

Success by
Hugh McGovern

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Second Draft

Part I - Trionics

Chapter 1 – Opens with Nicholas at home before work

Nicholas Martin, Fulbright scholar, graduate cum laude University of Chicago and, top producer, Stephen's & Co was close to his goal.

He woke before the alarm, deep in his queen-sized bed. He rubbed sleep-encrusted eyes, before tossing back the covers. The carpet was warm to his naked feet as he strode across the room. He glanced quickly through the balcony doors. A winter's sun was rising from the lake.

He sat at his computer, massaging his nose, snorting loudly to clear phlegm from his throat. Trionics was unchanged. The market hadn't opened yet. He struck a key. A graph of the week's closing prices flashed up on the screen: a steady upward curve. Satisfied he got up and walked to the bathroom.

The tiles were cold to the touch. He rested two suntanned hands on the washstand staring into the mirror. He brushed back short black hair with his hand. An irrepressible smile spread across his face. Another month, two at most and that would be it. Nothing could stop him now.

He quickly shaved, and showered, throwing on his favorite suit from the closet. It was Armani; one Sonia had picked out. Soon he would have as many as he wanted.

The street was bleak and windswept when he left the building. He stiffened against the cold. He joined a line of other pedestrians their bodies hunched against the sweeping wind.

He walked the few blocks to the station. It was crowded when he arrived. Commuters converged, forming a line that stretched onto the street. He merged with the crowd, thrusting his fare at the attendant when he passed through the turnstile. He climbed a rusting, metal stairway, dank with litter and leaves. He stood on the platform shielding himself from the wind behind a billboard.

A train screeched into the station in a shower of sparks. He boarded, pushing his way into the car.

He took the elevator to the twentieth floor, when he got into the building.

"Early again. You're the dedicated one."

It was Ryan. He stood outside his office, constrained in his newly pressed shirt. He pushed out his chest making him look bigger. He must have cut himself shaving. There were bloodstains on his collar. He was wearing the same shirt for two days in a row now.

"Not when there's money to be made" he said, throwing his bag on the chair in his office. "How's the syndication?"

"Which one?" said Ryan.

"InterMedia."

"Don't look at me. Warren's still figuring out our participation."

"What's there to figure out? We should take at least two hundred thou.

That shit's going through the roof."

"I told you. That's Warren's call." He shrugged letting his shoulders sag.

"Does he have to sign off on everything?"

His face clouded over. "What are you a genius? Since when did you know everything?"

"What?"

"Warren has a lot of experience. He's been doing this stuff since you were in diapers."

"It's got nothing to do with experience. It's business."

"I know. My hands are tied." He was quiet. "By the way, the old man really liked your speech. He told me to tell you."

"On high-tech stocks? That was nothing."

"I'd take the compliment if I were you. You won't get too many around here."

He turned to walk into his office, placing his hand on the door handle.

"Warren wants to see you."

"What for?"

"Why don't you go ask him?"

He walked down the corridor, passing through thick, mahogany doors. He crossed over the company logo, emblazoned on the carpet. The old man insisted upon it: a predatory eagle, stock certificate grasped in one claw. He walked quickly across the trading floor. It was quiet. Most of the brokers did not arrive for another hour. Peter looked up from his computer and waved as he went by. He passed through administration and the main reception area. The old man's office was empty. He rarely came in before noon. Mostly now he just slept at his desk. He was great in his day.

Warren was on the phone, leaning back in his chair, glassy eyes half-closed, one hand wrapped around his head, a nicotine-stained finger exploring his ear. His large belly was hidden from view tucked under his desk. Thinning hair was greased and combed over his crimson pate. A moment later he hung up.

"Hot shot, what a pleasure. I was just thinking about you. Come in. Have a seat."

He stood in the doorway.

"What's up Warren?"

"You still making your budget."

"That and more. I'm twenty per cent over this month. You know that."

"Did you call Rob Kruger at Goldman?"

"Of course."

"What did he say?"

"He'll take ten thousand for now, at twenty and a quarter."

"Good."

"We should do at least two hundred thou of InterMedia. It's rock solid."

"Say's who? You?"

"You know I'm right."

He coloured rapidly. "Don't tell me what I know and don't know. I'm the one making the decisions around here. "

"If we don't move fast, we'll lose the deal."

"Who do you think you are? You come in here with your degrees and your big attitude. You don't know shit. It's all theory and formulas to you, Mr. MBA. I've got twenty years experience in this business. Twenty years of sweat. When you've got that behind you, then we'll talk about what you know."

"Can I go now?"

"No, you can't." He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbow on the desk. He jabbed the air threatening with a pudgy index figure. "You're up to something, hot-shot. I can smell it. I've been around long enough to know."

What ever it is, it had better be legal and above board, because if I find out it's not, I'll come down on you hard, so hard that your next job will be flipping burgers in McDonalds." He sat there for a moment, glowering. "Now you can go."

Nicholas turned and walked back down the corridor, without saying a word.

He busied himself with his work as soon as he got into his office. There was a pile of paper on his desk. Ryan must have dumped it there, before he got in. It was all trivial, administrative crap. Now he had to keep tabs on the new brokers. He glanced out the window. The sun had burnt off the fog. He could just see the Sears Tower behind the building opposite.

It took him several hours to clear his desk.

After a while the phone rang. It was Sonia. She sounded husky. It was her morning voice.

"Did you just get in?" he said.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You sound it."

She laughed.

"Did you check it yet today?" she said.

"I just looked at it a few minutes ago."

"What's it doing?"

He leaned forward in his chair, keying the code word into his computer.

"It's up a half already."

"We should cash in soon. I've got a bad feeling about it."

"You've got to give it more time, Sonia."

"But we've already made a killing."

"It's not enough. We can make more."

"As soon as it starts falling, sell out."

"I know. I know. You don't have to tell me." He pulled up another stock, making sure Trionics was no longer on the screen. "Warren's getting suspicious."

"What could he know?"

"He doesn't know anything. He's just fishing for information."

"What's there to worry about? It's all legal, right?"

"Of course it is."

"I have to go. I'll call you later." She hung up.

After the market closed, he took the elevator down to the lobby, going into the restaurant near the entrance. It was an antiseptic and plastic place. Bare fluorescent tubes cast a white glare down on a windowless dining area. He

loaded up a tray with food and found a table at the back. He saw Peter coming in his direction. He ducked his head down. It was too late.

"Don't mind if I join you, Nick?"

"Help yourself."

He sat in the seat opposite. He was a florid, plumpish man in his early thirties, his face split by a permanent, idiotic grin.

"So what's the latest?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. What are the hot tips, the hot stocks? What are you getting in on these days?" A piece of food flew out of his mouth and landed on the table. He carried on eating unaware.

"You got to figure that out for yourself."

"Come on, Nick. Give me a tip. My sales are really down this month."

"Have you tried high-tech stocks?"

"Which ones?" He leaned forward, eagerly.

"That would be telling."

"Oh, come on."

"I could tell you about a few stocks that would make you a lot of money, but..."

"But what?" Red-rimmed eyes widened. His jaw hung down. There was a morsel of food stuck between his teeth.

"How can I put it?"

"What? What?"

"I could...but I'm not going to."

"You know sometimes you can be a real ass-hole."

"That's right."

Peter took a huge bite from his sandwich, talking with his mouth open.

"You still seeing that girl?"

"Which one?"

"Don't give me that. The one you talk to on the phone all the time.

Sonia, right?"

"Yeah, I'm still seeing her."

"She's pretty."

"Well, that's no surprise." He stood up, picking up his tray.

"Ass-hole" said Peter.

He smiled and walked over to the trash dumping his tray. "See you, later" he said, walking out into the lobby.

The day went in quickly after that. There were the details of a new syndication to be arranged. There were calls to be made to the syndication

partners. There were some new proposals from companies going to the market for the first time.

At seven the phone rang. "Are you ready, yet?" said Sonia.

"Almost. When are you leaving?"

"Next ten minutes or so."

"Okay, come round front. I'll be waiting outside." He hung up. He took another look at Trionics. Fifty cents up today alone. Three dollars on the week. Another few days were all he needed.

He stood, buttoned up, on La Salle Street, waiting until he saw her. She pulled up at the sidewalk abruptly with a screech of brakes.

"Francesco's?" she said, when he got in the car.

"Sounds good."

"Well." She tied back long blonde hair, while they were stopped at the traffic lights. One perfectly varnished nail scratched her large nose.

"Well, what?"

"How is it?"

"Will you relax?"

"What are you waiting for?" She crossed Michigan Avenue, accelerating on amber, scattering pedestrians with the liberal use of her horn.

"You're going to get a ticket," he said, putting on his seat belt. "We can make more, that's why. Do you know how much we make every day it rises?"

"I know how much we stand to lose. It's a crapshoot. You've said so yourself."

"I know I said that."

"I'm just worried, that's all."

"Will you just leave it with me. I know what I'm doing."

"I wouldn't mind, but for my mother. Did you have to get her involved?"

"It's a good deal. That's why I got her involved."

"I know, but if anything happens. She thinks the world of you. You know that."

"Sonia, listen to me. Nothing is going to happen. In a few more weeks we'll cash in. We'll be set. You can quit that bogus job. We can get the house we looked at. Life's going to get a whole lot better."

She shut up after that but still was not satisfied. She parked the car, slamming the door loudly, when she got out. He ignored the gesture avoiding her pointed look.

Francesco was writing in the ledger when they arrived. He looked up and smiled.

"Mr. Martin, good to see you." He brushed back a large mop of hair, straightening a stained waistcoat. "Ah, bellissimo. A pleasure, yet again."

Sonia laughed. "I bet you say that to everyone."

"Only you. Only you bellissimo."

They followed him through an archway, into a darkened room. He directed them to a secluded booth. A waiter came and lit the candle on the table, handing them two menus.

She was quiet, staring into her menu.

"What is it?" he said, after a moment.

"It's this whole thing," she said, looking up. "I just see a part of you that scares me. It's always been there, but never this strong."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, a compulsion, a demon, something driving you."

He said nothing.

"Are you ready to order yet?" The waiter had come back. He stood notepad in hand, trembling with eagerness and zeal.

"Not yet, thanks," said Nicholas. He left, leaving a carafe of wine and a strong smell of cologne behind him.

"You're all I want," he said, quietly.

"Am I, though?" Her blue eyes glimmered in the candlelight. "You say that, but I wonder if you'll ever be satisfied? Why do we need this? We both make good money. We're doing just fine, as we are."

"It's not enough."

"How much is enough?"

"I can't piss my life away on a miserable hundred grand a year. You know that. If I take a risk now, I can eliminate a life-time of work."

He poured himself a glass of wine, and sat back, resting one arm on the back of his seat. He picked up his glass, savoring the acidic liquid, letting it linger on his palate.

"It's not just money is it?"

"The money is incidental. This is about me Sonia. It's just something I have to do."

"It's a lot more than money."

"At least it will be over soon," he said, after drinking from his glass.

"I know."

"After this, let's go on a long vacation."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Doesn't matter what it costs. You name it. Somewhere warm. Far away from all this."

"I'm sorry. You know how I am," she said. She took his hand and squeezed it.

"That's all right."

"Let's not talk about it anymore, tonight."

"Okay."

They ordered, sitting back to watch the couples at other tables. She cut her pasta with into small, precise pieces, eating each, a spoonful at a time. He was hungry, concentrating on his plate, barely looking up, until everything was gone. He was done, long before she was finished. He leaned back, suppressing a belch, and poured himself another glass. The waiter came and cleared the dishes away.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm tired," she said. "Let's go soon."

He nodded, calling the waiter back for the check. They both got up. Francesco was gone when they passed through the lobby. It was a short, bitter walk from the restaurant to the car. The temperature had dropped, and they walked quickly now to avoid the cold. The car was cold. He buried his hands deeply in the pockets of his coat, when he sat in the passenger seat. They shivered while they waited for the heater to kick in.

"Do you want me to come over?" she said.

"Sure."

"You're not to tired."

"No. I'm okay."

Traffic was light on the highway. They merged with the other cars, joining a furious millrace of humanity. He could see the lake, vast and grey its shoreline in arctic freeze. Great ice-rafts were pushed upward, compelled by pressure from within.

The marina was deserted; its boats stowed until the thaw. No pedestrians braved its promenades. Lights sparkled on the pier, an illusory sign of life. The Ferris wheel was motionless, waiting for summer and tourists to bring back to life.

He looked into the other cars. The different faces sped by. Accountants, security guards, stockbrokers, students, doctors, lawyers, pizza drivers, cops, mothers and children, teenagers in daddy's car, seniors in sedans.

She rested a hand on his leg. It was warm to his touch. She moved the car over to the exit lane, slowing as they came off the ramp. She came to a complete stop at an intersection. It was a couple of blocks to his apartment building. She parked in the underground lot, and they took the elevator to his floor.

He threw his bag on the chair, after he unlocked the door. "Do you want something to drink?" he said, opening the fridge door.

"What is there?"

"Beer, wine, orange juice, milk."

"Orange juice."

He closed the fridge door, and poured her a glass. Next he went into the bedroom, hanging up his jacket in the closet. He walked over to the balcony door, closing the blinds. He sat on the bed, taking off his shoes.

"This room smells," said Sonia. She came and sat on the bed. "Do you ever open the window?"

"I don't think of it in the morning."

"Well, it's too cold to open it now." She put her glass on the floor, and lay back on the bed, stretching out. She kicked off her shoes.

He got up and walked over to the closet. He took off his trousers and shirt, hanging them with care beside the jacket. He walked back to the bed and sat in his vest and shorts.

She sat up and picked her glass off the floor.

"You can take them off, too, if you want" she said, smiling.

Chapter 2 – At work Stephens & Co

"This is he." He cradled the phone in his shoulder. It was Tuesday morning. He swiveled in his chair, facing out the window. A team of window-cleaners was hard at work on the building across the street. They hung, suspended from ropes, like so many rock climbers, water dripping from their brushes, down unto the street below. He flicked a speck of dust off his jacket.

"Jeff Cooper, from Roberts of San Francisco, how are you?"

"Fine."

One of the window-cleaners dropped a cloth. He watched it fall, until it passed out of view.

"You are the broker for his account. He has fifty thousand shares of Trionics in a personal account with us."

"So?"

"Well, I'm in a position to offer your client another fifty thousand at a discount."

"How much?"

"Fifteen and a quarter."

He sat up in his chair, banging his knee against the desk. "Fifteen and a quarter." He did some quick calculations on his notepad.

"I think you know what a deal this is. We had an option. As a service to our best customers we're giving them the option to get in on it."

"I'll have to think about it. I need time to organize the financing."

"Understood. I can hold it for an hour."

"Do that. I'll call you back." He hung up, staring out the window for a second. Next he picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Miss Havenstock, please."

"I'm afraid she's out of the office right now," said a voice on the other end of the line.

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"She's with a client in Naperville. It could be a five or six before she gets back."

"Just tell her Nicholas called." He hung up, turning to his Rolodex to look up a number. He got out of his chair and closed the door with his foot. He dialed a number in Manhattan, walking with the phone, back and forth.

"Max, it's Nick, over at Stephen's." The window-cleaners had disappeared from view. Only their ropes were visible now. "How you doing, today?"

"Good. What can I do for you?"

"I'm going to need some credit." He sat in his chair, drawing a square on his notepad. He filled it in with ink.

"What do you need?"

"What kind of rate can you do for five hundred thousand?"

"For how long?"

"Make it a week."

"You want the company rate, right?"

"Can we skip the red tape? I need it fast."

"What do you mean? We've got our procedures."

"I know. Can you do it as a favor?"

"I can't do it, Nick. I need your company stamp on that. The boss would have my ass for that."

"All-right. I'll stamp it and get it over to you. What kind of rate?"

"Three day inter-bank. Let me take a look." He heard the click of a keyboard in the background. "Right now it's six and three quarters. Don't you need to clear it with Warren?"

"No, I got it."

"Okay. Send me the form." He hung up the phone.

He pulled out a requisition form from a drawer in his desk, covering it with some papers.

"What do you know about Trionics?" Warren stood in the doorway of his office, his stomach bulging, scratching his crotch. He did it secretly through the pocket of his trousers.

It was after lunchtime.

"Not much."

"Have you seen this?" He threw a copy of the Journal on his desk. "It's going through the roof. How come you're not all over this?"

He glanced at the article, scanning the headline and first paragraph. "I'd say it's going to bomb. According to this, the fundamentals are bad. Their product is not even Windows compatible."

"That's not what the market thinks, hotshot. Look at this." He walked over to the computer and keyed in the cusip. "Look at that growth rate" he pointed at the screen. "That's consistent for a month now. Have you bought any of this?"

"Not yet."

"What? Nothing? You have none of this in your portfolios?"

"I don't see the appeal." Now that he was standing beside his chair he could smell the combination of body odour and cigarette smoke. "It's like Intertel, last year. That bombed after two weeks."

"It's a high-risk stock, hotshot. Spread it across all the funds. What are you thinking? Get two hundred thousand and get me the company report. I want to know what's going on with this. Who brought them to the market?"

"I don't know."

"Well, find out. I can't believe you missed out on this. Do I have to do everything myself?"

As soon as Warren left, he pulled out the loan form, quickly filling out the pertinent details. He stamped it with the seal, taking an old form from the drawer. When it was put it through the fax there would be no way of telling. He picked up both sheets and walked out into the corridor. He walked to the end of the corridor. A doorway led into a small room, which contained a copier and fax machine. He quickly made the copies. Warren's signature came out fine. He checked to make sure he had both originals and put the form in the fax machine.

"What are you doing? Playing with the fax all day" Ryan stood behind him, waiting to use the machine.

"Just trying to get through some paper work."

"You should come see me if you've any time left over."

"Yeah. Yeah."

The fax beeped and clicked. "What did you do? Dial the wrong number?" Ryan said. "Try it again."

He hit the sequence of buttons on the pad; his collar grew damp with perspiration. The fax went through. "Thanks" he said, grabbing the sheet.

He sat down in his chair when he got back to his office, his heart rate slowing gradually. A few minutes later he picked up the phone.

"Jeff Cooper" said the voice on the other end.

"Jeff, Nicholas Martin. The financing is on its way, from First Bank. You should see a credit transfer any minute, now."

"Hold on, let me check." He put down the phone. A moment later he picked up.

"Yep. I got it. I'll go ahead and put the shares in the account. Thanks for doing business with us."

Some time later the phone rang. It was Sonia. She was on her car-phone.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"I got a message you called."

"I know. I was seeing how your day went."

"But you never call in the morning."

"I know but..."

"Is something wrong?"

"No."

"You're acting weird."

"Nothing's wrong. How's your day?"

"Fine. The usual. " The phone clicked. "Oh shit, I've got a call. I'll call you back."

"Okay." He hung up.

The afternoon went by. Later he glanced through the window. Lights were beginning to wink on in two's and three's across the street. A dusky grey was settling on the city like the film of dirt that coated his window. He got up from his desk, and walked across the trading floor. Peter was not at his desk; his computer was still on. A few brokers still remained after the day's trading. The old man's door was shut when he passed. He stood in the doorway of Warren's office. Peter was sitting in the chair.

"Hot shot. You bring good tidings, I hope," said Warren. He put down a plastic fork he had been holding in his hand. The room smelled of food.

"I got the two hundred thou, but it's at seventeen and a half."

"That's the best you could do?"

"Afraid so."

Warren turned to his computer and pulled it up on the screen. "It cranked today. Wow, look it's up more than a dollar. Who gave you that rate?"

"Rob, at Goldman."

"Good old Rob. Okay, let's wait and see before we buy any more, shall we? The next few days will be key. Did you get the report?"

He handed him the document.

Warren scanned through it. "Peter here, showed more foresight than you, hotshot. He bought in at fifteen."

"How much did you buy?" said Nicholas.

"Only twenty thousand. I should have got more. I just didn't realize, Warren. Let me try. Maybe I can do better than seventeen and half."

"I doubt it," said Warren. "That's a pretty good rate. No, we'll wait for now."

"Let me try" said Peter. "I know I can do better. Just give me a chance."

"Shut up" he said, taking a mouthful of his Chinese dinner, that lay on the desk. "Get out both of you. You're upsetting my digestion."

Nicholas turned and walked away, Peter hard on his heels. He passed the old man's office. The door was open. The old man stood there, leaning on his cane, a genial look on his face.

"Nick, my boy, come in here a second."

He went into the old man's office. Peter scurried past, back to the safety of his desk.

"Shut the door and take a seat" said the old man, going back to his chair.

"How are things?"

"Oh, fine. Can't complain." He sat down.

"That was some speech you gave on high-tech stocks. I told Ryan to tell you."

"It was nothing."

"Come now, don't be modest. I know what it takes to do that. How's everything else? How are you and Warren working together, since your promotion?"

"He can be a little difficult, sometimes."

"He's rough and ready. Don't pay any attention to that."

"I don't."

"I bet you don't," said the old man, laughing. "Most people in this business are ass-kissers. They say what the boss wants to hear. Do everything by the book. That's not the way to get ahead."

"I know it."

"You scare the shit out of Warren. That's why he's on your case all the time. It's a form of flattery."

"I suppose."

"Let me tell you something. I was once eager and aggressive. Like you I was full of hope and arrogance. I thought I knew it all, that I was unstoppable. Now I realize that I was one of two types of ambitious people. There is the type that knows when to stop, knows where to draw the line, and say enough, and be content. His success doesn't destroy him. But there's also the type that doesn't know how. They have a self-destruct mechanism built in."

"What happens to the second type?"

"They always fuck up. For them there is no peace or inner harmony. They never reach a point where they're satisfied."

Warren was standing in the doorway, waiting for an opportunity to speak.

"Come in, Warren. I was just chatting to young Nick, here."

"Is this a good time?" said Warren.

"Of course. Good as any. You'll have to excuse us, Nick."

He got up and left, closing the door behind him. He walked across the trading floor. Peter was still at his desk, staring into his computer screen.

"Getting late for you, isn't it?" he said, looking at his watch.

"I fucked up," said Peter. "I should have bought more of that stock."

"It happens."

"Warren's pissed."

"He's always pissed."

"I know but."

"Go home, Peter. Go home and forget about it. Tomorrow there will be something else."

"You're right, I guess."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay."

He walked back to his office, gathering up some papers from his desk, which he placed in his briefcase. He made sure Max.'s fax was in there too. He turned off his computer and killed the light. Then he took the elevator down to the lobby, waving at the guard as he passed by. It was freezing all right. He walked quickly to beat the cold. La Salle Street was icy and bright. There were few people at the station. Rush hour was long past. He sat near the heater when he boarded. A couple of youths were the only other passengers in the carriage. He looked down avoiding their hostile gaze.

He got out at his stop walking down the stairway. A sleety rain had begun to fall, and he cursed his lack of an umbrella.

The phone was ringing when he opened the door of his apartment.

"Sorry, I tried calling you at work but you had already left."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at home, now."

He sat down on the couch, not bothering to take off his coat. "There's something I didn't tell you, today."

"What?"

"I meant to tell you earlier, when you called."

"Why didn't you?"

"It didn't seem like the right time."

"Why not?"

"Well, I was at work, I didn't feel comfortable talking about it."

"And it's the right time now?"

"I want to tell you, that's all."

"That's nice of you."

"Don't get smart."

"Do you think I couldn't tell? I knew you were hiding something. What is it?"

"I bought some more Trionics."

"So."

"I did it with company money."

"What does that mean?"

"It means in the event of it fucking up, not only would I lose my job, I could also be prosecuted."

"You're kidding?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why did you do it?"

"It's a calculated risk. If I cash out in the next week or so, we are so set, I can't tell you. Sonia we're going to make so much money. I'll simply repay the loan and no-one will know any better."

"It's not calculated at all. You didn't think. You just did it. Didn't you?"

"That's not true."

"You just gambled with our future."

"Don't look at it that way. I did it for you, too."

"Don't give me that shit. You did it for me." She mimicked his voice.

"You did it for yourself. It's all you Nicholas."

"No it's not."

"Isn't it? You didn't think to ask my opinion."

"There wasn't time. It was a split second decision. Anyway, I already know what you think."

"That's right. You know what I think. So you know what I think of this."

The phone went dead. He threw down the receiver on the floor, not bothering to hang it up, slumping back into the couch, still wearing his coat.

After a while, he got up and walked into the kitchen, hanging his coat on the coatstand. He poured himself a glass of water from the fridge, and walked back into the living room. He picked up the receiver and placed it on the handset. Next he walked into the bedroom and closed the blinds. He kicked off his shoes. The phone was ringing again. He walked back into the living room and picked it up.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I'm sorry. I meant too."

"Did you?"

"I'm glad you called."

"What are you doing?"

"Going to bed, pretty soon."

"Nick. You know how uneasy this makes me feel." There was a pause. "I was wondering what are the visiting hours are like in prison?" she said.

"You could come every Sunday to see me."

She laughed. "This isn't funny. It's tragic."

"I know. You know what, though?"

"What?"

"I love you."

There was silence again. "I know," she said, after a while. "I think I'm going to go to bed now."

"Okay."

She hung up.

He walked into the bedroom, undressing quickly. He threw his clothes on a chair. He lay on the bed, rolling over on his back. Suddenly, he felt a sharp, piercing pain in his side. He jumped up and pulled back the covers. One of Sonia's earrings was hidden under the sheet. He picked it up and placed it carefully on the nightstand. He lay down again.

Sleep was not long in overtaking him.

Chapter 3 – Breakfast with Ryan

"Try the Denver, it's pretty good." Ryan scooped a piece of an omelette onto his toast, and took a large bite. "Pretty friendly with the old man, lately, aren't you?"

"You could say that."

"I don't know why, but he seems to like you" he said taking another bite.

He sat opposite Ryan, looking out the window. Mels was packed. Mostly it was suits, business types: brokers, would-be brokers, fund-managers, traders and hangers-on. They crowded into the booths, sporting cellular phones and Gucci wristwatches. Their talk was loud and unselfconscious. Words like dividend, profit, quarterly results, hot options and best buys wafted around the room like the aroma of freshly roasted coffee carried by the waitresses, as they scurried up and down the aisles.

He looked out the window. It was sunny outside. It could almost have been summer. The car exhausts gave it away, and the pinched, red faces of the people passing by. Clouds of water vapour vented from the sub-way through grills on the sidewalk.

Inside it was chrome and nylon seats. Shiny white walls were plastered with black and white photos of eager young couples in boat-shaped cars, old

movie stills, and record covers. Ryan put an Elvis song on the nickel junk-box.

The waitress came and refilled his coffee cup.

"Do you have change?" Ryan said.

He dug into his pocket, pulling out a handful of coins.

"Man, they don't make songs like that anymore" he said, when the song came on. "Aren't you hungry?"

"I think I've lost my appetite."

"You got something against food? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"You're pretty quiet, today."

"I've got a lot on my mind."

Ryan picked up a piece of toast, and took a bite. "You know I just don't get it."

"What don't you get?"

"You. That's what."

"What do you mean?"

"Well. You're on board two years. You shoot up the ranks, ahead of twenty other guys. The old man thinks you're the shit. You're pulling in the best sales figures in the company, and you're still not satisfied. I don't get it."

"It's called life, Ryan. People are never happy. Just as soon as they get something, they want something else."

"That sounds like your life. What do you mean, "People are never happy"? That's fucked up."

"Tell me about it."

"You amaze me. Do you know how long it took me to get where I am, today?"

"Ten years."

"That's right. Ten years of work. Hard work, not poncing around some campus reading books and taking four-month vacations. You college kids. You think the world is your oyster." He put down his fork and pushed his plate away, leaving the rest of his breakfast uneaten. "What do you want, anyway? If you don't want this, what do you want?"

"What do I want?" He looked out the window, not focusing on anything. "You're going to wish you never asked me that question. I want everything. I want this whole frigging city to know who I am and respect me. I want the Mayor to shake my hand. I want to have lunch in the White House, have a star with my name on it on Hollywood Boulevard. I want a yacht, a holiday home in the Caymans, an honorary doctorate from Oxford. I want a

million-dollar expense account. I want to buy a pink Cadillac and give it to charity. I want a sauna on my private jet. I want it all."

"You're fucked up."

"You asked." He picked up his mug of coffee and put it to his lips. He put it down a second later. He'd already had enough.

"What's this hot stock Warren's talking about?" said Ryan. He poured sugar liberally into his coffee.

"Trionics."

"What is it?"

"It's a high-tech start-up based out of San Jose. They make hybrid modems."

"And?"

"There's rumours that it's going public. The stock price has tripled, already. It's still growing."

"Buying into that would be key."

"Exactly." He stood up and took his coat from the stand, stowing his gloves in his pockets, until he was outside. Ryan followed, after paying the bill.

They walked down Madison Avenue, back to the office, dodging the early morning traffic to cross La Salle.

Warren was waiting when they got back. They followed him into the main conference room.

It was a showpiece. The old man knew the value of image. Persian rugs, Indian tribal masks, a Picasso original were some of the items which adorned the walls. A huge, mahogany table took up most of the floor space. Windows faced to the east, revealing a panoramic view of the lake. Already some of the brokers were present; the rest were arriving in ones and twos.

Peter arrived, last, breathless and red-faced, carrying a large bundle of papers.

Warren waited a few more minutes for latecomers. "Shut the door, will you Peter. Okay, is everyone here?"

"Ed's out" said one of the brokers. His name was Jerry.

Warren scowled, nodding his head ever so slightly. "Okay before we get down to the routine stuff, there are a couple of things I want to draw your attention too. The first is our new participation, InterMedia. The second is a hot stock, which we're just uncovering. "Nick." Warren sat down.

He stood up and walked around the table to the projector. He switched it on, turning to face the table. "Here's the break out in participation. He pointed to a pie chart projected onto the screen. "We've got roughly twenty percent. It works out to be four hundred thousand shares."

"Can we get more if we need it?" said Brad Levenger. Broad shoulders barely fitted into the specially tailored suit he was wearing. He spent a lot of time in the work out room.

"Warren?" said Nicholas.

"We're working on that." He furrowed his brow. "Just move this lot, for now, and I'll be happy."

"Excuse me. I don't know about Brad here," said Tony Andretti. "Isn't this another multimedia stock? I mean you guys know some of us had problems moving the last one. Didn't we? Come on back me up on this."

"He's right," said Dan Brady. "I had to waive the commission to move my share. Intertel, right?"

"All-right, genie" said Ryan. "We haven't forgotten about Intertel. This is one of those situations where you have to let us do what we do best. You guys concentrate on selling and let us do the analysis."

Nicholas turned to the screen. "Okay, first you all know about our InterMedia syndicate. It's going public today. Sell the client on this stock. We've got two hundred thousand. We'd like to move it all today. I know you guys can do it so get on it. We're splitting it forty/sixty. Brad and his team, we want you guys to move sixty percent. So we all know what we need to do. The other item is Trionics. You've all read today's front-page article. He held up a copy of the

Journal, and read the headline -"Tiny modem maker takes bite out of Wall Street. This is a hot new item. What do we know about this stock? Right now, it's the market's joy. We all know how that can change." He put another slide on the screen. "In the last month it's appreciated more than three hundred percent in value and it's still growing. Get as much as you can. My sense is you won't find much out there. We'll take up to eighteen and a half depending on how it moves today. Ryan?" He sat down.

"I think that about covers everything. Keep trying to move our staples."

"What's the word on Trionics" said one broker.

"Like the man said," said Ryan. "Right now it's good. We'll take what we can get. "

"I need to talk to you" Warren said, after the meeting.

He followed him back to his office. Warren waited until he had walked through the doorway, closing the door behind him.

"We need to know more about Trionics," he said, after he sat behind his desk.

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"I just don't think it merits that much attention."

"Is there any basis to that opinion?"

"Just what I've read."

"Well, it's not enough. I want you to go to San Francisco."

"Why me? Why not Ryan?"

"Ryan's got too much going on for him to take this."

"What can I find out, that we can't learn from here?"

"Get a feel for the place. What's really going on there? Talk to the CEO and the execs. Find out what you can. What's their product like? We may want to buy a lot more of this stock. I want you to develop a relationship with them. There's only so much you can learn from company reports and press releases." He leaned forward. "Confidentially, there's talk of an offering. That might be something we would want to be involved in."

"When am I leaving?"

"You're booked on a flight out, tomorrow morning. Peter's coming with you. I want him involved in this. It will be good for him, and he needs the experience."

"Okay." He got up and walked to the door.

"Call me tomorrow evening" Warren called after him. "I want regular updates."

He dialed Sonia's number when he got back to his office.

"I'm going to have to cancel tomorrow night," he said, when she picked up, at her end.

There was a pause. "Why?"

"Warren wants me to go to San Francisco."

"For how long?"

"Just two days."

"What about tonight?"

"Can't do it. I've got a ton of stuff to get through."

She was silent.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There's nothing I can do about it."

She didn't say anything.

"It will get better."

"That's what you keep saying," she said, after a while. "It's just that right now I don't see it."

"We can ditch this whole lifestyle when we cash in."

"Give me a call when you get to your hotel."

"Okay." He hung up.

He turned around, hearing footsteps approaching. Peter stood in the doorway holding a printout in his hand. "Nick, can I talk to you, for a second?"

"What's up?"

"Something doesn't make sense, maybe you can figure it out."

"What is it?"

"Well, I was trying to balance the overnight figures. Normally I check them once a month. Well, last night I looked at it and they just don't add up."

"Let me take a look."

Peter walked over to his desk and spread the printout out fully.

"How much are we out by?"

"Five hundred thousand, exactly. Isn't that weird? It's normally not an exact figure."

He stared at the page.

"It's probably a typo," he said, after a second's delay. "Someone transposed a few numbers."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. You know what, let me take care of it. I'll put through a correcting entry to balance the accounts."

"You don't mind?"

"No. Not at all. Your password doesn't have the security clearance anyhow."

"Thanks Nick. I really appreciate it."

"No problem."

"I'll leave this with you, then."

"Sure." He folded up the printout.

"Oh by the way, you're coming with me to Frisco. Warren's sending us on a fact-finding mission."

"You kidding? For what?"

"Trionics. To find out more."

"Here's your ticket." He handed him an envelope. "Be at O'Hare, at six thirty tomorrow."

He logged onto the accounting system, after Peter left, making sure to use the manager's password. A few keystrokes brought him to the entry correction screen where he put through a credit to balance the accounts. He logged off as soon as the entry went through.

There were no more interruptions that day. He spent a good part of it preparing for the meeting with the CEO, scanning press releases and old company reports.

