading. Gene relived his embarrassment at finding out that his place had been taken by Harvey, of all people. He shivered.

"Cold?" said Faith.

"Yeah." Gene didn't want Faith to know that he was more or less financing his wife's lovemaking. He looked back at Larry and saw he was asleep.

"He can sleep anywhere anytime," said Faith. "He's trained himself to do that."

Gene turned to look at Faith. She seemed calm and competent, staring at the road ahead, both her hands holding the wheel.

"This is about revenge, isn't it?" he said.

"It's not personal," Faith said quietly. "It's business. It's just a new information system, that's all."

"Are you telling me you're not angry about Roger's death?"

"In his way, Yamada was a good man," said Faith. "Being a good man isn't enough right now."

Gene thought about Roger and how little control he'd had over anything that happened in the company. "Were you ever going to tell him you had come to work for the firm?"

"The question is, would he have ever found out?" Faith laughed and shook her head. "Yamada didn't have a clue what was going on."

Gene wasn't sure he did either. "I don't understand why so many people had to be killed."

"We do what we have to do to get the job done," said Faith.

"I don't like this," said Gene.

Faith spoke without looking away from the road ahead. "You really don't deal with this very well, do you?"

Gene didn't say anything.

"Do you really think management is the right career for you?" said Faith. The question was not at all hostile; indeed, it was solicitous and, for a moment, Gene had the same feelings he'd had back in bed with her.

"I've often asked myself that," he said.

They were quiet for a few moments. In the darkness Gene began to recognize the landscape of the region north of the lobster signs. He missed Frannie. He wished she were here to help him get organized. He had a lot to keep track of right now. "What did Justin mean when he said he didn't expect to see me involved 'after Frannie'?"

"I don't know," said Faith. "He was Cynthia's person."

Gene wondered if perhaps Faith was behind the poisoned cream. There was so little he understood about her, although what he did understand whispered to him that she was capable of it. It was like her to know that Frannie took cream in her coffee while he took his black. But why would she do such a thing? She must have known how vulnerable he was. He was between work teams. He was a manager in the moulting stage. Frannie had been his last remaining work relationship, his last real attachment to the

organization. What good would it do Faith to cut his organizational anchor line?

"It takes a lot to change the culture of an organization," said Faith. "You can't just say, 'This is the way we are going to be from now on.' It won't work. People resist change. So you have two choices: you can change everybody, one by one, or you can change a few and eliminate everybody else. Changing everybody takes too long. By the time you get them all changed, the market has moved, and it's time to change again. The only realistic way to push a company into another direction is to eliminate anybody who might stand in the way. Cynthia understands this. She's built her strategy on it. With lifetime employment, change gets a little messy. But if you can't deal with an occasional mess, you shouldn't be a manager."

"Larry killed Terry earlier this evening, didn't he?" said Gene.

"I don't know yet," said Faith.

"You don't know yet?"

"Yeah," said Faith. "He planted a bomb in her car."

"Where is this all going to stop?" said Gene.

"The company will be a lot more peaceful after we've pulled the plug on the mainframe computer," said Faith.

"Why are we doing this?" said Gene.

"Big stakes, Gene. I estimate we can reduce the cost of information processing by fifty percent or more. And we can cut the time for making critical decisions in half. We're going to boost profits significantly, if we can get Cynthia's agreement."

"Why would she resist it?" said Gene. "Doesn't she want to reduce costs and increase profit?"

"Cynthia doesn't care about profits," said Faith. "She cares about power. She doesn't want to reduce headcount. That's why she got rid of Sarah. Cynthia decided she wasn't going to be able to stop her staff from shrinking. That's why

she sent you down to kill Larry. He's reducing staff, and she wants him stopped."

The idea that Cynthia was killing people to stop staff reductions seemed strange to Gene, but then it was no stranger than Faith killing people to make the company peaceful. He thought then that Faith was about as cruel as Cynthia and that the two were well-matched adversaries.

They pulled into the parking lot of a small, seedy-looking motel. Gene thought it wasn't really in keeping with his status, but he didn't want to say anything. Faith turned around and woke Larry up, then sent him into the motel's office to get a couple of rooms.

