



SAVING THE
karamazovs

a novel

GARY GOLDSTICK

SAVING THE KARAMAZOVS:
A NOVEL

by Gary Goldstick

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To my aunt, Adele Coniglio
1912–2010

She possessed an inexhaustible reservoir of love, wit, and empathy that
brightened the lives of all who knew her.

A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and their contentions separate them like the bars of a castle.

—Proverbs 18:19

CHAPTER 1

April, 1970

Jeff Bascomb, twenty-seven, 1st Lieutenant in the 173rd Airborne Brigade, lay in his bunk. He had been marking the passage of time by frequently checking his watch. Sleep had not materialized by the time he looked at his watch again, 2100. Showtime. He breathed a sigh of relief. He rotated his legs over the bunk, sat up, and began to dress. He emerged from the bunker and felt his boots sink into the muck. The night was dark and stifling hot. Sergeant Flores was with the assembled patrol. Flores was forty-two years old, tall, and black, and had the build of an NFL linebacker.

“Ready?” Jeff adjusted his belt and holster.

“Yes sir, Lieutenant.” Flores stood at attention.

“How many?” Jeff looked down the line of troops.

“Nine plus the two of us. Sergeant Leroy, Smith, Conners, Calhoon, Rodrigues, Miller, Simpson, Baker, and Doc.”

“Too many. I need you to stay in the compound. I smell an attack in the wind.”

“You smell it?” Flores allowed himself a hint of a smile.

“Intuition, Sergeant. And I’m not crazy about taking Rodrigues. I haven’t been impressed with what I’ve seen.” Jeff looked over to the line of troops and focused on Rodrigues, who was fidgeting with his rifle.

“He knows that,” said Flores looking directly at Jeff. “He wants a chance to prove himself. I recommend that he go.”

“Tell him to stick close to Corporal Smith and make sure Smith knows that he’s to look after him. Okay?”

“Yes sir.”

Jeff turned toward the bunker and began to unbuckle his belt. “I need ten minutes to put my stuff together. Use the time to check their gear. I want two M-60s and one M-79. We’ll need twenty-four hundred rounds for the 60s and forty rounds for the 79. Make sure everything is taped. Navarro almost got us all killed the other night.”

“Yes sir.”

He headed for his bunker dogged by a mini-pang of guilt. He should have had his gear ready to go. Too much Wild Turkey last night. He checked through his pack to make sure he was carrying what he needed: a compass, maps, codebooks, binoculars, a strobe light, a .45 caliber pistol, three ammunition clips for the .45, an M-16 and twenty-five ammunition clips for the M-16. Each magazine was loaded with eighteen rounds. Every fifth round was a tracer. He checked to see that his dog tags and any other thing that could go clink in the night were taped. He deposited the book he had been reading in his footlocker and made up his bunk. He laced his boots, put on his helmet, grabbed his M-16, and walked back to the command post. He looked up at the moonless sky and checked his watch: 0110. He spoke briefly to Flores, putting him in command while he was on patrol, and then signaled to Sergeant LeRoy to move the men out.

The platoon could not afford to remain inside their triangular home. If they did, the initiative would be vouchsafed to the Vietcong, who would be able to pick at and probe the compound until they were in a position to overwhelm it. And of all the activities to which you could assign a soldier, the night patrol was the most dangerous. Of

the twenty serious casualties the platoon had sustained, seventy-five percent had occurred during a night patrol. This translated into a probability of about a serious casualty every ten night patrols. Jeff ensured that he assigned himself at least fifty percent more night patrols than any soldier in the platoon. That was the least he could do to protect his men.

Their mission was to set an ambush for a North Vietnamese Army patrol that had been operating in the area. The designated ambush area was about two kilometers southwest of the compound. The terrain between the compound and the ambush area was laced with rice paddies. The only way across the rice paddies were the dikes, dirt mounds that afforded walkways no more than a foot wide. Contiguous to the paddies was underbrush that offered good cover for an enemy who might be lying in wait to ambush the prospective ambushers. Since it was impossible to hack your way through the underbrush at any reasonable rate, Jeff opted to cross the paddies by walking along the dikes—single file—with at least ten feet separating each man so as to present only small targets. The good news about the dikes was that they were unlikely to be booby-trapped. Small consolation.

They headed to the south compound exit, and single file, the men moved through the wire into the hostile terrain. Each man wore a flak jacket and carried an M-16 rifle, his own ammunition, several fragmentation grenades, and some smoke grenades.

Jeff was particular. He studied his men and kept a ledger in his head, strengths against weaknesses. In a night patrol walking single file, they would be positioned in the column to exploit their experience, capitalize on their strengths and, he hoped, mitigate the potential downside of their weaknesses.

Calhoon, the twenty-one-year-old graduate of Michigan State, had nine months in country and excellent reflexes. He would lead the column. Corporal Smith had almost as much experience and would follow. Rodrigues would stay between Smith and himself so that he could watch him. His RTO, Baker, would follow. Conners, Simpson, and Miller, all of whom had less than three months under their belts, would be next, followed by Doc. Sergeant LeRoy, career noncom, who would bring up the rear.

Jeff looked up at the clear moonless sky. Good. A slight improvement in the patrol's odds. They reached a north-south trail, the designated target, at 0220 without incident. Jeff sent Calhoon, Conners, and Simpson with an M-60 and a claymore mine fifty meters up the trail to set up the north killing position, and LeRoy, Miller, and Smith fifty meters down the trail to set up the south killing position. At the north killing position, Calhoon, who was the designated hit man, emplaced his claymore to the side of the trail, securing it to a tree and covering it with loose vegetation. He then moved down the trail on the friendly side of the mine fifteen to twenty meters, and then concealed himself in a position from which he could electrically detonate the claymore when the enemy appeared. The Conners-Simpson machine gun team concealed themselves similarly on Calhoon's uphill flank. Upon detonation of the claymore, it would hurl seven hundred hardened steel balls weighing 10.5 grams each in a sixty-degree arc, usually killing everything therein up to a distance of one hundred meters. The machine gun team would engage the enemy, denying him the ability to maneuver until the rest of the platoon moved forward to reinforce the killing position.

Sergeant LeRoy took on the role of hit man in the south killing position. The balance of the platoon—Jeff, Baker, Doc, and Rodrigues—went into a tight perimeter defense across the trail midway between the two ambushes so that they could reinforce

either of the committed positions. Jeff and Baker positioned themselves on the west side of the road and Rodrigues and Doc positioned themselves on the east side.

Jeff checked his watch: 0235. So far so good. No problems. Rodrigues had performed well on the march to the ambush zone. No one had clinked or clattered. There was just enough starlight so that he could observe Smith and Rodrigues on the other side of the trail.

God, he hated the waiting—what a shitty job for a guy with a really low threshold for boredom. At 0247, he still had almost four hours ‘til dawn. He would maintain the ambush until 0545 and then pack up shop and go home. Another three hours and . . .

Shadows moved on the other side of the trail. He grabbed Baker’s arm and pointed. His heart started to race. If the shadows were NVA or Vietcong that had outflanked them, the platoon was doomed.

“What the fuck,” whispered Baker. “It’s Smith and Rodrigues—they’re moving.”

Jeff breathed a momentary sigh of relief. At least he didn’t see any enemy. But the feeling of relief was soon overshadowed by the realization that in the absence of an enemy, there was absolutely no reason for either of them to be moving. “Wait here,” said Jeff.

He leaped over the trail and ran after Smith who was running after Rodrigues. He raced ahead, blindly. The grass was waist high and wet and slapped against his hands and wrists. Jeff pushed past Smith and overtook Rodrigues. Rodrigues started to scream. Jeff pulled the bandana from his head and plunged it into Rodrigues’ mouth and drove his head into the grass and placed his knee in the small of Rodrigues’ back, further driving Rodrigues down into the ground. No more noise. Smith kneeled at Jeff’s side.

“Sorry, Lieutenant. He started to freak out. Mumbling that he knew he was going to die and that he had dreamed he was dying. I tried to quiet him but he stood up, dropped his gear, and started running.”

Jeff’s heart pounded.

“Okay, you need to get back to support Baker—assuming that all this noise hasn’t compromised our position. I’ll deal with Rodrigues. Maybe I can calm him down.”

Smith ran back to the support position next to Baker. Jeff was about seventy-five meters from the trail, exposed, and vulnerable. He took his knee off of Rodrigues’ back and turned him over. The bandana was still stuffed in his mouth. His eyes were wide, and his face was twisted and sweating.

“Okay, Rodrigues. Let’s do this real slow. If you promise not to scream, I’ll take the bandana out. Hear me? If you agree, nod yes.” No sign. Jeff put his finger to Rodrigues’ carotid artery and felt for a pulse. None. “Holy shit.” He felt nauseated. He suppressed the urge to vomit. He pulled the bandana out of Rodrigues’ mouth, ripped Rodrigues’ jacket off, opened his shirt, checked his mouth, and started CPR. Five minutes into CPR, a claymore detonated, followed by the rhythmic pounding of the M-60, which was followed by several M-16 rounds. Seven minutes in, he felt something crack dully in Rodrigues’ chest.

Ten minutes, still no pulse and there never would be one. Jeff slowly rose to his feet. His hands and elbows wanted to stay locked from pressing on Rodrigues’ chest. He massaged his forearms to relieve the cramping. He took the bandana from around his neck and wiped away the tears that were streaming down his face. He ran back to the trail and found the patrol inspecting the results of their efforts. Five NVA regulars, or what

was left of them, were sprawled around the trail near the southern killing point. The troops were jubilant. They were high-fiving each other. Several were smoking. LeRoy was eating.

“Goddamn,” said Conners.

“This here is a fucking mess,” said Simpson. “Glad I don’t have to clean up after us.”

“Sweet mother of God,” said Miller. “That claymore’s bad.”

“No,” said LeRoy. “That claymore’s good.”

He found Baker. “Call for a Medvac for Rodrigues,” said Jeff, loud enough for all the men to hear. “There’s no pulse.” The celebration quickly subsided. One of their own had become a statistic.

*

Jeff carried his cup of coffee to the command post and watched the red sun rise over the canopy of the Vietnam landscape, ushering in another hot, sticky day.

He tried to employ every sensory capacity he could muster to absorb the scene—to be in the moment. There was a very real probability that this would be the very last time that he saw it. He was resigned to the fact that he would not survive his first command.

Eight of his men had been killed, nine counting Rodrigues, and another twelve maimed with virtually nothing to show for their deaths and wounds. Nine of the casualties occurred within and just outside the compound. From where he sat right now, he could pick out the locations where each one happened—or was still happening, in a way, in his horrified memory. They had been living in a hostile, equilateral triangle of dirt, fifty meters on a side. At that wall right there, Jennings had taken a direct hit by a mortar round as he smoked a cigarette. And over there, near those sandbags, Boles was shot in the head on his way to the latrine. Carter took a fifty caliber round in his throat during the bombardment two weeks ago. One minute he was a funny, enthusiastic, highly competent soldier, and the next minute he was an ex-person, a statistic, sprawled on the dirt. And then there was Rodrigues, last night. His body was still waiting for the helicopter.

Their so-called home in the jungle, this mass grave, was located adjacent to the village of Trueng Lam in Binh Dinh province and was situated about seven kilometers east of North–South Highway 1 and three kilometers west of the South China Sea. The company command post was three kilometers south, and another American unit lay four kilometers to the west. The NVA and the Vietcong owned all other territory fifty meters outside of the perimeter. Hence, the platoon’s position was fortified by six rolls of concertina barbed wire, coiled wire with razor-edged protrusions all along its length. Amid the wire were punji stakes, bamboo poles honed to a fine point and then hardened in fire. Only two layers of sandbags rose above ground level.