About eight he started to get hungry. The office was deserted; even the receptionist had left for the day. He went out to the kitchen area to get some coffee. There were still another few hours of work to do. He walked through the trading area. It was dark. Computer terminals cast a faint, ethereal glow.

The main lights shut off automatically. It was as he walked down the corridor that he saw movement in his office.

A man was sitting in the visitor's chair. He turned his head, hearing footsteps. His face was deeply tanned and balding. Tinted lens disguised a wide expanse of face. A blunt nose was balanced by a precisely trimmed goatee.

"Mr. Martin, I was wondering where you were" he said.

"Who the hell are you?" He stood in the doorway holding his cup of coffee.

"Let's just say I'm a friend."

"A friend? What are you talking about? How did you get in here?"

The stranger smiled and nodded his head, making no attempt to remove his sunglasses. "I regret to say the security in this building is not of a high standard."

"Obviously not." The accent was hard to place. It sounded foreign-educated, Etonian or Oxonian.

"How can I help you, Mr...."

"Rosen. Norman Rosen." He stood up, moving a rotund physique with surprising agility. They shook hands. His handshake was limp and unenthusiastic, his hand clammy. "It's more a question of how I can help you," he said, sitting down again.

"And how might that be?"

He cleared his throat. "An ambitious young man, like you, might be interested in what I have to offer."

"What do you want, Mr. Rosen?" He sat at his desk, putting down the cup.

"In a word: information."

"What kind of information?"

"You are familiar with the Tyler family trust."

"We manage a fund for Mr. Tyler. That is correct."

"Are you also aware that certain personal effects of Mr. Tyler's are stored at this office? Effects of nothing more than sentimental value."

"We have safety deposit boxes for some of our clients. They are held in the Federal Reserve's vault. So."

"I need access to that deposit box." His bald pate glistened with a trace of perspiration.

"Why?"

"You don't need to know why." He checked the irritation in his voice.

"Let's just say I'm willing to pay a substantial sum of money for your co-operation."

"Why would you do that?"

"I have my reasons."

"And why should I help you?"

"You don't strike as a man content with his station in life."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, you would seize an opportunity to improve it." He gripped the arms of the chair, leaning forward. "Give me access to the deposit box and one hundred thousand dollars, in cash, is yours, tonight."

There was silence. The only sound was his breathing, coming quick and heavy.

"You're trying to bribe me."

"You want more?"

"No I don't want more. I don't want anything you have." There was silence. "Mr. Rosen, I don't know who you are, or what you really want. You come into my office, unannounced, behaving in a highly suspicious manner. I'm not going to give you confidential information."

"You're making a big mistake."

"What are you talking about? Are you threatening me?"

He said nothing.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, unless you want to really put our security to the test."

The stranger got up and walked out without saying a word. He followed him out into the lobby, making sure he got into the elevator. When he got back to his office he picked up the phone and dialed the lobby.

The security guard picked up.

"This is Nicholas Martin from Stephen's. Did you just see a guy come out of the elevator?"

"No, not yet. Hold on. You say someone is in the elevator?"

"Just saw him get in a minute ago."

"You're on twenty?"

"Yeah."

"Someone took an elevator from twenty, and got out on five."

"Can you take a look around? There's a guy in the building who shouldn't be here."

He hung up the phone. It was going to be a long night, and he still had a lot of work to do.

Chapter 4 – Going to San Francisco with Peter

He stood in the departure area looking up and down the hallway. It was six forty five, and still there was no sign of Peter. He glanced at his watch, for the third time in as many minutes. When he looked up he saw Peter struggling through the crowd, lugging two large suitcases.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said, when he was within earshot.

"The cab-driver was late." He stood, panting, by the check-in desk.

"Fifteen minutes late. Can you believe that?"

"Come on. We better move. The flight leaves in thirty minutes."

He walked quickly through the security cordon, showing the guard his boarding pass.

"It's not a two week vacation, you know" he said, while they sat waiting at the departure gate. "What's with all the luggage?"

"I brought printouts of the press releases and company reports, since they went public."

"All of them?"

"Well, I haven't had a chance to look over them yet." He stood up, joining the line, which was forming at the gate. "You've been on these trips before. What's the procedure?"

"It's not rocket science."

"I know, but it's new to me."

"I'll tell you on the plane" he said.

They boarded first, along with the other business class passengers.

"Why did Warren send me?" said Peter, when he finally found his seat.

He kept tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable.

"He wants you to gain experience."

"Oh." He was quiet for a while. "Aren't nervous at all?" he said as the plane started its take-off run.

"Peter, I'm trying to read these documents."

"I always hated flying as a child."

"Peter.."

"Sorry." He shut up for a while, and pretended to read, perking up when the airhostess came round with breakfast. "I haven't eaten anything yet today," he said, as he tucked in, making free with his elbows.

"Do you think you could keep your arms inside the arm-rest?" he said, after feeling a dig for the third time.

"Sorry." He started eyeing his tray, after he'd finished eating. "Are you going to eat your salad?"

"Why don't you have it."

"I think I will."

He sneaked a few sidelong glances, every so often, during the flight, to see if he was still reading.

Later they stood, waiting to collect their baggage from the carousel in the terminal building.

"It must be important if Warren is sending us to check it out."

"He's just being cautious."

"What can we find out?"

"Who knows. It might become a big deal."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"I'm not sure. Hopefully we can learn more about this company."

His body warmed to the increase in temperature as he stood outside the terminal building.

"You won't need the overcoat," said Peter, slinging his onto the luggage cart. "It got to be in the fifties at least."

They caught a bus to the rental car area where a car was waiting for them. Peter piled his suitcases into the trunk.

"Where to?" he said.

"We need to take the freeway south" said Nicholas, studying the map.

"The corporate office is here." He held it up to show Peter. "It's in Santa Clara.

It can't be more than a half-hour's drive"

"Where are we staying tonight?" asked Peter when they were safely on their way.

"Elaine booked us into the Fairmont."

"Very nice. " He drummed his fingers on the dashboard. "What do we do now?"

"Let's go over some of the information, before we get there."

"What about Jack Williamson? What do we know about him?"

"Not much."

"He's had a pretty checkered history," said Peter. He scrambled around in the back seat, managing to pull a folder from one of his suitcases. "He's been all over the place. Stanford graduate had his own software company in college. Worked for Apple for a while. Says here that he left due to disagreements with the management. He's had three different companies since then, none of which are still in business. He set-up Trionics a year and a half ago."

"What's his stake in the company?"

"Until the offering he held all the shares. He still has the controlling interest."

"Has he sold any stock recently?"

"Why?"

"That would be a good sign that the price is going to fall."

"I don't know. We'll be meeting with him first, though."

They parked the car and walked across the parking lot to a two-tiered glass-faced office building. A secretary ushered them into a large corner office on the second floor. A robust sunburnt man looked up from a desk strewn with papers when the door opened. Behind his desk a leafy window overlooked landscaped parkland, and to the freeway beyond, where cars sparkled in the afternoon sun.

He looked up when the door opened.

"You are?" His suntanned face creased into many wrinkles.

"Nicholas Martin with Stephen's" he said. He walked across the room and stuck out his hand. Jack shook it. He sat in one of the seats, at the desk.

Peter took the other. "This is Peter Berens, my associate."

"Oh I remember. I spoke to a Warren I believe yesterday. "

"That's right."

"He said he was sending you out here. What does he need?"

"Everything. We'd like to go over all the accounts. We'd like to sit down with your accountant and review the whole operation. "

"I see." There was a pause.

"Is that a problem?"

"No. However, this kind of information takes time to prepare. I couldn't possibly provide it to you at this notice."

"All we need is the financial data. It doesn't have to be a presentation."

"I know that. Anyway most of our records are with our brokers."

"And you don't have copies?"

"Of course we have copies." He furrowed his brow. Greying eyebrows converged. "Is this really necessary? Why don't you tell me what you want?"

"Like I said we want to see the financial statements."

"We can go over the general operating and accounting procedures. I was planning to show you around the plant and give you a demonstration of the product."

"That would be fine also. But we still need to see your accounts."

"I know. You've said it twice all ready."

"Who does your accounts now?"

"Since the flotation, McWhinney."

"Can we start with the company's current financial position?"

"We've already made detailed disclosures to the press. I think you'll find any information you need in the press releases."

"Jack, let me put it this way, we represent clients whose collective assets exceed three hundred billion dollars. We can't consider coming on board until we have satisfied ourselves that we have all the facts at our disposal."

"All-right, all-right. Jesus Christ." He picked up the phone on his desk, and called the secretary. "Mary, can you send Jane in here. Tell her to bring this quarter's financials. She'll know what I mean."

The door opened a few minutes later and a demur petite woman walked in.

Jack said, "This is Jane Lemur, VP of Accounting. Jane this is Nicholas Martin and Peter Berens. They're with Stephen's. I want you to provide them with whatever they need, to make their determination."

They shook hands.

"Is there somewhere we can set-up for the next couple of days, Jack? I'd like to make some calls, check my voicemail that kind of thing."

"Yes. Yes. Go with Jane. She'll take care of everything."

They got up and followed her out of the office. She led them down a corridor, through an open-plan office area.

"This is the accounting department," said Jane, as they passed through. "You can take over this conference room for the next couple of days. " She opened a set of double-doors that led into a large, airy room lit by a wide

expanse of window. "How was your flight?" she said, turning on the lights. The room overlooked a wide stretch of road, a four-lane highway.

"Fine" said Peter.

"I'll be back in a moment," said Jane. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure."

Nicholas picked up the phone as soon as she was out of the room.

"Well" said Warren when Elaine put the call through.

"I just met with the CEO, Jack Williamson."

"And?"

"Too early to tell yet. There seems to be some resistance there."

"We need more than that to go on."

"Once we've been through the financials, we'll have a better idea."

"Okay. Keep me posted." He hung up.

Nicholas put down the phone. "Take off your coat, Peter. Relax. Don't forget we're their clients."

"I know."

Jane came in with bundles of paper. Another woman followed carrying a tray with coffeepot and some food on it.

"These are all the financial statements. It's a printout of the entire transaction database. Do you need me to go through it with you?"

"No. That's okay. We'll give you a call if we have any questions."

"Okay." She closed the doors behind her.

He took off his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair. "It's going to be a long day," he said. "Do you want more coffee?"

Peter shook his head. "Let's get stuck in."

"Something's weird" he said. An hour or so had passed.

"What?" said Peter.

"Look at this."

He pulled out a printout where he had circled a series of numbers on the page. "The company has been making losses for the last year."

"What do you mean? They've reported profits for the last four quarters."

"Technically they've been in profit, but look at this. They've been able to operate only because of all these loans they've been receiving. Look at this. Every three months they receive a cash injection, and it's always for the same amount."

"How come the market doesn't know?"

"The market doesn't care. Anyway, it would not be obvious in the reports they file with the SEC."

He walked into the office. Jack looked up from his desk, putting down his pen.

"What can I do for you?"

"Maybe you can help me figure something out" he said.

"What's the problem?"

"From what I can tell the company has been losing money since it was set-up."

"What are you talking about?"

He put the printout on the desk. "Without these loans the company would not be able to operate."

"So. I know this already. Our investors are taking a long-term view. They have confidence in the product. They're not in it for a quick buck."

"I don't know what you did before you went public, but a publicly quoted company has to stand up to market scrutiny."

"The market is very happy with our performance. "

"I'm sure but without these loans the company would be insolvent. Jack the market is like a stack of dominos. You tip one and the whole stack starts to fall."

"What do you mean?"

"How do you think Wall Street would react to this kind of disclosure?"

"Don't tell me my business. You think I don't know the market?"

"There would be a run on the stock."

"I know. That's why I'm relying on your discretion now that you have privileged information. " There was a pause. "What's your background? You're an analyst, right?"

"Right."

"So you analyze data. You look at financial information. You make decisions based on numbers."

"So?"

"Numbers are only part of it. A company is more than its balance sheet. It's made up of people. People who work together to realize a goal. People with a vision. We have a damn good product here. We have the people and commitment to pull it off. There is no doubt in my mind that were going to get that contract, and when we do we will have the expertise and know-how to exploit it."

"No doubt. But if this got out you'll never get where you want to be. It could wipe a thousand percent off the value of this company, overnight."

He scowled throwing his pen on the desk. "Look I know you think you're doing your job. When it comes to this company there is nothing I don't know. This is a good investment for Stephen's. When we get the contract the stock price will plateau. The market will wait until then, barring unfavorable disclosures."

"You're right. But those unfavorable disclosures could come at any time, from anywhere."

He walked back through the accounting department. Peter looked up when he closed the door behind him. He picked up the phone and called Warren.

"It's worse than I thought" he said, when Warren picked up.

"What are you talking about?"

"The company has never made any money. They've been using debt to finance their operations until they get the contract."

"Don't jump to conclusions, hotshot. Let's wait and see how the FCC deals with their new modem. Have you seen the product yet?"

"Not yet."

"That's what we need to look at next."

"But what about the loans?"

"What about them?"

"If this news gets out the stock price will collapse."

"Make sure it doesn't get out. There's going to be some profit taking soon anyway. I don't care about that. And hotshot, don't burn any bridges while you're there. I'm hoping to develop a relationship with Trionics."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Don't antagonize any one over there."

"But what about the debt?"

"Don't get so hung up on the fundamentals. It's really not that surprising. A company like that is bound to have some growing pains. Cheer up, hotshot. It will pan out in the end."

"Don't you think it's important."

"Good-bye." The phone went dead.

"How's Warren?" said Peter.

"Delightful, as always. I'm going to talk to Jack. I'll be back in a few minutes."

He went back into Jack's office. He looked from his papers. He didn't smile this time.

"You can reach us at the hotel if you need too."

"I don't think that will be necessary."

"When can we see the modem?"

"I was going to schedule a demonstration for tomorrow."

"That would be fine."

"I think we'll go to our hotel now. You can reach us there if you need too."

"All-right."

He walked down the corridor to the conference room. Peter was still going through the print-outs.

"Let's call it a day" he said. "Take all the printouts with you and your notes. Don't leave anything lying around."

"What's going on?"

"Politics. The big picture. That's what's going on."

"What do you mean?"

"I tell you in the car."

He pulled out of the driveway. Soon they were on the freeway headed for San Francisco.

"The company is fucked up. Basically, Warren is hedging his bets."

"In what way?"

"He's hoping to make some money out of it yet."

They left the car with the parking valet when they reached the hotel. After they signed the register a bell-hop carried their bags up to the rooms. Nicholas unpacked his case, hanging a suit in the closet.

After a while Peter knocked on his door. They took a walk outside their hotel. They walked around a small park, and down a side street. The street dipped and then rose to meet another hill. When they reached the brow they could see the whole bay spread out before them. It was a clear evening and

they could see far out into the bay. They kept walking until they came to the Italian Quarter, following the advice of the desk clerk at the hotel. They stopped outside a European style bar. It was crowded with people. A live jazz band was playing in a club across the street. They found a seat by one of the windows.

He went up to the bar and ordered two drinks. He stood there waiting for his order. A woman to his right turned around on her bar stool, and spoke. "Hi" she said. She was tall and dark with pale, olive skin. She was dressed conservatively in business attire. "You're here on a business trip. Aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

She smiled. "Your case. It has an airline ticket on it. Chicago, right?"

"That's right."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"You ever been married?"

"Not yet." The barman came and left his drinks on the bar. He handed him his credit card.

She leaned closer until she was standing right beside him. He could smell her perfume. Her hair brushed against his face, as she turned her head. She whispered in his ear. "Where are you staying?"

"What?"

"Where are you staying?" She batted her eyelids, rolling her head to one side. "I'm only here for one night myself."

"I'm sorry, but I've really got to go."

He picked up the drinks and walked over to the table where Peter was sitting. "Jesus," he swore under his breath.

"What happened there?" said Peter. "She's really pretty. You didn't turn her down, did you?"

"Yeah, well."

"I don't believe you. Ninety percent of guys would have jumped at that."

"Well, I'm not ninety percent of guys."

"You're kidding? A one night stand with no strings attached?"

"Why don't you go talk to her?"

"Maybe I will."

He took a drink. "If you don't want that, then you must be in love, right?"

"Mind your own business."

A big grin spread across his face. "Love. Oh that's beautiful."

"Peter, you know, I've had to put up with you all day. Don't make this any worse than it has to be."

"Excuse me, Mr. High and Mighty."

There was silence for a while. Peter got up and walked over to the bar. A few minutes later he came back.

"What happened?" he said.

"All she wanted to do was talk about you."

"Must have got boring after a while." He laughed.

"Let's go back to the hotel" said Peter.

They walked up the hill to the hotel. "That's some hill" said Peter when they got to the top. A cable car screeched by its bell ringing loudly.

He lay on the bed in his hotel room, and dialled Sonia's number.

"You're still mad, aren't you?" he said when she picked up.

"How do you know?"

"I can tell by your voice. You sound like you're holding in something."

"What makes you so smart?"

"I know you. That's all. So what's up?"

"Nothing. How was your flight?"

"Okay. "

"You sound tired."

"Nicholas, why are you in San Francisco?"

"Warren sent me."

"Don't be stupid. Why did he send you? It's about Trionics, isn't it?"

"They're based out there."

"What are you so worried about?"

"Don't you see? If Warren gets interested. He's much more likely to figure out what you're up to."

"No he's not."

"Anyway if this deal goes through that makes you an insider."

"I bought that stock long before I had any privileged information."

"I really doubt a court would see it that way. Did you see what it did today? It jumped another dollar."

"I know."

"It's no longer a well-kept secret. Don't you think Warren is going to get increasingly interested?"

"Of course I do, but once the loan is paid back what difference does it make? They can fire me if they want. I won't need them anymore."

"When are you going to do that?"

"As soon as it turns."

"How can you wait, knowing what you know?"

"We're making a hundred thousand dollars a day on this. Sonia, you've got to see the big picture. Think of it this way. We can compress a lifetime of

stress into these few days. The time to sell is when it peaks. As soon as the price drops I'll dump the whole lot."

"I can't handle this gambling."

"I know."

"Call me tomorrow."

"I will."

"Goodnight." He rolled over and turned the light off.

Chapter 5 – Waking in San Francisco

He woke early in unfamiliar surroundings. He lay in his bed listening to the cable cars grinding up the hill, one by one. After a few minutes he got up and walked over to the closet. It smelled of camphor. A torn magazine and a clutter of restaurant receipts was all the remaining evidence of the last resident. He took the suit, which he had hung there the night before, lifting it delicately, by the hangar, and laying it on the bed. Then he pulled a shirt from the suitcase. It was slightly creased.

He picked up the suit, draping the shirt over the hangar. He walked into the bathroom, hanging the whole thing on the back of the door. He showered, drying himself quickly while he stood in front of the bathroom mirror. He dressed, putting on the shirt. The creases were hardly noticeable under the jacket.

At seven there was a knock on the door. He opened it. Peter was standing there, travel bag slung over his shoulder.

"You all-right?"

"I'm tired" said Peter. "That's all."

They went downstairs together to a large, ornate dining room. A liveried waiter led them to a table. He handed them each a menu.

"Did you pack all your stuff?" he said, sitting down. "We're not coming back to the hotel."

"I know" said Peter. He was quiet for a while, staring at his menu. Then he spoke, "what's on the agenda for today?"

"We're getting a tour of the plant and a demonstration of the modem. We should be done by lunchtime. Plenty of time to make the flight."

The waiter came and took their order.

"I'll just have cereal and coffee" he said.

Peter ordered the full breakfast. "Did you see the news? It's up again. Gained fifty cents."

"I know." He handed the menus to the waiter. "Something is bothering me about yesterday" he said, after he had gone.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I had an idea last night. Do you have those printouts from yesterday?"

Peter opened his bag and handed him the statements.

He took them and spread them out on the table, moving his cereal bowl out of the way.

"What are you looking for?"

"Just an idea." He scanned back and forth through the documents. "This doesn't make any sense."

"What?"

"There's no interest payments. They have not paid one cent in interest. Oh, hold on. Here's one payment. Five thousand dollars. Five thousand in eighteen months. If you borrowed five million dollars what you would expect to pay?"

"For venture capital, probably eight or nine percent."

"So conservatively around four hundred thousand."

"About that."

"Well, it's not there. I just don't see it." He was quiet, toying with his spoon, turning it over and over. "Jack owed all the shares until the offering."

"Right."

"What was the stock offered at?"

"It started at eight dollars."

"And what did it trade at before?"

"Never more than three dollars. Average of about two."

"So by the time of the offering his share had grown in value by four hundred percent." He dug his spoon into the cereal, raising it to his lips.

"Okay."

He put the spoon down. "What was the offer? A million shares, right?"

Peter nodded.

"So that's six million dollars roughly. Now the stock is trading at what? Twenty one dollars. So now his share is worth about eighteen million dollars, making him a pretty wealthy man, contract or no contract."

"But he could never dump all that without the market reacting."

"No. But even if he dumped a fraction of that. Or had friends who traded his stock for him, the market would not be aware. Anyway it's very difficult to prove insider dealing."

"Where are you going will all this?"

"I don't know. Something still doesn't make sense." He looked at his watch. "Come on. We'd better get going."

Peter gathered up the papers, stuffing them back in his bag. He grabbed a piece of toast off his plate.

Nicholas was already half way across the dining room. When he got to the reception desk he paid the bill using his corporate card. The bell-hop carried their bags out front, where a valet already had a car waiting. It was drizzling slightly, as they headed for the freeway. Traffic was heavy around Market Street. They came to a stop at an intersection.

"He's hard to read" he said. An electric bus had stalled, disconnected from its overhead wires. They watched as the driver pulled on the conducting poles trying to reconnect it.

"Who?" said Peter.

"Jack. I haven't figured him out yet."

"You think he's up to something?"

"I don't know."

The secretary directed them to some chairs in the lobby when they arrived.

"Jack will be with you in a moment, gentlemen. Please take a seat."

A few moments later, Jack came out.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Some important business had to be got out of the way. Why don't you follow me? I'll take you around, personally. Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks" he said.

He led them through a corridor and up a staircase.

"How many people do you have working here, Jack" he said.

"About one hundred and fifty. We hope to expand that a lot when the contract comes through. We have plans to extend the plant." He pointed out the window. "We own the option on three acres of this parkland."

"How long have you been in this building?" said Nicholas.

"About two years." He led them through double doors into a large machine shop. The sound of machinery rose in the background. They were high on a gangway overlooking the workshop floor, below.

"That's our main assembly line in the middle." Jack pointed to the mid section. "We outsource many of the parts. We assemble those parts here. Currently we have three lines."

"What's the production capacity?" said Peter.

"With all the lines running, we can churn out about two thousand modems a week."

"Any of these lines capable of running the new modem?" he said.

"Of course. They can be changed over easily. It wouldn't take long to have the new production line set-up."

They walked down a metal staircase and onto the workshop floor.

"This is our mainstay right now" said Jack, raising his voice to overcome the background noise. He picked up a modem unit from a pallet beside the conveyor belt.

He handed it to Nicholas. It was still warm.

"How many baud per second?" he said, handing it on to Peter.

"Twenty eight thousand. That's as fast as any telephone interfaced modem on the market can do. That's why the next generation will be so exciting."

He walked on down the line. Peter followed.

Nicholas lingered. An employee walked by with a trolley, laden with packaged modems.

"Hey you." The man stopped and turned around.

"Come here."

He pointed to himself.

"Yeah you."

The man walked over to him.

"How long have you been here?" he said.

"What?"

"How long have you been with the company?"

"About three months."

"What about the other guys."

"Same. Everyone's new here, man. All the guys. We're on a contract."

"You're not permanent?"

"No way. I wish."

"How long is your contract?"

"Runs out in a month."

"A month. Okay. Thanks."

He walked through double doors. The noise was dulled abruptly. Peter and Jack were waiting on the other side.

"Sorry about that."

"What was that all about?" said Jack.

"I asked him a question about the assembly process."

"I see. " He smiled. "I can have our operations manager give you a much more detailed account if you wish."

"I don't think there would be time, unfortunately."

"Well. We had better stick to the agenda." He led them up another flight of stairs and into a large conference room.

"Phil is going to demonstrate the capability of the new modem" said Jack. He directed them to the front of the room. They each took a seat. A computer was set up. It's output was linked to a large projector, which projected an image onto a screen on the back wall.

"Here's our current modem" said Phil. "I'm logging onto the Internet using a standard telephone interface which is fine, unless we try some of these larger files with graphics and pictures." He hit a few keystrokes. "As you can

see the download time is pretty bad. It's already three to four minutes." He looked at his watch. " It's still going."

"It restricts the kind of advertising that can be done on the Net too" said Jack. "Companies are going to opt for homepages that don't have long download times."

"How does the new modem work faster?" said Peter.

"Rather than downloading from the telephone line its hooked into the cable network" said Phil. "They have a much greater band width than a telephone line, so the data transmission speed is much higher. Here let me show you. " He typed a few commands into the computer.

"Can I see one of the new modems?" said Nicholas.

"Sure. " Phil handed him a small plastic case. He turned it over in his hand.

"What about uploading?" said Peter.

"That's still the same" said Jack. "The cable network was planned as a one-way street. Information can flow in one direction only. So the consumer will still be uploading through the phone system. Most consumers only do that to send mail, which typically is not going to be a problem. "

"Now we download the same page using the new modem" said Phil. The images appeared on the screen in seconds.

"Wow" said Peter. "Pretty impressive, isn't it?" said Jack.

"How many of these new modems have you made?" said Nicholas.

"We did a small run on the prototype. About two hundred" said Jack.

"Can I see a few more? I want to see the packaging too."

"Actually, we shipped most of them to Delaware for the FCC. We've only got about ten at this office. Right, Phil?"

Phil nodded.

"Can I take this one back to Chicago?" said Nicholas

"We're doing another run next Monday" said Jack. "Why don't I ship you a couple. You'll get it within a few days. We need this one to give demonstrations to other clients."

"Okay."

"So that's the whole show" said Jack. "Before you go, I'm taking you to lunch. So why don't we meet in the reception in ten minutes. Sound good?"

"Sure."

Phil followed Jack out the door. Nicholas and Peter were left on the own in the room.

"That's a huge time-saver" said Peter.

"What? What did you say?"

"I said it will save a lot of time - the new modem. It looks great."

"Yeah. It does."

"No wonder the stock price has gone through the roof."

He nodded. "We'd better get down stairs. Where are we going?"

"Some place in Palo Alto. Don't worry. It's on the way to the airport."

Jack was waiting for them in the reception area. "Jane's joining us too.

Why don't you follow us in your car?"

"Okay."

They followed Jack out of the parking lot.

"What did you think?" said Jack, pointing at his car. "It's the convertible, specially imported from England."

"Very nice" said Peter.

Soon they were on the freeway headed north.

"That's a hundred thousand dollar car" said Peter, as they got in lane behind him. "I want a Jaguar. Some day I'm going to get a car like that."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You'll see."

"I don't think I'm going to live that long."

"Smart ass."

They parked in the lot beside Jack's car. He was waiting at the steps with Jane.

"Follow me" he said. He led them inside to a spacious, open-plan restaurant. A busy dining area was focused around a marble fountain complete with living trees. A waiter came and led them past tables where people sat eating, out into a leafy courtyard. More tables were hidden from the midday sun in the shade of a white awing.

A circular table with four place settings was already laid out.

"How about some wine?" said Jack, when they were seated.

"Not for me thanks" said Nicholas. The waiter brought a basket of bread and a bottle of olive oil.

"So what do you think of our weather?" said Jack. "Not bad for January."

"I'm jealous" said Peter. "Beats minus thirty with wind chill."

"I'd bet."

Nicholas wiped his brow with his napkin. He took off his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair.

"Try the ribs" said Jack. "They're excellent."

He glanced quickly through the menu. "So Jane, who did you say Trionics banked with?"

"Oh.." She looked at Jack.

"Actually our brokers have a corporate banking division" said Jack,
cutting in. "We bank with them."

"Interesting. It must be a very close relationship."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, it's just that I couldn't find any interest payments in the financial
statements."

"It's funny you should say that. We just made a big interest payment this
morning. Right, Jane?"

"That's right. I just sent a requisition for three hundred thousand."

"I would have thought you would make more regular payments."

"The company is in quite a unique situation right now. Our bankers
understand that."

The waiter arrived with the food.

"So Nicholas" said Jack, after he left. "Have you any vacation time
coming up?"

"I believe I have a week left this year."

"You've got a girlfriend, right? A good-looking guy like you is bound
too."

"Where is this going?"

"It's not where this is going it's where you're going."

"What do you mean?"

He handed a plain white envelope to Jane who handed it over to Nicholas.

"Two tickets to Bermuda. Open-ended. Good for up to a year with hotel accommodation included."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly.."

"Take it. Go on. Have fun. And Peter, don't think I forgot about you."

He passed another envelope over to him. "A trip for two to Hawaii, good for a year."

Peter was about to speak.

"Don't mention it" said Jack. "The only pity is you guys are leaving at such short notice. I can't tell you what a beautiful city San Francisco is. I have a ranch in Santa Barbara where a lot of clients spend a few days. We have some pretty big get together's. Maybe next time you're over. You'd both love it."

He was quiet on the plane after they took off from the airport.

"You're pretty cagey" said Peter, after the attendant brought him a drink.

"I'm just tired."

"Oh."

Sonia was waiting when he reached the arrivals lounge. He waved goodbye to Peter and followed her out to the parking lot. He threw his bag in the trunk and climbed into the seat beside her.

"You look tired" she said, as she started the engine.

"I am."

"You're stressed too."

"Just a little."

"It's about this lousy stock."

"Yep."

"I'm going to say this once, and once only. I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that."

"Yeah" he said, smiling.

She paid the attendant at the parking booth as they passed through the checkpoint. "I don't know what you're trying to achieve. You say it's money but I don't think so. The money is incidental. Something deeper is at work. Whatever it is, it's all you. I did not choose this course of action."

She came off the on ramp onto the expressway, merging with the other city-bound traffic. "You need this. It's your deal. I was thinking about it last night. You helped me a lot when my mother was sick, and I won't ever forget

that. So I'm going to back off, and give you some space. If this stress gets too much for me I'm going to have to go."

"But you can see the benefits?" he said.

"Frankly, I don't. You're already a success. You're young, smart, upwardly mobile. You don't have to gamble everything to get where you want to be. There is a better way. Anyway I don't think a few million dollars is going to satisfy you. Wealth is relative. How much is ever enough? Anyway I don't want to get into all this, again. I've said my piece. I can't influence you on this issue. I'm not going to nag you to be something you don't want to be. That's up to you. Just be aware that everything comes with a price. Pretty soon you may have to make a choice. Between me and this obsession of yours."

"But Sonia you know in a few more days the whole thing will be resolved. And then I will be satisfied."

"I just don't know how much of this I can take in my life. Does that make sense?"

"It makes sense."

She said nothing for a while. "You know what's funny?"

"What?"

"When I look into the future, I would think of having a family with you. Kids. Settling down, finding a home, somewhere. Doing something really meaningful and selfless. "

"We can have all that."

"Just listen. When I think of you, when I romanticise, I think of both of us, away from all this, without a care. On some island, or some mountain top, looking down on the world. Then I look at the reality and I think that will never happen. The world will get in the way. All the things that you want or I would want. Won't they drive us away from each other?"

"Only if we let it happen." He took her hand and held it.

"Can you really fight it though? Can you fight yourself?"

He was silent for a while. "I don't know."

Traffic had slowed to a crawl. She played with the radio flicking through the different stations. Eventually she turned it off and put a CD in the machine.

"Can I tell you about the trip?"

"No."

"I'll be brief. I promise. It's Jack Williamson. I can't prove it. He looks crooked. He's too smooth for one thing. The whole thing smells like a set-up. Everything is for show. He thinks of everything, Sonia. I know he's biding he's time. When he sells you can bet the market is going to change."

"And?"

"If I know when he dumps his stock, then that's the turning point. Right now he's looking for a second offering. So he can't do anything until then. I just know he doesn't want that contract. All he has to do is ship defective modems to the FCC . They don't give him the contract, the price collapses. Everyone blames the FCC and Jack is a multi-millionaire."

"Why wouldn't he take the contract and make even more money?"

"There's too many coincidences. His operation is not set-up to take advantage of this opportunity. Everything seems pulled together at the last minute. How could he get venture capital for a year on such flimsy promises? Why would everyone on the shop floor be temporary? Why does he pay interest for the first time the day after I discover the loan?"

She parked the car. They walked the few blocks to the restaurant.

Francesco smiled when he saw them walk in. "Ah, my two favorite people."

"Come now" he said.

"You have been travelling? I missed you both in the last few days."

"I was in San Francisco" he said.

He smiled, "a beautiful city. I spent some years there, when I was a young man. I was stationed at the Presidio, you know. Oh before I forget. A man was here earlier looking for you."

"Really? Did he leave a name?"

"No. He said he would try again, later."

"I see."

"Enrico will show you to your table. Enrico" he called, to a short, darker man who was standing in the background. "Look after my friends, here."

Enrico led them through the dining room to their usual table. It was quiet. Many of the tables were vacant.

"I wonder who that could have been?" he said, sitting down.

"Who?"

"Who was looking for me, I mean."

They ordered their meal and ate.

Afterwards Sonia got up. "I'll bring the car out front. Give me about ten minutes. Then come outside."

"Okay."

He sat, listening to the music. A Frank Sinatra tape was playing in the background. It had already gone round one time. Now, it was on its second run. He toyed with the food on his plate, turning it over and over with his fork. The waiter came and cleared away the plates, leaving the bill.

"Not hungry I take it." He looked up to see who had spoken. It was the stranger who had come into his office. He stood there, a leery smile on his face.

"Mr. Rosen. What an unpleasant surprise."

He slid his portly form into the seat opposite him, uninvited.

"Too funny, Mr. Martin. Too funny." A mirthless grin split his face.

"Did you enjoy your trip to San Francisco?"

"What do you want?"

"High tech stocks can be so volatile." He smiled even wider.

"Have you been following me?"

"Mr. Martin, please. Such hostility. I have good news. I can't wait to tell you, I have revised my original offer. The price is now one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"The answer is still no."

"You drive a hard bargain."

"I wasn't aware that we were bargaining."

"Oh, but we are. Everyone has their price."

"Not me."

"Who can be so sure? Circumstances change. One should not be too particular in an uncertain world. Here is my card in case you change your mind." He left a plain white card on the table. It bore his name and a phone number.

"Don't worry."

"No-one can predict the future" he said, getting up. He walked away, without saying another word.

He watched him until he disappeared from view through the archway.

He sat there for a few moments, then he got up leaving some cash on the table. He walked out onto the street. Sonia was waiting, double-parked.