Larry took one room for himself, and Faith and Gene took the other one. As soon as they entered the room, Faith shut the door and pushed him toward the bed.

"Faith," he said, "I don't know if I'm capable of doing it again."

"Nonsense," said Faith. She pushed him down and began pulling his clothes off.

"This is the best way to control you, Gene. I need to keep your mind off the risks and responsibilities of our plan." When she had gotten his clothes off, she took them with her into the bathroom. She emerged a few minutes later, naked and smiling. She climbed into bed beside him, and Gene was surprised at how completely she took his mind off everything but his groin. In a few minutes he was depleted, and he fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

It was dark when he woke up, but he could see reasonably well. He wondered where he was, then he remembered the seedy motel. Faith was lying on her side beside him, sleeping soundly. He tried to think about the prospect of Faith talking with Cynthia, but he couldn't imagine it. He couldn't

see Faith tolerating the kind of dressing-down he had gotten the day before yesterday, and he couldn't picture Cynthia sitting still for Faith's theory of decentralized decision-making. Somebody was going to get hurt. Faith knew some sort of martial art. He had no idea how skilled Cynthia might be in self-defense techniques; the force of her personality had always been enough to deal with him. But he did know that both of them were prepared to kill as many people as might be necessary to make a point.

Lying there in the darkness, staring at the ceiling of a room in a seedy-looking motel, Gene wondered whom he'd be working for, when all was said and done. He would be glad when the confrontation was over with and he could get his life back to normal. But something told him the confrontation could go on and on. Faith wasn't going to be satisfied with talking, and Cynthia wasn't going to rest with rebellion afoot in the company. Gene realized the company was out of control.

Faith moaned and rolled from her side to her back. Gene looked at her in the darkness. While he was looking at her, she spoke.

"Daddy," she said. "Daddy, don't leave."

Gene thought she must be joking, but her voice had no humor in it.

"Faith?" he said.

She didn't answer, and he realized she had been talking in her sleep. He could see her head against the pillow, squashing down her strange hair. Asleep, she looked more her age, maybe even younger. She looked vulnerable, helpless. He thought about the framed sampler in her office again. "Abort, Retry or Ignore?" Which had she chosen this time? He couldn't tell.

Gene decided to abort. If he had to hitchhike home, it would be better than watching, and possibly being involved in, a Cynthia-Faith confrontation. He slipped quietly from the bed and crept to the bathroom. He went in and shut the

door behind him. He found his clothes piled up on top of the closed toilet. It was just a warm-up suit, so he put it on quickly and quietly. Then he opened the door and crept out. He looked at Faith as he stepped quietly past the bed. Then he turned and grabbed the handle of the door. As he did so, he heard the sound of his own automatic being cocked to fire. He stopped. He turned slowly. Faith was sitting up in bed, her elbows propped on her knees and the automatic pointed at him with both hands.

“Don’t go, Gene,” she said.

Gene shrugged.

“It’s time to get up anyway,” said Faith. She released the slide of the automatic and laid the weapon on the nightstand. “It’s almost dawn. Have a seat in that chair while I get my clothes on.”

Gene did as he was told. Faith got out of bed and went into the bathroom, where she used the toilet and dressed without taking her eye off him. Gene was a little surprised she didn’t make him have sex with her again, since he could feel himself slipping out of her control. But when she came back out of the bathroom holding the automatic, he realized that was probably control enough.

Larry was waiting for them in the car when they came out. He refused to speak, and Gene guessed maybe he just wasn’t a morning person.

After the car had warmed up, they drove a few minutes up the road until they came to the familiar dirt lane of Price Landing. They pulled into the lane and then into the gravel lot. Faith let the car roll to a stop at the edge of the gravel, facing the ocean. The four-wheel-drive utility vehicles were still there, on the other side of the lot. Faith switched off the lights and the engine. It was utterly quiet, except for the sound of lapping water.

The three of them sat in silence. The sky over the water slowly began to lighten, going first from black to dark gray, then very slowly acquiring a pinkness. Gene had never

watched dawn over the ocean before, and he thought it must be the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. By the time the sun sat redly on the horizon, they heard the telltale buzz of the island power boat.