Forty feet overhead, adjacent to the command position was a bamboo tower. One very brave observer served as a lookout. Jeff tilted his gaze above the sun and saw the hunkered form of one of his men up there now. At the moment, he was the only other human in sight—temporarily safe, but for how long? Their mission was to deprive the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army of the sanctuary of the village, maintain security around the village, and win the hearts and minds of the inhabitants. Yet Jeff no longer

believed in The Mission—to win the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese. The only real estate the army controlled in the boondocks of Vietnam was located within the heavily fortified compounds and bases. And when the sun went down, the Vietcong and NVA held sway over all the ground outside the wire—including the villages. There was nothing out here worth dying for.

When he graduated West Point, he had assumed that his training, dedication, empathy, and physical strength would give him the edge to protect his men and himself. But after five months in Vietnam, he had concluded that with the ubiquitous booby traps and the army’s inability to constrict the flow of weapons into the area, safety and survival had less to do with being a good soldier and a lot more to do with fate and luck. The best he could do under the circumstances was to keep his casualties low and get his guys back home in one piece—this was *his* mission, and he was failing.

He grew up wanting to be a soldier. The photos and memorabilia of his father’s service in World War II and Korea and his grandfather’s service in World War I had been all over the house. He loved hearing the stories his father told about the battles, the camaraderie, the pranks, and the heroism. And he remembered his grandfather telling him that there was no higher calling and no greater honor than fighting for your country. Those were the forces that motivated him to join the Army out of high school, volunteer for service in Vietnam, and then seek an appointment to West Point. But that was sixty-seven night patrols and thirty-eight senseless casualties ago.

Now, his men struggled to contain and manage their fear. He knew the terror that they experienced as they moved through the wire for a night patrol, wondering whether this would be the night that the bullet comes, or the mine explodes, rearranging their anatomy or ending their lives. He experienced the fear. He would no longer describe himself as fearless. He still had not desensitized himself to being surprised at how quickly one of his soldiers could be transformed from a son and or husband into whom years of education, experience, and training were poured, and who expected to change some aspect of the world, into torn flesh and blood that rapidly screamed itself out of existence.

He suppressed a flutter of nausea as he remembered the circumstances of Rodrigues’ death and once again he reviewed every detail of the patrol that might provide some insight as to what he did or failed to do that caused the tragedy. His CO had advised him that there would be an investigation and that he should cooperate fully. He had no intention of doing otherwise.

He watched the sun move higher in the clear sparkle of an apparently calm Vietnam morning and recalled that his twelfth-grade English teacher had him memorize a speech by Macbeth and deliver it in front of the class as part of the final exam. She would be amused to learn that it took ten years and an eight-thousand-mile journey for him to make it relevant.

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

*

Twelve night patrols later.

The Boeing 707 taxied down the long runway of Bangkok's Don Muang airport. Jeff shrouded his eyes against the searing late afternoon sun. He was conscious of his garish flowered shirt, great white hunter jungle pants, and the local variety of sandals that he'd purchased yesterday upon arriving in Bangkok. The aircraft taxied to the gate, and the ground crew pushed the stairs into position. As he was watching the door open, he caught sight of a lithe woman dressed in the traditional *ao dai*, a patterned tunic, over white trousers.

He sauntered over to her. "*Bonjour.*"

She turned to him and smiled. She had perfect teeth. He pointed to himself.

"*Je m'appelle Jeff. Quel est votre nom?*"

She shifted the bag she was carrying to her left hand and extended her right hand to him. "No need to struggle. I speak English. My name is Thuy Do."

He took her hand in a firm clasp. "It wasn't a struggle. *Enchanté de faire votre connaissance.*"

Her smile broadened. "That was really good. You have the accent, how do you say it, 'nailed.'"

He gently shook her hand. "Thanks, I'm really working on it. Jeff Bascomb. I'm very happy to meet you."

"What brings you to Bangkok, Mr. Bascomb?"

"The US Army. I'm stationed in Binh Dinh province. I'm here to meet my father, General Sid Bascomb, who is theoretically on that plane." He gestured at the aircraft that was just beginning to disgorge its passengers. "And you?"

"I live here. I'm attending the university. My girlfriend is also on that plane, theoretically." She smiled, this time with her eyes and her lips.

Jeff's eyes darted toward the gate door just as his father emerged—in uniform. As he shifted his gaze back to Thuy Do, he took a deep breath. "I see my father. His arrival is no longer theoretical. Why don't the four of us go to dinner tomorrow night? You and your friend can play tour guides. My father and I would be honored and grateful to have the pleasure of your company." He made a point of timing his most ingratiating smile to coincide with "grateful."

She hesitated, as if she were evaluating several other options. "I have to speak with my friend." She pulled out a card from her handbag and handed it to Jeff. "Call me tonight." She turned to the gate door and waved. "I see my friend. We will speak later, *A bientôt.*" She glided off toward her friend.

Jeff put the card in his shirt pocket. He placed the thumb and middle finger of his right hand in his mouth and blew. When Sid Bascomb heard the familiar whistle, he turned his head toward Jeff.

"Dad, Dad, over here."

Sid Bascomb had just reached the bottom of the stairs. He was lugging a bulging cordovan briefcase. The three silver stars on each shoulder glistened. He held himself erect looking taller than five-nine. Jeff's eyes started to tear. It was as if his house, parents, brothers, high school teammates, teachers, and girlfriends had all arrived to remind him who he was and what he had been fighting for.

Sid dropped his briefcase and clasped Jeff in a bear hug.

"It's good to see you, Dad." He untangled himself from his father.

Sid wrapped his arms around Jeff again. "I need to hold you, Jeff. I really missed you." After he released him, he stepped back and scrutinized Jeff's tanned and lithe body. "Say, you've lost a lot of weight."

"That's what happens when you eat crappy rations, don't sleep, and are scared shitless most of the time. Say, you've gained weight."

Sid patted his gut that was hanging over his belt, pleading for release from his shirt. "It's an occupational hazard. Too many diplomatic dinners with rich food and no exercise. My waist is up two inches since I redeployed."

"Too bad you can't grow your cock that easily."

Sid placed his hand on his hips and pursed his lips in mock indignation. "Now Jeff, what would I possibly do with a ten-inch cock? Your mother can hardly accommodate what I have."

Jeff laughed. His father's humor was crass, blunt, and typical for their family. God, he had missed it. "Are you sure that you're not measuring in centimeters?" He picked up Sid's briefcase. "Let's get your bags and get a drink. I know you need one."

"Amen." They headed along the corridor toward the baggage claim area.

"How is Mom, anyway?" said Jeff, as they waited for Sid's luggage.

"She's fine. She keeps busy with her charity work. She's president of the local United Way Chapter now."

"How's her health?" said Jeff.

"Still drinking too much. Always has a glass of white wine in her hand. Always. I've tried to get her to cool it. But every time I say something, she says, 'Unlike you, General Bascomb, this is my only vice!'"

Jeff laughed. "Well, Dad, she does have a point."

Sid ignored the comment, perhaps on purpose. "There's my stuff." They walked over to the luggage rack and pulled down a matching cordovan suitcase. As they walked out of the terminal and toward the parking lot, Jeff asked about Kevin and his family.

"Kevin's real busy. He's working on a new recon system that the Agency hopes to deploy within the next year. It's top secret, so I can't really tell you the details. He's the project manager of the whole enchilada. I'm really proud of him." Sid was beaming. "Carolyn is a typical suburban housefrau. Spends most of her time driving the kids from one activity to another. Dance lesson to music lesson to football practice to God knows what. Your mother never had to do that."

"Different era, Dad. The three of us thrived on benign neglect."

They arrived at Jeff's rented car. They put Sid's bag and briefcase in the trunk and got in. The comment lingered, unanswered except for the humorless line of a smile on his father's lips.

*

Jeff pushed away his half-eaten Sangkhaye. "I've had it. I'm stuffed."

"I've never seen you eat so much and so fast. It's like the last meal before your execution." Sid wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin and placed it on the table next to his empty plate.

"It could be," said Jeff. "Tomorrows are never guaranteed—and that's certainly true in Vietnam." He took out a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket and placed it on the table next to his brandy snifter.

"Aren't you being overly morbid?"

“It’s an occupational necessity. You know, I mean, I’m doing the same damn thing you did in WWII and Korea. I deal in death. I’m a trained killer. I train my men to be killers. I keep a tally of how many gooks we kill, and how many of our men are killed or wounded. And I will do it day-in and day-out until I’m killed, seriously wounded, or until these six months are over.”

Sid appeared to feel Jeff’s stare. He moved his chair back slightly and repositioned himself. “You chose the Army, Jeff. That is what the Army does. It destroys things and it kills people.”

“I didn’t have any comprehension what it would be like. I know that sounds dumb. And it is dumb.” He hesitated, sat back in his chair, and looked up as if he were trying to find his words on the ceiling. His eyes returned to Sid. “I was plain, fucking dumb.” He wiped his eyes with his hand and remained silent.

Sid’s big hand closed over Jeff’s. “You okay, son?”

Jeff pulled his chair closer to the table, leaned his elbows on it, and peered directly into Sid’s eyes. He spoke just above a whisper. “Dad, the Army never prepared me for the experience of holding the hand of a screaming nineteen-year-old kid from Birmingham, Alabama who had his legs, balls, and half of his face blown off, knowing that there was nothing I could have done to prevent it, and there is nothing that I can do to fix it; or humping through the brush scared to death that each step I take may trigger a booby trap, drop me into a punji pit, or bring me face to face with a gook whose only purpose is to shoot me and my men; or bedding down for the night with the full knowledge that most of the territory outside my tiny compound is controlled by the NVA who, if they wanted to, could wipe us out.”

He stopped. His face was flushed. He pushed his chair back, stood, up, and announced: “I’ve got to pee.” He came to attention, threw his shoulders back, turned on his heel, and marched off to the bar where the restroom was located.

He entered a large, gleaming black slate restroom that appeared to have just been cleaned. He relieved himself in the sparkling urinal and moved to the sink counter that was stocked with toiletries, towels, and combs. He looked into the mirror to see a dejected Jeff with bloodshot eyes and disheveled hair. The faucet was positioned high enough above the sink so that he could place his head under it and allow the cold water to soak his hair and face. He dried his face and then toweled and carefully combed his hair and left the restroom.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t ask you to come eight thousand miles to hear me whine. This is the first time in six months that I’ve really been relaxed and my censoring systems are down.”

“You don’t need to censor anything with me. I’ve been there. I know what you’re going through.”

Jeff took a sip from his brandy snifter. “Right. I’ll get through this, and like you, I’ll have some great stories to tell my kids.”

Sid smiled. “So why did you have me haul my ass out here?”

Jeff looked around and behind, and satisfied that he would not be overheard, he turned back to Sid. “In a minute,” he said. “First I want to talk with you about this.” He slid the folded sheet of paper across the table. Sid unfolded the paper. Jeff followed Sid’s eyes, and it was clear that Sid had seen the contents before. He held the sheet loosely in his left hand. He reached for the water glass and took a long drink. He coughed

and then cleared his throat. He re-folded the sheet, placed it on the table, and slid it back to Jeff. His lips formed into a faint smile.

“I was hoping that the story hadn’t reached you.” Sid was attempting to be casual. “How did you get it?”

“My company commander sent the *Times* article to me.” Jerry’s face was circled and his name was underlined. “It was attached to a note asking whether I was related to this ‘traitor’ who is leading the parade of war protesters in Stockholm. I haven’t answered him yet. I assume the question was rhetorical.” Jeff could no longer suppress the anger that had been building. He slapped his hand on the table, shaking it so that the ice cubes clinked against the sides of the glasses. “What was the little fucker thinking?”