"What took you so long?"

"That guy I told you about, the one who came into the office. It was him. He must have come earlier to the restaurant. Did you see him come out?"

"I wasn't paying attention."

He opened the passenger door and got in.

"What does he want?" she said, putting the car in gear.

"I haven't a clue."

They parked in the parking lot, when they reached his building. They took the elevator to his floor. The apartment was cold when he unlocked the door.

"It will warm up in a few minutes" he said, adjusting the thermostat.

She walked into the bedroom. "Can you come in here a second?" she said.

He hung his coat on the coatstand.

"What's up?"

She pushed him onto the bed falling down beside him.

"My, you're forward tonight" he said.

"Shut up" was the reply.

He waited until she was coming before he too let himself go. So that when she cried out, he cried out too. She climbed off after a while and lay beside him. Their breathing subsided, gradually.

"I'm going to think something" she said in the darkness, "and you're going to tell me what it is, okay?"

"Okay."

"All-right, I have a thought in my head. What is it?"

"Let me see. There's only one thing you could really be thinking about. One thing that's important enough."

"What is it?"

"Me."

"Wrong. Ego-maniac."

"I give up."

"No try. Seriously."

"I don't know. How am I suppose to know what you're thinking?" He sat up in the bed propping his head on one hand.

"You didn't even try."

"All-right. Let me think."

"Oh, forget it." She rolled over on her side. There was silence for a while. "Stop it."

"What?"

"Don't tickle me. You know I hate that."

"Just once."

"No. I thought you were supposed to be tired."

"Just once, I swear to God."

"No."

"It's all in the anticipation."

"Stop it." She kicked around convulsively.

"Ow."

"You deserved that."

"That could have been very serious."

"The next one will be worse."

He sat up in the bed. "You want something to drink?"

"You're full of life all of a sudden." She rested her head in his lap. "What is there?"

"I got some wine in the airport."

"It's pretty late."

"I don't care."

"Well, just a small glass for me." She moved her head.

"Let's open the curtains. It should be a clear night" he said.

He got up and walked into the kitchen. He opened the fridge door, shuddering in the chill air. He took the bottle out. Next he took two glasses from the cabinet above the sink. He pulled the cork and walked back into the bedroom, carrying the glasses and the bottle.

The bathroom door was shut. He could hear the sound of water running as she turned on the tap.

He drew back the curtains. A full moon gleamed, its radiance filling the room with a silvery light. It cast a meandering shadow on the surface of the water. He sat on the floor, leaning against the bed, and he poured himself a glass of wine.

She came out of the bathroom. "It's freezing with the curtains open."

"Do you want me to close them?"

"That's all-right." She pulled the cover off the bed and wrapped herself in it. "Aren't you cold?"

"Not really."

"Come inside." She made space for him.

They sat wrapped in the cover, arm in arm, watching the moon-light.

Success by
Hugh McGovern

"Do you want more wine?" he said after some time had passed.

"No thanks. I think I'm getting tired" she said.

"Let's go to sleep." He got up and closed the curtains. She was already
laying on the bed when he turned around. He climbed in beside her.

He rested his head on her shoulder. Within minutes he was asleep.

Chapter 6 – Going to Work Sonia stays over

He woke up early. She had rolled over in the middle of the night onto the other side of the bed. One arm lay hanging limply over the side. The other shielded her eyes from the lamp when he turned it on. She lay on her back covers pushed aside for coolness.

"Hey you, I have to get up soon."

"What time is it?" She grabbed a pillow and put it over her head. It was still dark outside.

"Six."

She groaned. "Why do you have to get up so early?"

"It's not that I want to."

"Come here." She reached over and pulled him closer, putting an arm around him. "Stay there and don't move. You love that lousy job more than me."

She dozed off again. A few minutes later he gently moved her arm, got up and walked to the bathroom.

"There's no sense in you getting up" he called out as he shaved. There was no response. He washed and dressed quickly, letting her sleep.

When he got into his office he got on the phone first thing.

"Mr. Lancing is on another line" said the secretary, when his call went through.

"I can hold" he said. He leaned back in his chair. It was snowing again. Already a layer coated the window ledge outside his office. More flakes floated gently down. The tops of the building were being buried, slowly, in a white mantle.

"Mr. Lancing, how are you?"

"Fine."

"I'm not sure if it's you I should be talking too. Perhaps you can direct me. I'm trying to contact the person in charge of the Trionics offering."

"Trionics. Hmmm, that would be Karl Lehman."

"I had another question also. Can you confirm if Trionics also banks with your corporate division?"

"To tell you the truth I couldn't say. You know Mr. Martin, the man you really want is Karl. He handled the whole offering for Trionics."

"I see. Has he been with the company long?"

"Karl? He's a partner and a senior vice-president."

"Would he be available to answer a few questions?"

"You know I'm not sure. Let me send you back to my secretary. She'll be able to locate him for you, better than I."

"Thanks a lot."

He was put on hold for a few minutes.

"Karl Lehman."

"Karl, Nicholas Martin with Stephen's. I just spoke with Mr. Lancing."

"Oh Mr. Martin, how are you? What can I do for you?"

"Well, we're really at a preliminary stage here, but we may be interested in being underwriters in the second offer."

"Wonderful. We'd love to have you on board. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Well, I thought you might share your research or due diligence in the company."

"I'd be more than glad too."

"I also had some questions. I got a chance to review some of the financial statements a few days ago. I see some major problems. The company is pretty heavily indebted for one."

"Where did you get that idea?"

"From the statements. Without the loans they've been getting from your corporate division the company couldn't operate."

"Oh you see Mr. Martin, at Fealty we take a different view. This is a start-up. It's bound to have some kind of debt. This is precisely why Trionics

went to the market in the first place. In any event Jack Williamson is a very wealthy man."

"Wealthy enough to operate for three years without covering costs."

"His net worth is well in excess of his debts."

"We would need to see copies of his tax returns, any statements that would prove that."

"No problem."

"What about the interest? There was no interest paid for three years."

"We just received a very substantial interest payment."

"I was more concerned about the first three years."

"Don't worry Mr. Martin. I think the problem is you don't have all the information. Let me send you the documents you need."

"I have enough information to know something doesn't make sense. Did this not arise before the first offering?"

"We knew about it. Like you we wanted to make money. The first offering was very profitable for our investors."

"Okay. My concerns are that right now we don't know anything about Jack. For us to join as underwriters we would need to see significant disclosures about Jack's track record."

"Of course I understand your concerns. I would feel exactly the same way in your position. We can get you what you need."

"You're planning to go to market again next week, right?"

"We want to do it quickly to capitalize on the market interest in the stock.

"Of course. My associate Peter Berens will be in touch regarding the documents."

"Fine. I look forward to working with you, both."

"Good-day, Mr. Martin." The phone went dead.

He put down the receiver.

He was busily engrossed in his computer when he turned around hearing footsteps approaching his door.

"Well, hotshot. What's the scoop?" Warren stood in the doorway, scratching his balding scalp. The cold had made his eczema flare up again.

He swivelled in his chair to face him. "Regarding?"

"Trionics."

"I just talked to Karl Lehman, their underwriter in the IPO. He says Jack is worth a lot more than the debt. "

"You sounded like you were on to something, yesterday."

"Well, I'm concerned about the debt and the absence of interest payments."

"What did Karl say?"

"He said Jack is good for it."

"The debt doesn't surprise me. Most of these high-tech start-ups are indebted. That's why they need capital. You can't expect them all to turn into Microsoft, you know. We just want to make sure that our investors are protected." He leaned against the doorway, examining something he had found under his fingernails. "How's it doing, today?"

"Still going." He pulled it up on his computer screen. "It's gained five cents already."

"What's the feed-back on our involvement?"

"Jack wants our business. There's no doubt about that. Fealty seems pretty enthusiastic about us being involved, too."

"Good. You're going to be our contact on this deal."

"We're really going to pursue this?"

"For now. Why?"

"I just don't think they are a good investment. Too many things don't add up."

"Like what?"

"The financials, the production staff are all temporary. The whole set-up looks planned."

"There could be any number of reasons for that. Anyway we need the business. We need to beef up our offerings this year. Don't get too hung-up on the details."

He said nothing.

"How did Peter work out?"

"Fine. He's coming along."

"You can use him to dig into this."

"All-right."

"Get Karl to ship the documents over here. I want all that stuff in place before I bring this to the old man."

He picked up the phone again when Warren left.

"Peinsula Realty" said a voice on the other end.

"Could you put me through to a realtor, please?"

A man came on the line a few seconds later.

"Yeah. I was calling about the three acre lot on Green Bay Road. Is that available?"

"Greenbay Road? Hold on a second. I think it's under option."

He came back on the phone a few moments later.

"I just checked the file. There was an option to buy on it but it expired a few months back."

"I see." He smiled.

"So you're interested, right?"

"Actually, no. Thanks anyway."

He hung up the phone.

Around one Ryan stuck his head in the door. "You got lunch plans?"

He looked up from his desk. "No. What are you doing?"

"Do you want go to Romano's?"

"Give me ten minutes. I'll come get you."

"Okay."

They walked through the snow covered streets. The city had put sand on the roads during the night, but already fresh falls had covered it over and the cars moved along cautiously. The sidewalks had received less attention. Pedestrians had turned the snow to slush. His shoes were damp by the time he reached the corner of the street.

"Forecast is for more snow, tonight" said Ryan his head dipped under his hat.

The wind picked up and drove freshly fallen snow from the ground. He turned his collar up to shelter his ears, keeping his hand buried deeply in his pockets.

"At least the city looks cleaner" he said.

"Only because you can't see anything" said Ryan.

Romano's was empty.

"The snow must have put everyone off" said Ryan, brushing it off his overcoat in the lobby. He looked in through the glass door. "Normally we'd need a reservation."

His trousers were damp from walking through the snow. It had soaked into his socks, too. "If I had known it was like this it would have put me off too" he said, stamping his feet.

"Oh, stop complaining. The food is worth it."

They sat at their table. A few more die-hards arrived after them.

"You know we're looking at being part of the next Trionics offering" he said. "Nothing definite yet."

"Warren put you charge of that?"

He nodded.

"But you're way too inexperienced to manage the whole deal."

"I was surprised too when he put me on the project."

"Something is weird."

"What?"

"I got to talk to Warren about this."

He said nothing. Ryan stared at his menu. After a while he spoke. "The guys are nervous about Trionics. They think it's going to bomb."

"What's the word on the Street?"

"No-one knows for sure. In the meantime everyone keeps buying." He took a roll from the basket, and broke a piece off. "What's the company like?"

"Too early to tell. I have some reservations." The waiter arrived and placed a bowl of soup in front of him. "But, like you say, it's still growing."

"I just don't think we should get into it in a big way."

"You should tell Warren that."

"I did already."

"We're hoping for a joint offering with Fealty Trust of San Francisco."

"They brought them public."

"Right."

After lunch he sat at his desk working at his computer. He picked up.

"Nick, it's Max over at First Bank."

"Oh Max. I got your message. Sorry I didn't get back to you."

"Yeah Nick, what's going on with this loan? It's already eight days."

"I'm going to need an extension for another week."

"An extension? You've never asked for one before."

"Yeah well we need one now."

"Well, I guess so. " There was a pause. "It's gonna cost you."

"How much?"

"An extra ten grand."

"That much?"

"Well, there's a late fee in there."

"All-right, then."

"I'll put it on the account." He hung up.

After work he took the train home. It was running slow because of snow on the track. He took off his shoes in the hallway. That was when he first noticed the door handle. From a distance it was not visible, but up close he could see a couple of very fine scratches around the key hole, as though a knife or some sharp instrument had been applied.

He tried the handle. The door was still locked. He leaned against the wall, while he pulled off the other shoe. He put his key in the lock. It turned normally. He opened the door, flicking the light switch, beside the door.

He walked around the living room. Nothing was missing. The kitchen was untouched. A cereal bowl lay in the sink. A plate with crumbs on it and a cup half full of coffee, lipstick on the outside.

He walked into the bedroom. The bed covers lay ruffled. The room was dark. The curtains had not been opened. He turned on the light in the closet and hung up his coat and jacket. He walked over to the computer. The chair was slightly out of place. He opened the top drawer. Everything was in order. There was some photos Sonia took on her birthday, his airline ticket stub and a few travel pamphlets he had picked up in the hotel. He opened the second drawer. It contained bills, a few letters, some credit card stubs. The bottom drawer was locked. He took his key ring out of his pocket, and opened the lock. He pulled the drawer open. He took out a sheaf of papers. He separated them out. Everything seemed to be in order. Max's fax was at the bottom where he left it.

He picked up the phone on the desk and dialed Sonia's number.

"What's up?" she said.

"What time did you leave at?"

"When?"

"This morning."

"About eight thirty. Why?"

"I was just wondering."

"Look, my mother's here. I'll call you back later."

"Okay."

He walked into the living room to the front door. He turned the deadbolt and put the chain on. He walked over to the kitchen and opened the fridge door. He took out a carton of juice and poured himself a glass. He put the carton back in the fridge and walked into the living room. He put the glass on the side table and sat on the couch. He picked up the remote and flicked through a few stations.

After a while the phone rang. He picked up.

"It's me."

"Is your mother there, still?"

"No she left."

"I think someone broke into my apartment."

"What? Why?"

"Well it looks like the lock on the front door was tampered with. The weird thing is nothing has been touched, as far as I can tell."

"Who would want to break into your apartment?"

"I have no clue. Whoever it was pretty careful not to leave any traces."

"Oh, my God. Do you want me to come over?"

"No. There's no point."

"Aren't you going to report it?"

"There's nothing to report. There's no theft."

"Well, maybe somebody was in the building. Other apartments could have been broken into."

"I suppose."

"Call me back afterwards."

"Okay."

He hung up and dialed another number.

"Front desk."

"Yeah, this is Nicholas Martin in twenty fifteen. Have you had any break-ins reported in the building?"

"Break-in's?" said the guard.

"Yeah, you know, housebreaking, burglary that kind of thing."

"No sir. Not in this building."

"Well, somebody broke into my apartment."

"You're kidding? Do you want me to come up?"

"No that's all-right."

"Was anything taken?"

"No. Nothing was taken."

"I'll have to get a police report. For the insurance."

"I won't be making any insurance claims."

"It's the procedure."

"Whatever." He hung up the phone.

He was about to go to bed when there was a knock on the front door. He looked through the spyhole. The security guard and a cop were standing outside the door. He opened the door.

"We have to get a police report" said the guard.

The cop was filling out a large report form.

"What's your name?" he said, scratching spongy red hair with his ball-point.

"My name?"

"No, the Queen of Sheba." He rested the pad on a brawny forearm.

"Is this going to take long?"

"Not if you answer the questions."

"Nicholas Martin."

"Day time phone number?" His radio came alive in a burst of noise. He turned and walked down the corridor, speaking into the mouthpiece.

"I'm sorry" said the guard.

"I know. I know. It's the procedure."

He nodded, eyes downcast.

"Occupation?" The cop returned to his interrogation. He scratched close-cropped ginger hair with end of his pen.

"Analyst."

"Analyst, what?"

"That's it - analyst."

He looked up. Nicholas didn't smile.

"Anything missing from the apartment?"

"No."

"Signs of forcible entry?"

He pointed at the door handle.

The cop bent down and scrutinised the handle closely. After a moment he looked up. "That's the forcible entry?"

"What do you want? A hole in the wall?"

"Those scratches could have been caused by the key."

"I don't think so."

"No signs of forcible entry" said the cop, writing in the report.

"Excuse me?"

"All-right. All-right. Possible signs of forced entry."

"Are we done?"

"You're done" said the cop. He closed his notebook.

He turned and walked down the corridor, the guard following behind.

He slammed the front-door so hard that the pictures on the wall rattled.

Chapter 7 – Presentation of new IPO

He sat beside Warren. Peter sat to his left arranging his presentation.

Behind them the early morning sun emerged from clouds and lit up the conference room. The old man's objet d'art were cast in relief against the plain white walls.

The brokers and fund managers arrayed around the table blinked in the sunlight.

Peter got up and adjusted the blinds, subduing the light. The art works lost their silhouettes.

"All-right, all-right" said Warren, standing up. "Now that everyone's here I want to get this over with in a timely fashion. "

Brad Levenger came in and shut the door behind him. Warren stared at him.

"Do you have some problem being on time?"

"Sorry" he said, sitting down.

Warren kept staring.

"My car broke down" said Brad looking up at him. "I had to take the train."

Warren looked away, after a moment. "All-right, we're going to talk about Trionics. I think it's about time we got an update on where we're at.

First, there is going to be a second offering."

There was a general intake of breath.

"There's been nothing in the media" said Tony Andretti.

"That's right genius. I'm relying on all of you to make sure that it stays that way."

"What do we do if someone calls asking questions?" said Ed.

"Refer any calls to Nick or myself" said Ryan. "Don't give out any information."

"Fealty will take care of the press releases" said Nicholas.

"That's right" said Warren. "This offering is being led by Fealty Trust of San Francisco. They are the main underwriter. Right now they're looking for other underwriters, including us, to take some of the share. Nick and Peter were down there last week. Based on that Peter's put together a short presentation." He sat down.

"Like Warren said the deal is at a sensitive stage" said Nicholas, standing up. "That means that no-one is to say anything outside this room. Unfavorable press disclosures would be disastrous at this stage. Fealty's Karl Lehman and Trionic's Jack Williamson will be in the office on Friday. They're on a

nationwide tour to drum up support for this offering. After that Peter and I will be out with them next week. That's about it. "

"I don't know anything about the numbers" said Tony Andretti " but everyone on the Street is nervous. The word is this stock is going to bomb, and soon. I mean I know you guys know what you're doing. I just thought I'd mention it."

"Yeah. We know the mood" said Ryan.

"What are we supposed to do if we already have stock?" said Brad

"Talk to Ryan" said Nicholas. "We'll get you to fill out a few forms. We don't want the SEC coming down on us. So let's not attract any insider suits. Anyone else?"

There was silence.

"Peter. You're up." He sat down.

Peter stood up and walked to the projector. His hands shook as he placed a slide on the screen. He flicked a switch.

"Okay" he said turning to face the room, "the first slide shows Trionics growth, in red, against a generic index of high tech stocks. I put the S&P 500 in for comparison."

"Peter" said Ryan after a moment, "the machine isn't working."

He turned around. The projection screen was blank. "Oh." A scarlet hue spread across his cheeks.

"It's the plug" said Nicholas. He got up and walked over to the machine, taking the flex he plugged it into the wall. He sat down again.

"Yes the red line is Trionics" continued Peter. "The green is the high tech index and black is the S&P." He turned to pick out another slide.

"The main point of this graph" said Nicholas, "is to show how much Trionics has out performed a basket of other high-tech stocks, right Peter?"

Peter nodded.

He turned and put another slide on the projector. "Oh sorry. That's the wrong one."

There was silence. He took the slide off the projector and spent some time looking through his folder.

"Okay Peter" said Warren, "we don't have time for this. Can you speed it up?"

He put a slide on the machine and turned to face the room. His cheeks were crimson now. "Okay this graph shows Trionics compared to a group of other comparable companies. These companies are all modem makers. The chart demonstrates how Trionics has outperformed all of its main competitors in the last year."

Nicholas walked with Warren to his office after the meeting. Ryan followed. He closed the door and turned to face Warren. "Why is Nick in charge of the deal?" said Ryan.

"He needs to learn" said Warren taking his seat at the desk.

"I don't get it. He doesn't have enough experience."

"Ryan there's plenty of other projects for you. Don't worry."

"It's not that. It just doesn't make any sense."

"I don't need to explain to you. He needs to learn and he needs the experience and that's the way it is."

"What are you doing here?" he said turning his attention to Nicholas.

"Why are we rushing into this? That's what I don't understand."

"What's your problem now?"

"Well I just think we should wait until we have more information. It seems like we're jumping into this."

"Look hotshot, I'm not interested in your amateur detective work. I'm not going to have you fuck up this deal by upsetting our clients. Anything you've discovered could apply to a hundred and one different companies. You need something much more solid than that for me to believe you. Secondly we need the business so don't screw up any client relationships. Some very

reputable people are involved with this company." He threw a copy of the Journal at him. "Take a look at some of the new executives they've just hired."

He glanced at the article. "They could just be buying credibility."

"Oh Jesus" said Warren. "What are you, Sherlock Holmes? I am sick of this shit. Let me put it to you in the simplest possible terms. If you step out of line when Lehman and Williamson are here you can kiss this job good-bye. I'm not about to let you fuck this deal up with your big mouth. Now get out of my office, both of you."

They stood outside Warren's office for a moment after they left.

"Why is he being so irrational about this?"

Ryan shook his head. "I've no idea."

They walked back toward their offices. The old man called out to him as he passed by. Ryan walked on.

"Nick, come in here. I haven't seen you in a while."

He turned and walked into his office. "You've been out for a while" he said.

"Oh doctors, doctors. The bane of my life. What a waste of time and money. They say I have a heart problem. Never felt better. You'd think they'd figure something out with what I'm paying them."

He stood in the office.

"Take a seat. Take a seat. There's something a need your opinion on."

He sat down.

The old man leaned down under the desk and lifted something heavy off the floor, straining to put it on the desk. It was a bulky object covered with a piece of velvet material. "There" he said, with a gasp. "Nearly gave myself a real heart attack."

He pulled the cover off revealing a life size bronze eagle one outstretched claw clutching a scroll.

"What do you think? Cost me ten thousand bucks. I'm going to put it out in the reception area."

"It looks great" he said.

"Doesn't it ? Let's get Warren in here. See what he thinks."

He got up and walked into the hallway. "Warren can you come in here for a minute."

Warren came into the office.

"Warren what's your opinion?" The old man pointed to the eagle.

"I like it" he said. "It's aggressive. It's Stephen's."

"Exactly" said the old man smiling. "Well said. Thank you, Warren."

Warren nodded and left.

"What else is going on? Warren tells me you're in charge of your first offering."

"That's right - Trionics."

"Good for you. There are plenty more opportunities in this company" said the old man, smiling. "Keep up the good work."

He stopped at Peter's desk on his way back to his office.

"The boxes arrived from Fealty" said Peter.

"Let's take a look" he said. Six large cardboard containers were stacked in the corner of his cubicle.

He opened the top of the first box, and scanned the letter that was placed on the top of the documents.

"This is exactly what we need" he said, turning to Peter. "Basically what you have to do is go through all these boxes. Pull out all the tax returns, any statements of net worth, all the financial information. We need to construct a financial profile of Jack going as far back as we can."

Peter said nothing.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Don't worry about the presentation. Those things get easier. It's just practice. That's all."

"I know."

"Once you've done a few times it will be second nature to you."

He nodded.

He left Peter and walked back to his office. He made a few calls and organized a few files. He opened his mail and sorted the junk from the important correspondence. After a while he started to feel hungry. He got up and walked across the hallway to Ryan's office. It was empty. He went back to his office and picked up the newspaper. He walked across the trading floor, through the reception, and out into the hallway. He took the elevator down to the lobby. The restaurant was busy. He picked a tray up at the self-service counter. Then he stood in line with the other customers. After he paid the cashier he carried his tray to one of the few vacant tables.

He spread out the Journal on the table. It was lunch-time. The restaurant was crowded. A line of people stretched out into the lobby from the self-service bar. He focused on the paper. There was a front page article on Trionics complete with a picture of Jack holding the new modem. He scanned through the article.

"It's a pity I missed you." He looked up. Norman Rosen stood looking down at him.

"Not you again."

"I missed you Mr. Martin. I was hoping to hear from you."

"This has gone beyond a joke." He threw down his fork. "What the fuck do you want?"

"You know what I want."

"Either you go away right now, or I'll have you arrested."

"Strong words. Strong words" he laughed.

He got up and was about to walk in the direction of the guards desk.

"You might want to take a look at this, before you do that" said the stranger.

He unfolded a piece of paper. He recognized it instantly. The company logo on the top, his signature in his precise, neat handwriting.

"Give me that" he snatched it out of his hand, sitting back in his seat.

"Mr. Martin, you shouldn't be so emotional. It can be very revealing."

"You broke into my apartment."

He smiled. "What makes you say that?"

"You're some scumbag."

"I suspected this is something you would not like to get into the wrong hands. In case your wondering that is not the only copy. I have two others in envelopes addressed and stamped waiting to be posted to certain people who might be very interested in this document."

"What do you want from me?"

"What I've always wanted."

"I can't do that. I'm not supposed to have access either."

"You'll find a way."

"What is that you want?"

"There is a letter in the deposit box or a document. Copy it, put the original back in the box and bring the other to me and I will give you one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"And if I refuse?"

"Don't throw away a promising career, Mr. Martin. There's no point in being stupid. This way I'll get what I want. You'll be one hundred and fifty grand richer and nobody need know anything about it."

He stood up. "You can keep that copy as a reminder. Call me when you have the information. I will expect to hear from you before the end of the week. I will arrange payment and pickup. Don't disappoint me."

He walked out into the lobby, disappearing into the crowds of people coming and going. Nicholas sat for a long time. After a while he looked down. His salad lay untouched in front of him.

He dialed Sonia's number when he got into his office.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"That freak is trying to black mail me."

"What are you talking about?"

"The guy, the weirdo. He just came up to me in the restaurant. He got a copy of the fax I sent Max."

"You're kidding?"

"I wish I was."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. If he sent that to Warren. I'd be fucked."

There was a pause. "You know I am so sick of your problems."

"What do you mean?"

"If you hadn't broken the law you'd have nothing to fear."

He said nothing.

"You got yourself into this mess. It's your own greed that's the problem."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"What am I suppose to do? Why should I support you when I don't believe in this course of action to begin with?"

"I'm only looking for some understanding."

"Don't try to manipulate me. It's your mess. You figure it out. You're a smart guy."

She hung up.

He sat still for a second. Then he took the phone and slammed it into the receiver so hard that his whole desk rattled.

"Jesus. What was that?" Peter stood in the doorway holding a sheaf of papers.

"Nothing. I'm just a little upset right now. What's up?"

"I stumbled across a resume of Karl Lehman's."

"In the boxes?"

"No. Elaine gave it to me. One of the press searches. I thought you might like to take a look."

"Sure." He took the piece of paper from Peter, scanning it quickly.

"He went to Stanford."

"Yeah. That's right."

"Thanks Peter."

"Are you sure everything's okay?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about me."

He left closing the door behind him.

He sat there thinking for a long time. Then he picked up the phone and dialled a number.

"What city?" said the operator.

"Stanford. Faculty of Business Studies."

He wrote the number on the edge of one of his printouts.

"Mr. Fairfax is not available" said the secretary when his call went through. "I can give you Mr. Doncaster. He was head of the faculty for the period you mentioned."

"That would be fine."

He was put on hold for a few minutes.

"Hello" said a deep baritone.

"Mr. Doncaster?"

"Yes."

"I'm calling from the Stanford Alumni Association of Chicago. I was trying to locate two former students. I was just wondering if you happened to know either of them."

"Who might they be?"

"Well the first name is Jack Williamson."

"Jack. Jack Williamson. Why is that name familiar? Oh I remember Jack. Isn't he head of some computer firm now?"

"He's been in the news lately."

"That might be it."

"He was also associated with another name in my mind. He had a friend.

Inseparable, those two. "

"Do you remember the friend's name?"

"Yes. Let me see. Lehman. Karl Lehman. That was it."

"I see."

"Thanks a lot Mr. Doncaster you've been a great help."

"I might have an address or a number for them."

"No. That's all-right. Thank you." He hung up the phone.

Chapter 8 – Tour of Trading Floor

"This way gentlemen."

Nicholas and the newcomers followed him. Warren led them from the reception through tall mahogany doors that swung silently shut after they passed.

"This is our trading floor" said Warren, turning to face them. He spoke louder to compete with the many strident voices that filled the air. They stood at one end of a long, high-ceilinged room. Double tiers lined each wall, carrying workstations fitted with computers. Brokers manned the stations. Some held heated discussion by phone with counterparts across the globe. Others sat staring at monitors oblivious to the noise around them. Assistants and support staff scurried back and forth across the floor.

Above their heads financial data flashed from four large screens. An electronic ticker display carried a moving tally of stock prices.

"There goes Trionics" said Warren looking up, as the symbol passed on the display. "Up five eighths already today."

"That's thirty days of solid growth" said Karl.

"How many people work here?" said Jack, turning to Nicholas. His reddish face clashed with the grey of his suit.

"On the floor? About eighty."

"Very impressive, Warren. This is some operation" said Karl, blinking repeatedly in the fluorescent lights. His lean, pinched face distorted into a smile. "I really like the logo" he said looking at eagle emblazoned to the floor.

"Very direct."

"The old man's idea" said Warren. "He's big on the symbolism."

"Well it works. It certainly does."

"Symbolism is vital" said Jack. "I use it all the time to motivate people."

The four men walked towards the conference room.

"I hope you got the documents I sent" said Karl, falling step with Nicholas.

"Yes I did."

"Please don't hesitate to call if you need anything else. Anything at all."

He nodded.

They walked into the conference room. Each taking a seat at one end of the table, Warren at the head.

Peter arrived a few moments later carrying a bundle of papers. He distributed a bunch of sheets to each man and took a seat at the end.

"The first thing we want to talk about Jack is your financial position" said Warren. "Peter has put together a report on your net worth. I thought we might go through that first."

"Sure" said Jack.

"Well your net worth is around the three million mark. Has been for the last four years" said Warren.

"I assume you gentlemen are basing that on tax returns" said Karl.

"We don't have very much else to go on" said Nicholas.

"Of course I understand. However Jack has other assets. He has foreign assets which would not come within US tax jurisdiction" said Karl.

"It's not wise for me to disclose all my assets" said Jack. "That doesn't mean I don't have them."

"What about documentation?" said Nicholas.

There was silence.

"Do we have to go over this again? I already explained this to your assistant, Warren. How many times do we have to labor this point?"

"I'm sorry Jack" said Warren. "I know you're frustrated. If it was something that you had readily available that would help us" said Warren.

"Otherwise I don't want to get too hung up on this issue."

"Well it's not."

"I think we all need to understand the issues" said Karl. "It's really something none of us appreciate unless we're in that position. This information is proprietary to Fealty. I can send you documentation to verify. Jack has substantial monies in offshore companies."

"It's not a public disclosure. Anything we receive is strictly confidential" said Nicholas.

"Warren I'm getting really tired of this. Can we move on?" said Jack.

"Also the debt. We'd like to get some figure on the total indebtedness of Trionics" said Nicholas.

"Oh your brilliant discovery" said Jack.

"I was getting to that" said Warren. "What is the debt ratio? That kind of thing."

"I guess we could come up with something" said Karl looking at Jack. "You see Warren and Nick too. Just so you both understand. Jack and I think he will allow me to say this, Jack is not used to making these kinds of disclosures."

"I know. I know" said Warren.

"Isn't this information you have readily available?" said Nicholas. "I guess I don't see the difficulty."

Warren glared at him.

"Warren do I have to be cross-examined" said Jack. "You don't need all this information. It's not in my interest to disclose all my financial records. Karl has all the documentation."

"With you?" said Nicholas.

"No. No. Not all with me." His face twitched. "It's in the San Francisco office."

"Excuse us for a second" said Warren. "Nick. I need to talk to you outside."

He got up and followed Warren out into the hallway.

Warren shut the door behind them.

"Don't try my patience, hotshot. I am very close to the edge with this shit. Just shut your mouth and let me ask the questions. Got it?"

He nodded.

They went back inside.

"Sorry about that" said Warren. "Now where were we?"

"The financials" said Karl.

"Yes" said Warren. "Just give us what you have. We'll let you know if we need anything else."

Karl nodded.

"Before I forget" said Jack, "Karl and I are taking you both out to lunch.

We have a reservation for twelve at Mondello's."

"That would be fine" said Warren. "Why don't you go with Nick? I'll meet you all out front."

He stood in the lobby with Karl and Jack. There was silence.

"So Nick. You don't mind if I call you Nick?" said Karl.

"That's fine."

"This is your first offering I believe."

"That's right."

"Must be quite a challenge."

"It's all-right."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty eight."

"That's what amazes me. Most people in your position are in their late thirties."

"I know."

"If this deal goes through it's going to mean a lot of money for everyone concerned. Many people are relying on this deal to succeed."

"No doubt."

"Everyone involved stands to gain."

"You could be in charge of this whole offering too. It could mean a lot more responsibility and possibly repeat business going forward" said Jack.

"Really."

"Jack has many friends in the industry" said Karl.

He said nothing.

"You've been with Stephen's how long?" said Jack

"Three years."

"I could see a position for you in a number of different companies."

Warren came out into the lobby wearing his overcoat.

"Sorry about that" he said. "I got caught on the phone."

They stepped into the elevator.

"Where are you staying?" said Warren.

"I always stay at the Francis Drake, when I'm in Chicago" said Jack. "I was able to get the presidential suite. It's worth it, though."

"Really" said Warren.

"Jack never skimps on comfort" said Karl.

They stepped out into the underground parking lot. A large black limousine was waiting, engine running, near the elevator door. Clouds of vapor spiraled upwards from the exhaust. A uniformed chauffeur jumped out when

he saw the four men and ran around the car to hold the door open. Jack got in first. Nicholas was last.

"How about a drink, Warren?" said Jack when they were all seated. Karl and Jack sat facing them.

"Oh I don't know."

"I'll make it small. Bourbon's okay?" He leaned forward. A small drinks cabinet was set into one side of the car. He took two glasses picking ice from a container with silver tongs.

"Oh hell, why not."

The car came up the ramp and turned onto La Salle Street.

"You can get these quite cheaply" he said gesturing around the car.

"They're not as costly to run as you would think." He placed one freckled hand on the leather arm rest. "I was able to get one for the San Francisco office.

What do you think, Warren?"

"I like it." He sat back in the seat bundled in his overcoat, his trousers hitched up around his ankles, an expanse of pink leg exposed.

They crossed the river. The cabinet rattled as they passed over the metal grille of the bridge. They came to a standstill at traffic lights.

He looked out through tinted glass. A teenage boy walked between the rows of cars, a bundle of newspapers under one arm. A ragged scarf was

wrapped around his head. His voice was muffled through the glass as he hawked his wares. The wind drove down the street driving paper and junk high into the air.

"People under estimate the value of quality" Jack said, after sipping from his glass.

Warren nodded his head. "There is no substitute for it."

"That's one of the things I've always liked about you Jack" said Karl.

"You've always had an appreciation for the finer things."

They sat in the hushed elegance of a regal dining room. Stylish waiters waltzed through the dining room carrying heavily laden platters with consummate skill. A string quartet played Mozart in the background.