"Wait here," said Faith. She opened the car door and climbed out.

Gene watched her walk down to the dock and noticed that she didn't stop at the little gatehouse to sign the guest book or call the island. But the boat was coming anyway, and Gene saw that Fraser was at the wheel again. Faith tucked the automatic into the waistband of her pants as the boat came up to the dock. Fraser tossed her a line, and she tied the boat up at one of the pilings while he got out. He had on his wheat-colored sweater, and he was wearing his red knit cap over his gray hair.

The two of them stood there talking on the dock for some moments. Then they shook hands and, partway through the handshake, they hugged. Fraser took off his cap and handed it to Faith. He pulled the sweater off and gave it to her as well. Then he kissed her cheek, turned, and left her to go climb into one of the four-wheel-drive vehicles. As he started the car, Faith gestured for Gene and Larry to join her. They climbed out and walked over to her as the utility vehicle crunched its way through the gravel and out of the lot.

"He says she's having breakfast in the solarium," said Faith, handing the cap and sweater to Gene. "He says he took her guns and dropped them overboard on the way across."

"Where's he going?" said Gene. He looked at the sweater and cap and wondered what he was supposed to do with them.

"Who knows?" said Faith. "I'm sure he isn't interested in company affairs."

Larry laughed. "Yeah, he's more concerned with his own affairs."

Faith chuckled. "I don't think Gene gets it."

"Gets what?" said Gene.

"You don't know about Fraser and Lorraine?" Larry shook his head. "You don't know much of anything, do you?"

Gene realized with a hollow feeling that Fraser and Lorraine had been lovers and that he had been the one to tell Fraser about her death. He would have liked to run down the road after the utility vehicle and shout his apologies, but he could neither protest nor resist when Faith and Larry directed him into the boat. He climbed in with difficulty, clutching the sweater and cap. They cast off, and Larry took the wheel. The boat roared seaward. Nobody tried to talk over the noise until they came in sight of the island.

"Put on the sweater and the cap," Faith shouted to Gene.

"Why?"

"Just do it," she shouted. "Put them on, then take the wheel while Larry and I lie down here."

Gene did as he was told. Faith and Larry lay down in the cockpit on opposite sides, and he realized that he was supposed to be Fraser's stand-in on the off chance that Cynthia might be looking out the window. He throttled down when they entered the little bay and took the boat in as he had seen Fraser do two days before.

"I still have your piece, Gene," said Faith.

Gene looked down at the deck, where Faith lay with her face near his feet. Her eyes were deep and liquid, and he found himself unaccountably drawn toward their soft depths. But an ugly little creature stirred near the bottom of those depths, then quickly hid itself from view. Faith smiled, and Gene saw she was pointing the automatic at his groin.

When they came up to the dock, they were out of sight of any of the house's windows. Gene snared a piling with a

line from the bow, near the dinghy, then he pulled the stern of the powerboat around to secure it with another.

Faith stood up. "We'd better get moving."

Larry stood up after her, a small revolver in his meaty hand, and the three of them climbed out of the boat. They trotted up the walkway to the house.

The front door of the house was unlocked. You don't need much security when you're on an island. The three of them crept into the entryway. They went through the living room and into the solarium. Gene glanced at the wall display of spears and shields. The stainless steel blades looked distinctly different in morning light than in the afternoon light Gene had seen them in before: brighter somehow. In the solarium they saw a marble-topped bistro-type table next to the stonework fountain. The table was set with breakfast things. A confrontation with Cynthia waited around any corner, Gene's senses were heightened, and every detail stood out with unusual clarity.

The fountain in the solarium splashed noisily. There were crumbs on the plates. One plate had a half-eaten croissant on it. There was a large cappuccino cup with dregs in it and a half-empty basket of croissants wrapped in red linen; the linen was open. There was a vase of exotic flowers and, even to Gene, who knew nothing about flower arranging, they were especially dramatic and alluring. There was an open jam jar, and one of the plates had a jam-covered knife lying on it. It was dark red and had seeds in it. Gene thought about Cynthia making the food and arranging the table. What kind of person makes such a fancy breakfast for herself? Cynthia had many layers.