Sid steadied the table and pulled his chair in. “Come on, Jeff, he’s just a kid. He protests everything and marches for anything. Civil rights, save the whales, women’s rights, and free speech. He’ll get over it.”

“Bullshit!” Jeff could barely suppress his fury. “You know, I mean, he was in a foreign country organizing a protest against his own country—and me, his brother, and you, his father—when thousands of kids not much older than him are risking their lives and dying.” He slapped the table again, toppling the floral centerpiece. “He’s undermining the war effort. He’s helping the enemy. He’s a fucking traitor and if I could get my hands on him, I’d kick the shit out of him.”

Some of the patrons had turned to stare at him. He took a deep breath.

“I’m through venting,” said Jeff. His voice was hoarse. His anger was spent. He wet his lips and spoke as if he were reporting the weather. “You and I have never agreed on anything where Jerry is concerned—so I don’t expect you to agree with me now. Just warn the little fucker that I’m going to wring his neck if I get back with all my parts intact.”

Sid sat back in his chair. He righted the centerpiece as an afterthought. “Let’s talk about what you brought me out here for.”

Jeff repeated his routine of looking around and behind to ensure that no enemy was lurking. The restaurant had thinned out. Most of the tables within twenty-five feet were empty. The waiters and waitresses languished at their wait stations, chatting and laughing. Jeff pulled his chair close to Sid and in a very low voice told him the story of the patrol and the death of Private Emilio Rodrigues. When he finished, he leaned back in his chair and motioned to the waitress for another round of Courvoisier. Sid’s sober expression conveyed his complete understanding of the implication of Rodrigues’ death. He released a long breath.

“What’s the status?”

“They’re conducting an inquiry.”

“Who?”

“CID, the criminal investigation guys.”

“What’s your risk?”

The waitress arrived with the drinks and removed the empty glasses. Jeff took a sip. He looked to each side and then turned so that he could see behind his chair. The restaurant was almost empty. One of the waiters had started to sweep the floor. He leaned into the table. “Runs the gamut—reprimand to the equivalent of a criminal indictment and a General Court-martial. At this point, I don’t have a clue as to how this is going to go down.”

“Have you been assigned an attorney?”

“No,” said Jeff. “Not yet.”

They sat in silence. Finally Sid said, “Ever since Mai Lai, the brass is hair-trigger sensitive—they recently charged fourteen officers with obstruction and they just charged Calley’s company commander. They may give you the option of an administrative discharge to avoid a court-martial and a full airing of the sordid details. Why don’t I sniff around and see what I can find out. Maybe there’s a wrinkle in the deal that could help you.”

Jeff put his hand on his father’s arm. “No, Dad, absolutely not. You’re in line for your fourth star, and I do not want you to put it at risk. Get too close and the stink will taint you. You stay away from this. I know you’re stubborn, so I’m giving you an order, General.” Jeff continued to hold his father’s arm and stare intently into his eyes. “What I need from you now is just some advice. That’s all, advice. What do I do if they do give me the option of an administrative discharge to avoid a court-martial?”

Jeff loosened his grip of Sid’s arm and pushed his chair away from the table. Sid stood up. “Tell the waiter that we’re going to take a stroll on the deck. I’ll meet you out there. Bring your brandy.” Sid strode over to and then passed through the double doors to the deck.

Jeff motioned to the waiter who came over to the table. “*Combien coûte?*”

The waiter held up eight fingers. Jeff handed him a ten-dollar bill, stood and picked up his brandy snifter, and quickly followed Sid to the deck. The restaurant was located in a marina that berthed boats and yachts ranging from twenty-foot sloops to fifty-foot schooners. They stood at the rail, looking at the boats and the reflection of the moon off the water. The only sounds came from the sloshing of wakes against the hulls.

Sid shook his head. “I can’t believe you’d even consider giving up your career and let the Army use you to cleanse itself of Mai Lai. It’s not like you. You’ve always been a fighter. You’re the guy who never gives up. Remember your hero, Winston Churchill. Never, never, never, never, never give up! You’re a survivor.”

“I’ve survived so far. I may not survive the next patrol, the next firefight, the next bombardment.”

Sid smiled. He reached over and placed his hands on Jeff’s shoulders and looked him directly in the eyes. “Well, if you don’t survive, you don’t have any decision to make. Come on. You saved the lives of seven soldiers. Rodrigues was a war casualty. If they start throwing shit at you, pick it up and throw it back. Get a lawyer and fight it. You owe it to yourself, to me, to Mom, and Kevin—even to Jerry. If you slink off into the twilight, it will look like an admission of guilt and you’ll regret it the rest of your life.” He held Jeff in his grip for a few moments and then let go.

Jeff put his head back and inhaled the rest of the Courvoisier. Then he threw the brandy snifter into the water, smiled, and then put his arms around his father and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks. You really helped me. I know what I need to do. What a terrific night.” Jeff let out a loud whoop. “I feel great. Thanks, Dad.”

Sid slapped him on the back. “You’ll do fine. You are a fucking rock!”

“Finish your drink,” said Jeff. “And let’s walk for a while.”

They walked in silence around the deserted deck. “Since we’ve completed the business part of the trip,” continued Jeff. “Let’s focus on the R-and-R portion. I’ve

arranged for us to have dinner with two attractive Vietnamese women that I met at the airport. Interested?" He was apprehensive as he waited for his father's reaction, not absolutely sure Sid would go.

"I'm not really into that anymore, Jeff. I promised your mother that I'd follow the straight and narrow."

Jeff stopped walking, grasped Sid's shoulder, and turned him around so that they were facing. He laughed. "Don't bullshit me. You can't expect me to believe that with all your traveling and wheeling and dealing with the Agency types, you don't get extracurricular pussy from time to time?"

The faint glimmer of a sheepish smile enveloped Sid's face. "Only on very rare occasions, Jeff. Very rare."

"Well," said Jeff, removing his hand from his father's shoulder. "Let this be one of those rare occasions. Look at it as an act of mercy. You're going to help your son get what he can before the VC deprives him of his manhood—or his life. And, I'll make it easy for you. I'll pay for dinner and your room."

Sid frowned, but the frown shifted to one of feigned indignation. "Lieutenant, are you implying that a three-star general can be bribed with a dinner and a room? I'm shocked."

"Okay," said Jeff. "I'll add two bottles of Dom Perignon."

Sid's face transformed into a bright smile. "I think that will work just fine."

*

Six patrols after Sid's visit, a CID investigator came to the compound and interviewed all the men who had been on the patrol the night Rodrigues died. The captain confided to Jeff that based on the reports he had received from Battalion Headquarters, he expected Rodrigues' death to be ruled an accident. His father had been right. Stick to your knitting, do your job, kill VC, forget Rodrigues, and protect the men. It paid off. Jeff felt recharged, almost buoyant.

He lay in his bunker and attempted to sleep. The trip to Bangkok had refreshed him. He couldn't say whether he had Sid to thank or the wildly satisfying two days with Thuy Do.

Just then, a series of explosions shook the bunker. RPGs. He rolled out of his cot, put on his helmet and flack jacket, grabbed his M-16, and scrambled outside. His RTO, Baker, was on his knees gasping for breath. A round hit ten meters away. He fell to the ground, and it shuddered beneath him.

There was no point in yelling. Mortar rounds were falling all over the compound. Jeff ran over to the injured Baker, unstrapped the unit from his back and tried to call company headquarters to request immediate air support. Static, no response. "Fuck!" He took a deep breath and called Platoon Bravo. "Come on, answer, dammit."

"Bravo Platoon, this is Corporal Maser."

"Lieutenant Jamison!" said Jeff. He held the hand set in a death grip. The bombardment continued unabated.

"Who's this?"

"Lieutenant Bascomb. I need to talk to Jamison pronto!" Jeff struggled to keep his voice even and professional.

"Jamison's dead. Sergeant Frazier's in command."

"Can you get him?"

Five explosions later, Frazier was on the phone. "Frazier here."

"We're under heavy attack and company headquarters isn't responding. Have you called them?"

"Several times with no response. We're getting clobbered, too."

"Keep trying. Let them know that we need immediate air. My number one RTO is down and I can't locate my backup."

"Will do, Lieutenant. Good luck."

Jeff picked up the unit and sprinted back to the command bunker. He put the unit inside the bunker and climbed ten feet up the tower ladder to assess his defenses. Squads B and C covered the northwest and southeast legs. They were still at full strength and holding their positions. Squad A was covering the south leg and posed a big problem. Nine guys were covering just over one hundred yards. And there were only eight guys in the D backup squad. Bill Calhoon, leader of D squad, was down and being worked on by Doc.

"How you doing, Bill?"

Calhoon bit his lip. "Not good, Lieutenant. I can't feel nothin' below my right thigh."

Jeff looked at the twisted wreckage that once was the leg of an athlete. Calhoon was looking at his face.

"You've got some damage, but all the parts are there. Doc's got it in a splint. Try to stay calm. We'll call in a Medvac." He turned to Doc. "You need to look at Baker. He's about fifteen meters from the command bunker."

An explosion was immediately followed by a scream. Jeff turned around to see the sickening sight of what was left of three bodies that ten seconds ago were one third of alpha squad. A mortar round had directly hit their hole. Simultaneously about two dozen NVA regulars stood up and prepared to charge the undefended section of the perimeter.

"Fuck." He clutched the medic's shoulder. "Follow me. Calhoon will have to wait. You'll feed and I'll shoot. Load up on ammo. Quickly." Jeff grabbed the squad D's M-60, and he and the medic ran to the foxhole that had just been involuntarily vacated.

"Help me stack these guys," he said as he grabbed one of the dead soldiers by the legs and pulled him to the front of the foxhole. The medic stood frozen, staring at him.

"Now, you son of a bitch! Move or we're all dead."

The medic dropped the ammo and helped stack the other two bodies on the first one adjacent to the trench. Jeff set up the M-60, so that the barrel was just above the stacked bodies. Then he and the medic crouched behind the gun and the dead bodies. The medic opened the ammo box, fed the belt into the chamber, and Jeff started firing at the regulars as they crossed the third wire perimeter. Jeff, Doc and the six remaining members of alpha squad fired continuously for about a minute. The assault stalled and the NVA retreated, leaving eight of their comrades behind.

"Get Jones and LeRoy."

The medic hesitated. "But you?"

"I'll be fine. You'll be back before they regroup. Move fast and don't you get killed or I'm fucked. Get it?"

Fortunately Doc was five-eight and 145 pounds and did not offer a very large target. He zigzagged in a crouch to the adjacent bunker thirty meters northwest of Jeff's position.

Minutes later Doc, Jones, and Leroy slid next to Jeff.

“What’s happening in your sector?”

“It’s gotten real quiet,” said Jones.

“Let’s hope it stays that way for a few more minutes,” said Jeff. “Maybe there is a God. Jones, you handle the M-60. Doc will feed. Leroy, you’re the new RTO. The unit’s in my bunker.”

Jones winced. He had just become aware that his former comrades were propping up the M-60.

“Focus on the NVA, Jones. You know, I mean, these guys are still putting out for the platoon. Doc is here to look after them.”

As he and Leroy moved to his command post the first flight of Phantoms started their strafing run two hundred meters north of the compound.

CHAPTER 2

Monday, June 25, 1990

A sharp buzz startled him. He disentangled his right arm from under Helen's body, fumbled with his watch, and turned off the alarm.

She laughed. "Christ, Jeff. Were you timing that?"