Jack speared his fresh salmon
"We've been very lucky with this offer, you know" he said after swallowing.

"How's that?" said Warren.

"The feedback we've been getting is amazing. Karl has all the info."

"Absolutely. I can't tell you how many calls we've been getting."

"You are coming to the banquet?" said Jack.

They both nodded.

That evening he drove to pick her up. He parked the car in the driveway of her apartment building waving to the security guard as he ran inside. She was standing in the lobby waiting.

"You took your time" she said.

"It took me a while to get out of the office." He stopped and stared when he saw her. "Look at you."

"What?" She followed him out to the car, sitting in the passenger seat. She rummaged in her purse pulling out a mirror. She was wearing a low cut black evening dress. "You said it was formal."

"I know. You look amazing."

"Oh shut up." She smiled.

"It's gained another fifty cents on yesterday."

"I thought we're not going to talk about it."

He said nothing.

"Don't start bringing it up."

"I know. I know. It's my deal."

"What are you going to do about that guy?"

He was quiet. "I don't know."

She put a hand on his leg, turning in her seat to look at him. "Nick why don't you pay off the loan? Then if he does send the fax then they won't come down on you so hard."

"Then I'll have to cash in now while it's still building."

"There are no alternatives."

"I'll cash out when it hits thirty. It won't be long. Just let me handle it, will you?"

"When are you going to handle it?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ."

She was silent after that.

A parking valet took the car when they pulled up outside. He handed them a ticket.

They walked through a revolving door into a glitzy foyer. Expensively dressed people lounged on elegant furniture and thronged back and forth past the reception desks. A uniformed usher directed them to a marble staircase. It led upwards in a gentle spiral to a second level. Thick red carpet spread out before them. A huge chandelier hung down from the ceiling. Its thousands glass pieces sparkled.

"Pretty impressive" he said.

She scowled.

Double doors opened and steady streams of people were passing through.

They met Karl and Jack standing by the door greeting the arriving guests.

"Who is this lovely lady?" said Karl, a wide grin transforming ascetic features.

"Sonia, this is Karl Lehman. He'll be working with us on the Trionics offering."

She shook his hand. He stared at her for a long time.

"Is something wrong?" she said.

"Enchanting" he said, relinquishing her hand finally.

More guests arrived distracting Karl's attention.

The banquet hall was centered on a huge dome where already a light orchestra was playing Strauss. Chandeliers and drapes offset gilded walls finished with ornate cornices. Couples crossed the oak dance floor as yet bare of dancers. A large stage at the back of the hall was decked out with a huge banner bearing Trionics name replete with slogan.

They walked towards their table.

"Gross" she said to Nicholas, taking her seat.

They were joined after a few minutes by Warren, Ryan and Peter with their respective partners.

"Is this someone new?" said Nicholas, whispering in Peter's ear when he took his seat beside him. A mousy girl with thick lensed glasses sat to Peter's left. She shifted in her seat avoiding his gaze.

"No. We're just friends." Peter leaned closer. "What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"Her" he whispered.

"She's fine. What do you think?"

"Such a lovely reception" said Warren's wife interrupting their talk. She planted one fleshy arm on the table. "It must have cost a fortune. Warren did you see the Mayor and his wife. I ran into John Pietro. He's such a kidder. He's just become chairman of the board of trade. Didn't say a word about it. I had to bring it up. So modest. You'd hardly know."

Warren nodded standing by his chair. He sat down, his gut bound in by a large cummerbund. "Not too modest to take the job" he said, sipping from his gin and tonic. Two empty glasses sat beside the full one. Under the bright lights his face was assuming its typical reddish hue. "Where's the food? That's what I want to know."

"Calm down, Warren. Now dear" she said turning to Sonia. "You're in what exactly?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What do you do?"

"I work for an advertising agency."

"Oh yes, advertising. I told my niece not to bother with that. Not much money is what I told her."

"Is that a fact? I don't know what you heard, but it pays pretty well" said Sonia.

"Oh you're too funny" she laughed. "Catering is where it's at. I manage a chain of franchises. In fact only last week I was in Dallas. We're opening a new store there. You've heard of Bello's Coffee, of course?"

Sonia nodded.

"I tell you if you're looking for a career we employ a lot of girls."

"I don't think so."

"Are you sure? Next week.."

"So nice to see everyone could come. I hope you're all having a good time" said Karl. His large Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. His eyes fixated on Sonia's chest. She followed his gaze folding her arms.

"Mr. Lehman" said Warren's wife.

"Oh call me Karl, please. We're all friends here."

"Karl what a wonderful evening. Absolutely adorable. I'm amazed you were able to get the Emerald Room at such short notice."

"You don't deserve anything less" he said, dividing his gaze between Sonia and Warren's wife. "It's absolutely worth it, don't you think."

"Of course."

"Good show" added Warren. He stifled a yawn.

"Got to go" said Karl as Jack appeared on the stage.

"What a delightful man" she said to Sonia after he left. "Now, Peter who is your date? You haven't introduced me?" she said leaning across Sonia.

"Don't mind me" said Sonia.

"Oh I'm sorry dear" said Warren's wife. She laughed but didn't move.

"We're not dating" said Peter, his cheeks reddening. "Mary, this is Mrs. Benton."

"Hello" said Mary. She looked up and quickly looked down again, twisting the stem of her wine glass round and round.

"How long is this going to take?" Sonia whispered to Nicholas.

"God knows. Ryan how long is the dinner?"

"With the speeches it could run to eleven or twelve."

"Bored already, hotshot" said Warren.

"It is very extravagant" said Ryan's wife. "It must cost thousands of dollars to finance this."

"That's nothing dear. Trust me" said Warren's wife. "We've been at some functions; I wouldn't like to say what the price tag was. Only last week my company rented out the banquet hall in the Drake."

"It's nothing" said Warren. "Nothing but a drop in the ocean to these people."

"It must be wonderful having such affluent friends" said Sonia.

"Oh yes..." she stopped and looked at Sonia closely.

"There are the guys from Renfell" said Ryan. A group of suited gentlemen took their seats at a table nearby.

"Jesus. Those vultures. Are they getting in on it already?" said Warren.

"I'm so sick of tripping over them." He finished his drink.

"Didn't Jack say they were meeting with Renfell after lunch today?" said Nicholas.

"Not to me" said Warren. "Where's that frigging waiter?"

A waiter came over in response to his signal.

"Try putting some gin in it this time" he said putting his glass on his tray.

"Warren that's your fourth" said his wife.

"Oh so what."

"Doctor Morgan told you to cut down."

"Screw Doctor Morgan."

"Looks like every brokerage in Chicago has been invited" said Nicholas.

"At least we're getting top billing" said Ryan.

"No one else wants to touch it" said Nicholas. Warren glared at him.

"Geez it's looking like cabaret up there" said Ryan looking at the stage.

Jack and Karl sat on chairs on the stage.

"Californian style" said Warren.

"I want to thank everyone for coming tonight" said Jack, his voice relayed through large speakers on either side of the stage. "Some of you I have already met, others I hope to meet soon. This is a very exciting time for Trionics. We've just had our first offering and soon we plan to have our second. I hope that many of you here tonight will join with me in taking Trionics into the next century."

Peter got up and left the table.

"Where's Berens going?" said Warren as the waiter brought him his drink.

"The bathroom" said Mary, looking up quickly and looking down again.

"The opportunities facing Trionics are quite simply enormous" said Jack.

"Some vegetables" said the waiter holding a steaming salver in one hand.

Nicholas shook his head.

"Quite a show" he said.

"They certainly want to impress" said Ryan.

The waiters came and cleared the tables. Warren's wife went off in pursuit of Karl Lehman.

"I've got to get out of here" she whispered.

He nodded.

They left the ball room and walked down the stairs and into the foyer. An attendant handed them their coats. They stood facing each other beneath the chandelier.

"Thank God that's over" she said. She put on her coat. "I don't know how you stand it."

"It pays the bills. That's all."

"I like Ryan" she said walking to the revolving door. "That's about it."

They stood shivering on the sidewalk. He quickly buttoned up his coat. Sonia was lightly dressed in a thin black overcoat.

"Do you want my overcoat?"

"No." Her frown returned.

"Maybe we should stand inside until a cab arrives" he said.

The valet arrived with their car. The doorman held the door open for them. They got in.

He reached for her hand. She didn't respond.

"Are you tired?"

She nodded.

"Sorry I dragged you to this thing."

"It's okay."

"Do you want to come over?"

"Not tonight."

"Oh." He was quiet. He parked in her driveway, lights flashing. "You seem distant the last few days."

"I suppose I have been." She opened the door.

"I know why."

She got out of the car.

"I'll call you tomorrow" he called after her.

"Okay." She shut the car door.

Chapter 9 – Meeting Jack Williamson

He stepped up to the revolving door and pushed. The warm air hit him as he passed through the doorway. The hotel was busy. Children crowded around parents, some chasing each other through the crowd. Staff and uniformed attendants moved through the throng. Porters followed dapper business men carrying large suitcases. A party of tourists passed by led by a blonde woman with a clipboard.

He walked to the reception desk, placing his briefcase on the floor. A desk clerk looked up from his computer terminal.

"Jack Williamson" he said.

"Ah." He smiled, picking up the phone. "Who shall I say is calling?"

"Nicholas Martin" he said.

He spoke softly into the phone putting it down after a moment. "You can go right up. You're expected."

The elevator left him in a long richly carpeted corridor. Tall leafy plants flanked the elevator and were dotted at intervals along the quiet hallway. He followed the signs his shoes sinking deep into the wool pile. He knocked on the door. After a long interval a tall well-built man in a dark suit opened it and stood there.

"Nicholas Martin" he said. "Here to see Jack Williamson."

He beckoned him to come in.

"He'll be with you in a moment. You can take a seat." He pointed to a suite of furniture before leaving him in an immaculate sitting room

He sat on a chair putting his briefcase on the glass coffee table in front of him.

He could hear voices coming from the bedroom. A woman's voice was audible. He opened his briefcase and took out some documents.

The bedroom door opened. He looked up. A naked woman stood in the doorway. Long blonde tresses hung down over a tanned athletic body. She smiled at him showing no sign of embarrassment or self-consciousness. Then she turned and walked back into the bedroom.

"Beautiful. Isn't she?" said Jack walking out of the bedroom. He was dressed in a silk dressing gown. The woman closed the bedroom door after him.

He said nothing.

"How old do you think I am?" he said sitting on the sofa near the marble fireplace.

He looked at him. "Early fifties?"

"I'm fifty six. Fifty six years old. Look at me. How many men of my age have a woman like that?"

"I don't see the relevance."

"Answer the question."

"I've no idea. Anyway your personal life doesn't interest me."

"Doesn't it? You're not a man if you didn't like what you just saw."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I have what you desire. How does that make you feel?"

"What do you know of my desire? I have my own ambitions."

"Your ambitions." He laughed. "You don't know what real money is. You can't even imagine the power it gives you. Do you know what it is to influence, to shape and to mold other people? I can help you get where you want to be."

"Why would you want to help me?"

"I have my reasons."

"What if I told you I didn't want your help and that I didn't need it?"

"You'd be a fool."

"Then I must be a fool." He slammed his briefcase shut. "Don't you have enough followers in your menagerie?"

"You're good at what you do. I'll give you that. Maybe very good. But what good is that? Guys like you are ten a penny."

"I don't think so."

"Everyone has a price. It's just a question of how much."

"I can see I'm beyond your comprehension."

"Don't flatter yourself. You yearn for wealth. I see it in you."

"Maybe. But on my terms."

"What are they?"

"You're very interested in what I think. Why would that be?"

He said nothing.

"I need you to sign these papers." He laid the documents out on the table. "Then I need not detain you any longer."

Jack grabbed the documents off the table. He signed them quickly and through them back at him. "Now you can go" he said.

He opened his briefcase and put the documents back inside. Then he got up and walked out the door.

He left the hotel walking briskly south. The sun was shining and the temperature was mild. He got to the restaurant in good time and was seated by a waiter. From his table he could see Ryan arriving.

"It took me that long to get a cab" said Ryan when Nicholas looked at his watch. "Relax. You haven't been waiting that long."

"I don't care."

He took off his overcoat and hung it on the coat stand beside the table.

"So how does it feel being in charge of your own project?"

"Everyone is so worried about what I think."

"I know what I want already" said Ryan, after a moment, putting down his menu. "I still don't get why Warren wants you on this project."

"I'm not so sure he does."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I embarrass him."

"How?"

"By questioning Jack and Karl."

"That's what you're supposed to do."

"I know."

"He's been acting awful strange about this deal" said Ryan.

"How's that?"

"I don't know. When you work with someone so long you get a feel for when they're acting weird. It's nothing I can put my finger on."

"Almost emotional?"

"That's it."

"He thinks you're feeling ignored."

"No really. It's great experience for you. I'm happy for you. It's not a competitive thing. It's just not smart to throw you into that. Warren knows that. Maybe he doesn't want me working on this one for some reason."

He took a piece of bread from the basket and picked the middle of it.

"Do you ever get tired of all this shit?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tired of the stress and the grief. My wife and I bought a cabin by the lake in Michigan. Sometimes I think of packing it in and moving up there with her."

"Wouldn't you miss the city and your job?"

"No. I doubt it. I'm not one of those people who need their job to feel good about themselves."

"Am I one of those people?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think you are."

Later that day the phone rang while he was sitting at his desk. He picked it up and said his name.

"Oh. Nicholas. Sorry. This is Karl Lehman. I was trying to reach Warren."

"Hold the line Karl. I can put you through."

"Can you? That would be great."

"Stay on the line."

"All-right. Thanks."

He keyed in Warren's extension. He waited until he heard Warren's
voice.

"This is Warren Benton."

Karl spoke. "Warren, Karl Lehman."

"Well?"

"You're going to have to wait."

He stayed on the line.

"Why?"

"You'll get it. Just be patient."

"What about today?"

"No go."

"That prick. I'd like to wring his fucking neck."

"Jack's pretty mad. "

"Don't worry about it?"

"He's concerned."

"Tell him not to worry."

"Okay."

"Call me tomorrow." They hung up.

He put the phone down.

After lunch he sat at his desk working on some papers. Warren came into his office. "You can tell Peter to stop working?" He stood in the doorway pretending not to pick his nose.

"Why? He's still collating the data?"

"Because we don't need him to do it anymore."

"What?"

"Don't look so surprised hotshot. We're close to a decision. That's all."

"What do you mean close?"

"Do you have to question everything I say?"

"There might be something in those documents that would sway our decision."

"Just do as I tell you."

He was silent. "Aren't they coming into the office today?" he said after a moment.

"They're scheduled for two."

"Do you need me there?"

"I don't think so. I'll give you a call if I do."

It was close to the end of the day that he sat in the cubicle in the bathroom. He was about to stand up and flush the toilet when he heard the sound of the bathroom door open. He could hear voices. It was Jack and Karl.

"I'd say we shoot for next week" said Jack.

Karl stood at the urinal. "Any sooner would give the wrong impression. Everything is pretty much ready."

"That little prick" said Jack.

"You think he's onto something?" said Karl.

"He thinks he is. I don't like him sniffing around, though."

"What's his angle? That's what I don't get. Why does he care so much?" said Karl. "Most of these guys take the money."

"Who knows?"

"Don't give anything away, Jack. I'm telling you. Don't let your temper get the better of you."

"I know. I know."

"I sure would like to get to know his girlfriend better" said Karl.

"Don't start that shit. Get a hooker or something."

The bathroom door opened and closed after them.

He pulled out his trousers and flushed the toilet. He came out of the cubicle and washed his hands. It was dark outside when he looked out the

window of his office. He turned off his computer and took his coat from the coat stand. Then he killed the light and closed the door of his office. He took the elevator down to the lobby and walked out through the main entrance.

It took a few minutes to get a cab.

Francesco looked up from his desk when he walked in the door.

"Mr. Martin, how are you?"

"All-right."

"You look troubled my friend."

"I am."

"What could trouble a young man such as you?"

"You'd be surprised."

He nodded. "The lady is waiting."

"Thanks."

"Come say good-bye, my friend."

"I will." He walked through the archway.

Sonia was sitting at their table, sipping from her wine glass. She looked up when she saw him but didn't smile.

"You look terrible" he said sitting down beside her.

"Thanks."

"You've got to stop worrying so much."

The waiter came and filled his wine glass.

He waited until he left. "Look it's my mess. I'll deal with it. I don't want to involve you. Really I don't."

"My mother was asking about her investment."

"I'll call her tomorrow."

"What are you going to tell her?"

"I don't know yet."

The waiter came with the main course. He set two plates on the table. He cleared away the soup dishes. Then he came back with a carafe and refilled their glasses.

"Everything okay" he said.

He nodded. He picked up his fork and started to eat.

Sonia picked at her dinner. After a while she put down her knife. "I don't feel well."

He looked up. "Something you ate?"

"I don't know. I feel weird."

"You look like you're really stressed out. Are you?"

"I don't know. Can we go soon?"

He nodded. The waiter brought the check.

Francesco was not around when they left. They caught a cab outside the restaurant.

"You want to come over?" he said.

"I suppose."

"How are you feeling?"

"Okay. A little bit better."

There was silence. The cab stopped at an intersection.

He reached for her hand.

"Don't."

"What?"

"Just don't."

"What's wrong with you?"

"It doesn't feel right."

"What doesn't feel right?"

"I don't know."

The cab dropped them in front of the building.

"I think I'm going to throw up" she said.

Her face was chalky white. They took the elevator up to his floor. As soon as he unlocked the front door she ran to the bathroom.

He followed after her. "Is there anything I can do?" he said.

She was crouched over the toilet bowl. Suddenly she retched and threw up into the toilet.

"Are you okay?" he said, leaning over her. Her coughing subsided.

"No." She leaned over the toilet again. "Leave me alone."

He went out and closed the bathroom door behind him. He walked into the bedroom and stood at the window. The sky was overcast and grey. The wind rattled the furniture on the balcony. He closed the blinds and walked across the room. He stood at his closet, undressing. He hung up his tuxedo putting his shoes at the back of the closet. He listened for sounds from the bathroom. There was silence. He lay down on the bed.

A few minutes later he heard her come out of the bathroom. She came in and sat down on the bed. There was more color in her cheeks.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Water."

He got up and walked out into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and filled a glass from the bottled water in the fridge. He carried the glass back into the bedroom.

"You look a bit better" he said handing it to her.

She took the water and drank it down fully. Then she lay back on the bed and stretched out. She was silent. He lay down beside her not saying anything.

"It's you who's making me feel this way."

"How could it be me?"

"It's your damn agenda. Your stupid pride and ambition that's doing this."

"Sonia, I'm so close. I just know it. I know I've been unreasonable. I know you've had to put up with a lot. You won't have to wait much longer."

"I'm sick of talking about it." She rolled over so her back was turned to him.

"I don't want to lose you."

She said nothing.

A low flying jet rumbled over the building. He listened as it faded into the darkness.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

"I don't know. I can't live like this, though."

"A few more weeks and I'll be there."

"Oh shut up. A few more weeks. It's always another week with you. If I hadn't felt so sick I would have gone home."

"Don't be like that."

"I will be like that."

He reached out and put a hand on her back.

"Don't touch me."

"Jesus Christ."

There was silence.

He got up and walked out into the kitchen. He opened the fridge door and took out a bottle of wine. He took a glass from the cabinet above the sink. He uncorked the bottle and poured himself a large glass.

"Do you want something to drink?" he called out. There was no reply.

He put the bottle back in the fridge and shut the door. He took the glass and walked back into the bedroom. Her eyes were closed. By her breathing he guessed she was asleep. He closed the bedroom door. He put his glass on the table beside the couch.

He put a CD in the player and sat back into the couch sipping from his glass.

Chapter 10 – Meeting Ryan at work

There were few people in the station when he waited for the train.

He caught the train early and was in the office in good time. Ryan came in and stood in the doorway. His face was red from the cold. He was wearing the suit for four days now.

"Ryan when was the last time you had your suit cleaned?"

"Since when did you take an interest in my appearance?"

"I'm concerned about your personal hygiene."

"Smart ass. You made me forgot what I came in here for. Now I remember, Max from Interbank was trying to reach you. I told him you'd give him a call when you got in."

The knot in his stomach tightened. "How come you got the call?"

He shrugged. "I guess he was calling around. Elaine put him through."

"Did he say what it was about?"

"No he just said call him."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks."

"How are you today?"

"All-right."

"You look kind of pale."

"No I'm fine."

"Warren wants to meet on Trionics."

"When?"

"A.S.A.P."

"Okay. Give me a few minutes."

Ryan turned to leave.

He pulled out a file drawer in his desk and took out his folders. They were all neatly labeled and sorted by alpha.

Warren was on the phone when they looked into his office. He waved Ryan and Nicholas to the seats in front of his desk. A half-eaten bagel was sitting on his desk. Peter arrived a few seconds later.

Warren put down the phone. "Take a chair from next door" he said taking a bite of his bagel.

"Here's the deal" he said with his mouth half full. Specks of bagel splattered on the documents in front of him. "Peter you're off the case effective now."

"But he's still building the financial profile" he said.

"Don't contradict me hotshot. We have enough for now. Karl is supplying all the necessary."

"He's right Warren" said Ryan. "We can't just rely on their information."

"Not you too. What's your problem?"

Ryan said nothing.

"How does it hurt to have more information? I just don't get it" said
Nicholas.

"There are other things Peter can spend his time on" said Warren. "This
is not our only project, genius."

"We could contact the SEC. They might have some something" said
Nicholas.

"Oh shit. You're determined to give me indigestion" said Warren.

"Why would you contact the SEC?" said Ryan.

"My impression was they were reluctant to disclose."

"I could keep digging" said Peter. "There might be something in the
documents."

"What decision have you reached regarding Trionics?" said Ryan.

"It's with the old man" said Warren.

"We should still go through what we've got" said Ryan.

"Oh Jesus. How much work is there?" said Warren.

"I could have it done by tomorrow evening" said Peter. He sat forward
in his chair. One foot was wagging under his seat.

Warren nodded brushing a smear of cream cheese off his chin.

"Hot shot why don't you supervise that. It will give you something to do rather than telling me how to do my job. Ryan can you get Stan Madden to start drawing up legal papers."

"Sounds like you've made a decision" said Ryan.

"I just want to be prepared. Ryan don't look so miserable."

When he got back to his office he closed the door. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number. Max picked up right away.

"Nick what's going on?" he said.

"What do you mean what's going on?"

"What's going on with this loan? You've got two late fees, and tomorrow you'll get another. You can't just leave it sitting here and ignore it."

"What's the problem? Just slap them on. You'll get your money."

"It's not as simple as that. Anyway we've never had a problem with Stephen's before. I checked the register. You've never had a late fee."

"Don't worry about it."

"My manager wants to talk to you. Hold on he's right here. I'm putting him on."

A deeper voice came on the line. "Who am I speaking too?"

"Nicholas Martin. Who are you?"

"Jerry Holt VP of lending. Mr. Martin this loan is seriously overdue."

"I know that Jerry. The money is tied up in stock. We'd like to keep it that way and pay the late fees."

"Why didn't you take a longer maturity loan? They're cheaper."

"Jerry in retrospect we would have. When we took out the loan we had no idea we would hold on to it this long."

"Well I guess its okay for now. You'll have to redeem it in a week or exchange it for a longer maturity."

"Don't worry."

"I used to deal with a Warren Benton over there. Is he available?"

"He's on vacation."

"Oh. All-right. Can you have him call me when he gets back? I guess we'll talk in a week then."

"In a week." He hung up the phone. His hand shook as he put down the receiver.

It had grown dark outside when he looked up from his desk. Karl Lehman stood in the doorway a bony hand resting on the handle.

"I just spoke with Warren" he said. "I thought I'd stop by. Can I come in?"

He waved him to a chair. Karl came in, shut the door behind him and sat down.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

"Well first of all I just want to tell you we really appreciate the job you're doing for us. Jack and I are very impressed with all the dedication and hard work you've put in on our behalf."

"That's not the impression I got talking to Jack."

"Oh he can be a little abrasive sometimes. He's just kidding around. He doesn't mean it. Really he thinks you're doing a great job."

"Is that what you came here to tell me?" he said.

"Well that and more." He shifted around in the chair crossing and uncrossing his legs blinking in the light. "We'd like to show our appreciation."

"How's that?"

"Well Jack and I wanted to make sure you were properly compensated for all you've done." He put a white envelope on the table.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

He opened the envelope. There was a check inside. It was made out for two hundred thousand dollars.

He looked up at Karl. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"It's a gift, a sign of our appreciation."

"I can't accept this."

"Why not?"

"Do you think I'm stupid? You don't give away two hundred grand for nothing."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you really want Karl? Why don't you answer that question? I don't think you're in the charity business."

"Think about it. That's a lot of money."

"I already have." He took the envelope and threw it back at him. "I can make my own money, thanks. I don't need yours."

The smile was gone. "You don't realize who you're fucking with."

"Maybe I don't, and maybe I don't care. What are you going to do? You're powerless."

Karl's face blushed with anger. He snatched the envelope off the desk and walked to the door.

"Not so nice anymore. Are you?" he called after him.

After Karl had left he got up and walked down the corridor. He walked through the mahogany doors and onto the trading floor. A few brokers were still at their desks. It was Friday and trading had been light. A guy in blue overalls was sweeping tickets off the floor. He walked past the old man's office.

The light was off and it was empty. He walked into Warren's office. He was on the phone.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"

He put his hand over the receiver. "Hotshot, I'm busy."

"It will only take a moment."

He waved him into the room. After a few moments he put down the receiver. "What do you want?"

"What's on the schedule with Karl and Jack?"

"You know what the schedule is."

"I thought he might have come to see you."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Either one."

"Why would they do that?"

"Aren't they flying out tomorrow?"

"So? What do you want, hotshot?"

"He came into my office."

"Who came into your office?" He leaned forward in his chair his bald head glistening in the light.

"Karl." He watched his face. There was no reaction. He waited for a moment then he said, "he told me what a good job I was doing."

"Oh he did. You'll get no such compliments from me."

Warren's phone started ringing.

"Is that it?" he said picking up his phone.

"That's it." He closed Warren's door behind him.

He walked back in the direction of his office pausing at one of the trading stations. The financial news was showing. He turned up the volume.

"Another big day for the stock that keeps growing. Trionics has analysts scrambling to understand just what it is that makes it tick. This was another record day for the stock now known as the lovechild of Wall Street. It posted record gains on the New York Stock Exchange. Trading was brisk, at one point gaining twenty base points. Some profit taking occurred in the afternoon. It closed ten points ahead."

Peter came and stood beside him.

"What are you doing here?" he said turning around.

"I'm still working on the documents." He looked at the chart on the screen. "Look at that. What I would give to be in at the start."

"That would make you an insider."

"I know. I know. It's just wishful thinking."

"How's the document review going?"

"Okay. I should be done by tomorrow. I won't be going anywhere tonight, though."

"Well, this is the life we lead."

"I know. I know." He looked at him directly. "Are you okay? You look kind of weird."

"I'm all-right."

He looked at his watch. "Well I got to get going. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

He walked back to his office and picked up his jacket. Then he turned off the computer. He took his coat off the coat stand and put it on. He picked up the phone and dialed Sonia's number.

"How was your day?" he said.

"Don't ask."

"You still want to meet later."

"I suppose."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"Where do you want to go?"

"How about a jazz bar? There's a place on State Street."

"That sounds okay."

"I'll come get you."

"What time?"

"Right now."

"Give me ten minutes. I'll be out front."

He hung up the phone. At seven he picked her up from the parking lot outside her office. She got into the car beside him.

"Are you still mad?" he said.

"Maybe."

"What do you mean maybe?"

"It depends on how I feel."

"You need a holiday. We could go to the Caribbean for a weekend."

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not? You always liked going there."

"Look. Don't pretend things are normal between us. Okay."

"Just how are things between us?"

"Let's not get into that."

He was silent. The valet took their car when he parked outside. Inside it was hot and smoky. People lined a narrow corridor that led from the street past a long bar where patrons jostled two and three deep around. Cigar smoke filled the confined space. They passed the bar and crossed a small dance floor jammed with gyrating couples and onlookers. Middle-aged women in panty

hose and short skirts drank from large wine glasses and flirted. One of them pinched his ass as he passed. In the corner there was a large piano where an elderly man with a grizzly beard was playing.

Steps led up to a quieter area beyond the floor with tables. Couples sat sipping drinks and watching the crowd. A waitress came and led them to a table. She took their coats when they sat down. A few moments later she returned with two drinks.

He downed his drink right away and then ordered another.

"You're in a hurry" she said.

"I'm a little tense right now."

She said nothing. After a while she said, "It's getting colder."

"Are you making conversation?"

"Well you're not saying anything."

"All I want is for it to be the way that it was."

"I can't do it. Not right now. I don't feel that way at all."

He turned his back to her and stared out at the crowd. He signaled the waitress as she went by.

"Are you talking to me?" she said after a while.

"I don't feel like talking."

"Stop being ridiculous. You're such a baby some times."

He ordered another drink.

"Do you want one?" he said.

"No. You're going to be drunk soon."

"I don't care."

"You're falling apart inside."

"Shut up."

"I don't even want to know what the latest in your long litany of misfortunes is."

"Good." He turned his back on her.

"You're so predictable" she said. "And to tell you the truth I'm not sympathetic. I'm not even sorry for you. You've made your own bed. Now you can lie in it."

The piano player stopped taking a burning cigarette from the ashtray.

He turned around to look at her. A solitary tear trickled down her face leaving a trail of mascara. She brushed it away with her hand.

"Why are you crying?" he said.

"You're destroying everything" she said.

The waitress brought him another drink.

"I want to leave."

"I'll drive you home" he said.

"You're too drunk."

"You drive then."

He followed her out of the bar swaying on his feet. The valet came and brought the car around. He slumped into the passenger seat.

When he looked up they were in the parking lot of his building.

"What happened?"

"You feel asleep."

"My head hurts. Are you coming up?"

"I don't know."

"Oh come on."

He threw his coat on the couch when he opened the door.

"Shouldn't you drink some water?" she said as he lay down on the bed fully dressed.

"I don't care."

"Do you want me to close the blinds?"

"Okay."

She lay on the bed curled up in one corner. He snuggled up closer.

"Aren't you cold?" he said putting his arms around her.

"I'm not really in the mood, tonight."

"Oh come on. You're not tired."

"No really."

He snuggled closer kissing the back of her neck.

"Stop it."

He kissed her again.

"Stop." Her voice was hard.

He pulled away and rolled over to his side of the bed. "What's wrong?"

he said.

"I shouldn't be here."

"Why not? Where else would you be?"

"Somewhere far away from your agenda."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Can't we just go to sleep?"

"If you like." He said nothing.

"What's wrong now?" she said.

"How do you think this is supposed to make me feel?"

"Nicholas I'm very tired."

"It's more than that. Don't you want to resolve what's bugging you?"

"There is no way to resolve it."

"What can I do?"

"Let's go to sleep."

There was silence.

After a while she rolled over on her. He could tell by her breathing that she was awake.

"Maybe I should sleep on the couch" he said.

"Oh just go to sleep. Stop being melodramatic."

"Sonia. I don't think you realize how this makes me feel."

"Maybe I don't."

"I want to talk about it."

"What's there to talk about? If you want to negotiate you have to be willing to compromise."

"It shouldn't be affecting you like this."

"Well it is."

"But it's my business."

"Your business is my business."

"Why?"

"Am I supposed to watch passively while you throw your life away?"

What if I told you I wanted to throw my life away? Would you stand by and watch?"

"It's not throwing my life away."

"You're jeopardizing your career, your freedom, possibly even your life."

"What do you mean my life?"

"That psycho who's been bugging you. He could be capable of anything."

"I can look after myself."

"Well you don't need me then."

"Oh stop."

There was silence.

"For the first time ever tonight I didn't like you" she said.

"Don't say that."

"I hate this part of you. It's alien to me. It cares nothing for me. And since you refuse to deal with it grows to dominate everything."

"Why can't you allow that I do this? All I'm asking is that you have an open mind and be patient."

"That's what you always say. You're asking too much. I'm too involved. I have too much of a vested interest to watch you fuck up everything. It's torture to me."

"Two weeks. That's all I ask."

"Oh what's the use? Why do I even bother trying to discuss this with you? You're not going to change."

"Neither are you."

"Fuck you Nicholas Martin. Damn your pride and ambition. I hope you're happy when you have your million dollars because you'll going to be very much alone."

She got up and pulled the covers off the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sleeping on the couch." She slammed the door behind her.

Chapter 11 – Looking in the safety deposit box

It was lunch hour. He shook, shaking on the street corner, waiting for the lights to change. He rubbed gloved hands together for warmth. Icicles hung from the streetlights and the awnings of buildings. Snow, frozen hard, crunched underfoot. The cold seeped into his shoes. There were few pedestrians. Those that were toddled penguin-like along the icy sidewalks.

He looked up at the entrance. Doric columns flanked a stone staircase above which a lintel bore the words Trust Bank. It was quiet when he passed through the revolving door. Two guards stood at the security barrier, watching. They took his bag putting it through the x-ray machine. They handed it back to him when he passed through the metal detector.

A large empty hallway echoed with his footsteps. At the end was a marble topped counter behind which metal grilles rose from floor to ceiling. A clerk looked up from his terminal.

"I want to look in a safety deposit box" he said.

"You need to sign your name in the register." He pushed an open book towards him. He looked at the signature. "How are you today, Mr.?"

"Jones."

"How are you, Mr. Jones?"

"Fine."

"Do you have the account number?"

He nodded placing a sheet of paper on the marble counter top. His hand shook as he put it down.

The clerk looked at the page and then keyed a number into his computer. "All those boxes are kept on aisle twenty. And the last name?"

"Tyler."

"You need to come round." He followed him along the counter until they reached a flap which he raised. He followed him back. He opened the metal gate.

TV cameras attached to the ceiling turned slowly as they passed. They walked along rows of security boxes, stacked floor to ceiling.

"This is the aisle" said the clerk stopping to read the number on the floor.

They walked down the aisle, boxes to their left and right.

"Here it is" he said. "Tyler right?"

He nodded.

The clerk inserted a key in the box and turned. Then he pulled the box from the wall and handed to Nicholas.

"Do you need a few minutes?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"I'll be waiting in the aisle."

"Okay."