He knew he had been a disappointment to her, and despite everything, it pained him. What was the matter with him? Was he incapable of doing the right thing? Did he know what the right thing was? Even as she was sneaking around in her house, Faith was the kind of employee

Cynthia wanted. Under different circumstances, she would probably be running a department.

Faith swore under her breath at the empty table. She signed for Larry to stay in the solarium. He shrugged, sat down, laid his revolver on the little table, took a croissant from the basket, and began spreading jam on it. Faith gestured for Gene to precede her as they went quietly toward a door off the dining room. Gene's heart pounded furiously as they approached the room. Faith stood back as he opened the door. It turned out to be a guest bedroom with a neatly made, unused bed. Gene thought he would be sick to his stomach, but Faith signed for him to go into the room, and he knew if he were sick she would probably shoot him. Inside the guest bedroom, he had to open the door to a closet, then one to a bathroom.

Each door turned up nothing, and Faith made him continue to the next room and then the next. He could feel his chances of survival narrowing as they reduced the number of rooms. He was shaking by the time they had finished a fruitless circuit of the ground floor. Faith gestured toward the staircase with the gun.

Gene walked slowly around the sequined elephant and started up the stairs. He got down on his hands and knees to control the shaking. He could sense Faith following him in the same manner, although he doubted she was shaking. They crept up without a sound. Before he was halfway up the stairs, Gene could hear a human voice, but it didn't sound like it was having a conversation. By the time they reached the top, however, he could tell what it was. Cynthia's voice, in a meaty, ecstatic groan, was muffled by a door but nevertheless unmistakable.

"Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh. Um-um-um."

Faith pushed past him. Apparently he wasn't necessary if Cynthia was off her guard.

Gene got to his feet behind her. Cynthia's throbbing cries went on and on. In his mind's eye, Gene saw Cynthia

in the bedroom, on the bed, with her robe open, masturbating. In spite of his fear and his anxiety, he found himself aroused.

The automatic was elegant and purposeful in Faith's hand. Gene had never stopped to think before about the aesthetics of its design. He imagined someone lovingly sketching it out on paper, trying to add a tiny bit of originality to a design perfected over generations of blowing holes in human beings. The sound suppressor added several inches to its length, and made the gun look even more imposing in Faith's delicate hand than it had in his.

Faith held it extended in front of her when she pushed open the bedroom door, but she never had a chance to fire it. She walked into an upraised spear. One of the assegais from the display downstairs, it entered her abdomen high, just above her stomach, angled upward, and drove into the center of her.

She didn't even have time to cry out before her heart stopped. Just a short gasp, then she dropped the automatic and fell forward on the spear, so that it pushed deeper into her. Cynthia knelt before her, bracing the other end of it against the carpeted floor. The spear apparently encountered some resistance deep inside Faith because her forward movement stopped and for a split second she was balanced against it, propped against her fall. Then she listed heavily to her left and fell to the floor.

Shocked as he was, Gene still bent down, instinctively, to scoop up the automatic. Faith lay on her side, a surprised expression on her dead face and the handle of the short spear protruding from the vicinity of her solar plexus.

Cynthia stood up. She was wearing gray satin pajamas. She looked flushed and excited. She spoke quickly and with an uncharacteristic breathiness.

"I took you off guard with the moaning," she said. "It must have been very convincing. I've had a lot of practice

with Fraser. Where *is* Fraser, Gene? You didn't kill him, did you?"

Gene didn't know how he felt about this situation. He had watched Faith die, and even though he was afraid of her, there was a part of him that loved her. But he sensed he was in a life-threatening situation and that leakage would be the worst emotion he could have right now. He looked down at the automatic in his hand. He pointed it at Cynthia.

"I've got a gun pointed at you, Cynthia," he said.

"You won't use it, though," said Cynthia. "You're not capable of doing what you need to do. Answer my question. Where's Fraser?"

"I don't know," said Gene. "He drove away."