"Sorry, honey, I have a meeting at noon with Kevin and our lawyer about the bank problem. I've got to go." Jeff rolled off her and made his way across the king size bed, and got up. He stooped down to gather up his clothes that were spread all over the floor. He disentangled his trousers from his briefs and held them up along with his shirt for inspection, shaking his head and grinning.

"The result of passion is wrinkles. I can't go looking like a bagman. Where's your iron and ironing board?"

"Give them to me. I'll do it. This is a full service establishment. We provide food, drinks, sex, and valet services."

Helen jumped out of bed, took the clothes from him, put her arm around his neck, kissed him, and then gently pushed him away. "You better take a shower. Kevin bought me the perfume I'm wearing." She covered herself with his clothes in a gesture of coy modesty, and as she brushed passed him, he again felt himself rising. He glanced at his watch and realized that he would have to hustle to make the bank meeting on time. He walked up behind Helen as she was levering open the ironing board and kissed the warm, smooth flesh of her shoulder.

"You're more addictive than a damn drug," he said.

"Go," she said, pushing him away. "Take a shower and cool down that package."

He turned up the shower pressure to the max and allowed a cold stream to blast against his face. How long had it been? Five months? Six? Yeah, six. He knew how a heroin addict must feel. What a piece of work she was. Firm, tight, thin, tits like grapefruits and no silicone. And those white-white teeth. As he worked the lather over his body, he was getting turned on again.

He shut off the water and reached for the towel she had placed by the shower door. I've got to focus, he thought. He turned on the shower radio and stood in front of the full-length mirror, drying himself off. His attention lingered on his biceps and washboards—muscles as hard as the day he finished West Point and shipped out to Nam. He moved closer to the mirror and noticed a hair in his left nostril. He rummaged through the drawers until he found the type of scissors he needed and carefully snipped it off. The radio grumbled the news, and he stopped to listen. One of his ex-military buddies predicted that Saddam was planning trouble in the Gulf, but the media reported nothing.

He shut off the news. In the spare bedroom, he approached Helen from behind and wrapped his arm around her chest and caressed her left breast. He glanced at his watch. Eleven twenty. If he left by eleven forty-five he'd only be fifteen minutes late...

He whispered in her ear. "I've got twenty-five minutes."

"Animal..." she whispered back.

"Right."

She set down the iron, turned around, and kissed him. Then she reached down and very gently grabbed him and slowly, slowly led him back to the bedroom.

*

Three time zones away, a gust of cool air came through the open window of the Upper East Side apartment and passed across Jerry's bare skin. It took his attention away from the immediate task, namely holding back his orgasm until he knew that Lisa had come. She was slow tonight.

She made the moan he loved. Good, she was close. Hallelujah. His reputation for stamina had a great deal to do with his success with women. Lisa was moaning louder and in a higher key. Jerry shifted his weight, placed his hands under her buttocks and plunged into her as deeply as he could. It only took five or six thrusts and Lisa was digging her nails into his forearms and yelling, "Oh God, oh God..." Simultaneously with the second, "Oh God," the telephone rang and the answering system engaged.

"Alyosha! Ivan here. Hey, bro, hey, we really need to talk. We've got some serious problems here and . . . uh . . . I need your input. It's 8:40 here, so call me whenever you get in, any time . . ."

"Answer that now and I'll kill you," yelled Lisa.

Jerry wasn't paying any attention to Lisa or to the telephone. He heard the urgency in Kevin's voice just as his orgasm started and then all of his faculties were focused on the moment.

Jerry sprawled across Lisa's legs and slowly stroked her back.

"You were great again," she said.

"I know, but it's nice to hear it."

"How do you manage to hold back? What's your secret?"

"I've studied Zen."

She grabbed the pillow and brought it down hard on his head, pushing his face into the covers. "That's bull. Come on, tell me how you do it." He turned to ward off the next blow and she lunged at him again, but he moved away.

"Trade secret," he said. "It's my competitive advantage and I don't intend to share it. Any woman who wants to enjoy me has got to shop in my store."

"Chauvinist!"

"Guilty as charged.

"Who is Alyosha?"

"It's my nickname, or the nickname my brother uses, anyway. It's a family thing."

"I thought 'Jerry' was your nickname, you know, for Gerome?"

"Right, but when I was in high school, I read *The Brothers Karamazov*. I saw the similarities between the Karamazovs and our family." Lisa nodded at the book's title, but Jerry could see that she hadn't actually read it. "There were three Karamazov brothers and a domineering father. So I started using the names of the brothers and the father as alternatives to our real names. Kevin caught on to the game and we still play it."

"What's his name?"

"Ivan."

"How many brothers do you have?"

"Just two, Kevin and Jeff. Kevin's four years older than me and Jeff's eight years older." He rolled off of her and out of bed and started for the kitchen. "You hungry?"

"What's available?"

He opened the refrigerator and studied its contents. When he returned to the bedroom, Lisa was in the same position, arms and legs spread wide, half-doing.

“Vegetarian frozen pizzas or leftover Chinese food from Ying Lee’s, and lots of frozen yogurt.”

She opened her eyes. “How old is the Chinese?”

“Yesterday.”

“I’ll take it—but heat it up. I’m going to sleep for a few minutes.” She turned on her side. Jerry covered her with the comforter and left the bedroom. He inserted a CD of *Don Giovanni* in the entertainment unit and stooped down to pet Chelsey, his Golden Retriever, whose head was collapsed on her big front paws in front of the fireplace. He retrieved the chow mein from the refrigerator, dumped it into a bowl, and microwaved it. The pause while he waited for the food brought him back to Kevin’s call. He reached for the telephone and replayed the call.

Kevin sounded anxious, more so than usual. He took the chow mein out of the microwave, put it on a tray with a fork and a napkin, and walked it back to the bedroom, humming along with Plácido Domingo.

“Soup’s on.”

She sat up and locked her elbows, breasts hanging between them. “Are both your brothers cocksman like you?”

He was still feeling a twinge of guilt over not having called Kevin yet, and didn’t answer her flirting. “Not anymore. They’re both married.” He gave her the bowl of chow mein. “I really have to call Kevin back. I may be tied up for a while. Do you want to sleep over? We can have breakfast tomorrow at Nate’s before we go to work.”

Lisa braced her back with a pillow and settled the tray on her lap. “No, I’ll go home. I can’t sleep when you go into your wheeling and dealing mode. The call from your brother didn’t sound like he wanted to discuss your mother’s birthday present.” She tossed a bolster at him, hitting him in the crotch.

Jerry laughed, picked up the pillow, and tossed it back on the bed. “Okay, enjoy your midnight snack.” He felt a twinge of regret over sending her home and forfeiting the balance of a night of guaranteed great sex. But he would not have been able to keep his mind on screwing her, knowing that his brother was waiting for his call.

Kevin picked up on the second ring.

“Jerry?”

“Yeah, how you doing, bud?” Jerry punched the speakerphone button and headed toward the entertainment unit.

“Not so good. We’re in deep shit.”

Jerry turned off the entertainment unit, covered his naked body with a burgundy afghan and walked to the kitchen. “Kevin, you and National are always in deep shit, or doo-doo, or ka-ka, or whatever.”

“It’s different this time. It’s serious.”

“Okay, what do you think the problem is?” Jerry started to load the dishwasher.

“Think is not the operative word, Jerry.” Kevin’s voice stretched tighter. “We know what the problem is. Our chief financial officer and our vice president of manufacturing have been cooking the books since February. Our financial condition is upside-down. The bankers are furious and want to cut off our balls and hang them from the company flagpole.”

Jerry stopped loading the dishwasher and moved in the direction of the phone.

“Jerry, are you still there?”

He sat down in the chair next to the phone, picked up the receiver, and took the phone off of speaker mode. “Yeah, I’m here. How the hell did this happen? Where were you and Jeff?”

“It’s complicated. It’s hard to discuss over the phone. I need you to come to L.A. and meet with Jeff, Richard, and the family.” He coughed and blew his nose. “Sorry, I’m catching a cold. I really need your input, Jerry. I can’t think clearly anymore. This whole thing has shaken me.”

“Who the hell is Richard?”

“He’s the bankruptcy attorney we hired. Will you come out?”

“You hired a bankruptcy attorney?” He groaned. “I guess it’s serious. When do you want me to come?”

“As quickly as you can. Tomorrow if possible. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t critical.”

Jerry thought through his schedule and which partners might pick up his slack. “I think I can get there by Wednesday. I’ll call the airlines and get back to you later tonight.”

“Thanks, Alyosha, I’m feeling better already.”

Jerry cleared the line and then quickly made his reservations to leave on a 9:05 a.m. Delta flight out of Kennedy on Wednesday morning and called Kevin back with the information.

He knocked on the bathroom door.

“Lisa, honey, you out of the shower?”

The toilet flushed. “Be out in a minute.”

“Good, I need to go over some things with you. We need to juggle.”

Lisa walked back into the bedroom, wearing nothing but her smile.

“I’ll be happy to help you juggle your schedule, Mr. Bascomb, sir, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to concentrate until you help me out with something . . .”

She came over to the chair next to the bed where Jerry had sat down, climbed up on it, straddled his legs and pressed her pelvis against him, all the while moving her hips to the rhythm of *Don Giovanni*.

CHAPTER 3

Tuesday June 26, 1990

“You unmitigated asshole!”

Sheila Crown’s complexion had, in a brief moment, transformed from bland, pale and colorless to bright crimson. She delivered the line at screech. This was no act. The banker was a very unhappy camper and she didn’t give a damn who knew it and who heard it.

Her voice moved up an octave. “You don’t really expect us to believe that bullshit!”

The conference room was darkening. The late afternoon sky was overcast and the lack of light added to the funereal atmosphere. No one moved to turn on a light. Sheila’s attorney, Bill Bromfield, was sitting to her left. He stifled a smile; he’d been through scenes like this before.

“There is nothing to smile about, Bill. I’m fucking pissed—no, I’m furiously pissed. For Christ’s sake, how did those guys in the Torrance branch let these assholes into the bank?” She encompassed the assholes with a gesture across the table, aimed at the group from National Technology.

Bill Bromfield, senior partner at McCallaster and Reardon, merely looked down at his papers and organized them into two neat piles. The room grew very quiet.

Jeff, the CEO and fifty percent shareholder of National Technology, stared at Sheila as if playing “made-you-blink.” This was one of the few times he did not know either what to say or how to say it. The rest of the National Technology team consisted of Kevin, who was the chairman and the other fifty-percent shareholder, Richard Krimble, a bankruptcy attorney, and Cecil Watson, the company’s independent accountant. Kevin slumped down in the chair as if he were trying to make himself less obtrusive, despite his bulk. Krimble’s fingers remained positioned on the keyboard of his laptop. They all sat pinned to their respective chairs, waiting for the next round to explode.

Jeff’s heart beat at what seemed like twice its normal rate; his throat was dry and a lump prevented him from swallowing. He tried to look directly into the pupils of Sheila’s eyes, but he simply couldn’t cope with all that righteous indignation. He had to perform; this was his play. The rush of energy that usually sustained him when he was under pressure was absent. Reaching down into his soul for it would not help. It simply was absent. But he had to speak.

“Sheila, could you arrange to bring this thirsty asshole a glass of water?”

Bromfield giggled and Sheila actually laughed. Krimble removed his fingers from the keyboard. Sheila suggested a break, and the room quickly emptied. Bullet dodged.

In his Vietnam days, his platoon’s position had been fortified by concertina wire punctuated by punji stakes, trip flares, claymore mines, and M-60 machine guns. Considering the enemy that made these provisions necessary, and comparing the enemy to Sheila’s tenacity now, he thought maybe he had not lost his survival instinct, as he sometimes feared. He still didn’t know where that joke had come from.