He looked inside the box after the clerk had gone. There was jewelry, a lock of hair set in crystal, and a sheaf of stock certificates bound with a ribbon and underneath it a plain white envelope. He took out the envelope holding the box under one arm. It was not sealed. He opened it up. Inside was a sheet of paper. On it, clearly printed, was a six digit number. He repeated the number several times to himself. Then he folded the sheet and put it back in the envelope placing it carefully in the bottom of the box. He was still wearing his gloves. He signaled to the guard who came back down the aisle.

"All set?" he said.

"Yeah."

He put the box back in its slot and turned the key. "Most of them sit here for years" he said. "I guess some people just forget about them."

He stood by the metal gate, waiting while the guard turned the key in the lock.

"You're the first person who came in today" he said, holding the flap open for him as he passed through the counter.

"Thanks a lot."

"No problem."

He walked quickly through the hallway. A guard looked up from his newspaper as he passed by.

When he got to his office the phone was ringing.

"Where were you?" said Sonia when he picked up.

"At lunch."

"Oh. You sound weird."

"I'm all-right."

"I need to talk to you later."

"What about?"

"I don't want to discuss it over the phone."

"Okay."

"I'll call you later."

He hung up the phone.

Sometime later he looked out. Snow was falling again. It swirled in great clouds past his window leaving a white coating on ledge. A man in the office opposite looked down from his window to the street below. He was bald. Another man came into the office. The bald man turned around to face him. Then they walked out of the room together. The light went off abruptly. He looked up from his desk. Peter stood in the doorway.

"Do you have a second?" he said.

"What's up?"

"I think I've found something." He walked over to Nicholas's desk and put a smudged facsimile in front of him.

"What's this?"

"Read it."

He looked at the sheet of paper.

"Where did this come from?"

"It came off the fax. Elaine brought it to me."

"Yes. But who sent it."

"I don't know."

He looked at the fax. There was no name, address or telephone. Just a plain sheet of paper with the words 'cover page' printed on it. The second page was a computer printout. It showed a series of payments from Jack Williamson's personal account to various individuals.

"Look at this. These are all high ranking executives in brokerage firms."

"I know" said Peter. "Why do you think he would be paying them these sums of money?"

"Look at these names. That's a roll call of who's who in the underwriting world. He's got them all on a payroll." He picked up the phone.

"Who are you calling?" said Peter.

"Hold on."

"Stephen's & Co." said the voice at the other end.

"Elaine, it's Nicholas, can you print a transmission report from the fax machine?"

He hung up. "We might be able to trace whoever sent that fax."

He knocked on Warren's door. Warren looked up from his desk when he shut the door behind him.

"Take a look at what Peter discovered."

"What do you want?"

He put the document on his desk. "I think that says it all."

Warren inclined his large head downwards. "What does that prove?" he said looking up after a moment.

"It proves they are not what they claim to be."

"So. It's hardly conclusive."

"I think it's enough to cancel our involvement."

"Let's not jump to conclusions."

"How much proof do you need? Anyway there's been evidence already."

"All-right. Let me look into it."

"Do you want me to call the SEC?"

"Do not call the SEC."

"Why not?"

"Jesus Christ you're fucking driving me nuts."

"Maybe he has a record."

"Get the fuck out of my office before I throw something at you."

He shut the door behind him when he left. He walked past the old man's office. He called out to him as he passed.

"Come in Nick. Come in for a second."

He went into the office.

The old man was sitting at his desk in a newly pressed suit. His skin looked pale and clammy. He looked up.

"Take a seat. Take a seat." he said.

He sat down. "How are you?" he said sitting down.

"Terrible. Doctors. Doctors. They're killing me Nick. Eighty grand and I still feel like shit."

"Is that where you've been?"

"They're not done yet, either. They want to do another bypass. Those frigging butchers. Murderers. That's what they are. Tell me something to cheer me up. You've got youth on your side."

"Well, everything is going well."

"Really. You don't look it. Nobody tells me the truth. Even Warren lies to me. Just like my wife." He looked at some documents on his desk. "What do you think of this Trionics deal?"

"I have reservations."

"You think its crap."

"Basically."

"I think you're right. Scratch that from the list." He threw the document into a wastepaper basket. "Do you want some real advice?" he said, lowering his voice.

"Sure." He leaned forward in his chair.

"Make your killing and get the fuck out. Get out of this business as soon as you can. It sucks you in. Before you know it you're all washed up. I had so many plans. And where do I end up? On the chopping block with hundred grand hole in my chest and a gold digging bitch waiting for me at home."

He said nothing.

"I'm sorry Nick. I need to be alone now."

He nodded getting up. He closed the door behind him after he left.

Later that day he knocked on Warren's door and went in.

"What decision have you made on Trionics?" he said after he closed the door.

"I'm working on that."

"I would have thought it was a priority."

"Leave it with me."

"When are they coming up?"

"Actually we're meeting them at Mondo's."

"I'll grab my coat and meet you out front" he said.

Voices murmured over the clink of cups and cutlery. Waiters moved back and forth tending to their charges. It was midday. Tables of business men lounged on Victorian settees some huddled over documents. Others relaxing in some expansive with their and conspiratorial conversations. A grey haired man with glasses waved his arm in the air to emphasize a point. His companion nodded. explained some concept to an immaculately groomed man with were dotted across the drawing room. *Characterize people in room.* Expansive gestures, confident pronouncements and aggressive Chairs and tables were of period design. A large picture hung over a massive marble fireplace where a log fire blazed.

"This is the most expensive restaurant in Chicago" said Warren.

"That's right" said Jack. "But as we've said already the finer things in life are worth it."

"Absolutely" said Warren.

"Jack is well known here" said Karl.

"My second favorite restaurant" he said. His open mouth revealed a quantity of chewed bread.

"What's your first?" said Warren.

"We were there last time."

"Oh."

"We need to talk business" said Nicholas.

"I'll handle this, thanks" said Warren. "We came across something in the documents that we should discuss. I want to say in advance that I don't see it as a huge problem."

"What is it?" said Karl.

"Maybe it would be easier to show you" said Nicholas. He took two sheets out of his briefcase. "This came off our fax earlier today."

"What the hell is this?" said Jack looking at the sheet of paper.

"It's a list of payments made by you to various high ranking officials in brokerage firms."

"Where did you get this? Warren you don't believe this unsubstantiated rubbish do you?"

"I don't know what to make of it" said Warren.

"It's pretty obvious" said Karl. "Someone is trying to destroy this deal and Trionics reputation in the process."

"Why would anyone want to do that?" said Nicholas.

"Don't be so naive. Jack has made some enemies. It's natural when you're in business for yourself."

"Where did you get this?" said Jack.

"We weren't able to trace the fax transmission. It came from a copier's store in Cleveland. Anyone could have sent it."

After the waiter cleared away the plates. He got up and walked to the bathroom. He stood at the urinal focusing on the tiles on the wall. He heard the bathroom door open and swing closed. Footsteps approached the vacant urinal to his left. He looked up. It was Jack.

"You're enjoying the lunch?" said Jack.

"The food's pretty good."

There was a pause. Urine pattered into the bowl. "I can't tell you how damaging that kind of information is in the wrong hands. Things are very delicate right now" he said.

"Of course."

"I think I have been pretty tolerant so far."

"What?"

"You punk. Let me tell you something about myself so you understand better." He turned to face him. His face reddened with anger. "I get what I want. Do you understand that? When you're on my side I can be very generous. People who stand in my way discover another side of me."

"I see."

"I don't want any unfavorable publicity."

"What kind of publicity would that be?"

"You know what I mean?" said Jack.

"I'm not sure that I do." He pulled up his zipper.

"I'm not going to allow anyone to drag my company's reputation through the dirt."

He smiled looking at him. "Well, Jack that depends on the condition of your company."

He turned to the wash basin and began washing his hands. Suddenly he was pushed aggressively from the side. He fell back against the basin, his back banging against the rim of the basin. He turned around. The smile was gone. Jack grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pushed him up against the wall. Saliva splattered over his face.

"You little prick. I could break you in two if I wanted. Don't get in my way."

Suddenly his face relaxed. He released his grip, smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "I'll see you inside."

He washed his hands, pausing to dry them under the fan. He wiped the traces of saliva away with a paper towel. Then he opened the door and walked back to the table. Everything was normal when he resumed his seat. The conversation carried on as before.

"So, Jack" said Warren after the waiter cleared the soup dishes, "have you found many underwriters?"

"We are still working on that" said Jack. "Karl can tell you more than me."

"We've had a lot of interest Warren" said Karl. "Nothing definite. People are so excited by the company right now."

"Have you seen today's Journal?" said Warren. "Trionics is on the front page. Fastest growing stock this year."

After the meal they stood outside the restaurant waiting for cabs.

"So think about it" said Jack to Warren. "And let us know what you decide. We would be very happy to do business with you."

"It's up to the old man, now" said Warren.

"Well keep me posted" said Jack. He shook hands with Warren. He did not shake Nicholas's hand.

"You're flying out tonight" said Warren.

"We're booked on a eight o clock flight" said Karl.

A cab pulled up in front of the restaurant. "We'll look forward to hearing from you" said Jack. They got in and shut the door.

"So few people have class these days" said Warren.

"What, Jack?"

"Shut up, hotshot. You know sometimes you really bug me."

Another cab pulled up. They got in.

"The last thing I want to do is upset you Warren."

Warren didn't reply. The cab dropped them in front of the office. They took the elevator up in silence.

It was starting to get dark outside by the time he sat down at his desk.

Chapter 12 – Funeral of the Old Man

It was a bright, bitter day. A few skaters were out on the inlet. A rasping wind swept in over the highway fluttering flags on the poles of a new apartment building and bending trees planted along the highway. A police car led the procession diverting traffic with flashing beacons. The line of cars stretched for half a mile down Lakeshore Drive. He rode in the second limousine with Ryan and Peter.

"I can't believe it" he said. "I talked to him two days ago."

"It was the second bypass. He died on the operating table" said Ryan.

"What a shitty way to go" said Peter.

"Where's Warren?" said Nicholas.

"Up front with the wife" said Ryan nodding at the limo ahead. Through the tinted glass he could just catch a glimpse of Warren's beetroot neck, bending and nodding. A woman's head was visible also. Beyond that the hearse.

"How old is she anyway?" he said.

"Twenty five" said Ryan.

"Twenty five" said Peter. "You're kidding. What's her game?"

"What do you think?" said Ryan. "He's got to be worth a hundred million at least."

"Who gets it?" said Peter.

"She gets the lot."

"Bitch" said Ryan. The others nodded their heads.

Later they stood by the graveside huddled in a miserable group. The workers had used drills to dig into the frozen ground. The wind swept in over the cemetery gates and shook the trees, sending soil scattering into the hole they had dug.

The priest raised his voice as he spoke into the microphone.

"Quite a turn out" said Ryan between chattering teeth.

"There's the mayor" said Nicholas, "and a couple of senators," his eyes watering from the wind. He wiped his eye with a gloved hand.

"He always was a big contributor to the party."

"Warren looks upset" said Peter.

"Is that possible?" he said.

"Crocodile tears" said Ryan.

"My first memory of the old man" said Warren speaking into the microphone, "was when I was a new employee fresh out of college. He came up to me on my second day."

"Are you going to the reception?" said Peter.

"Where is it?" he said.

"At the house in Winnetka."

"The office will be closed today anyway" said Ryan.

"Sure" he said.

After Warren had finished the workmen quickly started filling in the grave.

"Let's get out of here" said Ryan. "This place is depressing."

As they walked away the short, stocky figure of Norman Rosen appeared from behind a headstone nearby where he had been observing the ceremony. He approached the grave. Already the workmen were beginning to fill in the soil. He stood alone by the grave for some time. His face was impassive as he stroked his goatee. The rain started to come down heavily now. After some time he turned and walked away. A solitary tear fell from his eye and rolled down his chubby cheek merging with the rain as it descended on his bare head.

They got back in the limo and followed the lead car back onto the highway.

It was later at the reception that they stood in a circle in the old man's front room. A portrait of the old man and his first wife hung over the mantelpiece.

"He was a good guy" he said.

"One of the best" said Ryan.

"Who's that other guy?" He pointed to a picture taken on a golf course.

The old man and another man stood, clubs in hand.

"That's the old man's best friend" said Ryan. "They used to be partners too. I can't remember his name - Taylor or something. He had a stake in Stephen's way back when, before my time. He was even on the board for a while."

"How are you gentlemen?" said the old man's wife, detaching herself from a group that included Warren and the senators. She was dressed in black. She smiled when she looked at him.

"Sorry for what happened" he said.

"Oh I know. It was terrible" she said. "Do you work for the company?"

"Yes. I was speaking to him on Monday."

"And how long have you worked there?"

"Three years."

Ryan and Peter joined the other group. He stood alone with the old man's wife.

"Hmm. You must come around sometime" she said. "I get so bored on my own."

"I don't think so."

"Oh it but it would be fun, especially with such an attractive man."

"You're fucked up" he said. He turned from her and joined the other group.

He left the house shortly after and took a cab downtown.

The office was deserted. He walked through the trading area to his office and turned the light. He sat at his desk and picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"SEC, how can I help you?" said a voice.

"Ralph Wagner, please" he said when the secretary picked up.

"This is Ralph."

"Ralph, Nicholas Martin from Stephen's."

"What can I do for you?"

"Well we're on the verge of underwriting an offering of Trionics stock and I was wondering if you had any information on the CEO Jack Williamson or his partner Karl Lehman."

"Jack Williamson. We've been trying to pin something on that guy for years."

"What's he done?"

"Well that's just it. Nothing we can prove. You say your company is considering underwriting his stock."

"That's right."

"We've been watching his progress since this issue, Trionics, right?"

"Yeah."

"Since that hit the news."

"You don't have anything definite?"

"You know I wish I did. All I can tell you is we're investigating. I'd steer clear if I were you."

"Well let me know if anything comes up."

"Sure."

He hung up.

The next morning he arrived early. He made his way to the conference room catching up with Peter in the corridor.

"New suit?" he said.

"Yes it is" said Peter.

He smiled.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. It just seems like everyone is changing their image."

"You just don't like it when someone else tries to out do you."

"Keep trying, Peter."

They took their seats at the table. Warren was already there bulging out of his brand new suit. Ryan sat beside Peter. A few employees continued to

trickle in. Warren waited until the last person shut the door. He stood up.

There was silence.

"I know you have all heard the tragic news. I can't tell you what a loss this is to Stephen's and of course to his grieving wife. As sole beneficiary she is the largest shareholder in Stephen's. Until a suitable successor has been found she has asked me to take over the running of the company. The one other announcement I have is that we will be joining with Fealty Trust of San Francisco in underwriting an issue of Trionics stock." There was a

general intake of breath.

Warren continued. "We believe this participation will be very profitable for Stephen's."

They filed out after Warren left. Ryan turned to Nicholas. "Come with me if you wish. I think it's time we talked to Warren."

They waited until the rank and file had streamed out and then walked across the trading floor to Warren's office. He looked into the old man's office as he passed by. The Journal was sitting in his inbasket, unread.

They walked into Warren's office. He looked up.

"What do you want?" he said after Ryan had shut the door.

"We need to talk about Trionics" said Ryan.

"What is there to talk about?"

"Warren what's going on? This company is a dog. You know it as well as anyone else. They're con men."

"What the hell are you talking about?" His face started to redden.

Nicholas stood beside Ryan, silent.

"Warren this is a bad deal. Our investors are going to get burned if they put in for this."

"Who's been filling you full of this shit? Are you spreading rumours hotshot?"

"He has nothing to do it. Do you think I'm blind Warren? I can see what you're doing. I am asking to stop this deal before we get ourselves embroiled in whatever shading dealing they are up too. It could destroy our reputation and the company."

"Who the fuck do you think you are?"

"Don't make me take this to the board."

"Get out of my office. You're fired."

"You can't fire me."

"I can and I will. Clear out your desk. I want you out of here in two hours."

"Warren we've worked together for ten years."

"I don't give a fuck. I'm in charge now. I make the decisions around here. Don't make me call security."

"You know I'm right."

"Get out of my sight."

He looked at Nicholas. His face was crimson.

"Do you have something to say hotshot?"

He shook his head. He followed Ryan out the door. Ryan slammed the door behind him.

"That prick."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry for me" said Ryan. "Be sorry for this company and everyone who works for it with him in charge."

"I can't prove it but I think they got to him."

"Nothing else makes sense. Oh well. It's not my problem anymore."

He nodded.

They walked back towards his office.

"Now that I think about it, this is a good thing. I have money put by. I might just get the cabin by the lake I told you about."

"What about the board?"

"Oh to hell with the board. Let Warren fuck it up. Why should I care?"

I'm just as happy the way things have turned out. I'm too old for this shit, anyway. I just don't care anymore." He put out his hand. "Good luck."

They shook hands.

"Yeah you too. Keep in touch."

He went into his office and sat at his desk. The phone rang. He picked it up.

"Did you get it?"

He recognized the voice instantly. "I got it."

"When do I get my fax?"

"Union Station. Sunday at three. In the main hall. Come alone. What's the number?"

"Not until I get my fax."

The phone went dead.

"I heard about Ryan." He looked up. Peter stood in the doorway. "Can I come in?"

"Sure."

He shut the door and sat in the chair in front of the desk.

"Everyone is talking about it. We all think Trionics is a dog. Some of the brokers have been asking around. What's going on with Warren?"

"Who knows."

"But he's crazy committing to Trionics."

"He's the boss, now."

"What do you think?"

"I think Trionics is bad news. We have every indication."

"Aren't you going to do anything?"

"Why should I care if he hangs himself?"

"I guess."

He looked at his watch. "It's getting late."

"Do you want to have a drink before you go home?"

"Sure. Why not? Give me five minutes."

They walked down steps to a basement bar. A hostess greeted them when they entered, taking their coats.

They were in a large, low-ceilinged, dimly-lit room that stretched back. Mirrors on the walls gave the illusion of greater space. To their left was a grand piano where a man played jazz with an air of melancholy. He wore a shabby, evening jacket. His face was the colour of old mahogany, wrinkled and worn. A grey, fuzzy beard straggled up his chin. He pulled deeply on a filterless cigarette during a break. The ashtray was almost full to the brim.

In the center was the bar. Black and white photographs from the city's past hung from the walls. A thirties baseball star smiled for the camera. Another showed Lower Wacker under construction. A jubilant crowd celebrated V.E. day. And a signed portrait of Frank Sinatra. They sat at the bar.

"You look pretty strung out" said Peter digging his hand into a bowl of pretzels. He took a sip from his beer leaving pretzel on the rim of his glass.

"I can't get over the old man."

"I know. Just like that. One day he's around the next he's gone."

He took another sip. The hostess came and spoke to the piano player.

He stopped playing.

"How's Sonia?"

"She's all-right. I guess it's been better."

"What's the problem?"

"What's it to you?"

"Relax. Will you? You don't have to tell me."

"Good."

"Jesus." There was silence for a while.

"How's what's her name?" he said breaking the silence.

"Mary."

"Yeah, Mary."

"I really like her."

"That's nice."

"Shut up. Smart ass."

"I make an innocent remark and you take it up the wrong way."

"You never make innocent remarks."

He smiled. "Do you want another drink?"

"Why not?"

He signalled to the barman.

"I'm going to miss Ryan" said Peter.

"Life goes on."

"You're full of compassion."

"Don't feel sorry for him. He's happy with the way things have turned out."

"How could he be happy?"

"He wanted out but didn't know how to get it. Now he's got his push."

"I don't understand."

"He didn't want the decision to rest with him. This way it's not his failure. And he can go free."

He drank from his glass.

"What about you?"

"Now you're getting personal again."

"You're a nice guy, Nick. You could trust me."

"You're probably right, Peter. Don't take it personally if I don't. Pretty soon I will be able to tell you anything you want to know."

"Why then and not now?"

"I have my reasons. What about you Peter? What are you looking for?"

"Oh I don't know. I'm just getting by."

"Don't you have dreams, goals? That kind of thing."

"Sure I have fantasies. I mean not sexual." He laughed. "I just don't think they'll ever become reality."

"What have you done to make them a reality?"

"You sound like a tele-evangelist."

"Oh well. It's your life."

There was a pause. "I dream about owning a bar in the Caribbean, sometimes. I can even see it in my mind. More like a shack or a lean-too. On the beach, you know. With a folding back window so you can sit at the bar and look out over the water when the sun is setting. I can even see the sunset. All orangy and weird looking." He stopped for a second. Then he said "but who doesn't dream about that?"

Nicholas shrugged.

"I mean, realistically I can't see it. I like having money. There are certain things about my lifestyle that I wouldn't feel comfortable giving up."

"You're in conflict" he said.

"That's it. Conflict. I want conflicting things."

The barman put some money in the juke box and pressed a few buttons on the machine.

"Do people ever get what they want?" he said raising his voice slightly over the music.

"Some people. Not very many" he said.

"Who are those people? I mean we meet people all the time, you've met people who are successful by any definition of the word. But they're still miserable."

"I know."

"Why, though?"

"Simple really" he said draining his beer glass. "Are you staying or not?"

"I'm staying for a while anyway."

He put on his coat and picked up his briefcase. "The answer is they don't know themselves. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

He walked to the door. The hostess held it open for him. "Thanks for coming" she said.

"You're welcome."

He climbed the steps to the street. It took a few minutes to get a cab.

Chapter 13 – Going to meet Jack Williamson

He walked across the parking lot to the office building. It was an overcast day. The secretary looked up when he walked into the reception area.

"Nicholas Martin to see Jack Williamson" he said.

"Take a seat sir. I'll let him know you're here."

He sat in a chair by the window. After a half hour passed he got up and walked over to the secretary's desk.

"I told him you were here" she said in response to his look. "Hold on I'll try again." She called upstairs. "He'll be with you as soon as he can" she said after putting down the phone.

He sat down again and looked out the window.

A truck pulled up in the parking lot. A man in overalls got out and opened the back pulling out two large canisters of drinking water. He closed the back of the truck putting a canister under each arm. Then he walked towards the entrance.

He looked up. Jack Williamson stood at the desk.

"Let's get this over with" he said.

There was silence as he followed him upstairs to the same conference room he had sat in with Peter. Three documents were laid out neatly on the table. Karl and another gentleman were waiting.

"This is Peter Harris, our attorney" said Jack. "Okay you're representing Stephen's" he said to Nicholas.

"We need you to sign each copy" said the attorney. Karl was silent.

He started to read the document.

"Standard legal agreement" said the attorney when he hesitated.

"Just sign the frigging form" said Jack.

He signed his name at the bottom of each page.

"Well done" said Karl, when he had finished. He put out his hand. He shook it. Jack proceeded to sign followed by Karl.

"Here's your copy" said Jack throwing the document in his direction.

"Off you go, now."

He turned around and walked out the door taking the stairs down to the ground floor. "Can you call me a cab?" he said to the secretary.

It was early evening when the cab dropped him at his hotel. The grind of the cable cars coming up the hill permeated through the double glazed windows of his room. He threw his bag on the bed sat down. He flicked the TV on and browsed through the channels. There was a fire in southern

California. A teenage girl was missing in San Jose and the Giants beat the Dodgers in the Rosebowl. He turned it off and walked to the window. He stood looking out. Fog blanketed the city reducing his visibility to a minimum.

He unpacked his bag. He walked into the bathroom and turned on the light. He put a small wash bag in the closet over the sink. Then he walked out to the bedroom and lay on the bed, stretched out full length. He kicked off his shoes. After a while he picked up the phone and dialed Sonia's number.

"It's me."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the hotel."

"Why did they send you there?"

"To sign the papers for the deal."

"I thought the deal was off."

"Warren give it the green light. It's his problem."

"Look I can't talk right now. I've got my mother on the other line."

"Okay. I'll call you again." He hung up.

He got up from the bed and walked around the room. He took his coat from the closet and put it on. Then he closed and locked the door of his room.

He took the elevator down to the lobby. He walked through the foyer and stood on the steps.

"Do you need a cab sir?" said the doorman.

He shook his head.

The fog was turning into a light misty rain. It drifted gently down on the hill. He walked across the street to the park and stood by the fountain. Rush hour traffic was moving slowly up the hill.

He left the park and walked down a narrow street. The street sloped downwards steeply. So much so that he had to walk slowly. After a few blocks the store signs changed from English to Chinese.

He turned onto a busy thoroughfare. Early evening shoppers crowded the narrow sidewalks. He walked along the street. He stopped in front of a fish shop. Live fish sat in greeny tanks. The storekeeper leaned over the counter and pulled one out hitting it a wack on the head. He leaned forward to look closer at the tank.

There was a sudden crack. The fish tank exploded sending water gushing all over the sidewalk. He fell backwards stumbled and lost his balance. He landed on a mass of writhing fish. More cracking noises like the popping of a champagne bottle.

A woman who was standing beside him fell forward onto him blood streaming from her face. He could feel her body recoiling as a series of bullets pounded into her. Her blood dripped into his hair and onto his face.

"Oh my God, sweet mother of Jesus. Mother of Jesus" she said over and over.

Her voice faded becoming an inarticulate croak. She stopped speaking.

A dying fish slapped convulsively against his hand. His face was pressed against another. He could hear the sound of people running and sirens wailing. Everything went black.

He felt a weight being lifted off him. He could hear voices around him.

"He's all-right" said a man. "He fainted."

He opened his eyes. A paramedic leaned over him applying an oxygen tank. He was lying on a stretcher in an ambulance. The door was open and through it he could see a large crowd had gathered.

"What happened?" he said.

"Nobody knows" said the man. "That women saved your life though. Whoever that maniac was fired fifteen bullets into her."

"Am I hurt?"

"No you're fine. You were in shock though."

"And the women?"

"She died."

"Oh."

"The storekeeper got one in the head, too. Hold on the detective wants to talk to you."

A man in a raincoat stepped into the van and sat down beside him.

"How are you doing?" he said. "Detective Maloney, SFPD."

"I'm okay."

"Nicholas Martin, right?" He held his driver's license in his hand.

"You're from Chicago? Why are you here?"

"I'm on a business trip for my company."

"I see. Any idea why someone would want to shoot up a fish monger's store?"

He paused.

"Well?"

"No. No idea."

"Okay. We know where you're staying. Let me know when you're leaving the city. We may want to ask you a few more questions."

"Okay."

The paramedics drove him to a city hospital and gave him some pills for the shock. He spent two hours waiting to see a psychologist who made him fill out a questionnaire and asked him a few questions. It was almost midnight before the cab dropped back at the hotel. The desk clerk raised his eyebrows when he saw him in his bloodied clothes.

"Don't worry about it" he said. "I was in an accident."

He took his key and took the elevator up to his room. As soon as he shut the door. He dead bolted it and went into the bathroom. A large red patch on his coat was the only reminder of the women. He stripped off his clothes and jumped in the shower.

Later he stood in the bedroom in a bathrobe. He sat on the bed and dialed Sonia's number.

"Who is it?" she said.

"Did I wake you up?"

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Did you see the news this evening?"

"No. Why? Nicholas are you all-right? You sound really weird."

"I'm scared Sonia. I'm really scared."

"What happened? What are you talking about?"

"I think somebody tried to kill me."

"What? Who? Who tried to kill you?"

"I can't talk about it now. The next flight is leaving in an hour."

"Wait. I'm meeting you in the airport. I need to talk to you."

"Okay." He hung up.

He dressed in fresh clothes and bundled his possessions quickly into a bag. He took the elevator down to the foyer. The clerk looked at him.

"Checking out tonight, sir?"

"That's right."

He charged his bill and walked through the lobby to the front entrance.

A bell hop flagged down a cab and he jumped in.

"Where to?"

"The airport. I've got forty minutes to make my flight."

The city streets were deserted. A clock on Market Street read one as they passed on their way to the freeway.

"Big shoot out in Chinatown tonight" said the cab driver.

"I know" he said.

"Probably gang related. There's several factions in there." The cab bumped as it went over a pothole. He fell silent when he didn't get a reply.

The freeway was deserted. They overtook a few large trucks heading south. There were no other cars on the road. The cab dropped him at the departure building. He passed through the security gates and was on the plane with five minutes to spare.

She was standing waiting in the arrivals lounge when he walked out to meet her. Her face was grave. There was silence as they walked out to the parking lot.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" he said.

She didn't look at him. She looked straight ahead. "We need to talk."

"What about? I thought I was going to do the talking."

"Let's wait until I get you home" she said.

He nodded.

She didn't speak again. They took the elevator up when they got into his building.

"I've made a decision" she said after she closed the door of the apartment. He took off his coat and threw it on the floor, slumping on the couch.

"What have you decided?"

"You're going to have to make a choice."

"What choice?"

"This whole incident today confirms it. Do you realize you could have been killed today? Nicholas you don't have a fucking clue what you're dealing with. Are you trying to downplay what happened?"

He shook his head.

"What's it going to be?"

"What?"

"Are you going to give up on this obsession of yours?"

"Sonia what are you trying to say?"

"Here's what I want you to do. Sell the Trionics stock. Pay off the loans including my mother. Then if this freak does send the fax at least the loan will have been paid off."

"They'll still be able to tell."

"Well it's going to look a lot better than if you don't."

She stood in front of him. "Well what's it going to be?"

"Sonia I just had the worse day of my life. I'm not in the mood."

"Well, get in the mood. What's it going to be? Me or your bullshit obsession."

"Sonia give it time."

"No Nicholas. You've run out of time. You have to decide."

"I'm not going to give everything up just because some one thinks they can intimidate me."

"You are so fucking arrogant. You know that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everything is what you want, what you need. What about me? What about my hopes? My ambitions?"

"We share the same ambition."

"No we don't Nicholas. Where you're going there's only room for one person."

He sat back on the couch and covered his face with his hands.

"It's you're vanity Nicholas, you're arrogance that is destroying this. Why can't you be content with what you have? What about a little humility for a change?"

"But it's so hard to be humble" he said, smiling.

Her face was cold. "Well then, that's it."

"Sonia will you just be rational."

"I am being rational. You're the one whose fucked up. Nicholas I can't live with this stress. Maybe you get off on it in some machocistic way. I hate it. I wake up every day thinking about your fucking stock wondering if today is the day you'll see sense. I have been patient, very patient, too patient. I have tried to stay out of it. I reasoned it was your deal. I can't do it anymore."

"Give me one more week."

"No Nicholas. I've had it with excuses. You can't go on like this. I can't go on like this. You can't have it both ways. You have to start thinking for more than yourself if you want to be with me."

"Oh Sonia will you leave it out."

"You think I'm kidding. This is not some fucking joke. This is my future and your future. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You know it does."

"Why don't you act like it?"

"Sonia this isn't easy for me, you know."

"It's your own fault. I'm beyond sympathy. Today I thought you were dead. I really did. And you know what I thought. He's somewhere with a bullet in his head and it's his own frigging fault. His own stubborn, obstinate pride that got him where he is."

"Sonia..."

"Wake up to reality, Nicholas. A relationship is a two way street. It's give and take. Right now you're taking way more than you're giving."

"It will get better."

"I'm not going to wait any longer. Have you made up your mind?"

"I'm not going to be bullied into giving this up on a whim."

"Well you're on your own, then."

She opened the door and slammed it after her.

He sat still for a few moments then he took off his coat.

He threw it across the room knocking a picture off the bookcase. It fell with a crash to the floor as the glass shattered.

After a few moments he got up and walked to the fridge. He opened the freezer and took out a bottle of vodka and put it on table. He took a glass from

the cupboard. It slipped from his hands and fell to the floor, shattering into pieces.

He ignored the broken glass. He took another glass from the cupboard and poured himself and triple shot. He picked up the glass and the bottle. Glass crunched underfoot as he walked to the couch and sat down.

He took a gulp from the glass. He coughed and spluttered but managed to hold it in. He drained the glass and poured another.

He got up and walked to the stereo. He picked out a CD and put it in the player. He picked up the remote and walked back to the couch. He sat down. His throat was becoming numb to the alcohol. After a few more gulps the fuzzy warmth of inebriation began to spread through his body.

He turned the volume up and lay back basking in the glow.

He held up the bottle surprised to notice that it was already half empty. He poured out another glass, The bottle fell from his numbed hands to the carpet. Vodka sloshed onto the floor.

He ignored the bottle and took another gulp from the glass. A thought crossed his mind and he laughed quietly at first but growing in volume. He finished the glass and threw it on the carpet. It bounced a few times, but didn't break, before coming to rest near the bookcase.

He kicked off his shoes and stretched out full length on the couch. His head was beginning to spin and he tried to focus on the picture to re-orient himself.

After a few minutes he got up off the couch and stumbled to the bathroom swaying as he walked.

He stood in the bathroom holding the towel rack for support as he urinated into the bowl. Part of it missed the bowl and went over his shoe. He laughed as he zipped up his trousers.

He staggered back into the living room standing uncertain in the middle of the room.

He turned for the couch. Suddenly he slipped on the bottle and fell to the floor with a crash, his head narrowly missing the bookcase.

There was silence. He lay prone on the floor muttering and giggling to himself.

After a while he started to snore.

Chapter 14 – Meeting Sonia – Things not going well

A gush of stale smoke and flabby beer engulfed them when they went in. The place was empty apart from a couple of leery men past their prime. They slumped at the bar sucking beer from large mugs. One parked sausage-like forearms on the counter while the other chewed tobacco and scratched a freckled and balding pate. Above their heads baseball radiated from the TV. Their heads turned when Nicholas and Sonia came in, returning after a cursory glance to their game after they sat down.

They found a table at the back away from the bar. A log fire crackled and sparked in the hearth beside them.

"It's too hot" he said, shrugging out of his cashmere coat and draping it on a coat hook beside the table. She said nothing.

He sat on a stool facing her. She held his gaze for a moment and then looked away, slamming her car keys down on the table, blue eyes glinting in the firelight.

"What do you want to drink?" He smiled revealing a mouth of radiant white.

She scowled. "Look Nick. I only agreed to meet you because you said you had something new to tell me. Something important. Something that

would change everything. I think they were your words. So let's not waste each other's time, shall we?"

"I know. And I meant it. I am getting to it. What do you want to drink?"

"I may not be here long enough to drink it."

"Jesus. Do you want a fucking drink or not?"

She scowled crinkling her large nose. "Don't talk to me like that." She pulled a hairpin from her hair letting long blonde tresses fall to her shoulders.

There was silence. An apathetic cheer came from the men at the bar. Someone had scored on the TV. After a moment they returned to a subdued silence.

A waitress came and took some empty glasses from a table beside them. Then she came over to their table and exchanged their ashtray for a clean one.

"Martini."

"A beer for me" he said to the waitress.

"Look I'm sorry" he said after she had left. "I didn't mean to fly off the handle. It's just I've been under a lot of pressure lately."

The waitress returned with their drinks.