"Where's the other one who came in with you?" she said. "There were three of you, weren't there? God, I feel so. . . Where's the other one?"

With her foot, she pushed Faith over on her back, as if she were turning over a large piece of driftwood on the beach. She bent over the spear handle, took it in both hands, and pulled it out of the body. It made a strange sucking sound when it came out. Gene couldn't look at Faith.

"Who was this, Gene?"

Gene wanted to turn away, but he didn't dare while Cynthia was holding a spear.

"Gene, I asked you a question," said Cynthia.

"She was Roger Yamada's daughter," said Gene. "Her name was Faith."

"Roger's daughter?" said Cynthia. "You don't say! God, that's amazing." She looked down at Faith. "I'm sorry," she said. She looked back at Gene. "I was wondering whatever happened to her. Roger abandoned her shortly after she was born. The man had no sense of family."

Cynthia was wide-eyed, and she spoke rapidly. Her nostrils flared and and her eyebrows worked up and down. Gene realized she was caught up in events, and it seemed to him that she had lost some of her managerial perspective.

She turned the spear toward him. The blood ran down off the blade, onto the handle and her hands. As it thinned out on the stainless steel blade, it stopped looking like blood and looked more like food coloring or a trendy color of nail polish. Gene backed away.

“Hold still, Gene,” said Cynthia. “This will just take a moment.”

Gene backed out of the room, watching her carefully. A door slammed somewhere.

She came on steadily, not bothering to move quickly, as if she expected him to settle down, behave himself, and be skewered.

“Where’s the other one?” said Cynthia.

“Downstairs,” said Gene, “eating a croissant.”

“Is he armed?”

“I think so,” said Gene. “Yes, he is.”

“Are you on good terms with these people, Gene?” said Cynthia. “Can I disarm him by threatening to kill you, or will he just let me do it?”

Gene shrugged and backed up another step. “I’ve got a gun on you, Cynthia.”

“Don’t repeat yourself, Gene,” she said. She continued toward him slowly, and Gene thought she looked excessively menacing.

He turned and ran down the stairs.

“Gene, come back here!” said Cynthia.

On the way downstairs, Gene could see that the solarium was empty and that Larry was nowhere to be seen. Then, through a clerestory window, he saw the little boat moving away from the island with a single figure at the wheel. Cynthia called after him.

“Gene, your friend’s taken the launch. You might as well stand still for this. You can’t prevent it.”

At the bottom of the stairs he nearly ran into the sequined elephant. He went around it and leaned against its overdressed forehead with the pistol in his hand. He looked

back up the stairs. He didn't know what to do. Abort, Retry or Ignore?

Cynthia was standing at the top of the stairs with the assegai. "This isn't so bad," she said. "Downstairs, you'll be easier to take outside."

He decided to it was time to Retry. He pulled the slide back from the barrel of the automatic, propped his elbows on the elephant's head, and aimed the automatic with both hands. He knew he could make a center-shot on her from here.

"Put it down, Gene," she said. "You're not going to use it. You're incapable of shooting anybody."

Gene surprised himself by arguing with her. "Then why did you tell me to kill Larry?" he said.

Cynthia laughed. "I wanted to see what would happen," she said. "You see, the other thing about you is that you respect authority. You're the kind of subordinate a manager loves to have. You do anything you're told to do. Why do you think you've been allowed to stay alive all these years, even though you never had the guts to perform a termination?"

Gene didn't know.

"You aren't a threat," said Cynthia. "All of your managers have loved you."

Gene realized with a spasm of chagrin how important that was to him.

"Just wait there," said Cynthia. "I'm coming down now."

As Cynthia took her first step, Gene aimed the automatic carefully, lining her up in its sights. He squeezed the trigger. The hammer fell against the firing chamber. The gun clicked. It wasn't loaded.

EIGHTEEN

Every year, there are up-and-coming corporations that fulfill their goals and qualify for the Fortune 500. But a place must be made for each one that gets on the list, and not all companies that achieve membership can stay there. Some stand still and are eclipsed by the success of those around them. Some slide backward a little and fall off the list. Some disappear.