Fifteen minutes later, after the secretary had left, everyone was back in his or her chairs. Sheila, somewhat more composed, but still very stern, looked across the table at Jeff.

“Okay, Jeff, in your own words, tell me how fifteen percent of your inventory disappeared?”

The sweat ran down his neck. His throat was still parched, the water having had little effect. The survival of the company and the financial well-being of his family and his brother’s family, and perhaps even his freedom, depended on his ability to persuade Sheila that he and Kevin were not crooks. Incompetent, yes! Negligent, yes! Perhaps even stupid—but honest. He looked directly at Sheila, this time at her pupils.

“Sheila, I know that you will find what I tell you hard to believe. I don’t believe it myself and I was running the damn place. But I did not know that it was going on. Potter and Johnson did it on their own. They thought that they were helping the company over a rough spot. These guys are experienced executives. We never suspected.”

Jeff took a breath and made sure he was holding eye contact with Sheila and Bromfield. He dwelled a bit longer on Sheila, who looked attentive. It was about the most he could hope for at this stage.

“It was excruciatingly simple,” he said. “We had more orders for our new ACS system than we had the cash to fill. So rather than turn down business, Potter and Johnson got creative and started shipping units that were in for repair. They cleaned them up, stuck on a new serial number, and shipped them as new. They figured the profits from these borrowed units would cover the cost of building replacements for the customers waiting on repairs.”

“And how many ‘borrowed’ units were shipped between April and last Monday, when Cecil here blew the whistle?”

“About one thousand,” Cecil answered. “We’re still working on it.”

“How come you had so many units running through your repair operation?” Bromfield asked.

Jeff said, “Why don’t you respond to that, Kevin. You’re the technical guru.”

Kevin sat up in his chair and for the first time during the meeting appeared alert. He was the only participant not wearing a coat. Both his white shirt and pale blue tie were stained, and he wore a pocket protector. “We were shipped a bunch of bad memory chips by Intel.” His voice was slow and confident. “The bad chips caused intermittent failures in the field after the equipment was shipped. At first we couldn’t figure what the hell was wrong and we busted our asses for two weeks twenty-four hours a day until we sorted the thing out. We went back to Intel and finally traced the glitch to a quality control problem. They agreed to replace the chips, but we had to recall the units and invest the labor to retrofit the units.”

Jeff nodded. “We were halfway through the repairs when the new order rate went through the roof. Potter saw all those fresh units in the repair shop, and he came up with the plan to use them to fill the new orders.”

“I see,” said Sheila. Her face expressed something between humor and ridicule. “And since starting that practice, you have been scrounging for parts to build for both the new orders and replace the units that you stole.”

Richard Krimble was on his feet, all six-feet-four of him, and he knocked the table with his knuckles. “Damn it, Sheila, you know that there was no criminal intent.”

“I don’t know that and neither do you,” she said. A no-nonsense banker face had replaced her sarcasm. Yet, in an instant, the consummate actress was smiling. “But since this is a fact-finding meeting, I will give your client the benefit of the doubt and use the

word 'converted.' So, Potter has been replacing the converted units while trying to keep up with new orders.”

“Right,” Jeff said. He overcame the urge to shift his position, assuming that Sheila would interpret it as squirming.

“And you didn’t have a clue, a tiny fucking clue that this was happening in your company. Christ, Jeff, do you have a bridge you want to sell me, too?”

Jeff allowed his eyes to drop ever so slightly. “No, I didn’t have a clue and neither did Kevin.”

Kevin was turning paler. “I didn’t know either, I didn’t.”

“And what about the controller, Howard? Did he know?”

“He should have,” said Kevin. “But he’s a new employee. I think that he just didn’t recognize the anomaly.”

Sheila turned to the CPA. “What did Johnson say to you, Cecil, when you confronted him with the discrepancies?”

Cecil shrugged with one hand. “What could he say? He didn’t say anything. He just stared at me and nodded. He went directly to his office and shut the door. He exited the building about forty-five minutes later with a box of personal belongings. He left a one-line letter of resignation on his desk. I don’t think anyone has spoken with him since.”

Bill Bromfield fingered the neat stacks of papers in front of him. He cleared his throat. “This is a very interesting story, and perhaps you might be willing to sell me the rights to the movie. But you still haven’t explained the missing inventory. What happened to the \$926,000 of missing inventory?”

Jeff glanced at Kevin and saw that Kevin wanted him to carry the ball. Jeff drank from the water glass, looked at Sheila, and then Bromfield. “It never existed, Bill. It was the labor cost of repairing the defective units that should have been expensed as warranty repairs, but were added to the cost of goods. Cecil, why don’t you fill in the blanks?”

Cecil began passing around copies of a worksheet. When everyone had received a copy, Cecil said, “As you can see, as of June 30, the repaired units amounted to an inventory increase of \$961,000. Since the bank advances 65 percent of inventory, including work in process, the company borrowed \$624,000 for the ‘excess’ inventory.” He paused. “On collateral that doesn’t exist.”

Kevin spoke up. “The repair should have only cost about \$100 per unit and would have if they had been shipped to our facility in Mexico. It was crazy to fix them here in L.A. Christ, the labor on a new unit is just under \$800.”

Sheila abruptly stood and started to pace around the conference room. No one else moved. “I just may throw up. I feel that I’m attending the Mad Hatter’s tea party.” She completed the circuit in silence and then sat down again. “So tell me, why the hell didn’t you ship the units to Mexico for repair?”

“I think I can answer that,” said Jeff. “I’ve known Potter for almost twenty years. He probably did not want to let the units out of his hands, since he was changing serial numbers. I’m sure he never thought that it would be so expensive to fix them in L.A.”

“That’s bullshit, Jeff,” said Kevin, his voice rising in frustration and anger. “Potter knows what everything costs down to the last grommet. The goddamn son-of-a-bitch just did not think it through. Once he got into it and figured out what it was costing us, there was no way to stop. And I’m sure he never shared the real numbers with Johnson.”

Jeff was surprised at Kevin's outburst. But there was nothing he could do except nod in agreement.

Sheila turned to Cecil. "Is that the extent of the problem?"

"Not quite," said Cecil. "After the inventory adjustment, the company's loss in the first six months is about one million six. That compares to a profit of about one million three in the first six months of last year. Even discounting the excess inventory problem, the company experienced a negative profit swing of almost three million dollars despite an increase of fifteen percent in the shipment rate. That's huge." Cecil paused. "And of course there is the matter of the borrowed units. I estimate that it will cost the company almost three million to replace the customer units, assuming they can still build them at their historical margins—which appears unlikely."

Sheila made notes on her yellow pad.

"What about Potter?" asked Bromfield.

"He gave us the entire story Monday night," Jeff said. "He's very contrite. He said he did it for the company, and for Kevin. He did not want to leave—he's been here since Kevin started—but he knew he was a dead player, so he resigned."

"Anyone else in on it outside of Potter's and Johnson's departments?" asked Bromfield.

Jeff did not respond immediately. He allowed Bromfield's statement to hang while he mustered up his indignation. "No," replied Jeff. "We've interviewed the middle managers, and they all appear to have been as surprised as we were."

"Do you have anything to add?" Sheila asked Kevin.

"Jeff pretty much covered it all." He sat up in the chair, placed both hands on the table, and splayed his fingers as if he were trying to tap into a hidden source of energy. "I just want to say that as the founder of the company, I am mortified over what happened, and I want to assure you that we'll do whatever it takes to make this thing right. We just need some time to work things out." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes. He blew his nose and took a deep breath. "I've given my life and my health to this company. This is a good company. We make a great product. We've got a great reputation and triple-A customers. What's happened is a fluke, an aberration. We can fix it." He stopped and looked from Sheila to Bromfield. "All we need is a chance and some time. That's all I have to say."

The room was very quiet. Jeff was embarrassed for his brother.

Sheila was unmoved. She looked over to Bill Bromfield and motioned to him to respond. "The bank will have to examine the situation and review its options. I don't have to tell you, Richard," he said, looking at Krimble. "What has happened here is serious. Your client's firm has converted property of its customers, offered bogus collateral, submitted fraudulent financial statements . . . And your chief financial officer has submitted fraudulent certificates of compliance. Your firm is in default of virtually every covenant of the loan agreement. And what is the most disturbing aspect of the entire sorry situation, your two principals, both of whom are highly educated and well experienced, appear to have been asleep at the helm. He continued, "The bank is very concerned that when your supposed triple-A customers find out what your clients have done, you will not have much of a business left." He looked back to Sheila, who was already standing.

Fully composed, she walked around the conference table and smiled as she shook hands with each member of the National team.

*

Kevin walked slowly along the aisle formed by the windowed offices of the attorneys and the tiny cubicles of the clerks and secretaries. He negotiated his way through the corridors to the elevators and stood, slouching. When Jeff and Cecil stopped beside him, he was holding his scarred and battered attaché case loosely against his leg and staring at his shoes, what he could see of them. They were in need of a shine. Jeff and Cecil kept up their conversation, not paying much attention to Kevin, until Jeff noticed that the call light for the elevator was not lit. He glanced over to Kevin and then walked over to push the elevator button. Kevin did not notice.

“Well, it wasn’t as bad as I expected,” Jeff said to Cecil. “Sheila is a real ball breaker, but she mellowed toward the end. Don’t you think so, Kev?”

“It was no Sunday afternoon picnic,” said Kevin. “And I expect that we haven’t seen the worst of it. And I don’t think it was an act. I think she’s reflecting the bank’s attitude. Shit, I don’t want to talk about it now.”

Jeff threw his arm around Kevin’s back and gently shook him. “Let’s not hang the black crêpe until we talk with Richard. I told him we’d wait for him downstairs at the bar and grill. He doesn’t expect to be more than a half hour.”

As the elevator descended the thirty-five floors, Jeff felt nauseated. Kevin was too depressed to be scared, but he was scared enough for both of them. Then there was the guilt—the goddamn guilt over the fact that he was asleep at the helm. It was his responsibility to know what the hell was going on, and he wasn’t paying attention. He wasn’t paying attention because he was too busy screwing his wife’s sister. He was busy screwing her during lunch, after work, on the weekends, and every spare minute he could arrange. He looked over at Kevin—poor dejected, depressed Kevin. Kevin’s world was crumbling because his brother’s life was consumed with screwing their sister-in-law.

The elevator stopped. Kevin headed for the parking lot and said over his shoulder, “You guys wait for Richard. I don’t feel so hot, so I’m going to head home. Call me later and let me know what happened. Regards to Salli, Jeff.”

His voice was flat. No surprise. Kevin had almost broken down in the meeting. He was beaten, a casualty of war.

*

“Richard, it’s your meeting.” Sheila smiled. He had remained behind after the National team left. “I trust that you’ll provide some enlightened interpretation of the bullshit that we’ve listened to for the past half-hour.”

“I hope to.”

Richard was across the table from Sheila and Bill Bromfeld, but the atmosphere was more relaxed. He closed his laptop and returned it to his briefcase. The only items on the table in front of him was his coffee mug and the coaster on which it sat, and a neat pile of yellow paper about a quarter of an inch high. “I can understand why you have trouble believing the principals’ story. Frankly, I did not believe it either. So I spent three days interviewing a total of twenty-one employees—middle managers, engineers, secretaries, and production supervisors. I even interviewed the janitor. I think I got the real story.” He gestured over to the pile of typed yellow sheets. “Bill, I’d like a gentleman’s agreement that if this deal ends up in litigation, I won’t read what I’m going

to tell you in a fucking affidavit. I'm taking a risk by laying this mess out on the table, but I think the company's worth saving and I'd like to work something out. Do we have a deal?"