"Well" she said. Her face was cold. "Say what you have to say."

He paid the waitress and after she had left he pushed a white envelope across the table at her.

"What is this?" she said.

"It's for you. Open it."

"What is it?"

"It's an agreement. A contract between you and me. A legally binding, watertight solution to our problem."

She frowned. "What contract? What are you talking about?"

"Why don't you read it?"

"Why don't to tell me what's in it."

"Oh Jesus." He grabbed the letter and torn the envelope open. "Look" he said waving a white sheet of paper in front of her. "It's all here."

"What's all there?"

"Everything you are worried about. My promise to you, to sell the stock as soon as I get this Rosen character off my back."

"You're no stranger to promises."

"Look this is different."

"How is it different."

"Well it's a contract between you and me."

"It's just a piece of paper" she said putting her hands in the pockets of her sheepskin jacket. She was still wearing her coat.

"The first part is the section I sign" he said starting to read. He began to read. "I Nicholas Martin do solemnly and sincerely promise.."

He stopped and looked up. Sonia burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Is that the thing you told me about that you spent two days working on."

"What's wrong with it?"

"The expression on your face when you read it."

"What's so funny?". He frowned. "If you're not going to be serious you can forget the whole thing."

"Oh, all-right. Go on. Read it. I won't laugh I promise."

"I Nicholas Martin..."

She laughed again. "I can't help it. It's your face."

"Look Sonia this is very serious."

"No wait. I promise." Tears rolled down her face.

He sat down again. "You're smiling."

"No I'm not. Really. Jesus can't you take a joke." She waited until the waitress put the drinks on the table and left.

"I don't understand you. One minute you're walking out the door. The next you're laughing hysterically."

"Well I haven't had much to laugh about where you're concerned."

He started to read again. When he finished she looked intently at him - her large blue eyes scanning his face critically.

"You're going to sell out? You're really going to do that?"

"Sonia, I'm not as stupid as you think I am. Nor am I blind."

"I never said you were stupid."

"Just listen, will you? Here is what I'm going to do. I am going to meet this freak Norman, or whatever his name is. Get the fax. He's already got what he wanted. So he should be amenable. Hopefully that's the last I'll see of Norman Rosen. Once I have the fax I'm going to sell my whole position in Trionics."

"Bullshit."

"It's not bullshit. I'm going to quit my job. Sonia, I've made three million dollars easily. I never need to work again. Maybe I'll go into consulting or something if I get bored."

"I'm glad you're using "I" instead of "we". At least you're not misrepresenting this as anything other than your ambition."

"Sonia, I never wanted to lose you. You know that. This way we're both happy."

"What was that number for?"

"What number?"

"The number in the deposit box."

"I don't know. To tell you the truth I don't care either."

"Where are you meeting the freak, Norman?"

"Union Station."

"Why there?"

"There's a lot of people around. No room for funny business."

"I want to come."

"Why?"

"I just do all-right."

"I don't think that's very smart."

"I don't care."

"You better stay out of sight if you do. I don't want him freaking out."

He reached for her hand across the table. "Things will be normal between us again. I promise you."

"I don't know. You've said as much before. I just can't believe you are giving it up so easily."

"Well. Think about it." He smiled wide grin across his face. "I practically have what I was looking for. Maybe I could make an extra few grand. But it's not worth losing you to do that."

"You're some prick. And you try to make it sound like you were making a sacrifice."

"What's the difference? You're getting what you want."

"This is not strategy Nicholas. It's not a chess game."

"Sonia. This is the end of it. I've made my killing. Just like the old man said."

"So. What now?"

"Let's go out to dinner tonight. Somewhere really nice."

"I don't feel like celebrating."

"You will believe me. I'll prove it to you."

She looked at him searchingly again and shook her head. She glanced at her watch. "Look I have to meet my mother in a half hour. Do you want me to drop you to the office?"

"Yeah. Come and get me when you're done shopping."

"Okay."

The guard unlocked and opened the main door when he knocked.

"How you doing today Mr. Martin?" he said as he relocked after him.

"Good. Good."

He took the elevator up to the office. There was no-one about. The trading floor was silent. He walked into his office and turned on the light. Then he picked up the phone and dialed a number.

It was Saturday but Jeff was at work.

"It's Nicholas Martin" he said, when the call went through.

"Nick, what can I do for you?"

"I'm going to sell my position pretty soon."

"Okay. The earliest I can do it for you first thing Monday if you want."

There was a click of a keyboard as he pulled up the account. "Wow, you sure made a bundle."

"You know what? Don't do anything just yet. I'll call you on Monday to confirm. Just be ready. That's all. You'll hear from me on Monday latest."

"Okay. No problem."

He hung up the phone. He got up and walked out into the corridor. He walked across the floor and through the mahogany doors. He walked past the reception area and stood outside the old man's office. On impulse he opened the door and walked in.

The bronze eagle still sat on the desk along with a sheaf of unread documents. He turned to the wall. There was a picture of the old man shaking the President's hand, his degree from Princeton, framed, a youthful old man in

a sixties-cut suit and hat. He stood in front of his bookcase and looked at some of the titles. "A History of Wall Street.", the old man's book about emerging markets. There was that dry, rarefied air to the place. It had only been a few days but it might as well have been unoccupied for years.

"What are you doing in here?"

He turned around. Warren stood in the doorway looking at him.

"Nothing."

"You're not supposed to be in here."

"Yeah. Yeah. I was feeling nostalgic. All-right."

"Save that for your mother."

He looked at him. His eczema had flamed up again. He sneezed into his hand and wiped it on his trousers.

"Don't you ever feel anything?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You really don't know, do you? I could be talking Greek for all you know."

"If you're asking me to be a sentimental idiot like you, forget it. It's not going to happen. You were very chummy with the old man weren't you? Well he's not here to protect you anymore. Now I'm in charge."

He walked passed him and turned to look directly at him. "You're pathetic, you know that. I really feel sorry for you."

"Save your pity hotshot. Save it for yourself. You may need it more than me."

He walked back to his office and sat at his desk. Even though there was plenty of paper work his mind was not able to concentrate on the work. After an hour or so the phone rang. He picked it up.

"It's me" she said. "I'm finished."

"So soon? Is that possible?"

"Don't get smart. I only bought a few things."

"What's a few things?"

"Well that pair of shoes I told you about and the dress."

"The five hundred dollar dress."

"It's my money. It's not like you're buying me anything."

"I hope you wear it now you've bought it."

"Oh shut up. Are you ready yet?"

"Yeah. There's no point in me staying on. I'm not doing any good here."

"Meet me out front in ten minutes."

"Okay."

Twenty minutes later she pulled up outside the building.

"What happened?" he said when he got in beside her.

"Traffic. What else? You made a reservation?"

"Oh you do want to go."

"Yeah. Yeah. What time did you make it for?"

"We can still make it."

They pulled up outside the restaurant twenty minutes later. The valet took their car and they walked into the restaurant.

The host looked up from his ledger.

"Reservation for two" he said. "The name's Martin."

He led them to their table.

"Do you require a wine list, sir" said the waiter after they had been seated.

"I think so. Bring a bottle of Dom Perignon, while you're at it."

"Certainly sir" said the waiter.

"That's a two hundred dollar bottle" she said looking at the menu, after the waiter left, "and you call me extravagant."

"This is a special occasion - for me anyway. It's not every day a man finds himself or what he's looking for."

"I don't think today is the day."

"Come on. Can't you indulge my delusions a little?"

"What are you talking about?" she said.

He waited until the waiter set the champagne bucket down and poured them each a glass. After he left he said, "I'm talking about myself. You touched on it once or twice. I was searching for something. Always trying to be better, more competitive than everyone else."

"And you don't feel that anymore?"

"No. Not really. I was always trying to convince myself. It was irrelevant what other people believed. It was a personal quest."

"And you think you've found what you're looking for?"

"I think so. I've proved something to myself. The money was never really the point. It was more the fact that I did that. I played the game and won. I was a survivor."

"It's not over yet" she said sipping from her glass.

"It will be soon" he said. "And when it is we are going on the longest holiday ever."

"Let's wait and see what happens, shall we?"

"I want to go everywhere - the Caribbean, London, Paris, India. You name it. We're going." He put his hand into his jacket pocket. "There's something else too" he said placing a small black box on the table.

"What's that?" she said. Her eyebrows arched.

"Before I give it to you I have to ask you a question" he said. "Sonia, will you marry me?"

"What?" She nearly dropped her glass. "Where did that come from?"

"What do you mean?" He pushed the box in her direction. "Open it."

She opened it and looked up eyes widening. "Oh Nick. It's beautiful." She took it out of the box and put it on her finger. "It must have cost a fortune."

"Let's just say it wasn't cheap." He waited for a second. Then he said, "well?"

"Well what?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Oh Nick. This is all so sudden."

"Well. Don't answer then. Just think about it."

"We haven't been getting on that well lately" she said after a moment.

"But Sonia. It's all related to this business. You know that."

"I know. I know."

"Keep it and think about it, will you?"

She nodded. "What's come over you in the last few days?"

"You still don't believe me, do you?"

"Believe what?"

"I'm done searching. I have found all I wanted."

"What? Just because you stand to gain a few million bucks?"

"It's not the money. Look let me explain it to you this way. Men, or at least me. I was trying to prove something to myself. Why do you think I took this risk? Gambled my future as you called it."

"I don't know. Ego or pride."

"In a way that. But the point is I was dissatisfied with my lot. I wasn't happy being Warren's side kick. I never saw myself as part of the organization. Not long term anyhow."

"I knew you didn't like it. I thought you saw it as a stepping stone."

"I did, but to what I didn't know. Now I know. Sonia I've made it. I am whole again."

The waiter came and brought their meal.

After he had left she said, "I'm a little skeptical about overnight transformations. I just can't imagine everything is all that different for you."

"You don't have to believe me. I will prove it by my actions. Words are easily spoken I agree. I'll show you. You'll see."

He took her hand and looked at her. "I nearly lost you, didn't I?"

"Don't think you've won me back yet, Nicholas Martin. I've been smooth-talked by you too often. I know you better than you think."

"Well. You'll think about it."

"I will."

For the first time that day she reached out and squeezed his hand.

Part II - The Kidnappers

Chapter 15 – Meeting at Train Station

He drove his car past sombre granite faced buildings, shops closed and silent for the weekend, the corner diner with its weary retinue of homeless. A flashing neon sign on a building caught his eye as he passed - Checks Cashed twenty four hours. A huge mural took covered one whole side of a building. He looked for the parking structure next to the station, driving up spiralling ramps locking hard on the turns. Sunlight slanted, weakly, through the glassless openings, the walls tinged black with monoxide stains. He came to a screeching stop and got out. He coughed, the light caught it, silhouetted.

It was Sunday, and an eerie quiet lingered in the empty spaces and the silent street. He passed a newspaper vending machine close to the elevator-yesterday's Tribune. He stopped, one hand pinching wind-reddened nostrils and read. Headlines crowded impatient for attention. Daley was in trouble again - a missing hundred thousand dollar payment. Islamic bomb on tourist bus in Paris - fifteen dead. A basketball player was fined for punching a journalist. A fleck of dust caught his straying attention. He brushed it from his overcoat. He waited, scratching his head, for the elevator.

It arrived, creaking and clicking. The doors yawned wide exhaling a strong smell of urine. Inside it's walls were black-layered with graffiti. He

stepped in. One naked tube flickered spasmodically above. He held his breath against the stench. It left him on the first floor and he walked quickly out onto the street. The wind was up and strong gust swept down the river, riffing the leaden water and fluttering flags on the bridge, channelled by the tall buildings on either side.

He crossed the bridge, head stooped against the cold, gloved hands raised over his ears, cursing his lack of a hat, left in the car. Newspapers, MacDonalds wrappers, a plastic bag, dead leaves swirled by, caught on the wind, - some fluttering over the parapet into the grimy river below.

The entrance was at the base of a towering Miesian block. He waited outside constantly swinging door for his turn to enter. A mother harried and worn struggled out clutching large paper bags crammed full with groceries. Two children followed in her wake. One, the girl, holding a half chewed chocolate bar, crying, brown goo dribbling from her mouth, while the other, a red-headed fat boy, taunted and poked, chanting, - " fat pig, fat pig who's a big fat pig."

He let them pass and entered walking quickly down the long tiled corridor, heels clicking on the floor. A newsstand, flower shop, hot dog stand wafting smell of processed pig, busker, a toneless voice of a busker echoed down the corridor. A beggar squatted, hunched, head in his lap, a cardboard

sign hanging by string around his neck - God bless you and save you. Posters proclaimed movies, concerts, perfume, insurance policies with fresh faced couples exuding goodwill. Start your pension today. Full life cover. Tinny instrumental music seeped from speakers above.

The corridor came to an end and he stood in a large hall. The ceiling was a vaulted lattice of steel girders beyond which the winter sun was fading to dusk. At the far end of the hall large display screens carried details of times, destinations and platforms. Streams of people scurried back and forth across a stained marble floor, discharging from other corridors and tunnels, spilling off escalators from the subway below, their babbling voices quieted by staccato announcements - Cleveland train delayed by snow - three thirty to Michigan departing at platform eleven. Crowds gathered looking up at the displays.

He stood in the center of the hall by a by a ornate, man-high clock, scanning the faces, as they went by. Sonia was out of sight in the restaurant, as they had agreed.

Five minutes passed the hour and still no sign. He sat down on a bench beside the clock. An old woman swaddled in rancid coat and scarf moved two large dripping bags of tin cans onto the floor. He sat at the far end of the bench to avoid the smell and wet patch.

She stared at him with unseeing crazy eyes, face weather-worn and creviced with age. Her momentary curiosity passed and was lost amongst a jumble of other thoughts. She turned her head and rummaged in one of the bags, muttering softly.

At ten past he stood up and paced. He glanced over at the restaurant. Sonia was out of sight. Good. He turned around. The old woman was gone, wadding off across the floor, lugging her cargo, in the direction of the exit. He sat down again.

"What's in the restaurant college boy?"

He knew that sneering, nasal tone. He turned around.

Norman, stood his face alight with malicious glee, beside the clock. his face pale and inscrutable, sunglasses glinting, catching the overhead light as he turned his head.

"How nice to see you again."

"You have the fax."

He grinned. "In good time. In good time. Have you got it?" he said.

He stared at him, silent. "Got what?"

"You know what I mean."

He did not reply.

"The number. The number. " He tapped a shiny leather shoe on the floor, impatiently. "What's the number?"

"Not so fast. Where's the fax?"

Anger smoothed into a smile. "Very clever. Very clever. An exchange you might say."

"Exactly. Give me what I want. Then you get what you want."

He fell silent as a couple came within earshot. They walked apart. The man's face was a frozen mask of irritation. The woman was arguing. "You have no idea how that makes me feel." Her shrill voice faded as they passed. The man shrugged guiltily.

"Ha. Very clever." Norman spoke after they went by. "I have it here in my pocket."

"Let me see it."

He put a deeply tanned hand into a fur-lined coat pocket and took out an envelope.

"Give it to me."

"What's the number?"

"Let me ask you a question. Why do you want this? What's it for?"

"Mind your own business."

"You've made it my business."

"Give me what I want and I'll give you what you want."

He put out his hand to take the fax. At the same time he took another envelope from his pocket. "It's written inside on a sheet of paper." He held one end of the envelope. Norman took the other end.

They exchanged envelopes.

"It's in there with the copies."

He took another envelope out of the pocket of his overcoat.

"What's that?"

"Your money."

"What are you talking about? Keep your money" he said opening the envelope. He scanned the contents, satisfied. "If it even is your money. All I want is the fax."

"Ethics. I had no idea."

"You're fucked up."

Norman smiled.

"Hope I never see you again" he said, as he turned to leave.

Norman's smile grew even wider, revealing sparkling white teeth. "Come now, Mr. Martin. I thought we were friends."

He didn't reply. He walked in the direction of the exit, without looking behind him. In corner of his eye, he saw Sonia get up walk out of the

restaurant. He kept walking. He walked out onto the street and stood at the taxi rank.

He waved down a cab and only began to relax when it started to move.

"Where to?" The driver said stretching, his bull neck reddened with acne scars. He glanced at him through the rear-view mirror. He was a big man. He filled the whole seat his head nearly touching the roof. He put a half-eaten chicken wing back into a carton on the passenger seat. The smell of fried chicken was strong.

"Fullerton and Armitage."

"Cold one today" he volunteered suppressing a belch.

He nodded but did not reply.

"Good game, last night."

"Hmm."

"I said good game last night." He raised his voice.

"Didn't see it" was the clipped reply.

The taxi-man gave up and turned on the radio. It was a thirty minute drive. Traffic was light on Lakeshore Drive.

The cab left him outside the apartment building and he took the elevator up.

She was waiting in the apartment when he opened the door. She stood in the hallway with her overcoat on. Her face was

"Do you get it? I could hardly see from where I was standing?"

He let the door swing shut behind him before answering.

"Yep. I got it."

"Then it's over."

"Looks that way."

She crossed the room and put her arms around him. They stood like that for some time.

"You left you're car downtown?"

He nodded. "I can pick it up tomorrow."

It was still dark when he got up. Sonia was still asleep. He walked naked to the shower. Despite the heating the bedroom was cold. Then he turned to the wash basin. He took a canister of shaving foam from the cabinet above the sink and sprayed a quantity into the palm of his hand. He spread the foam evenly across his face. He opened the cabinet again and took out a razor. He removed an old razor from the head and attached a new one. He shaved quickly cursing when he nicked himself on the neck. He let it bleed.

Finished he walked to the shower turning on the tap. He let the water

run for a few minutes before he stepped in. He put some shampoo in his hair, closing his eyes as he rinsed it out. He heard the shower curtain rustle and felt Sonia put her arms around him.

"I thought you were asleep" he said, without turning around.

"I was." She kissed him.

"Why did you get up?"

"Oh I wanted to see you off, I suppose."

"But you're not up for another two hours."

"I know."

"Do you want the shower left on?"

"No I'm coming out."

He turned off the shower and got out. He pulled a towel from the rack beside the sink.

"Here let me do" she said.

"Wow you're very attentive all of a sudden" he said, giving her the towel.

"It's not every day a man asks me to marry him" she said drying his hair.

"I guess not."

"What would you like for breakfast?"

"Do you think this will last for the next forty years?"

"I haven't said yes, yet."

"I know. I know. You're still thinking about it."

"Shut up, ass-hole."

She pulled on a bathrobe that was hanging beside the towel rack.

He walked to the closet and began to get dressed.

"Do you want coffee?" she said on her way out of the bedroom.

"Sure."

When he came out of the bedroom she had the kitchen table laid and ready.

"I like it."

"Don't say anything or you'll piss me off."

"My lips are sealed."

It was wet and windy when he left the office. Lunch time pedestrians streamed past, up and down La Salle - some returning from Merchandise Mart laden down with large shopping bags. Students, mothers with kids, tense business men speaking aggressively into mobile phones, a gang of schoolchildren led by two harried and harassed teachers. A man approached him holding a bundle of newspapers.

"Streetwise, sir?" He was heavily set and heavily dressed in jacket, scarf and gloves. The hood was drawn tightly over his head. Dark eyes strove vainly

to make eye-contact. He waved a grubby identity card before his face. One brown eye focused on him while the other strayed independently a large cataract at its centre.

He shook his head without establishing eye contact. He walked to the corner of the block and waited for the signal to cross. Changing his mind he turned and walked over to the newsstand where the vendor sat shivering, warming his hands on a small brazier. He picked up a copy of the Tribune and started to read. The headline caught his eye blazed in bold type across a good third of the page - "Evanston business man abducted from his home". He started to read, casually at first. Suddenly despite his furlined overcoat he felt a cold chill run down his back. The paper shook in his hands.

"Are you going to pay for that?"

"What?" He looked up from the paper. The vendor a small beaky man with wind-chilled nose and lips

"The paper. Are you going to pay for it?"

He thrust a dollar into the man's hand and walked away.

He walked to the call box on the corner and picked up the phone. She picked up after two rings.

"Sonia?"

"What is it, Nicholas? I'm busy right now. I'm with a client."

"It's really important. I need to talk to you."

"Hold on." She put down the phone. There was the sound of voices in the background. A second later she came back on the line.

"You'd better make this quick."

"Sonia I don't understand what's going on but I'm worried."

Her voice was cold. "What are you talking about? I thought you said this whole business was resolved - once and for all."

"So did I."

"So what is it?"

"Did you read the paper today?"

"No. Why?"

"A business man named Tyler has been kidnapped in Evanston."

"So?"

"Don't you see. Tyler is the name of the guy who owned the safety deposit box. The one Norman Rosen was so interested in. It's just too much of a coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the day after this weirdo Norman gets access to Tyler's deposit box the guy is kidnapped."

"Nicholas what's going on?"

"I don't know. There's definitely a connection there. If I was linked to that I could be an accomplice."

"An accomplice to what? All you did was look in the deposit box."

"How do you think that would go down in a court?"

"Jesus Christ. This is impossible. I can't believe I was naive enough to think this was over."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's just one crisis after another with you."

"You can't blame me for this."

"If you hadn't have been stupid enough to get yourself into this fix in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"Look, it's just a thought. There's no reason to suppose I would be implicated."

"There's no reason to suppose you wouldn't."

"Look Sonia. There's nothing I can do about it. The best thing is to sit tight and say nothing."

"What do you want me to say, Nicholas?"

"Nothing."

"I should have my head examined believing that this would ever end. Just leave me alone. I don't want to be involved in your mess."

The phone went dead.

He slammed down the receiver so violently that the plastic head-set
cracked.

Chapter 16 – Cashing out Trionics – Getting kidnapped

It was just light when he left the building. He walked along the tree lined street, their branches bare and gaunt against the morning sky. The streetlights were fading into glowing points, their radiance dimmed by the sun as it rose gradually over the lake.

Despite the cold his spirits soared. This was the day. The day he had dreamed about. Fantasised about for so long. One phone call to Jeff and he could pack his bag. He saw the scene in his mind. He would pick up that phone first thing when he got to the office. Better that than to leave anything to chance.

He stopped at the intersection. A dirty yellow cab pulled up. The driver rolled down his window throwing a cigarette to land in the dirty slush of the sidewalk.

He walked on. No need to hurry. He resisted the temptation to get a cab. Yes. Leave nothing to chance. Jeff would be in his office in an hour.

Pedestrians huddled miserably on the corner waiting for a bus. Those who could find room huddled under the shelter. Others stood clutching umbrellas.

A newspaper vendor stood shivering beside his stall, shifting from one foot to another, rubbing his hands to keep warm. His face was pinched and reddened by the cold. A light, sleety rain started to drift down melting as came to rest on his overcoat.

What was it worth? Three million easy. That was after he paid Jeff off. That would be the next phone call. Then what? He smiled.

He stopped at coffee shop and went in. The aroma of coffee was strong. Behind the counter three student workers lounged one moving reluctantly to take his order. Her nose and ear were pierced. A chain ran from one to the other.

He walked briskly to the station passed the bus stop on the corner of Diversey where people congregated miserable at the prospect of a week of work. Not much longer for him.

He turned right onto to Diversey and walked passed the sidewalk cafe. It's outside tables were bare and leaves had cluttered the enclosed area. The summer tables were packed away.

Yes he know what the next step was. That fat bastard Warren. It was time to set the record straight. He looked at his watch. Better hurry.

A black van without license plates pulled up in front, stopping right in the rank. He looked the other way.

Suddenly strong hands grabbed him from behind. Before he could protest he was bundled roughly into the back of the van striking his knee painfully against the A second person closed the door from inside. He looked around. A man, his face hidden in a balaclava looked at him. Suddenly he felt a blow to the back of the head, but soft almost feather like. There was Everything went dark.

He came round. He felt groggy and his vision was blurred.

A short, fat man was leaning over him. "He's coming round" he said.

"Don't worry about it" said another voice from the front of the van.

He tried to sit up. His hands were tied. He tried to pull them free.

"Don't bother" said the man leaning over him.

He managed to sit upright in the van. The van turned a sharp corner and went over a bump. He was thrown on his back again.

"Who are you people?" he said.

"Never mind who we are" said the man.

"What do you want?"

"Shut up and be quiet."

The man pulled out a large roll of tape and cut a length of it. He took the tape and stuck it over his mouth.

"There. That'll keep you quiet."

He sat in silence. The man stepped over him to join his partner in the front. From his vantage he could see the van had turned off the freeway. The ride got bumpier, the van taking some very sharp turns. He could see there were no streetlights outside.

The van came to a sudden stop. The two men got out. He could hear them walking back towards the rear. The back doors opened suddenly. The driver was wearing a balaclava also. The first man climbed into the van. He hustled him out onto the roadway.

It was night. It was a clear sky but very cold. The sky was light up with a thousand points of light. In the distance, across fields, he could see a radio tower, lit up with lights flashing. The man gave him a push and he walked ahead of the two.

"I don't understand why we do it right now?" said the first man whose name was Eric.

"Boss wants to talk to him" said the other man who's name was Josh. He was tall and well built. He took off his balaclava revealing short-cropped orangy hair.

"I tell you we never should have left him with the money."

"Will you relax?"

"I just don't trust him."

"Look Eric, you have to take some things on face value. He organized everything. So far it's gone according to plan."

"That doesn't mean anything."

There was silence for a moment.

"What do we want with this guy?"

"Who knows?"

"That's what I don't like. He's fucking weird. I mean we have the money. Why all this? I don't understand his motives. They just don't make sense. You know what I mean? There's no logic to it. That's what makes me uneasy."

"We have to cover our tracks."

"Are we though? It's seems like we're just drawing more attention to ourselves. Anyway we'd better get going." He gave Nicholas a push that sent him stumbling in the direction of a car that was parked some distance up the road.

"Once we get the money.."

"When are we getting the money?"

"You know as well as I do."

"I know. But I don't see the point."

"Look he's just a little quirky."

"Just a little! And what about the old guy. Why haven't we wasted him?"

"Look don't worry about it. Once we have our share we're out of the picture."

"I just don't like it. That's all. It doesn't make sense."

"Let's just follow our instructions. Once I get my share I don't care."

In front of the van a car was parked. The first man opened the trunk.

"Get in" he said. He looked at him. The man gave him a push.

He climbed into the trunk. There was just enough room. It smelled of oil and grease. The man slammed the trunk shut.

For a long time he lay cramped in the same position. A car jack had been left in the trunk and it pressed painfully into his side. Every time the car went over a bump there he felt a painful jolt. Judging by the frequency of these bumps they had left the freeway and were travelling on marginal roads.

The car came to a sudden stop. He could hear voices, muffled through the side of the car. He banged the side of the car with his fist repeatedly. After a while the trunk was thrown open and one of his captors looked in, grinning. He blinked, his eyes contracting painfully. It looked like early morning. Grey was fading to early morning.

"Your wasting your time. No one can hear you."

"Let me out for a few minutes."

"No. I prefer to hear you banging." He slammed the lid down.

After another interval the car started to move again. He dozed off. He couldn't say for sure how long.

He was woken when the car came to an abrupt stop. He could hear the sound of voices approaching the trunk. The lid was thrown back and the two men looked in.

"All-right. End of the line" said one. "Out you get."

He felt the dig of strong hands into his arms. He was pulled roughly out of the car. He was in a clearing in a wooded region. Pine trees enclosed a small plot of land and a narrow track that disappeared into the trees, in the center of which stood a small wooden shack. Rusting farm implements and assorted junk littered the clearing. The shell of a burnt out car covered in snow.

His legs felt weak after the confinement. He stumbled and fell as they pushed him towards the house. He skinned his knee on a rock. He was lifted roughly to his feet.

"That's a thousand dollar suit you just ruined."

They both thought this was very funny.

"That's the least of your problems" said Eric, pulling him to his feet.

"Get inside."

Inside was a dusty living area. A battered stove in the center of the room gave out feeble warmth. Garbage littered the floor. Most of it of recent origin.

Two makeshift beds lay in one corner of the room. He was hustled quickly through the room. Eric took a key from his pocket and unlocked a door. It was dark inside. Before he could speak Josh gave him a shove that sent him flying into the room. He tripped on something and fell flat on his face. As he fell he caught a glimpse of a startled man sitting up on a worn iron bed.

The two men broke out into raucous laughter. One of them slammed the door shut. He could hear the sound of the key turned in the lock.

He lay prone for a moment.

"Are you all-right?" The man on the bed spoke.

He turned his head painfully. He touched his face.

"Your fore-head is bleeding" said the man.

"Is it bad?" he said sitting up slowly.

"I don't think so. Come closer. The light isn't that good."

He got up and sat on bed opposite the man. Genial eyes scanned his face, critically.

"It's just grazed. Nothing serious."

"What are you doing here?"

"I was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped? What happened?"

"It was two days ago. I was asleep in my house in Evanston when I heard a noise downstairs. My first thought was someone has broken in. You see I have a lot of expensive paintings, had I should say. I had this alarm system installed. Cost me nearly half a million. Now that I think about it I was suckered by a salesman. The damn thing didn't even go off. So anyway I keep a gun under my pillow. You never know when some freak is going to break in. So I took the gun and went downstairs very cautiously. I could hear voices in the study. I burst in and caught two of them completely by surprise. What I didn't realize was there was a third. He must have been behind the door. That's how I got this." He turned his head showing a bloody sheet that was bandaged around his head.

"Are you all-right?"

"It stopped bleeding this morning."

"But you need a doctor."

"It's all-right. Our two hosts were kind enough to give me disinfectant. Only because I told them I might die before their boss gets here."

"Who is their boss?"

"What?"

"Who was the man who hit you?"

"I never saw him. I came round here. All I can tell you is those two clowns are very afraid of him. Do you know who he is?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

"Well, spit it out."

"Well. I have not met our two friends out there." He gestured towards the other room. "Not before today. But I have a feeling they are connected with a character who's been trying to blackmail me."

"Who? What's his name?"

"He goes by the name of Norman Rosen. He came into my office about three weeks ago and he's been harassing me every since."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Well, let's just say he found out something about me that would have compromised me professionally."

"What makes you think he's responsible for this?" said Tyler.

"Some things he let slip."

Tyler looked at him questioningly for a long moment. "Well one thing is clear. We won't be here much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious isn't it? We're not going to be let go free. Not when we can identify those two, and maybe the ringleader, as well."

"Aren't they trying to ransom you? That was the speculation in the newspaper."

"I don't think so. I surprised them. I was supposed to be out of town that night. They must have thought the house was empty."

"They can't do this."

"Why not? Who's going to stop them?"

There was silence. Tyler got up from his bed and paced to the window.

"I can tell by your face you have no idea why you're here" he said turning around.

"What are you? A mind reader."

"Just perceptive. You're tired."

"Yes. And every part of me hurts."

"You might as well lie down and relax. I don't think we're going anywhere for a while."

"What's your name?"

"Tyler. Matt Tyler."

He nodded.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

"Because your name is on the front page of every newspaper in Chicago."

"I can't say I'm surprised. And you are?"

"Nicholas Martin."

They shook hands.

Tyler gave up his pacing and threw himself on the bed. "There is one thing I can't understand."

"What's that?"

"Well how they managed to disable the alarm system. I mean this thing was state of the art. Ought to have been. It cost nearly half a million bucks."

Nicholas stared up at the ceiling, avoiding eye-contact.

Tyler went on. "The only way I was told it could be disabled is if someone know the code. They had ten seconds to disarm it after they broke in. Least that how the salesman pitched to me. Son of a bitch. Lot of use it turned out to be."

"This code. Who knew it?"

"Well that's the thing. Nobody except me. I have it memorised of course and I have a copy in safekeeping."

"Oh."

"Can't for the life of me understand out how they figured it out."

"Maybe they disabled it some other way?"

"Just doesn't make sense. "

There was silence for a while. They could hear their two captors moving around in the other room. A chair was pushed back and footsteps could be heard as floorboards creaked. Then there was quiet again. It seemed like a hour later when Tyler spoke.

"Listen, I doubt they will ever let us go."

"What do you mean?"

"It's pretty obvious to me that we are being held here until further instructions."

"What further instructions?"

"I'd say as soon as this Norman character arrives we'll both be dead."

"If that's true then what are we waiting for?"

"That part I don't understand. The most logical thing to do would be to kill us both. Keeping us alive only increases the risk of detection."

"What do you think we should do?"

"Well I have an idea."

After a few hours Tyler lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. He paced back and forth from the window to the door. He looked at his watch. It was five forty five. In fifteen minutes the stock market would be closed.

He knocked on the door. Tyler looked up from his bed. There was no response. He knocked again. This time more loudly. After a few moments the door swung open. The short, stumpy man named Eric stood in the doorway, one hand in his pocket, openly scratching his crotch.

"Listen I want to make a phone call" said Nicholas.

"Of course you do." A malicious smile broke across his chapped lips.

"Would you like room service, as well?"

"Look. You can stand beside me while I do it. I have to make one phone call. You'll hear every word."

"Who would you like to call?" Eric smiled, seeing the possibility for some entertainment. "Is it your mother?"

Nicholas said nothing.

"Maybe it's your girlfriend. Do you have a girl-friend, pretty boy?"

"Look jerk. Let me use the phone."

"Jerk. That's not very nice."

"Forget it" said Tyler, sitting up in the bed. "They don't have a phone. I overheard them. The nearest phone is thirty miles away."

"That's right, old man. Now shut up and stay quiet."

Eric slammed the door shut. There was silence for a while. Nicholas sat on the bed. After a while he spoke.

"Why did you want to use the phone anyway?"

"It's a long story."

"We've got plenty of time."

"I know. I just don't feel like talking about it, right now."

There was silence again for a while. He sat on his bed and stared up at the ceiling, imagining faces in the cracked and discoloured plasterwork. "Don't you have an account with Stephen's & Co?" he said after a while.

"I was one of the founding partners."

"What?"

"Yeah. Back in the early sixties. Before you were born probably. Rob and I started it. He bought me out after a few years. Just as well."

"Why's that?"

"Well, Rob's one of those guys that has to be right all the time. Let's just say he was not an ideal business partner. Still he was a good friend. I was at the funeral. I think he went off the rails a bit towards the end."

"In what way?"

"Well, his health wasn't good and then he married some girl in her twenties. I also heard from an associate of his that the company wasn't doing all that well. Some questionable deals were done."

"You see to know a lot."

"When you're my age you get to hear things."

They talked for a long time.

Chapter 17 – Captured with Tyler by Norman

He woke as the first feeble rays of morning shone through the dirty window. The room was deathly cold. His breath rose in white clouds. The springs in the bed creaked as he turned over. He lay fully dressed a thin blanket thrown over him. He dug his hands deeper into the pockets of his overcoat for warmth. Tyler gave a throaty cough in his sleep.