A corporation, like a human being or a plague, has a life cycle. It is born, it grows, it dies. Along the way, it develops a personality, a sense of purpose, a value system. It creates the people who work for it even as it is created by them. And it develops a consciousness distinct from theirs. Its character can be strong or weak, wholesome or wicked, juvenile or responsible.

Can the people in the corporation change or shape its development? Even if they could, most of them wouldn't try. They are preoccupied with their own development.

Yamada waited for the three employees to come into his office. Tracy entered the shadows and sat to the left of Yamada's desk. Then Alex and Phil followed. Alex took the center chair, and silent Phil, to whom the other two always deferred, seated himself in the ancient swivel chair.

"What's up, Roger?" Alex said a little too heartily.

"Gee it's dark in here," said Tracy.

Yamada glanced down at the pad of paper on his desk, took a deep breath, and began enumerating his rehearsed points. He briefly described the company's financial difficulties, the payroll situation, and the excellent references he intended to provide them. When he completed the first

three points, he hesitated a moment. Then he stated the fourth.

This time the words recaptured their meaning, emerging from him with the clarity and crispness of a gunshot.

"All of you are excessed," he said.

He looked up from the desk and looked at each of them, or at least looked into the darkness where each of them was sitting.

The others sat quietly in the darkness. No movement, no reply. Phil shifted himself in the chair, which squeaked. Yamada turned toward the squeak, but nothing else came from that direction.

"Roger?" Tracy's voice said at last.

Yamada turned toward her voice. "Yes?"

"What does excessed mean?"

Yamada swallowed drily, then cleared his throat.

"We've eliminated your jobs," he said hoarsely.

The darkened room was silent.

"You mean we've lost our jobs?" she said.

Yamada nodded his head.

"Can we go now?" said Alex's voice.

The question took Yamada by surprise. He blinked several times and began to jog a small pile of envelopes on the desk. "Let me give you your final checks first."

"Hey, all right!" said Alex.

Yamada handed Alex his envelope, then watched him do a little dance when he got into the hallway. He realized Alex had not expected to be paid and was grateful for the money.

Phil rose to leave.

"Phil?" said Yamada.

The young man turned toward him.

"Let me give you your check," he said and handed the envelope to him.

Phil didn't even look at the envelope as he took it, and he didn't say anything. He just scuffed off in the direction of

the computer room. None of this was happening the way Yamada had expected.

He turned in Tracy's direction, where there was neither movement nor sound. Yamada sat quietly and waited for it to be over.

"You can't do this," Tracy said at last. "You're not our boss. Ira is our boss."

Yamada shrugged helplessly. It had not occurred to him that any of the employees would actually resist. He realized how little he knew about people. "Ira knows all about this," he said lamely. "This is the only way we can keep the company going. I wish we could do it some other way."

"Ira didn't have the guts to tell us, did he?"

"It's not that," said Yamada. "It was my decision."

Tracy stood up, reached over Yamada's desk, and grabbed the last envelope before he could hand it to her. She started to leave, then turned in the doorway, lit from the corridor. Her normally pretty face was twisted with hostility.

"I'm going to talk with Ira," she said. "I don't blame you, Roger. You're just Ira's errand boy."

Perhaps there was something else she might have said that would have hurt Yamada more, but it is doubtful. When she was gone, Yamada wanted to sit in the darkness and let the discomfort build his character, but he couldn't. He felt sick.

He got up from his desk and walked down the corridor and out the office door as quickly as he could. Fortunately, the men's room was just a few yards from their suite. Unfortunately, there was somebody in there, and Yamada didn't have it to himself. One of Madam Flora's patrons—a man in a lime-colored leisure suit and a badly-trimmed moustache—was using the urinal in preparation for his spiritual advice.

Yamada burst into the room, went directly to one of the stalls behind the man, and began retching loudly into the toilet. The man in the leisure suit did not take Yamada's

appearance as a good sign. He finished hurriedly and left without washing his hands.

Yamada leaned against the enameled steel wall of the partition for what seemed to him a week, until his stomach settled. He limped to the sink, turned on the water, and splashed his face.