Bill looked at Sheila, who nodded. He had his customary tablet and uncapped pen on the table in front of him.

Richard hesitated. "No notes, Bill. Please don't take offense." He looked at Sheila. "I don't have any experience in situations that could result in a criminal charge, so I need to be very careful."

Bill placed his pad back in his briefcase and put it on the floor. He put his pen in his jacket pocket.

Richard took a deep breath and thumbed the edges of yellow papers. "The company's current problems stem primarily from the fact that Kevin has been depressed and non-functioning for at least the past year and has abdicated all executive and operational duties to Jeff. It's not that Kevin doesn't want to work and be involved—it's just that he can't. I met with him privately a few days ago, and he simply can't focus on what is going on. He can't make decisions, can't function. So there's been a vacuum, and Jeff has filled the vacuum even though he doesn't have the technical background, people skills, or industry smarts that Kevin has when he's functioning. There is no question in my mind that if Kevin had been involved, he would have understood that the numbers didn't make sense and would have investigated. He simply has not been involved. Kevin has been seeing a psychiatrist for the past six months and is on antidepressants."

"Okay," said Sheila, "Kevin's *non compos mentis*. What about Jeff?"

"He lacks the business insight to see that the reports didn't make sense. Of course he would never admit it. The operational reports generated by accounting and production don't jive—there wasn't enough money being spent on the inventory that they were supposedly buying."

Bromfield shook his head and leaned into the table. "What about the other managers who looked at the reports, the ones who weren't perpetrating the scam? Didn't they notice?"

"They did, and at least three of them said they tried to bring it to Jeff's attention. But Jeff was either preoccupied with other problems or didn't take the time to understand what he was being told. Jeff has very little rapport with the troops. Most of the middle managers regard him as a megalomaniac martinet and try to minimize their involvement with him. The culture that developed at National during the last six months created the perfect environment for a gigantic management screw-up. Kevin and Jeff are guilty of stupidity, dereliction of duty, and gross mismanagement, but they are not crooks." Richard looked directly into Sheila's eyes. "You have my word on it. They are not crooks."

"But the result is the same," said Sheila. She pushed back her chair, stood up, and started pacing. She stopped and leaned on the table. Her voice conveyed the depth of her exasperation. "The company is financially upside down and over a million dollars of our collateral doesn't exist. What difference does it make whether they stole the money or squandered it? It's still gone. And we have a company that is being run into the ground by a Laurel and Hardy management team." She pointed her finger at Richard. "You tell me why I should feel better."

Richard placed his large boney fingers on the table and looked first at Bill and then at Sheila. He kept his voice calm. “You should feel better because the bank has options that it would not have if Kevin and Jeff were crooks. If they had been stealing, you would have to foreclose, I’d have to file a Chapter 11 to protect the company, and you would have to move to install a trustee, which Jeff and Kevin would fight but would not be able to prevent. The negative publicity and the installation of a trustee would spook our customers and our engineers, many of whom would walk. The company would not be able to survive. The bank would incur a huge loss in the liquidation. Kevin would lose, Jeff would lose, and the vendors would lose. A disaster.”

Bill’s face remained expressionless.

“And what’s my option?” said Sheila. She sat, clasping her hands together. “I’m certainly not going to sit by and let those idiots run the company. If I recommended that to the loan committee, they’d send *me* to a psychiatrist.”

“I’m not suggesting that. My point is that I believe the company is basically sound, and with proper leadership could be turned around, so that nobody gets hurt. Bill, you and I have worked on these deals before. Remember the plumbing equipment distributor? What the hell was its name?”

“Reliable Plumbing,” said Bromfield.

“Yeah, Reliable,” said Richard. “Five years ago, the partners were in a pissing contest because of some family dispute.”

Bromfield laughed and turned to Sheila. “The partners were brothers-in-law, and one of the partners was screwing the accounts receivable manager. They stopped talking to each other and the business turned to shit. Richard told them that they had to get a consultant in there pronto to fix the problem or you were going to call the loan. They hired Farmer, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” said Sheila. “He did a hell of a job. Turned the company around so that it was making more money than it ever had, and structured a deal, so that one partner bought the other one out. The bank didn’t lose a penny. We got all of our interest, attorney fees, and accounting fees. Farmer made me a hero.”

“That’s what I have in mind,” said Richard. “We need them to stay with the company. Kevin’s technical expertise and Jeff’s relationships with the customers are crucial. They’ll have jobs and salaries—but they won’t sign the checks, and they won’t make policy.”

Sheila studied the table in front of her hands for a long moment. Behind the gaze was a silent conversation, and finally she sighed. “You think that they’ll agree to that?”

“I believe I can persuade them that it would be in their best interest,” said Richard.

Sheila pushed her chair back and stood up. She straightened her skirt and whisked her hair away from her face. She seemed to be pulling off some of the ball-breaker façade that had carried the meeting. “It’s been a long morning,” she said. “I’m drained. We need some quite time to talk this through. Call me tomorrow morning. I appreciate your hard work.”

CHAPTER 4

Wednesday, June 27, 1990

Delta Flight 27 roared down the runway. Jerry stuffed his novel in the seat pocket, put his seat back, and closed his eyes. His first thoughts were of Lisa humping him on the chair to the beat of *Don Giovanni*. How much he loved his twin demons, work and sex. But another five hours and he'd be in Kevin's time and seeing Mom and Dad, Carolyn, the kids, and good old Salli. He hadn't seen Salli in two years, the same time he saw Jeff.

Wonder how Jeff reacted to the fact that Kevin called me—if Kevin told him. Shit, five hours and I'm back in that mire . . .

He closed his eyes and tried to resurrect that final meeting at National.

The sparsely furnished conference room had felt crowded that day, even though there were only five of them. The air was thick. Jeff was smoking a pungent President cigar even though he knew the smoke pissed Jerry off. Jerry remembered how he had sat quietly at the end of the table, listening to Kevin recount how he and Jeff had hiked twenty-two miles from the Big Kern Lake to the trailhead when the wrangler failed to show up with their horses.

"We left the lake at noon," said Kevin. "And we arrived at the trail head about nine. Damn good thing we had a flashlight or we'd still be out there."

"What happened to the wrangler?" said Johnson.

Jeff blew a perfect circle in Jerry's direction and grinned.

"He forgot the day he was supposed to pick us up," said Kevin, and laughed.

"Daniel Boone here shot a rattler on the trail," said Jeff. "Knocked his head off from twenty feet."

Kevin shuffled the papers on his desk. He held up a photo and passed it over to Johnson. "Here's the evidence."

Jerry had seen the photo of Kevin holding the dead rattler in one hand and his revolver in the other. Jerry wished he had been there to see the action, but work had kept him in L.A.

Kevin had started the meeting and invited Jerry to express his concerns over the fact that engineering on the Hughes and Boeing projects were overrunning their budgets. He'd barely spoken two sentences when Jeff swaggered in, already on the attack, saying, "If you don't have enough fucking good engineers to do the job, I'll hire some for you." Jerry had really tried to remain calm and explained that at least half of the overruns arose from freebees that Jeff had promised his buddies at Boeing. He was upset and had been loud, and Kevin had shouted at him. The cigar smoke and the tension were fusing into the same substance in his memory, weaving around the table, thickening.

"Stop yelling," said Kevin. "This is supposed to be a business meeting. And sit down. I've reviewed the memo, Jerry. You've got more detail, but it covers the same basic issues that were discussed two weeks ago. Why agonize over it. Jesus."

Jerry took a deep breath against the side of his fist, but the smoke made him dizzy. His notes and the points he needed to make swam a little. He said, "Each time I talk to Boeing, I find out some more things we have to do. The tasks keep expanding because Jeff negotiated such a nebulous contract."

Jeff pounded his fist on the table. “What the hell do you know about selling or negotiating? You couldn’t sell lemonade in the desert.”

Bill and Doug observed the altercation with the indifference of bored judges used to seeing lawyers insult each other. Only Kevin was upset. Logical, even-tempered Kevin. Jerry couldn’t recall exactly how the meeting ended. But the fact that Kevin would not support him was seared in his memory, and he left the meeting, knowing that he was going to leave National. He was going to do something else with his life as far away from his brothers as he could go.

*

“Breakfast, sir?”

Jerry felt a hand on his arm and awoke.

“Breakfast, sir?”

Jerry looked up at the smiling flight attendant and realized that he had dozed off.

“Yeah, yeah.” He sat up in his seat and lowered the tray table. He tried to recall what he had been dreaming about, but the aroma of ham and eggs diverted his attention. He attacked the mediocre airline food with more gusto than it deserved.

*

The Delta 737 touched down at 11:35 a.m. L.A. time. The cabin was up and pressing forward. Jerry closed *The Brothers Karamazov*. He’d stopped reading at the end of the closing argument of Ippolit Kirrillovitch, the prosecuting attorney. A phrase lingered—*They have their Hamlets, but we still have our Karamazovs*. Jerry stuffed the book into his briefcase and muttered to himself, “We certainly do!”

As he emerged from the plane, he noticed Kevin at the fringe of the gate crowd. The lingering phrase transposed itself into their old family custom, and Jerry yelled, “Ivan! Ivan! Over here.”

His brother had turned into a hulk, a flabby one. With slack jowls and red rimmed eyes, Kevin looked ten years older than forty-four. As he lumbered over to Jerry, he flashed a toothy smile. “Alyosha, it’s good to see you!” Jerry set down his carry-on bag and his briefcase and put his arms around his brother. When he stepped back, Kevin’s cheeks were wet.

“You came out on such short notice. You’re a prince, no, a king. Jerry, thanks, thanks.” He gripped Jerry’s right hand and continued to shake it.

Jerry took his other hand and grabbed Kevin’s elbow to stop the shaking and pulled his hand away. He looked around to see if anyone was watching. “Okay already, no big deal. You need me, so I’m here. Stop crying, Kevin. Things will work out. They always have.” Jerry dug around in his pocket, found a packet of tissues, and handed them over.

Kevin stood back from Jerry and looked him over slowly. “You look fantastic. What do you weigh now? One seventy-five?”

“Nope, one sixty-nine, same as when I ran track for Mira Costa High.”

“You work out?”

The attention was getting awkward. “Yeah, maybe four or five times a week. It depends.”

“Maybe you’ll inspire me, Jerry.” He addressed the floor in front of his feet. “I feel like shit and I know I look like shit. I spend all my time and effort working and worrying. Carolyn’s sick of me and I don’t blame her.” His voice started to crack. “It

seems as though things have been going downhill for the last three years. Christ, I'm glad you're here."

Jerry handed Kevin his carry-on bag. "Come on, big fellah, give me a hand. Let's go get something to eat and you can tell me the whole sordid story."

They drove south on Pacific Coast Highway through El Segundo, Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, and Redondo Beach. The sky was clear, the sun bright and the ocean glistening. Jerry devoured the scenery as each building and landscape stimulated recollections—the shop where he bought his first surfboard, the park where he played little league baseball, and the auditorium where he was awarded soccer trophies. He recalled the evening when his team was awarded a trophy for winning the thirteen to fourteen division championship and he came away carrying the MVP trophy for the championship game—a heavy, shiny armful that seemed to promise more of the same for the rest of his life. He and his brothers were damn lucky.

"How are Mom and Dad? I spoke with them a few days ago, and they sounded fine. They haven't been sucked into this mess, or have they?"

"They're okay. I've kept Dad informed. I mean, he and Mom are major creditors. He's having a little difficulty with his gall bladder, and he might have to have it removed. He tells me that it's a minor operation, and you don't need a gall bladder to survive. He's playing golf three days a week and shooting in the low eighties. Mom's doing her hospice thing. She's real active and I expect she'll be on the board next year."

"They have enough money?"