It lighted up the grey, drab of the room. The walls were bare walls and unplastered. The floor was paved with cracked and grimy stone flags. Two rickety iron beds were the only furnishing. A defunct wash basin discoloured with many years of grime was positioned in the corner a mildewed bucket beneath the leaky piping.

Tyler was still asleep lying on his back. The gash on his forehead had started to heal and harden. It gave him a certain rakish quality. His freckled face with bristling moustache exuded a quality of calm and pragmatism despite his circumstances. His hands were folded neatly over his chest. He woke and rolled over.

"What time is it?"

"God knows. Sometime after seven I would guess."

"God it's freezing in here." He got up off the bed and started pacing up and down between the beds. "Did you ever read Papillion by Henri Carree?"

"No. Why?"

"Well it's a true story. The author was an inmate on Devil's Island. This is how he kept himself fit during two years of solitary confinement" he said as he turned on his heel and paced back. "Used to walk about five miles in his cell each day."

"I don't know how you can be so relaxed about the whole thing."

"What can I do? We might as well wait and see what happens."

"Yeah well I have some urgent business to attend to which will probably go down the toilet if I'm not there to look after it."

"Is this what the phone call was about?"

"Look. I'd rather not say."

"My, you're cagey." He sat down on his bed. "What do you do anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know - for a living."

"I'm a stock broker."

"Oh. Which company?"

"Stephen's."

"Stephen's? Rob Stephen's firm?"

He nodded.

"That's how you knew I had an account there."

He nodded.

A key clicked in the lock and the door swung open. Eric stood in the doorway. His hair was tousled as though it hadn't seen a brush in days. The shirt he was wearing had been white but was stained in a hundred places. He filled the room with an acrid smell of body odour. He chewed hard on his tobacco.

"What do you want?" said Nicholas. "Don't bother us unless you're ready to let us go."

Eric smiled revealing set of yellowing, nicotined stained molars. "That's not very friendly."

"Where's your precious boss? Has he forgotten about you?"

The smile faded from his lips.

Josh called out from other room. "Eric leave them alone. Come back in here."

"Use your head Eric. Norman is not going to let you live."

"What are you talking about? I'm not listening to you college boy."

"He's used all of us, and he's done it very well."

"All I care about is the money. If I had my way I'd waste you right now."

The floorboards creaked as Josh came out of the other room to investigate.

"Eric don't talk to him. Just come out here."

"No. I'm bored."

Josh took him by the arm and pulled him away from the doorway.

"Think about it Eric" said Nicholas as Josh shut the door and locked it.

The shadows cast by the window frame grew and lengthened across the room. It was early afternoon when he heard a door open and the sound of footsteps approaching again.

The door swung open, suddenly hitting Tyler's bed with a clang. Eric stood framed in the light his large gut hanging over his belt, jet black hair bushing up from below a greasy collar. He ran a nicotine stained finger carefully through thinning black hair. He was silent for a moment chewing tobacco. Then he hawked loudly and spat a large globule of brown liquid on the floor, between the two beds. It lay like - a embryo of swirling colour. "So college boy how do you like your new home?"

"Get lost."

"Oh, don't be like that" he said. "Looks like his luck has run out" he said to Tyler. He stood in the doorway picking his teeth with a match. "What do you think old man?"

Tyler said nothing. "I'm talking to you old man." He gave Tyler's bed a kick.

"What do you want?" said Nicholas.

"Want? Me? Want?" He seemed puzzled by the question. "From you, nothing."

"So, get lost then."

"Oh you're tough aren't you."

"Maybe I'd like to break your fingers. Just the small ones." Eric leaned over him. "Do you know how painful that is?"

"I'd like to see you try?" said Nicholas, squaring up in front of him.

"Oh aren't you brave. What you think old man?"

"Go to hell" said Tyler.

"Tut tut tut."

"Come Eric. Leave them alone" said Josh from the corridor. "The instructions are they're not to be touched until we get word."

"Oh to hell with the instructions. Who gives a fuck?"

"Come on." Josh took him by the arm and escorted out of the room. He closed the door. They could hear the sound of the key turning in the lock.

Shadows grew in the room as the sun set beneath the trees. Outside dusk gave way to darkness. He judged by the light that it was now late afternoon. From the other room came the sound of raised voices mainly Eric's. There was the crunch and tinkle of glass breaking. Later still the sound of cracked and monotone singing drifted under the door.

Then came the sound of someone leaving. Footsteps clicked across the bare floorboards. The front door slammed shut with a bang. A moment later a car engine started shattering the silence. The engine revved, reversed and then gradually faded into the distance. The quiet enveloped them once again. They could hear someone moving around in the other room. A bottle smashed. Furniture was dragged violently across the room. Pots, plates and other utensils clattered to the floor.

A while later the sound of footsteps could be heard approaching the door.

The door swung open again. Eric stood unsteadily in the doorway, smelling of body odour and cigarette smoke. In one hand he held a bottle of gin already half empty. In the other he held a revolver. He belched loudly.

"Oh look. Isn't this nice?" he slurred, swaying on his feet.

"Which one of you wants to die?" he said, slurring his words. "How about you old man?" He pointed the gun at Tyler.

"Leave him alone" said Nicholas.

"Oh you'd like to be the one." He swung the gun, shakily, around in his direction. "You afraid to die?" He pointed the gun directly at his head. He was scarcely four feet away. "Oh no. You're not afraid." He mimicked his voice. "You're the tough one. Let's see how tough you are." He cocked the gun with his thumb. "See no safety catch now. Are you still brave, college boy?" he shouted.

He said nothing. He stared into Eric's eyes. The pupils were shrunken and glazed over. Bloodshot veins stood out on the eye-balls - crazy-mad eyes.

"On your knees, college boy" he screamed at him. Spittle and saliva flew from his mouth. He swayed forward pressing the cold metal against his temple.

"I said on your knees."

He didn't move. More out of shock than bravery he sat rooted to the spot. Eric pulled the trigger. He felt the click as the hammer fell, the shock alone made him recoil across the bed.

Eric laughed raucously - a high pitched cackle. He pulled the trigger repeatedly. The hammer clicked through each empty chamber. "Not so tough now." He laughed slamming the door behind him. The key clicked in the lock.

Tyler looked over at him. "You okay?"

"I think so."

He sat up on the bed, his hands shaking. His heart started to race, now, after the event. Blood pounded through his temples.

"Lie down on the bed" said Tyler.

"I'll be all-right. Give me a few seconds."

He lay down on the bed staring up at the ceiling. After a few minutes his heart rate subsided. The pressure on his temples fell. There was silence from the other room.

Later he got up and paced from door to window and back.

He silent stood at the door listening.

"I think he's asleep."

"Why?" Tyler sat up in his bed leaning on his elbow.

"I haven't heard any noise for some time." He sat on his bed. "Tyler we've got to try something. We can't just sit here waiting to be murdered." He got up and paced around the room, again. There was one small, barred window

which looking out over a ramshackle shed. Beyond it trees blocked the view.

"No way out there anyway" he said, trying the bars.

"You're wasting your time. I've already tried that."

"There must be some way."

"I hope you find it" said Tyler. "Brick walls, a steel plated door., bars on the window.."

"What about the roof?" He looked up.

"Plaster and brick after that. They didn't leave anything to chance."

"Well, what do you suggest?" he said throwing himself on the bed in frustration.

"Any chance some one could have seen you being kidnapped?"

"I doubt it. They timed it pretty well. It was early in the morning. I think there's more chance you would be missed."

"Why?"

"Well you're the model citizen - the pillar of society."

"What do the papers say?"

"Prominent Evanston business man kidnapped. Major man hunt underway. That kind of thing."

"They must be hard up for a story."

"You're too modest. You underestimate your popularity."

Tyler laughed. He was quiet for a few minutes. "The only way is to get them into the room and jump them."

"That's what I'm thinking. They never both come in, though."

"There has to be a way. They're just two brainless punks."

"Well we need a plan fast."

"When this Norman character shows up it's curtains for both of us. Did you hear what Josh said?"

Nicholas nodded. "Where are we anyway?"

"I'd guess somewhere in Wisconsin judging by the length of the car journey."

He walked to the window and looked out, leaning his elbows on the sill. The light faded and through the glass the forest grew pitch black save only for a clear sky which was gradually lit with innumerable points of light. He turned away from the window and sat down on his bed.

"Tell me about your wife" said Nicholas, more to break the silence and monotony than anything.

"Oh, well" said Tyler. A smile broke out on his lips. He stared up at the ceiling. "We first met when I was stationed in San Diego with the navy. She

worked on the base in administration. I thought she was beautiful, of course.

Still do."

"She was blonde, right?"

Tyler looked at him intently. "How did you know that?"

"Just a guess."

"Oh."

"How did she die?" he said.

The smile faded. "It was a car crash. Seven years ago, now."

"That must have been hard."

Tyler nodded. "It was. Still is in fact. We had our ups and downs like anybody else. It's funny the way you only remember the highs and not the lows. I have three children too, you know. Well not children anymore. Adults, really. One lives in New York."

Nicholas lay on the bed and shut his eyes. The springs creaked in Tyler's bed. He looked over. Tyler was sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at him critically.

"You seem very wired up" he said. "Is there something on your mind? I mean apart from all this."

"You could say that."

"What is it?"

He got up and walked to the window and looked out. There was silence for a moment. Then he said "everything I worked for is going down the toilet as we speak."

"Why?"

"If I don't make a call to my broker to sell a certain stock then in a few days I stand to lose everything."

"I think we've got more serious problems."

"I know. I know. It's just one phone call. That's what kills me. One little phone call."

He sat down on the bed again.

Tyler sat up and faced him. "Let me give you some advice, my friend. You're too hung up on this whole deal."

"What do you mean?"

"You want to be successful, right? You want to make a lot of money."

"Yeah. So? What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing per se. Only ask yourself this. Why are you doing this? Why is it so important to you?"

"Where did that come from?"

"I'm just trying to understand it. That's all."

"I want to be somebody. I don't want to piss my whole life away in some mediocre desk job."

"And you think people with money have it any easier?"

"Yes. I do actually. At least they have choices."

"Choice? Different choices maybe. You think it's any different? What do you earn now? Let me guess, hundred grand, maybe a hundred and fifty if you're really good."

Nicholas said nothing. He leaned back on the bed and closed his eyes.

"The point is all that is gold does not glitter."

"What are you talking about?"

"Life's not only about being successful. It's not solely about making money. That's only one criterion. Fact is it's not about anything in particular."

"Like you have all the answers."

"Well put it this way. I am where you want to be or are struggling to be."

"It's easy to be disparaging of wealth when you have it."

"Maybe. But I know a lot of wealthy people. They're not any happier than you or I. Often the reverse is true. It doesn't solve any problems."

"You're suggesting there is one."

"Maybe. I don't know you very well."

"No. You don't."

"Put it this way. Nothing is worth risking your all."

"Meaning?"

"Anything that could potentially make you much worse off than you are currently is not a prudent investment."

Tyler sat down on his bed. "We think success will fill a hole in our lives until we get it."

He said nothing.

The sound of raised voices came from the other room. Eric seemed to have woken again. They could hear the sound of the car approaching. The floorboards creaked. Then the front door swung open with a bang. The sound of the engine stopped abruptly. Eric was saying something they couldn't catch. Nicholas stood up and put his ear to the door to listen. The metal was cold to the touch. The front door slammed shut. The floorboards creaked.

"Do you hear what they said on the news?" said Eric.

"Hear what?" This was Josh's voice

"On the radio. The radio."

"What about it?"

"They're searching the woods over at Epson. That's twenty miles from here."

"Big deal. I didn't see one check-point."

"What do you mean big deal? That's too close."

"Quit drinking and relax. Will you? You're all hyped up. Put down that bottle."

"I'm not going down again."

"You're not going to go down."

"They won't take me alive."

"Shut up. Will you? Jesus Christ."

There was silence.

Nicholas lay down on the bed and shut his eyes. Eventually he fell asleep.

Chapter 18 – Tyler and Nicholas Escape from Norman

They waited until mid-morning before they acted. There was movement in the other room. He pressed his ear against the door. The radio was playing loudly. There was no conversation to be heard. A chair scraped noisily across the floor and then stopped.

He turned to Tyler and nodded.

Tyler took up position. He lay on the bed letting out loud groans. He kicked and jerked convulsively on the bed. After a few moments Nicholas went to the door.

"Eric, Josh, come here quick" he shouted.

There was silence for a minute. He hammered on the door with his fists. Then he heard the sound of footsteps approaching the door.

"What do you want?" said Josh, from the other side of the door.

"It's Tyler. I don't know what's wrong him. I think he's having some kind of a seizure."

As if to justify this statement, Tyler let out a few more groans.

He heard the sound of the key turning in the lock. He looked over to Tyler.

"What's all this about?" said Josh as he opened the door. He was dressed in dark trousers and black pull-over. His eyes strayed from Nicholas to the bed and back again.

"I don't know" said Nicholas. "He just collapsed suddenly."

Eric was standing in the doorway behind Josh. He wasn't holding a gun. Josh came in and leaned over Tyler.

"Shut up old man. There's nothing wrong with you."

In the next instant Nicholas made a lunge for Eric who stood in the doorway. At the same time Tyler leapt up from the bed and wrestled Josh to the ground.

Eric fell back losing his balance falling against dusty boxes that were stacked high against the wall. He landed on his back, his head striking the bare stone floor with a thwack. He was up in an instant fists flailing.

Eric swung his left fist directly at his face. He dodged. The blow caught him on the side of the head. He stepped back stunned. He ducked another blow from the left.

He dived low, under Eric's swinging arms, catching him around the waist in a tackle. Eric went reeling back into the sitting room, carried by his impetus. They brushed against the table. It tipped and fell over. Plates, cups, bottles, magazines, newspapers and trash clattered to the floor. Eric hit the stove in the

middle of the room with a painful thud. It rattled and shook but remained standing. A cloud of ashes rose from it enveloping them both in grey powder.

His shoulder struck the hard metal with an agonising crunch. He landed on top of Eric. Dark, bloodshot eyes stared up at him, full of impotent rage. He brought his fist down with all the force he could muster on the fat, stubby chin striking repeated blows to his face. Eric's arms were pinioned to his sides under the weight of Nicholas's legs.

His cheek turned crimson. Blood flowed from his torn lip. His cheek turned puffy. Blood gushed from his nose.

Nicholas reached for a bottle lying on the floor. Finding it he raised it by the neck, high above his head, sloshing liquid. Whiskey streamed onto his head and trickled down his arm. He brought it down on Eric's head with sharp smack. The bottle didn't break. He raised it up again, steeling himself for a harder blow.

A sudden blow to the back of the head threw him off balance. His head felt numb and disconnected from his body. He turned in slow motion to see Josh raising his arm above his head. A second blow sent him reeling into the chair and then everything went black.

When he came around everything was dark. A small square shadow of moonlight was cast on the floor. He was lying on his bed. His face felt numb.

He touched his cheek. It was tender and damp. He felt the warm sticky flow of blood. He sat up painfully on the bed. His ribs were bruised and rigid. A sharp jab of pain caught him in the chest. From the other side of the room he could hear Tyler's breathing, hoarse and irregular.

"Tyler, are you okay?"

There was no response. He repeated himself, louder this time.

"Oh, my head." The springs creaked in the bed as he turned over. He reached for the light switch. The sudden flood of light made his eyes contract painfully.

"Jesus. You look awful" said Tyler.

He put a hand to his face. There was a long gash running down the side of his cheek. Already he could felt the hard touch of a scab forming.

"You don't look the best yourself."

"I think you got the worst of it. Eric really had a go at you when he got you in here. I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Josh was too quick for me. He's strong too. I thought I could take him. If it wasn't for that we would be long gone by now."

"It's okay. Forget about it."

He cleaned his face as best he could using the silk lining ripped from his overcoat. He counted his ribs. As far as he could tell, none were broken. He gingerly touched the gash on his cheek. The scab felt hard and strange to the touch.

He felt weary again so he lay down on the bed, springs creaking, as he repositioned himself, delicately, to minimise the pain.

He lay in silence listening. All was quiet. He could tell by Tyler's breathing that he was already asleep.

His mind wandered. He remembered a day spent on the beach with Sonia. It was summer or early fall. The sound of the waves breaking gently on the shore, the smell of sun-tan lotion, seagulls and the cries of children in the distance came back as he relived the memory. Sonia came back from the water, wet and dripping. Heads turned to stare as she walked.

He stretched and unintentionally struck his hand off the metal frame of the bed. The memory faded and he was back in the room with Tyler.

He must have fallen asleep for a while for when he woke it was already dark outside. He could hear noises from the other room. And then in the distance, gradually growing louder in intensity the unmistakably sound of a car engine. There was movement in the other room - the floorboards creaked. The

front door was opened and then slammed with a bang. Footsteps approached the door. The key turned in the lock.

The door swung open and Norman stood squarely on the threshold. He was dressed in spotless white trousers and pressed navy jacket over which an expensive, silk-lined overcoat hung. A smile spread across his face. He stroked his immaculately groomed goatee, brushing a speck of dust impatiently from his arm.

"My, my. What have we here?"

Tyler and Nicholas looked at him, without saying anything.

"You don't look the best, I must say."

"What do you want?" said Nicholas.

He smiled but didn't reply.

"Let us go and the authorities will go easy on you" said Tyler sitting up in his bed.

"What an attractive offer" he said, leaning his shoulder against the door jamb. "You are so kind. But I'm afraid I am the authorities. At least as far as you're concerned. That was a nasty stunt you pulled this morning. Poor Eric is not in a very forgiving mood."

"Give it up Norman. You'll never get away with it."

"Oh but I have. And I will. It's great to see you have become such comrades in arms. But I wouldn't get too friendly with golden boy here" he said to Tyler. "Without him we never would have broken into your house."

"What are you talking about?" said Tyler.

"He got the code from your safety deposit box" said Norman. "Not a very nice thing to do was it?"

"You are some scumbag" said Nicholas. "I had to do it, Tyler. He was blackmailing me."

"Friends should not keep secrets from each other" said Norman, smiling from ear to ear. Through the dark sunglasses Nicholas thought he could detect a faint sparkle in his eyes.

"So what now, Norman?" said Tyler.

"Well. I think you should know why you're here. You at any rate. Poor Mr. Martin is more of an innocent bystander. I brought you here because I want you to suffer."

"Why would you want that?" said Tyler.

"I have my reasons."

"Why go to all this trouble?" said Nicholas. "What could you possibly hope to gain?"

"I'll tell you what I hope to gain, Mr. Perfect, Mr. I Can Do No Wrong"

he spat. Spittle flew across the room. He clenched his fists, the veins stood out in relief on his temples. "I'm setting the record straight.

"What record?" said Tyler.

"We're from different worlds you and I" he said turning to face Tyler.

"You could not possibly imagine where I'm from."

"Try me" said Tyler.

"Try you. You think you can understand me? Oh I can move in your world all-right. I can speak your language but I'm not like you. That son of a bitch you called your friend. Do you have any idea what he was really like? You think you do? He was my father."

"Rob was your father" said Tyler.

Norman said nothing. He turned around and walked out through the doorway. He slammed the door behind him. A second later they could hear the click of the key turning in the lock.

"It still doesn't make sense" said Tyler lying back on the bed.

"What?"

"How could he be Rob's son. I don't believe that. I know Rob's family. I know his history. He never mentioned anyone."

"He certainly seems to believe he is. Anyway I don't think Norman needs a motive. He's psychotic enough to get by without one."

Tyler watched him as he paced back and forth.

"Will you sit down and relax?"

"How can I?"

"Pacing is not going to do any good."

"I feel so frustrated. We're like pigs going to the slaughter, Tyler. Worse, actually. Pigs don't know any better."

He lay down on the bed after a while positioning himself delicately on his good side. "We should get him in here and get him talking" he said, turning to face Tyler.

"What good would that do?"

"Well. We might learn something. Now that everything has gone his way. He might be more inclined to open up."

"There's no harm in trying" said Tyler.

He got up and knocked on the door. There was no response from the other room. He knocked again more loudly. Finally he could hear the sound of footsteps approaching. He sat down on the bed again.

"Yes?" It was Norman's voice.

"Can I have something to clean my face with?"

"No." There was a sound of footsteps.

"Wait" he shouted.

"What?" He heard the sound of a key being placed in the keyhole. The lock clicked and the door opened. Norman stood there with a gun. "Back on your bed, where I can see you" he said. He stood in the doorway keeping both of them covered. "There's nothing wrong with either of you, of course" he said. "You just want to pump me for information. Well it won't do you any good."

"So you were never motivated by money, at all" he said.

"There are a lot easier ways of making money than this."

"What has Tyler got to do with this? He's not responsible for your father."

"Ah but he is."

"Rob was my friend" said Tyler. "I find hard to believe that he would have disowned you had he really believed you were his son."

'Of course you do" said Norman. There was a menacing glint in his eye. "Everyone finds that hard to believe. All those delightful people that my dear father chose for his friends over the years. Such powerful influential people. People who could never be touched. People like you Tyler who were beyond the law."

"That's horseshit" said Tyler.

"Is it really? Do you really believe the rich and the poor are bound by the same laws. Well of course you would. Things are great, aren't they Tyler.

Society is so just. Everyone gets a fair crack of the whip - a true meritocracy.

Of course. I'm sure every wealthy person in America believes that. Well in that case you won't object to this illustration of merit." He waved his gun around the room. "I will admit it took a fair bit of organisation to get you both here."

"To what end?" said Tyler. "Even if Rob is your father and even if he treated you terribly as you seem to believe, so what? Two wrongs don't make a right."

"Two wrongs don't make a right" he mimicked, contemptuously. "Of course they don't. You hypocrite. You lecture me about morality after what you did."

"What did he do?" said Nicholas. "How has Tyler wronged you so terribly?"

Norman stopped as though the words were on the tip of his tongue. Suddenly, he smiled. "Touché, Mr. Martin. Touché." He looked at him closely. "Perhaps you are a little more dangerous than I give you credit for. You'll excuse me, I'm sure. I think I've said enough for one day."

He stepped backwards through the doorway keeping an eye on both of them until he had crossed the threshold. Then he closed and locked the door behind him. They waited until the footsteps faded away, before speaking.

"I think you were on to something" said Tyler sitting on the edge of his bed.

"I know. If we could just figure out his motive."

"Do you really think it would help?" said Tyler lying down again.

"It might. Let's face it Norman has gone to a lot of trouble to orchestrate this whole thing. If some perverted desire for revenge is driving him. It might be sufficient if we could succeed in planting a seed of doubt in his mind."

"I don't know" said Tyler. "There doesn't appear to be much logic in his behaviour from what I can tell."

"Everyone has something that makes them tick, some weakness that can be exploited. That's what Norman is so good at finding out."

"He found your Achilles heel, evidently."

"He was blackmailing me, Tyler."

"You knew what you were doing was wrong. You should have reported him at that point."

"I know. You're right. In retrospect I can see I should have. But it would have destroyed everything I was working for. I had no idea then he was a homicidal maniac."

"And I thought that crummy salesman had sold me a dud alarm system. There was never anything wrong with it."

He said nothing for a moment. Then he sat up on his elbow and looked across. "Look Tyler I'm sorry about the way things have turned out. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. You know that."

"I know. No-one can predict the future."

There was silence for a while. Then Tyler laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"That's how you knew what colour my wife's hair was. Of course, I knew you looked uncomfortable when you let that slip."

"I thought finished with that subject."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Good-night." He killed the light.

Chapter 19 – Norman with a gun

He woke early before it became light. His clothes were beginning to smell. It was three days now since he had taken a shower. His once clean and neatly pressed suit was in a sorry state. The arm of the jacket had ripped along the seam. The ends of his trousers were frayed, tattered and stained with mud.

The darkness was gradually fading to a frigid dawn. He got up and banged on the door. Tyler turned uneasily in his bed. He hammered again. Footsteps approached the door.

"What do you want?"

"I need to use the toilet."

The door opened. Norman stood in the doorway looking immaculate despite his surroundings. He motioned with the gun he held in his hand. He walked down the corridor and through the living room. Josh and Eric lay sleeping on their makeshift cots. The air in the room was fetid and close.

He opened the front door of the shack. It creaked and scraped loudly on the floor. He stepped out onto the ramshackle verandah with Norman following. A cold, clammy mist was lifting slowly. He walked down the steps and through the frozen and snow-covered ground. It crunched underfoot.

"So you were responsible for the shooting in San Francisco" he said without turning his head.

Norman smiled. "Me? Responsible? Not exactly. Let's just say some of my associates got carried away and took the initiative. They thought you were a threat. But as far as I was concerned you hadn't fulfilled your purpose at that point."

"What associates?" He stopped and turned around.

"My, you are curious, aren't you?" He waved him on with the gun.

A small outhouse stood at some distance behind the shack. He opened the door. A foul stench greeted him as he closed the door and sat, gingerly, on the porcelain seat. It was ice cold. He stood up after a few minutes and pulled up his trousers. He unclasped the door and stepped out. Norman stood there, waiting.

"So when is it going to be, Norman? When are you going to tie up all your loose ends. After all we are your loose ends, are we not?"

Norman said nothing. He waved him on with his gun.

"Don't you have any compassion?"

"My father in addition to being an adulator and abuser of small children taught me the virtue of a lack of compassion."

"You think this is some kind of game."

"Don't tell me what I think. I know very well what's involved."

"Haven't you ever cared about anything?"

Norman laughed, a long sneering, sinister laugh.

"Oh, dear, Mr. Martin. You never give up, do you? Your morals and ethics don't have any hold over me. I can see I am just beyond your comprehension. It's an unforgiving world, my friend. Don't look for understanding and you won't be disappointed. Now go back into your room before I lose my patience."

It was some time later. He had been lying on the bed. Tyler was up and pacing back and forth.

"We have to do something" he said, standing with his back to the window.

"What? There's three of them now."

"I know but I am not going to go like a lamb, meekly to the slaughter."

"I'm with you Tyler. I just don't have any ideas."

"We just have to be ready. The chance may come when we least expect it."

Later that morning the door opened. Norman stood there holding the radio. "Oh I thought you might want to hear some financial news" he said casually, turning up the volume.

Tyler sat up in his bed.

"Listen." He turned on the radio.

"In other news today, Trionics has been suspended from trading on the New York stock exchange pending an investigation into allegations of director fraud and falsification of company results. Trionic's woes began yesterday when a private investor dumped his entire holding, nearly 30 percent of the company's value, on the market. Later an anonymous letter to the Wall Street Journal created more jitters. Panic selling hit the market as the deadline for suspension approached. "

His face turned very pale. He clasped his hands tightly together. His body shook. He stared at Norman, squinting until his eyes were only barely visible.

He looked at Norman

"The stock market is so risky, these days" he said turning off the radio.

He jumped off the bed, going directly for him.

Norman stepped smartly into the corridor and slammed the door in his face. He pounded futilely on the door. Through the door he could hear the sound of high-pitched laughter.

"You're wasting your time" said Tyler after few moments. "That's exactly what he wants you to do. He gets his satisfaction from your misfortune."

He stopped and sat down on the bed. He sat there with his head in his hands, staring at the floor.

"There will be other deals" said Tyler after a while.

"I'm ruined."

"No you're not. I went through two bankruptcies when I first started out. It's a setback but you'll get over it. The main priority now is to stay alive."

"You don't understand. I bet everything on this."

"I'll tell you something" said Tyler. He leaned back on his elbows. "I used to have over two hundred people working for me when I ran my company. Success in business doesn't hang on flash in the pan deals. It's just continual hard work and dedication."

"That makes me feel a lot better" he said sarcastically.

The door opened suddenly without warning. They were both resting on their beds. Norman stood in the doorway. He held a gun in his hand. He pointed it at Nicholas.

"What do you want?" he said, turning around to face him.

"Come out here. I want to talk to you."

He followed him out into the corridor and into the other room. He squinted in the brighter light. Eric and Josh were lounging around in chairs. He had only seen the room briefly and then from the perspective of the fight. The two unkempt beds in the corner were as before. There was a small fire burning in the stove and it filled the room with thin grey smoke. Two decrepit and tattered armchairs were drawn up close to it, stuffing bulging from all sides. Norman pointed to one of the chairs. Nicholas sat down after Eric vacated it with a long, hostile look on his face.

"Now, Mr. Martin" said Norman seating himself in front of him, on a rickety stool, he put the gun in his pocket, "I want to know what you know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Who knows about our little business other than you or I?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Not good enough, Mr. Martin. I don't think you quite understand who you're dealing with. We don't play games. Eric here has no love for you, especially after your little escapade recently. Eric."

Eric got up and walked over to the stove. He picked up a poker which had been lying on the floor and opening the hatch placed it in amongst the white-hot coals.

"Do you know what it's like to have a white-hot poker touch your skin?"

"What do you want?"

"Who have you told about this?"

"No-one."

"Don't bullshit me. What was your girl-friend doing in Union Station?"

"Nothing."

"Eric, can you help Mr. Martin remember? He's not being very co-operative."

Eric smiled, his eyes glowed in the fire-light. He pulled the poker out of the stove and walked towards Nicholas.

"You see, Mr. Martin I think you're a lot smarter than you look." Eric stood holding the poker, now a scant foot from his face, waiting for instructions. He could feel its heat. Eric grinned from ear to ear.

"Now maybe you discussed a few things with that pretty girl-friend of yours" said Norman. "Things that might complicate matters for us. You understand of course. You see news of Mr. Tyler's disappearance was all over the newspapers before we took you out of circulation. It's just possible that

your delightful young lady friend has connected that event with me. So now

Mr. Martin, I ask you again, what does she know?"

"I told you: nothing."

Eric brought the poker down suddenly on his bare hand. He yelled. A shock wave ran through his whole body. He tried to pull his hand away but Eric held his arm while Josh held the other arm. He could smell the burning flesh. After what seemed like an eternity of agony the poker was removed. His hand was numb. He looked down. A searing, black scar ran across his palm.

"Norman, what's the point in this?" said Josh, suddenly.

"Well" said Norman, ignoring him.

Eric smiled. He waved the poker before Nicholas's face.

"She might have an idea" he said, after a long pause.

"Good. Now we're getting somewhere." Norman leaned back on the stool. The legs creaked in protest. He put a carefully manicured hand into his inside pocket and took out a mobile phone.

"Call her" he said, handing the phone to Nicholas.

"What?" He felt dizzy and lightheaded. He took the phone with his left hand. His other hand he held close to him. The numbness was wearing off and he could feel a dull, throbbing pain pulsating through his hand.

"Call her up and leave a message. Tell her you'll call her in a few days.

You're just very busy right now."

"She's not going to believe that."

Norman nodded at Eric. Eric smiled and waved the poker in his direction.

He dialed her number. After a few seconds the machine answered. He waited until the beep and then spoke. "Sonia. Hi. It's me. Listen, sorry I haven't called in the last few days. I've been really busy. Look. I'll call again soon. Don't worry. Everything's fine."

"Very good" said Norman, taking the phone out of his hand.

He got up, holding his burnt hand tenderly to his side. Eric escorted him back to the room. He opened the door and then as a parting gesture gave him a vindictive shove that sent him sprawling into the room.

The door slammed shut after him.

He pulled himself delicately onto the bed.

"What happened to you?" said Tyler sitting up. "I could hear voices."

He showed him his hand.

"Those animals."

He stopped at the door pressing his ear against the cold metal. He could hear the sound of raised voices from the other room.

"I don't understand what we're waiting for." This was Eric's voice.

"I told you" said Norman. "We'll finish it tomorrow then we'll split the money and we'll all go our separate ways."

"Where are you going?" This was Josh's voice.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

The front door slammed shut and a few moments later he could hear the sound of an engine starting.

Nicholas repeated what he had heard of the conversation to Tyler.

"We're for it tomorrow unless we come up with something" he said, sitting down on his bed.

"We just have to stay alert and seize the opportunity when it arises."

"Only now they're expecting us to try something. Have you noticed how none of them come into the room anymore. They just stand in the doorway. And they are always armed when they open the door."

"I've noticed."

"Oh, it's hopeless" he said, throwing himself on his bed.

"There must be a way" said Tyler. "I'm going to talk to this Norman character. See if I can't make some kind of deal with him."

"Are you serious?"

"Well, why not?"

"The man is completely insane to begin with. What can you offer him that he doesn't have already?"

"Well, he got some money and jewelry from my house but there's a lot more where that came from."

"If he all-ready sold his holding in Trionics before it crashed he must have made ten or twelve million dollars. He doesn't need anything from you. The only thing he wants now is to leave no traces behind."

"Josh is the weak link. He could be reasoned with."

"I don't think he's any more reasonable. He just thinks this is a waste of time. That we should have been shot days ago. He's waiting for Norman to give the word."

"Surely there must be something.."

"We have no bargaining chips, as far as Norman's concerned and somehow I don't think we can appeal to his moral sense."

There was silence for a while. No sound came from the other room.

"So what happened with this stock, exactly?" said Tyler, breaking the quiet.

"What do you mean?"

"Well. How's Norman linked into your affairs."

"I don't know, yet. It's not all clear to me. There was a silent investor.

One who financed Trionics at the start. This investor held forty percent of the stock in the beginning. Jack and Karl held the remaining sixty."

"You think it was Norman."

"Well if you wanted to ruin a stock-broking firm what better way than to embroil in a company like Trionics. That bastard must have known all along that I had a stake in the company."

There was a silence for a while, both men lost in thought.

"I was so close" he said, more to himself than aloud.

After a while Tyler spoke. "Success is not simply for the taking."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a lot of people want something for nothing. There's no secret to it."

"Who are you talking about?"

"The egotistical and arrogant. They think can have success without putting in the slog, the long hours to tedium, the years of networking and building. They're wrong."

"Am I like that?"

"I don't know. You want everything quickly. You want the benefits but are you ready for the costs. It takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. You don't strike me as someone who will have the patience to wait."

"You really think it's based purely on merit. I'm not so sure. I mean look at Norman, so far nothing has prevented him from getting what he wants."

"He'll come to a bad end, sooner or later."

"I hope you're right."

He could hear the sound of a car approaching. Then the sound died away. Moments later the front door opened and slammed. Footsteps crossed the living room floor. There seemed to be some kind of argument going on. Nicholas got off the bed and put his ear to the door.

"Norman why we are waiting?" This was Josh's voice.

"I've told you all-ready. Everything will be taken care of tomorrow."

"The longer we stay here the greater the risk. Let's finish it now. Eric and I can take care of it."