Ira Growth walked in. "Jesus, Roger, are you all right?" he said. His voice could be heard over the running water; it reverberated through the small room like a car bomb.

Yamada looked up with water dripping from his face. "Fine."

"My God," shouted Growth. "I don't know what you said to Tracy, but she was on me like a banshee."

Yamada bent down and splashed more water on his face, then turned the faucet off. "I told her it was my decision."

"Then I don't know why she hit me," said Growth.

"Hit you?"

"Yeah." Growth rubbed the side of his face. "Never saw anything like it. I guess we're lucky this happened. The woman has no self-control. What if she'd done that to a customer?"

Yamada wondered how he could be responsible for so much pain. "That was the hardest thing I ever did in my life," he said.

Growth, who was usually quite immune to other people's pain, softened at the disturbed look in Yamada's eyes. "You won't have to do it again," he said quietly.

"You mean because we won't ever have employees again?"

"This can't last more than a couple of quarters," said Growth. "And when we start adding people to the operation again, it will be permanent. We can even have a policy of lifetime employment, if you want."

"Maybe that's worth looking into," said Yamada.

NINETEEN

Gene did not remain unchanged by the experience out on Cynthia's island. It seemed to take every bit of strength he had to decide to shoot Cynthia, and when the gun didn't fire it seemed like just another commentary on the futility of trying to survive, not to mention get ahead. He thought wryly that it was a good thing Faith had not taken over; she hadn't even checked the automatic to see if it was loaded. Very poor follow-up. In her own way, she was probably as bad a manager as Roger.

Getting away from Cynthia was actually fairly easy. She didn't have a throwing spear, after all, and she seemed unwilling to exert herself to the extent of running to catch him. Why should she? Even if Gene did get back to the mainland, she knew she had only to make a phone call to her people to round him up. She didn't know yet that her staff assistants, Justin and Terry, were gone.

Gene dashed out of the house without any clear idea what he was going to do. When he saw the little dinghy still tied up at the dock, he decided to row himself out into the island's harbor while he assessed the situation.

It didn't take much assessing.

He rested on the oars about fifty yards from shore while Cynthia stood on the dock in her gray silk pajamas, clutching her assegai and glaring at him. He wondered that she could stand the cold. He, at least, was wearing a knit cap and a wheat-colored sweater in addition to a sweat suit. He knew he couldn't last a day out there, however, so he finally decided to row across to the mainland.

He put his back into it and rowed himself out beyond the harbor into a choppy sea. When he turned around, he could see the mainland, so at least there wasn't much chance of getting lost. He rowed for what he judged to be about half an hour. Then he rested on the oars while the boat rolled in the swells, one or two of which banged the boat so angrily he thought at first it might be one of those big man-eating sharks. He started rowing again.

It was inhumanly cold out on the open water. The wind seemed to take the tops right off the waves and spray them all over him. His hands got the worst of it. They turned deep red and they hurt like they were being squeezed in a vise. Eventually, however, they stopped hurting and began to feel less like hands than like hooks on the ends of his arms. The rest of his body preserved its temperature from the exercise. He lost count of the number of times he had rested, and he had no idea what time it was when the boat was near enough to the shore for him to contemplate the possibility of survival.

The current had taken him south somewhat to a small town with a harbor at the mouth of a river. The shore was rocky, as it is everywhere in that section of the coast, but the water in the harbor was relatively smooth, and he was able to land the dinghy at a public boat ramp, deserted at the mid-morning hour. He dragged it as far up on shore as his aching muscles allowed, then sat down on a rock to catch his breath. He sat in the sun with his hands in his armpits until they started hurting again, then he set out to find a road.

It was about a four-hour drive home, but the trip took Gene eight hours because he was hitchhiking. He completed the trip in six installments. Nobody except locals seemed inclined to pick him up, and they were never going very far.

It was dark again by the time he got home. He was a tired, hungry, aching, unshaven nub of a man when he walked up to his door.