"Money's not a big deal. The combination of his Army and Lockheed pensions and Social Security are almost equal to what he was earning at Lockheed." He laughed. "And their expenses are zilch. Where do you want to eat?"

"Something light—pasta, soup, salad." He wasn't sure if Kevin was trying to change the subject. "How are Carolyn and the kids?"

He hesitated as if getting together the exact words he wanted. "Carolyn's fine. She's into country western music and line dancing. Keeps her busy. She's lost a lot of weight. She and Salli could pass for sisters. You'll be surprised. Mary's finishing her junior year. She's a good student. She thinks she wants to go to law school."

Okay, he thought, let him change it, then. "Have her call me and I'll give her some ideas on where to apply. What about John and Kevin, Jr.?"

"John's still struggling. He moved up to San Francisco. He's currently working at a bookstore and taking some courses at San Francisco State. We don't talk much."

Jerry noted disappointment.

"And Kevin, Jr.? Is he still seeing the same girl?"

Kevin perked up. "Yeah. They're starting to talk wedding bells. I think she'd be great for him. Provide some ballast. Help him to focus. He's so damn smart—but can't focus."

Kevin took a right turn off of Pacific Coast Highway and drove over to the Redondo Beach Pier. They parked the car and walked over to Beachbum Bob's Restaurant that was located on the water and had a 180-degree panoramic of the ocean. The waitress brought Kevin a beer and Jerry a Diet Coke. Jerry ordered angel hair pasta with sun-dried tomatoes and clams and a dinner salad. Kevin ordered a steak and French fries. During the next half-hour, Kevin told Jerry the recent history of National, its dealings with the bank, and yesterday's big meeting *cum* crucifixion by Sheila Crown. As

Kevin spoke, Jerry could not help but focus on the speed at which Kevin's fork shoveled the food from the plate into his mouth. He was eating to dull his pain, and ordered another beer to wash it down.

As he sawed into another bite of steak, he said, "Why do I feel embarrassed eating steak and potatoes in front of you? I shouldn't eat this crap, but I can't help myself. Who says that being depressed ruins your appetite? Do you have any vices, Jerry?"

"Sure."

"Name one."

"I love sex. If I didn't have to earn a living, I would devote my life to achieving the maximum number of orgasms with the maximum number of women."

"Sounds more like an addiction than a vice. It must take a lot of effort. It's all I can do to try keeping one woman satisfied, and I'm not doing very well. It must take a lot of your time."

"It takes all my time except when I'm playing investment banker and working out. I don't have time to play the piano anymore, and I only read one book a week. It's like having a second job."

"How many women are you seeing?"

"You mean how many women am I screwing?"

"Whatever."

"At any given time, it's in the range of three to five. That's my rule—not fewer than three and not more than five. Three girlfriends keep me from getting too serious with any one and five is the limit that I can handle logistically."

"What about AIDS?"

"I usually wear a condom, and I pray a lot. If I get it, I won't put on the Magic Johnson act. Those NBA guys piss me off. What hypocrites. They screw any woman that's breathing, and when they're diagnosed with HIV, they appear on television, holding their wife's hand and imply that they got it from a toilet seat." He pulled his napkin off of his lap and threw it on the table. It fell on the floor. "I'll go quietly. What do the criminals say? If you can't do the time, then don't do the crime."

Kevin leaned down to retrieve Jerry's napkin and put it on the table. "I worry about you, Jerry. Don't you want to settle down, have kids, play daddy?"

"Maybe, when my testosterone level drops. Anyway, I didn't come three thousand miles to talk about me. Does old Dimitri Fyodorovich know I'm here?"

"I called him this morning."

"What did he say?"

"You know Jeff. It's not what he says, but what he doesn't. He was noncommittal. We're going to have a meeting at my house after dinner tonight. Richard Krimble, our attorney, is going to join us." He reached over and patted Jerry's hand, smiling broadly. "Incidentally, Helen's going to be there."

"Helen?"

"Salli's kid sister. She was living in Paris. Came back to the U.S. after her divorce. She's working in L.A. trying to get her new life started."

"I can't remember the last time I saw her. Maybe Jeff and Salli's wedding." He tried to recall what she had looked like. He shook his head. "I don't remember her. What does she do?"

“She’s in the art business—galleries, you know. She’s an absolute knockout, a ten-plus.

Jerry laughed. “You’re kidding—or are you? You don’t have to sell me, Kevin. I’m in L.A. already.”

“I’ll put ten bucks on your seeing her as a ten-plus.”

“You’re on, Kevin, but I need to warn you that I’m very particular.”

Kevin glanced over the check, pulled some bills from his wallet, and left them on the table. They walked outside.

“How are you feeling?” said Kevin. “You look beat.”

“I am. I was up into the wee hours getting stuff organized for my staff. I could use a shower and some sleep.”

“Then let’s go! We’ll visit a few minutes with Carolyn, and then you’re on your own until dinner.” He slapped Jerry on the back and led him out into the perfect California day.

*

Kevin’s house was the same one he’d been living in fifteen years ago when Jeff and Salli got married, but the landscaping was new. Sharp yucca leaves and acacia saplings glowed orange in the evening light, set amid generous heaps of mulch. The grass glittered with a recent rain from the irrigation system. Jerry climbed the few front steps, hands empty except for the rental car keys, thinking how grateful he was for his efficient little apartment.

The front door made a solid click and whooshed open. Jeff was wearing chinos and a collared cotton shirt, looking ready to step onto the first hole at Pebble Beach.

“Jerry, you little fucker, how ya doing?” He came toward him with outstretched arms, embraced Jerry in a bear hug, and kissed him smack on the lips. “Damn, it’s good to see you! What’s it been, at least three years? You look terrific! Still working out?”

Tears welled up in Jerry’s eyes. He was incredulous that he still felt so much emotion for his brother. Into his mind flashed the old memory of Jeff flattening him when they met at Jeff’s return-from-Vietnam party. Jeff had called him a traitor. It was a long time ago, but his brother’s fist still lingered at the front of his memory’s filing cabinet. And here he was, choking up, letting himself be led toward the foyer.

“It’s good to see you too, Jeff.” He squinted. Jeff’s head eclipsed the reddish setting sunlight that streamed through the window over the front door, creating a halo effect.

“Hit me in the stomach,” Jeff boasted. “Just hit me. I’m still a rock. Work out six days a week for an hour and a half a day—mostly on the gut. Come on, hit.”

Jerry was embarrassed. His brother was as coarse and physical as ever. “Christ, Jeff!”

A woman said, “Jeff, why don’t you take your shirt off and let Jerry feel the ripples on your stomach. Or better, strip down to your briefs and share your body with everyone.”

She was wearing a beige fitted St. John dress that must have cost \$1,500 and a small diamond heart that lay at the base of her throat. Her gleaming white smile lit up her face.

“Salli, how are you?” Jerry rushed over to Jeff’s wife and hugged her, grateful for the reprieve.

“It’s been quite some time, Jerry. My father tells me about the great things you’re doing, but we never see or hear from you. We miss you.” She held onto his hand and looked directly into his eyes.

In the time since he had last seen Salli, she had become even more beautiful than he had remembered. She was at least ten pounds lighter and all muscle.

“You’re as smashing as ever.”

“Good genes and a very expensive personal trainer. But I’m being impolite. You remember my sister Helen, don’t you?”

Jerry was conscious of the fact that many of the people in the room were watching him, so he tried not to show the surprise that he experienced when Helen entered the foyer from the kitchen. Kevin had not overstated his case. She was a knockout, a definite ten. He started to extend his hand to her, but she brushed it away and hugged him, placing a discreet kiss on his cheek.

“No need to be formal, Jerry. We’re all family.”

“You’ve grown up since the wedding,” said Jerry, hoping he appeared nonchalant. His whole family was there, but Helen was leaning in, speaking in a voice that was almost too soft for the room.

“That was two husbands and fifteen years ago, to be precise. Wall Street seems to agree with you. Jeff tells me you are quite the mover and shaker. Making lots of money?”

“Depends on what you mean by lots. I make more than I spend.”

“That makes you a very unique member of this family. Sure you’re not adopted? We can talk later—I must say hello to Carolyn and see if I can help. So good to see you again, Jerry.” She floated off, flashing the famous pure white smile that was the trademark of Mrs. Knudsen’s daughters. The feel of her hand on his arm lingered where she had squeezed it in parting.

The repartee had occurred at stock-ticker speed. Kevin came up to him holding a drink, wearing a loose fitting, garish blue and white Hawaiian shirt that was inappropriate for the host of even a casual dinner party. His face was red and blotchy.

“Try this. It should calm you down.” Kevin handed him a large glass. “Well, admit it. I didn’t oversell her, did I?”

Jerry took a large gulp, handed the drink back to Kevin, took out his wallet, and found a ten-dollar bill and handed it to Kevin. He nodded assent and watched Helen disappear into the kitchen.

Kevin introduced him to Richard Krimble, an Ichabod Crane of a man, and wandered off to pass out more drinks. Richard briefed Jerry on the status of discussions with the bank. He was concise, somewhat dry, and gave a clean summary of the situation. Jerry made a mental note to ask Birney to find out what he could about Richard’s background and reputation. Mrs. Bascomb, who wanted to make sure that Jerry had everything he needed, interrupted them. Jerry assured his mother that he was fine and smiled—the youngest child syndrome. No matter how old you are she makes sure your nose is wiped and your fly is up.

Carolyn announced that dinner was ready. Kevin’s description of Carolyn’s metamorphosis from *hausfrau* to babe, was, once again, not overstated. She was a different woman from the one Jerry had seen years ago, and even though she was old enough to be in menopause, she could turn heads. She and Kevin led everyone into the brilliantly lit, formal dining room. Silver serving pieces and Waterford crystal reflected

the light from the overhead chandelier and the twenty or so candles around the room. Fresh flowers, mostly irises and tulips, were arranged into elaborate centerpieces. Carolyn was the same in this one respect. She had always been elegant, even in the early days when the budget was tight.

Kevin and Carolyn sat at the ends. Jerry was seated between Helen and his mother and opposite Salli, who was seated next to Jeff. Kevin stood, struck his wineglass several times with the salad fork, and asked for order.

“I want to propose a toast—while I’m still capable. The advantage of entertaining at home is that you don’t have to worry about driving.” Kevin shifted his weight a little to avoid staggering. “To Jerry. I certainly never expected that when my little brother left National many years ago, thoroughly pissed at Jeff and me, that he’d go off and become a hero on Wall Street. Welcome back, little brother. We’re grateful for your help.”

Jeff rose and lifted his glass. “I second the toast. Here’s to the return of the not-so-prodigal son.”

There were a number of “here-heres” and “to Jerrys.” During dinner he attempted to allocate his conversation and attention equally among his mother, Helen, Salli, and Jeff. However, he was drawn more and more into conversation with Helen; as if planned, his mother all but ignored him during the meal, choosing instead to hear all about Mrs. Krimble’s recent tour of the Greek Islands, and Salli turned her attention to Carolyn. Jeff was dissecting his Saturday golf game for Richard and his father. The joviality of the evening, plus three glasses of wine and the absence of other distractions at the table, conspired to focus Jerry’s attention on Helen. During the two hours of dinner, Jerry learned about the last several years of her life and her analysis as to why her two marriages failed. He could not take his eyes off her; his concentration was often so intense that he frequently missed a sentence or two. He noticed on two occasions that his father appeared to be staring at Helen. When their eyes locked, Sid just smiled and turned his attention back to Richard and Jeff.

Finally the wine, jet lag, and din caused him to feel slightly nauseated. He excused himself and navigated to the main bathroom to douse his head with cold water. Shortly after he returned to the table, Kevin announced that the men would be meeting in the den to discuss business.