"No. I told you. I'm the boss. We agreed that at the outset and so far everything has gone according to plan. Hasn't it?"

There was silence.

"It's true" said Eric.

"Think about it" said Josh. "You're waiting another day gives the police that much more time to find us."

"The money isn't ready yet."

"What do you mean?"

"The fence hasn't moved all the painting."

"I thought you said it was taken care of." This was Eric's voice.

"It will be. You'll get your money. Just like we agreed. Now why don't you both shut up and relax. This will be over soon enough."

There was silence. He lay down on the bed. On impulse sat up and looked over at Tyler. "Listen, I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. So in case we don't make it, good luck."

They shook hands.

"We'll make it" said Tyler. "One way or another."

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. For a long time sleep didn't come. When it did his dreams were violent and full of pain.

Chapter 20 – The Execution Attempt

It was just light when the door opened. Norman stood in the dusty doorway. He was dressed warmly in overcoat and gloves, in his hand a gun glinted wickedly. He stood watching. He wasn't smiling now. "Time to go" he said.

"Where too?" said Nicholas sitting up in his bed, bleary-eyed, eyes sticky with sleep.

Tyler woke and rolled over in his bed.

"The big trip" said Norman.

"What's he talking about?" said Tyler.

Eric and Josh brushed past Norman and hustled Nicholas and Tyler out of bed.

"So this is it then?" said Tyler. "You're going to hide behind your hired gangsters? What kind of coward are you?"

"Spare me your schoolboy ethics, old man. Let's get going. You too" said Norman pointing his gun at Nicholas.

The two were manhandled out into the main room, blinking in the light. Outside the sun was rising. The early morning mist was beginning to clear.

"Let's get this over with" said Norman.

They were marched around the back of the shack past a small outhouse. The forest loomed before them. Tall evergreens swaying slightly in the wind the interior dark with scant light penetrating through the foliage above. A narrow track led into the trees. Eric and Josh walked on either side of them. Norman followed behind.

There was silence now.

"So this is it, Norman? Murder, is that the plan?"

Norman said nothing.

"Why don't you let us go? You'll be long gone before the police get here."

"Too many loose ends, Mr. Martin" said Norman from behind. "Too many loose ends."

"You won't get away with this" said Tyler.

"Won't I? What do you think, boys?"

Eric laughed.

The track seemed to widen and narrow by turns. Sometimes the trees would close to completely overhang the track. At other times they retreated leaving a foot or so of straggly grass on either side of the pathway. The path seemed to be sloping gradually downwards as they went.

He could feel the blood pounding in his temples. He scanned the ground before him and to the left and right looking for an opening, an avenue of escape. He watched Eric's hand as he held his gun. He looked at Tyler. He made no movement or gave no sign, staring ahead of him.

Rain started to fall. It came down lightly first and then heavier, until it was sheeting out of the sky. Despite the trees they were all quickly soaked to the skin.

He slipped and fell, landing head first on the sodden grass. Eric cackled and pulled him roughly to his feet.

After about an hour they came to a stop in the path. A huge boulder, weathered and cracked, with age blocked their path. Eric and Josh stopped and looked to Norman for a sign.

"This is about far enough" said Norman from behind. He raised his hand pointing the gun first at Tyler. Eric and Josh drew back out of the way.

"On the ground, face down."

"Why are you doing this?" said Tyler.

"You don't have a clue do you?" said Norman, lowering his gun for a second.

"No I don't."

"Do you remember Carla Rosen?"

"Carla Rosen. Carla Rosen. The name's familiar."

"Well let me refresh your memory. A very long time ago. She worked for your buddy Rob Stephen's. Only one night Rob had a little bit too much to drink and took advantage of poor Carla. The way of the world you might say. The rich exploiting the poor. That kind of thing. Such was my inauspicious introduction to the world. When my dear mother went to Mr Stephen's and told him what happened she was told to pack her bags and leave. So you see I'm really part of the family only daddie never wanted to know me."

There was silence.

"And you played your part in that drama, did you not Mr. Tyler?"

"That wasn't the way I heard it."

"Of course not."

The rain was coming down in sheets now. Nicholas could feel the water dripping down his back. His hair hung lank. His shirt collar grimed with several days of dirt was sodden. The rain was beginning to soak through his overcoat.

There was a pause.

"You see my mother was really a very simple woman. She always thought that if she told the truth justice would be done. It never occurred to her that it just doesn't work like that."

"What do you mean?" said Tyler.

"You talked to your friends in the justice department and told them to falsify the evidence. You see there were such a lot of problems with the case. Evidence went missing. Blood samples that were inexplicably lost - American justice at its finest."

"Rob told me she was after his cash. I never heard the other side."

"That's right. Nobody ever heard the other side. Because nobody was listening."

"So all this is just revenge" said Nicholas, cutting in. "Nothing more."

"Well. Let's just say I'm setting the record straight."

"Surely your issues are with Rob Stephen's. Not anyone else."

"Unfortunately my dear father was as unobliging in death as he was during his life."

"Meaning?" said Tyler.

"Meaning he robbed me of the opportunity to make him pay."

"And what have I got to do with all this?" said Nicholas.

"Well Mr. Martin. You're just a casualty of circumstance. You know too much. Besides we've said enough. Your part in all this is at an end."

As soon as he said the word "end" everything happened very fast. Tyler made a sudden lunge for Norman knocking his gun hand wide. A shot rang out shattering the silence. Tyler and Norman fell to the ground wrestling.

In the same instant he gave Eric a huge shove sending him toppling into Josh. He didn't wait to see what happened next. He dived through an opening in the trees and ran not looking back. Branches lashed painfully across his face. A another shot rang out. A sudden blow sent him tumbling to the ground. He felt a searing pain in his arm as if a thousand red-hot needles had been driven through it. His face hit a rock sending a jarring jolt through his body.

Norman lost his balance grappling on to Tyler as he fell pulling him to the ground. They struggled. It seemed to be going well for Tyler. He had fallen on top of Norman. He quickly straddled him dealing bruising blows to his face. Despite his age he was fit and strong. His initial move had taken Norman by surprise. The gun fell from Norman's hand as he fought with Tyler. He made a lunge for it.

He didn't reckon on Josh. Even as Nicholas bolted through the trees and Eric ran after him Josh stood watching as Tyler and Norman battled it out on the ground. He raised his gun to aim. He couldn't get a clear shot as they rolled over and over first this way, then that. He waited with the infinite patience of a experienced killer then as Tyler made for the gun he fired. The first shot went wide clipping Tyler on the ear. He was knocked sideways,

stunned. Despite it he was back up, crawling on his hands and knees like an injured animal. Inarticulate noises of anger and rage came from his mouth.

Josh cursed and aimed again. At the same time Tyler reached for the gun and grasped it. He start to turn in Josh's direction. At the same time Josh fired. The second shot caught Tyler right in the back of the head. Blood sprayed like a burst water-main from the wound. He was flipped sideways like a rag doll coming to rest on his back. The gun fell from his limp hand. His lips grimaced in a silent scream. Then his legs jerked and twitched convulsively and were still.

Even as Tyler lay dead on the sodden grass, Nicholas fell gashing his cheek on a jagged rock buried beneath the pine needles. A second later he was up. He clutched his useless arm to his side. More shots rang out. One splintered off the tree to his right. Another strafed through the bushes around his feet. He ran, adrenaline pumping through his veins. Past trees, ducking beneath branches, heedless of a myriad of scratches, cuts and nicks. The ground sloped upwards to a rise.

Suddenly his feet gave away before him and he was tumbling head over hills down a steep slope. Bushes and rocks gave way before him. His hands grasped and flailed about lacerating on brambles and thorns. He came to rest in a dense thicket of bushes. Above on the rise he could hear voices. He sat up

painfully nursing his injured arm. He was completely concealed by thick foliage all around.

He scrambled to his feet and started to make his way painfully along the bank of a narrow river which flowed past the bushes on either side. There was no sound of pursuit from behind. The adrenaline that had brought this far started to ebb. He put his good hand into his coat. He took it away. It was stained red with blood. He felt no pain just a dull numbing throb just above his elbow.

The rain had lessened now to a light drizzle and in the distance he could see what appeared to be a break in the trees. He got to his feet. He felt light-headed and dizzy. The banks of the river began to recede and fall away. In the distance he could see the beginnings of a path which led from the riverside back into the trees.

He followed the track. It broadened into a paved road. Road signs gave directions to scenic walks and picturesque hikes. The telephone wires ran alongside. He started to jog - a swaying, tottering run, stumbling and tripping over stones and branches that were strewn across the pathway. Once he tripped and fell to his knees grazing his kneecap painfully on the asphalt.

The path broadened out suddenly into a wide clearing. A deserted collection of wooden buildings, closed up for the winter, were grouped around

a bare flag-pole, guide rope, rattling in the wind. He looked back up the path.

No sign of pursuit. One of the buildings appeared to be some kind of office.

The telephone line led to a pole beside the cabin. He followed the wire with his eyes. It led to a verandah which overshadowed the windows. He could not clearly make it out in the fading light.

With rising excitement he could just made out in the dreary light a public phone nestled in the shade of the wooden awning.

Despite his weariness he ran across the clearing and climbing the wooden steps reached for the phone. His heart skipped a beat before he could hear the dialing tone.

The phone rang and rang. Finally after what seemed like an age the answering machine picked up. He waited on the machine beeped, then he spoke.

"Sonia, it's me Nicholas. You've got to help me. Look I've been kidnapped. Norman Rosen is behind the whole thing. He set me up completely. He never had any intention of letting me go. Look go to the police. Tell them everything. Tell them they're holding Matthew Tyler hostage. I'm in a call box. The number on the phone is 526-7892. Get them to trace the call. It's about two miles from the an old abandoned shack where they're holding Tyler. Do it right away."

Suddenly a shot rang out from across the clearing. The window behind him shattered into a thousand pieces. He dropped the phone and ducked in behind a stack of plastic chairs piled high around the verandah. More shots rang out. One ricocheted off the metal awing around the phone with a metallic clang. Another

He ducked behind the building and raced for the trees. Eric was quick but before he could get a clear shot Nicholas had disappeared under the shadow of the trees.

He ran and ran, ducking under low hanging branches, through straggly bushes, tripping over fallen branches and climbing over fallen tree trunks.

In the fading light visibility was at a minimum on the forest floor. Exhausted he lay down in a shady hollow where the bushes crowded together in a dense thicket. A heavy silence descended broken only by the sound of his erratic breathing and pounding heart. He buried himself deeply under a dense clump of leaves until only his eyes were uncovered. He placed his lifeless arm on his stomach and lay still.

It seemed like a long time had passed when he heard a branch crack in the distance. It was almost completely dark now. He lay still. He could hear footsteps approaching. A beam of light cut through the darkness glancing off the trees.

There was silence. He turned his head. In the darkness he could see a shadowy figure standing on the rise overlooking the depression in which he was hidden. He could hear his rasping breath. He waved the torch back and forth cutting the night.

He closed his eyes as the beam passed over his head. A few moments later he looked up. The shadow was gone. He could see the light bouncing off the trees as he walked away.

He lay back exhausted. Sleep overtook him quickly as his adrenaline ebbed. His dreams were vivid and violent. He was being pursued relentlessly through long, dark tunnels, up winding metal staircases, down endless flights of steps and across wide, grey expanses of rolling greenlands.

He woke with a start. A freezing mist was rising as the first feeble rays of morning reached the forest floor. His arm was completely numb now. He tried to raise it but it would not move. His face was damp and his breathing hoarse and throaty. He felt feverish and light-headed. Using a fallen tree-trunk for support, he sat up delicately.

He limped to the top of the rise, where he had seen the shadow the night before. He looked nervously around him. There was no-one to be seen. The forest was cold and silent. He walked down the rise and made in what he judged to be an westerly direction using the sun as his guide.

The forest floor began to slope downwards steeply and his tottering walk gradually gained momentum. He stopped suddenly hearing the sound of an engine. A light aircraft passed overhead. But it was high in the sky and he was well-covered by the dense canopy of trees. Even as it passed it banked to the east and its drone faded into the distance.

He continued walking. His senses were constantly alert, expecting any moment to hear the sound of footsteps in pursuit or for Eric to spring suddenly out from behind a rock, or the scraggly undergrowth.

A deer passing some fifty metres from his position caught him unawares, causing him to dive painfully for cover.

Imperceptibly at first but with growing certainty he could feel the daylight growing brighter and brighter.

In the distance he could see the end of the forest and broad daylight beyond.

Success by
Hugh McGovern

Part III - Resolution

Chapter 21 – Escape in the Forest

He came to the edge of the forest finally and after stumbling over a low stone wall found himself walking along a narrow track which skirted the woodlands. He felt weak and he had to stop constantly and rest. His arm was now completely numb and it rested limply in his coat pocket.

He came to a fork in the road. One fork led to the right across flat prairie land undulating slightly as it followed a straight line to a line of hills which covered the horizon. He choose the left fork which continued to follow the line of the trees and after a few minutes rest, he trudged on.

After another half hour or so he stopped and could hear faintly in the distance the sound of an approaching vehicle. He climbed over the hedge and crouched behind a bush peering out to see what was coming.

A few minutes later a police car came into view driving slowly. He jumped up from his hiding place nearly falling over the hedge in his eagerness to catch their attention. The car stopped and two officers got out and approached him.

"Oh thank God" he said, walking towards him.

"What happened to your arm?" said one officer. He was the taller of the two.

"I've been shot. I need the attention of a doctor."

They escorted him to the car and radioed ahead to the local hospital.

"So you were kidnapped by this Norman Rosen?" said the other officer taking down the details as they drove. "That's right. It's the same gang that staged the Tyler kidnapping. There's a shack about six miles from here. That's where they were holed up."

They took him to a hospital where a doctor came and examined his arm. They gave him a bed and something to help him sleep.

Later a detective came to interview him when he had woken. His arm lay bandaged and in a sling as he sat up in the hospital bed.

"What happened?" said Nicholas.

"They found Tyler's body near the spot you described in your statement. There was a shallow grave in the trees behind the rock."

"What do you mean body?"

"Tyler's dead. He was shot several times in the head" said the detective.

"Dead." His hands fell to his sides. He lay back slowly in the bed. "I heard shots as I ran. I thought they were for me. I mean I know they were maniacs I just somehow hoped he would be all-right." He was silent for a moment. "And the others?"

"Well. The bodies of two men were found in the cabin."

"And the third? It would have been a sallow skinned man with goatee, slightly overweight, well dressed."

"No. No one who corresponds to that description."

Later he looked up from his magazine hearing footsteps approaching his bed. It was Sonia. She did not look him directly in the eye. She was dressed in a tan overcoat, that accented her blonde hair which hung down to her shoulders. She sat on the chair playing with her bracelet, a present he had given her on their second anniversary, turning it round and round between her fingers.

"Hi" he said when she sat down in the chair.

She said nothing for a moment then she spoke without looking at him.

"I came to see if you're all-right. The doctor tells me you're going to be fine."

"Eventually. I'll probably have this cast" he tapped his arm, "for a while yet."

"What happened to your face?"

"I was in a fight. More than one, actually."

"I heard what happened" she snapped.

"Well, what do you think of me now?"

"You idiot. Why do you persist in thinking that I cared about whether or not you made millions. You really don't understand me at all if you think I care about that."

"I could have made it if it wasn't for that bastard. He fucked the whole thing up. Now I'm going to lose my license. I'll probably go to jail."

"You are so fucking insecure, you know that. I was happy the way things were."

"What about us?"

"I don't know, Nicholas." She looked at the wall behind his head. "I need time away from all this. It's just too much."

"You wouldn't be saying this if things had worked out. The difference between a fool and a genius is success."

"It's got nothing to do with that. It's you, you idiot. Don't you see. There were tears in her eyes now. She looked away, embarrassed. "I have to go. I just wanted to see that you're okay and you are." She stood up.

"Wait."

She turned to look at him, eyes full of recrimination. "What?"

"I love you." She turned on her heel and walked out the door without saying anything.

Later the detective returned. This time he was accompanied by two police officers. He motioned to one of the officers who walked up to the bed said "Mr Martin I have a warrant here for your arrest."

"On what charge?" he said sitting up in the bed.

"On charges of insider trading and misappropriating and misusing company funds, and also on charges of complicity in the abduction and murder of Matthew Tyler."

"That's ridiculous."

"Mr. Martin you have the right to remain silent.."

"You think I murdered him." He looked at the detective. He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't believe this. This guy killed three people and you don't even believe that he existed. You should be out looking for the real killer. Not harassing me."

The orderlies came and put him on a stretcher and escorted him to a secured ward in the hospital. The cops walked on either side of the stretcher.

He was in his new quarters about an hour when the cop on guard outside his door came in and spoke to him. "There's a guy out here you wants to talk to you" he said.

"Who is it?"

"He is a lawyer. Says his name is Stein." He handed him a white business card. On it was embossed in gold ink the name 'Moses Stein' and under it the title attorney at law.

A moment later a small, dark-skinned man was ushered into the room. He moved with quick, energetic movements. He sat down in the chair beside the bed.

"I never asked for a lawyer" said Nicholas turning to face him.

The man crossed and uncrossed his legs a few times, one foot wagging constantly.

"No but you need one."

"Why?"

"Well I don't need to remind you of where you are." He looked around the room, taking in the bars on the window. Outside the cop was vaguely visible through the frosted glass panel of the door. "But there's more. Have you see this?" He sprang the clips on his briefcase and removed a copy of the Tribune from inside. "Look at the headline."

He glanced at the newspaper. The headline read "Evanston Business Man Kidnapped and Murdered. Former Gold Coast Stockbroker Suspected."

"They can't do that."

"Can't? Says who? It only takes a headline like this to convince most people, including the jury that you're guilty." He took the paper back and tucked it away in the case. "Well, do I get the job?"

"How does it look?"

"Not good" said the lawyer.

"What do you mean?"

"Well. There's the insider dealing charge for one. Then the misuse of company funds. I think we can beat that one, since Stephen's & Co. is in a lot of trouble anyway. Tyler's lawyer is trying to pin complicity charges on you for the kidnapping."

"That's a load of crap."

"Yeah. I agree. We have to prove conclusively that this guy, Norman Rosen existed."

"Tyler was my friend."

"Well, unfortunately he's not around to testify."

He sat back on the chair, his heel clicking on the floor. "Look. I take it I've got the job. I can tell you honestly I'm more interested in this case because there's all-ready huge media interest."

"Charming."

"Well it's a win-win for you too. You get cheap legal aid compared to what I normally charge. So why don't you tell me everything that happened" he said, taking out a notebook.

They talked for a long time.

The next day Stein came back and sat in the chair, foot waging furiously under the bed.

"Well" he said, putting down his paper.

"Listen I did some digging on this character." He threw a photograph down on the bed in front of him.

"That's him" said Nicholas. "That's Norman Rosen, without the beard."

"Miguel Santiago" he read from a file on his knee. " Says here he had a long history of mental illness coupled with psychotic outbursts. Been hospitalized most of his life. According to the file he showed a marked improvement and response to therapy in the last year. Says here he was released on probation on the advice of his psychiatrist six months ago."

"Is that enough?"

"Problem is we have very little connecting him with all these events."

"What about the allegation that he was Rob Stephen's son?"

"Well. I was able to trace a Carla Rosen. And she did work for Rob Stephen's for several years in the sixties. However there is no record that she had an illegitimate son or any son at all, for that matter. She never married."

"Well, did you talk to her?"

"She died four years in Mexico of a heart attack."

"What about Santiago's birth certificate?"

"There isn't one. Miguel was found abandoned outside Chicago General a few weeks after he was born. He was adopted by Jose and Carmen Santiago a month later."

Later that afternoon he was taken by stretcher to a side entrance of the hospital and put in an ambulance escorted by two police officers. The ambulance left the hospital with two police cars following closely behind. Once on the freeway the convoy headed for Chicago.

The journey was uneventful and since he was now well enough he was able, on arrival, to change out of the regulation pajamas and into normal clothes. The officers escorted him to cell in the courthouse where he was to remain until the hearing.

Later that day the guard came and told him he had a visitor. He walked into the waiting area and sat down in the seat, assigned to him. Ryan was sitting on the other side of the glass barrier. He was casually dressed in jeans and denim shirt. His face was tanned as if he had just returned from a sunnier climate.

"How are you?" he said.

"Let's just say it's been better." He ran his hand through his hair, then resting his head on his hand. "Not such a hot-shot anymore."

"I heard some of what happened."

"Well. I don't think it's a secret any longer."

"Did you know Warren has been indicted too?"

"What? You're joking."

"Apparently he had his own stake in Trionics. He was trading out of a secret account."

"I knew he was up to something."

"Yeah, when the SEC went through all the records they found evidence of secret payments from Jack and Karl."

"Who told you this?"

"Everyone in Stephen's knows. Peter told me. It looks like Stephen's will be barred from trading. There's been a run on the accounts. All the clients are bailing out."

"That's just what he wanted."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Who wanted?"

"Norman Rosen."

"Nicholas nobody believes that guy exists."

"You believe that? You think I kidnapped Tyler and murdered him?"

"No. I don't think that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"Relax, will you?"

There was silence for a moment. Then he said "Look, I'm sorry. I'm very wired up."

"It's okay. It's understandable. I didn't come in here to make you feel any worse than you all-ready do. If it's any consolation I think you're innocent and I'm rooting for you."

"Thanks."

"So what's going to happen?"

"Well, it will go to trial, in the next few weeks and then if I beat the murder charge I face the other charges of insider trading and misuse of company funds."

"What are you're chances?"

"Stein, the lawyer, thinks I can beat the murder rap. I've already signed a full statement about my involvement in Trionics. Thanks for agreeing to testify, by the way. I need all the support I can get."

"Don't worry. Least I could do."

He nodded.

"Well I'd better go, now."

"Okay."

He stood up to leave, then he turned around. "What did you have to go and do it for?' he said. His face was

"Do what?"

"I mean fuck up your career and your life, damn nearly get killed into the bargain."

He said nothing.

"I mean you had everything going for you. Why did you throw it all away?"

"Like I told you, that day in the restaurant. I wanted more. It wasn't enough for me."

"Well now you got nothing."

"What do you want me to do, cry?"

"No. I guess I just want to understand."

"I can't explain it."

"How do you feel now?"

"Now" he paused and looked puzzled for a second. "I don't know how I feel. Kind of empty. Like it was all a waste of time. All the worry, all the stress. Seems like it should have meant something, at least to me, if no-one else."

"And it doesn't?"

"Not now at any rate. Maybe later. I feel used up and spent."

He was silent for a second. "I was so close Ryan. So close to what I wanted to be, what I wanted to have."

"Maybe that's just it. You were too close. Maybe the point is you never get there. Nobody gets what they want. You live for the journey not the arrival."

"Maybe."

"Well, I'm sorry things turned out the way they did."

"Me too."

"I'll see you again."

He nodded.

He got up from his seat and walked to the door. The guard held the door open for him and he filed out into the long, cold corridor, shoes echoing on the tiled floor. When he reached the end a guard unlocked and opened the gate to let him through, locking it behind him. He walked up the metal staircase, shoes clanking on each step. He reached the second level and looked down.

Below he could see prisoners scurrying back and forth across the courtyard around which the prison cells were constructed. There were three floors each linked by metal stairways which ran up and down linking each floor to the next. Above a glass roof criss-crossed by dusty metal girders let in the

fading sunlight from a grey and overcast day. He leaned on the railing and looked over.

After a while he tired of it and walked passed the rows of open cells to his own. There were two bunk beds in one corner of the room. The bottom was vacant the top he had chosen for himself.

He climbed ladder and lay down on the bed. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

Chapter 22 – The courtroom appearance

Judge Wilson scratched his ass under his gown and glared down severely on the courtroom. He held the gavel, ready in his hand, having already used it several times. He looked at his watch again for the third time in as many minutes. Twelve forty five already. He had hoped to issue his verdict an hour again. The defense statement was running on interminably and at this rate he would never make his lunch date with his new girlfriend.

To his left the jury sat. Twelve men and women who had already sat through two days of accusation and counter accusation.

In the space before the bench sat the defense and the prosecution. Nicholas sat beside his lawyer and his assistant. In the audience behind sat Sonia with her mother. Ryan sat to her left and beside him sat Peter Berens.

The prosecution's attorney stood and walking around his desk faced the jury. He was a large, obese man. He walked to the balustrade and rested fleshy, oily hands on the rail focusing his bulbous, bull-dog face on the jury.

"We've all heard the argument that Nicholas Martin," he turned a heavy-lidded eye in his direction, "was a victim of circumstance, manipulated by a sinister and maniacal character, that all the illegal acts he committed where at

the behest of this Norman Rosen." He swivelled his large bulk and paced across the room.

"It is the prosecutions contention that this Norman Rosen, never existed. Moreover that Nicholas Martin staged the whole operation. After he had killed everyone involved he hid the money and concocted this whole story about a sinister ring-leader."

He patted his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

"Let's examine the facts, ladies and gentlemen. No-one has ever seen this Norman Rosen, Miguel Santiago, or whatever his name is. All the people who are supposed to have met him or known him, have conveniently died, before they could give testimony. The only living witness, other than the accused, is the accused fiancee. I say to you this does not constitute proof. It is a pathetic and sinister attempt to pervert the course of justice."

He hooked his thumbs into his jacket and rocked on his heels. "I say to you ladies and gentlemen, not only is Nicholas Martin guilty of fraudulent misuse of company funds, insider trading"

"Objection, your honour" said Stein butting in. "This case is concerned solely with the charges relating to the abduction and murder of Matthew Tyler. The outcome of any other pending legal proceedings is not relevant to this case."

"Sustained" said Judge Wilson. He looked at his watch again. He'd have to call her. Maybe he could get her to come over tonight.

Hogan continued, unruffled "I say to you that this man plotted and implemented the abduction and murder of a prominent citizen in this community, as such he should face the full rigour of the law."

With this parting shot District Attorney Hogan retook his seat. Stein got to his feet. He shuffled his papers his papers for a moment, re-adjusted his glasses and then looked up.

"You've all heard a lot of information during the course of the last few days. Some of it is true, undoubtedly. A lot of it is false, ladies and gentlemen. So what is true and what is false. Well, what are the facts, ladies and gentlemen? Let's examine the facts. A well-known business man is kidnapped from his home. Three days later a man with a bullet-wound in his arm surrenders himself to the police in a remote part of Wisconsin - hardly the action of a hardened killer. This man, my client, Nicholas Martin has consistently asserted his innocence. Nicholas Martin is, or I should say was a stockbroker. Yes he bent a few rules in order to make some money. This does not mean he is capable of murder. If money was the motive for the Tyler kidnapping, what did Nicholas Martin stand to gain. Nothing, ladies and gentlemen. Nothing. I ask you is it likely that a promising young broker would set up a highly risky deal

such as has been described in considerable detail in this courtroom and then let the deal go to hell and stage a kidnapping instead. It doesn't make sense."

He walked to the jury's bench and stood facing them, his pointy face darting back and forth across the jury.

"This Miguel Santiago, or Norman Rosen, as he calls himself, planned the whole thing. True we have no independent record of this man but Nicholas Martin's story checks out every step of the way. Insider trading is a crime ladies and gentlemen and my client freely admits his guilt on that issue. But it is a not uncommon crime in our society so much so that Nicholas Martin's former boss also stands accused.."

"Objection" said Hogan jumping to his feet, "the activities of the defendant's former boss have no bearing on this case."

"Sustained" said the Judge.

After Stein's summing up the court recessed. Stein brought Nicholas into another, smaller room off the court room. He sat down in a leather backed chair behind the desk drumming his fingers, absentmindedly on the table for a moment. Nicholas filled a paper cup with water from the fountain in the corner

"What do you think?" he said sitting down in a chair facing him.

Stein stopped his drumming. "I think we've won the jury" he said, leaning forward. The chair creaked.

"How can you tell?"

"They don't buy into that bullshit story. It's got more holes than a string vest. Basically the DA's office needed an arrest quickly because of all the heat they came under after the kidnapping. You were just the fall guy."

"What's the Judge like?"

"Judge Wilson? He's all-right, if you stay on the right side of him. He's more concerned about getting home on time than the outcome of the case." He leaned back in the chair, swivelling it to the left and then the right. "You did the right thing, pleading guilty to the lesser charge."

"What do you mean, "the right thing"? It was the truth."

"Truth. Since when did that come into it?"

"Don't you believe me?"

He stopped swivelling and leaned forward looking intently at him.

"Yeah, I believe you. Your story makes sense and you look like an honest guy, or reasonably honest anyway. I tell ya I've seen plenty of guilty people go scot-free."

"That's fucked up."

"Oh the system is a crock. Anyone will tell you that. Anyway we better go back" he said looking at his watch. "The jury are due back in. Better not keep the judge waiting."

The jury filed in one by one and took their seats. The judge came in last as everyone stood up.

"The court will come to order" he said, bring his gavel down with a bang. "The court is now ready to hear a verdict in the case of the people versus Nicholas Martin. Have you reached a verdict" he said turning to face the jury.

"We have your honour" said a tall, bearded black man.

There was a pause. He could feel his heart beating. He gripped the arms of his chair tightly.

"It is the jury's verdict that Nicholas Martin is not guilty as tried."

He felt his muscles relax.

The judge brought his gavel down with a bang. "Case dismissed" he said, looking at his watch.

Stein jumped up and shook his hand warmly. After the judge had left they got up and walked down the aisle. Sonia and Ryan joined them with Peter bringing up the rear. Ryan shook his hand and Sonia gave him a hug.

They stood outside the courtroom as the other spectators filed out.

"Well, at least that's over with" said Ryan.

"Yeah, until the next hurdle" he said. Sonia held his hand and squeezed it.

"There's a big difference between a murder rap and pleading guilty to insider trading" said Stein.

"When's the next case" said Peter, who had been hovering on the fringe of the group.

"It won't be for a while. Unfortunately Nick will have to wait in prison until his case comes up" said Stein. "Oh shit" he said looking over his shoulder, "here come the media."

A group of men and women carrying cameras and tape recorders were approaching.

Police officers escorted them up a marble spiral staircase, away from the crowd. They were ushered into an empty room overlooking the street below while he waited for the escort to take him back to prison.

Ryan and Peter said their good-byes, and Stein left them to make a statement to the press.

They were left alone for a few minutes.

"You really fucked up this time" she said, after the door closed.

"I did. Didn't I? I don't have much to offer you now" he said turning away from the window, and facing her.

"I know."

"Will you write to me?" he said moving to embrace her.

"Maybe" she said, not responding to his movement.

"Stein thinks I'll get six months to a year for insider dealing. He also said my sentence might be remitted for good behaviour."

She said nothing.

"Don't expect me to wait for you."

"I know. See how it goes. No promises."

This time she didn't resist. They embraced for a long time until the police officer tapped him on the shoulder.

"Time to go now."

"I know." He brushed away tears.

"I'm ready now."

"Will you wait for me?"

"I told you. I don't know."

"At least I've learned my lesson."

"Have you? I wonder."

They took him away and put him back in his cell. Later two guards came and escorted him to a van.

A week passed. He was convicted on the charge of insider dealing. But his sentence was commuted to six months on account of his guilty plea.

It was late in the evening after the trial that he was admitted to the prison. Despite everything he fell asleep in his bunk soon after the door clanged shut and was locked behind him.

He woke up and looked around him. His cell was small but bright. He was lying on the top bunk. Underneath the other inmate was still asleep. He leaned over the edge and looked down. He swung his legs over the edge, bending his head to avoid the brick ceiling which curved upwards just above his head. The springs in the bed creaked.

His cellmate stirred. "Welcome to white-collar prison" he said, without looking out of his bunk. "Got any cigarettes?"

"Don't smoke" he said, throwing himself back on the bed with a sigh.

"You will" he said. "You came in last night, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"Insider trading. What about you?"

"Tax evasion and embezzlement."

"How long did you get?"

"Two years."

"How long have you been here?"

"One year, eight months and fourteen days."

"What's this place like? You hear stories, you know."

"Don't worry it's not like that. Most of the guys are business men, or were. No-one here has been convicted of anything more serious than

Scene:

A month later he went to the visitor's area. Sonia was sitting there waiting when he sat down

"So I'm supposed to forgive you now and everything will be hunky dory."

"Sonia. I've nothing left. Don't leave me now."

"Nicholas I tried so many times to tell you, you just wouldn't listen."

"I'll be out in less than six months."

"What will you do then?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'll find something to do."

"I'd like to think you learned something from all this."

"What is there to learn? Life goes on."

"At least you learned your lesson."

"I was reading about this new stock in the Journal."

Her face froze.

"I was joking, all-right."

"Don't make jokes like that."

"All-right. Jesus."

The months passed in a dreary succession of mind numbingly boring days, cigarettes and lonely nights where conjured images of Sonia were his only companion.

Winter gave way to spring. A wet spring was replaced by a sweltering, humid summer and in the early days of fall when leaves littered the courtyard below his barred and reinforced window a prison guard came into the cell and escorted him along a long, dimly lit corridor smelling strongly of antiseptic. He was led into a small, storage room where he signed for his clothes. He recognised the suit he had been wearing on the day of the trial. It reminded him with regret of the wasted months and the failure of his hopes. He signed a few more documents.

Then the guard led him to another smaller room where he changed into his clothes.

After that he was escorted through the prison along clanking metal stairways and shady, institutional corridors that he had come to know well. On through the empty canteen and recreation area past the reception desk and out into the bright sunshine of a fall day.

The metal gates closed behind him with a clang and he stood disoriented on the sidewalk.

He looked around the parking lot anxiously. Then he saw her walking towards him. He walked towards her. When they met he picked her up and swung her around, lifting her off her feet.

"Not so fast" she said after she successfully broke free.

"What?"

"Well, I told you in my last letter, we've been apart for a long time. I'm not sure how I feel."

"Are you letting me stay?"

"You can sleep on the couch for a while. Until you get sorted out. What about your place?"

"Everything was sold. You know that. There wasn't much left over after I paid off Stein and the rest."

"Come on. Let's get going. I have to go back to work after I drop you off."

He nodded. She didn't resist when he put his arm around her while they walked to the car.

"Well, at least you're in one piece, still" she said, starting the engine.

"That's about it."

"Don't worry. You'll be back on your feet, in no time." She took his hand and squeezed it, encouragingly, when they were stopped at traffic lights.

On the corner of the street a chubby man in raincoat started his car engine and put it into gear. He was clean-shaven and wore dark sunglasses. He followed Sonia's car as she went up the on-ramp onto the freeway making sure he kept his distance. He scratched his chin, thoughtfully, as he drove. Some day he would grow another goatee.

THE END