While he was feeding the kitten, it occurred to him that he should guard against attempts on his life. Cynthia, he knew, tended to put her plans in motion quickly. He assumed someone would come for him within the next few hours, as soon as her intelligence sources reported him back home. He pulled a comfortable chair over to a window, put a small table with a telephone next to it, and sat down. He watched the shadows at the edges of the light cast by the street lamp in front of his house. The kitten, having finished its dinner, came over and batted at his shoelaces. He smiled and thought what a nice domestic scene he made, sitting in his armchair with a cat batting at his shoelaces.

When he looked down at the kitten, threatening little creatures began to emerge from the shadows outside, but when he looked out the window again, they were gone. He wondered if Cynthia had a troop of malevolent dwarfs working for her. It didn't matter. He was a good shot and fully capable of hitting a dwarf when one got in range. He looked down at the automatic in his hand and realized there were no bullets left. He had forgotten again.

He pressed the release on the pistol so that the magazine dropped out of the handle and into his lap. To his astonishment, it was filled with ammunition, slender bullets with sharp, stainless-steel tips, like little assegais, each one tipped in blood. That was when he realized he was dreaming, a diagnosis that was confirmed by Faith's appearance in front of him. He hadn't seen her walk in. He simply looked up and there she was. She stood in the center of the living room in front of him, even though he distinctly remembered arranging the chair so he would be looking out the window. She had changed from her sweat suit to one of her Brooks Brothers, but her hair didn't stick out all over. It lay down smoothly, as it did in the photo in her bedroom. In fact, she had it tied with a ribbon.

"I must be dreaming," he said.

"That doesn't make it any less real," said Faith.

And he knew she was right.

“What are you going to do when Cynthia’s dwarfs arrive to kill you?” she said.

“I guess I’ll kill them first,” he said.

“Like you killed Cynthia?”

“I pulled the trigger, didn’t I?” said Gene.

“When you walked away from her, she was still alive,” said Faith.

“I made the decision, and I pulled the trigger,” said Gene. “It didn’t matter what happened after that. The rest is just anticlimax. I found myself out there. I learned who I am. I owe it to you, Faith. You showed me that I’m capable of doing what has to be done.”

“I suppose you want me to tell you that you’ve done the right thing,” said Faith.

“What’s right got to do with it?” said Gene.

“You’re a fool, Gene.”

“Tomorrow,” said Gene, “I’m going to find out what business the company is in. I’m the manager in charge. I should know these things.”

“It’s too late for that, Gene,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re way behind on your reading list.”

“I don’t need to read any more books,” said Gene.

“She’ll come back now because I’ve proved myself. When I was pushed to the wall, I did what I had to do. I can do it again if I need to.”

“She’s not coming back, Gene.”

“Of course she is,” said Gene, “I’ll have to take care of the dwarfs first, but she’ll come back.”

“You’re so obtuse,” said Faith. “When you succeed, you think you’ve failed. When you fail, you’re proud of yourself. It never had anything to do with your job. She left you because she couldn’t touch you. She even said it. You had a personal crisis, and you never even let her know what was happening inside you.”

"I couldn't take the chance," said Gene.

"Which should be your epitaph," said Faith. "I've got to go now. Your phone is ringing."

She was right. The telephone on the table beside him was ringing, and Gene slowly came back to consciousness. He had one foot in the dream when he picked up the receiver. The movement woke the kitten in his lap. It yawned and stretched as he spoke into the phone.

"Hello?"

There was a hesitation at the other end before a man's voice spoke.

"I'm sorry," said the voice, "I must have the wrong number."

"Wait," said Gene, hardly conscious of what he was saying. "Is this Franco?"

There was a pause at the other end. Then the man spoke again. "How do you know my name? Are you in my house?"

"No, not at all," said Gene. "I think my number is similar to yours, because a lot of people call up here looking for you. How are you? I've been worried about you. Did you get your bodyguard? Are your legs OK?"

There was another pause.

"Don't you know better than to get involved in other people's business, buddy?"

Gene did know better, but he didn't answer; he just hung up.

He pushed the kitten gently from his lap. He yawned and stretched and stood up unsteadily. Then he went into the garage, where he dug around in the trash can until he found the thousand-page novel about a man lying in bed.

If you would like to know more about Floyd Kemske's
other novels and Catbird Press's other books,
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