“I really enjoyed talking with you and learning about your adventures in France,” said Jerry as he pushed back his chair and stood.

A blush highlighted Helen’s cheekbones. “I’m afraid I dominated the conversation.” She made no movement to leave the table, but turned and looked up at him. Her gaze flicked to his crotch, then back at his face. “You’re such a good listener. I hope I didn’t bore you.”

“Uh, not at all,” he stammered. He sat back down in the chair. “You’ve led a very interesting life, but I want a turn. How about we have dinner tomorrow night and I’ll tell you my story—which in comparison is dull and pedestrian.”

“I’d love to, but I’m booked this rest of the week. What about next week?”

“I’m planning on returning to New York by the weekend.”

Helen hesitated. “I’ll see if I can free up my schedule for tomorrow. Call me before noon.” She took out a card from her purse and handed it to him. He felt a hand on his back; behind his chair towered a ruddy-faced Kevin.

“Come on, Jerry, time to work.”

Jerry turned to Helen and grabbed her hand. "I'm looking forward to our dinner." She covered his hand with her left hand and squeezed it. "So am I."

Kevin's den was designed to create an old money club ambience like the ones in New York where the bankers and traders gathered at noon to lie to each other. The room was about sixteen by twenty and had ten-foot ceilings. One long side consisted of floor-to-ceiling bookcases. The other three walls were lined with dark paneling. Oil paintings, primarily landscapes and hunting scenes, broke up the paneling. The rug was the one Kevin and Carolyn purchased during a trip to Turkey. The furniture, several green and burgundy wing chairs and a large three-person burgundy sofa, were organized around a large circular glass coffee table. It was a man's space, but Jerry was pretty sure Carolyn decorated it.

Richard situated himself in one of the wing chairs. Jeff and Jerry took the other ones and Kevin and their father shared the sofa. Although Sid Bascomb was much shorter than Kevin, he had a bulldog build that he moved around with a general's swagger. He had a full head of white wavy hair. His face was more suntanned than Jerry had ever seen it—reflecting the many hours of his retirement that he invested in golf, hunting, and fishing.

"I've had a number of conversations with Bill Bromfield since our meeting on Wednesday," said Richard. "Bill is trying to be helpful, but the bank is taking a very hard position. We have very few options. What I want to do this evening is to set out the bank's current position and where I think our wiggle room is. I want you to realize," he said, looking first at Kevin and then at Jeff. "I am not optimistic that we will be able to materially affect the bank's position."

Sid interrupted. "How serious do you think they are about the criminal issues, Richard?"

"They are not talking at this time. They know that the threat of a criminal referral to the FBI for the violation of banking regulations is guaranteed to get our attention, but they are not about to put themselves into a situation where we can yell 'extortion.' They've hired a criminal attorney to advise them whether they are obligated to report this matter to the regulators and if, by failing to report it, they will be violating the law. If they are advised that a report to the regulators is mandatory, they will do so, independent of any other considerations."

"So they're not holding out the notification to the regulators as a deal point?" asked Jeff.

"No," said Richard. "They can't do that. What they are saying is if they don't have to report it to the regulators, they may choose not to do so."

Kevin put his hand on his father's shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Dad—they don't want our hides. just the money."

"Jeez, I hope you're right." Sid did not appear reassured. "What's your take on this, Richard? I mean your opinion beyond the usual lawyer bullshit. I need to know."

Richard nodded. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes for a minute. If it had been any of Jerry's New York banker friends, he'd think the gesture was affected. But Richard just opened his eyes when he was done thinking and said to Jerry's father, "No bullshit. Kevin and Jeff have every reason to be concerned. Having said that, there really is nothing any of us can do at this time to affect the outcome, other than to press on and attempt to work things out with the bank."

The room was silent for a minute, and Jeff spoke up. "Okay, Richard, so what's the deal, really?" He looked relaxed and immersed in the process of cleaning and paring his nails. "What's it going to take to get the bank out of our hair?"

Richard looked around the room, making sure that he was making eye contact with everybody. "Jeff, this is 'not a get the bank out of our hair' problem. This is an extremely serious matter and it's very important that everyone understands our situation. The bank is apoplectic, and they have every reason to be. The company has lost about one million dollars during the last six months, its liquidity ratios have deteriorated by 35 percent, the bank's collateral is underwater, the company owes its customers almost a thousand units, and the bank has lost confidence in the management skills of you and Kevin." He paused again. "And, what makes both of our situations untenable is that the bank has a concern that Kevin and Jeff may have known about or even condoned Potter and Johnson's actions."

Jerry sat upright in his chair. He hadn't expected this. He looked over to Kevin who just shook his head.

"That's a bunch of garbage and they know it," said Jeff, voice rising.

Richard ignored the outburst. "The bank is fully prepared to foreclose and liquidate the company's assets to satisfy their debt. It is currently owed about thirteen million; but even if they liquidate and sue Kevin and Jeff, both of whom guaranteed the loan, they will still have a shortfall of a least six million." He paused. "Any questions?" There was none. "So let me outline the bank's position. First, the bank wants all of the funds collected on the converted units that were financed to be paid to the bank."

"That will really screw up our cash flow," said Kevin. His face was less ruddy.

"Second, the bank wants Kevin and Jeff to pledge all their personal assets that are not already being used as collateral, specifically Kevin's residence, Jeff's residence, and the Lake Arrowhead cabin. The bank is willing to give Kevin and Jeff six months to either find another lender or sell the company. They are willing to extend on three month increments, provided the company is making progress."

"What do they mean by progress?" said Kevin. He closed his eyes. The last of the color had left his face.

"If they feel that the management is doing everything in their power to take them out or sell the company, and the value of their collateral is not deteriorating."

"Their call exclusively?" asked Jerry.

Richard nodded. "That's the way it works." Richard looked down at the pad on his lap. He flipped through a few pages and said, "In addition, Kevin and Jeff would have to give up operating control to a professional turnaround or workout manager who is acceptable to the bank. The turnaround manager would have all the authority of a CEO with full powers to manage the day-to-day operations of the company. He would not have the authority to enter into any financing agreements or sell the company; that authority remains with the board. The bank provided me with five names. I'm familiar with two of the guys on the list, and I'm checking with some bankruptcy attorneys who I know to get information about the other three. The bank wants Jeff and Kevin to start the interviewing process immediately."

"Would they consider people who are not on their list?" asked Kevin.

"Sure, if the bank interviews them and they're acceptable. This guy is going to work for National and be paid by National and theoretically be National's advocate. But,

the reality is that his ultimate loyalty will be to the bank because that's where he will get his next assignment.”

Jeff abruptly got out of his chair and walked behind it and leaned over the back. “Well what the fuck are Kevin and I supposed to do while this guru takes over the company?” He dug his fingers into the leather.

“I asked the same question,” answered Richard. “And Sheila's answer was to quote Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind*. She said to resolve that with the workout manager.”

He squeezed harder. “That cunt!”

Sid jabbed his finger at the chair. “Jeff, shut up and sit down. That kind of an attitude is not going to help get us out of this mess.”

Jeff returned to his seat, dug out his nail clippers from his pants pocket, and resumed paring his nails.

“Let's go on,” said Kevin.

“The rest of the deal is pretty vanilla.” He paused and looked over his notes. “Oh, I almost forgot. They handed me this list of reports that they want us to submit periodically. There are a bunch of them. Some are due weekly, some monthly, and some quarterly. Failure to submit a report on time will place the loan in default. You'll have to add some muscle to the accounting department to be able to produce those reports. And of course, you'll have to find a new CFO to replace Johnson.”

As Richard completed his recitation of the bank's offer, a thick silence settled in the room. Kevin slouched down in the sofa. Sid's face was teary, and he looked as though he had aged during the meeting. He wiped his eyes, folded the tissue hard several times, and put it into his pocket. Jeff was back to his fingernails.

Jerry tented his fingertips on the bridge of his nose. Although he had talked to Kevin and to his partner Birney about the difficulty National was in, this was the first time the enormity of National's problem registered.

“Richard,” he said. “How do you see our options for responding to the bank's offer?”

“I don't want to be flippant, but the answer is slim to none. We could refuse the offer and file a Chapter 11 petition in the bankruptcy court, but it wouldn't help.”

“Why not?”

“Two reasons. One, the bank will be in the next day with a motion to appoint a Chapter 11 trustee, which will contain affidavits that lay out the whole sordid story of the Potter-Johnson scam. It's likely that the bank would win in court, a trustee would be appointed, and Jeff and Kevin would be out anyway. And the second reason is that all of National's customers will immediately become aware of the scam and the company's reputation will be permanently damaged.”

“Any others?” asked Jerry.

“If we had a buyer or investor standing in the wings with substantial resources, and you could work out a satisfactory deal in the short term, we could probably persuade the bank to sit still until the investor did his due diligence.”

“You're talking about a white knight,” said Jerry.

“Right.”

“Any ideas?” he said, looking over to Jeff and Kevin.

“Nothing comes to mind,” said Jeff. Kevin merely shook his head.

Silence.

After several minutes, Jerry had worked through the situation again in his head. “It’s obvious that accepting the bank’s offer is the only viable alternative. So let’s stop pissing and moaning about it and deal with it. Richard, what parts of the bank’s offer are negotiable that could help us? Would they give us more time?”

“I don’t think so, not initially. They want to keep the pressure on us.”

“What about keeping the residences out of the collateral?”

“No way,” said Richard. “That is a deal point.”

“The workout manager?” asked Jerry.

“I guarantee you, that one is a deal point.”

Kevin abruptly sat up straight and set his glass of burgundy down on the coffee table with a loud clink. “I have an idea,” he announced. “What if we propose Jerry as the workout manager? That would at least ensure that we had some influence over the management of the company.”

“You’re kidding,” said Jerry. Or too drunk to think clearly, he thought.

“I’m damn serious,” said Kevin.

Jerry glanced over to Jeff. The expression on his face was unchanged, and he had begun to file his nails.

“What do you think?” Kevin asked Richard.

“It would be a tough sell, assuming Jerry would take the job. He’s not a turnaround manager, and as your brother, he’s hardly independent. It would take a lot of convincing.”

“Right,” said Jerry. “I don’t want the job. I’ve got a job in New York. I’ve got responsibilities, commitments. I simply can’t put my life on hold to . . .”

“Just hold on a minute,” said Sid. “You stop whining, and, Kevin, give me the rationale behind your suggestion. Why would Jerry’s involvement as CEO be so important?”

“Look, Dad,” said Kevin. “We don’t know shit about any of these workout artists. I’ve heard lots of stories. I’m sure some of them are good, but the majority have egos the size of—well, the size of the Eiffel tower and the management style of Attila the Hun. We’ve got problems up the ass and the very last thing we need is some jerk who doesn’t know shit about the industry, the company, and the people, taking over and fucking things up worse than they are. We’ll lose key people; the engineers will get spooked. Trust me, Dad, it will be a disaster.”

Sid folded his hands and leaned over the coffee table. “How do you feel about it, Jeff?”

“I would say Amen. Kevin’s perceptions are right on. The workout guy could be a Dr. Jekyll, but it’s more likely that we’ll get Mr. Hyde because, you know, I mean, there are a higher percentage of Hydes in the workout business. Jerry is a known quantity. With him on board, at least things won’t get any worse and with some luck they could improve.”

Jerry’s head was getting light, and not from the wine at dinner. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Jeff, but I really, really, don’t want the job and moreover . . .”

“You just stop right there,” said Sid. “I hoped that I wouldn’t have to be this blunt, but I’ve got a dog in this fight, too—in the form of a \$750,000 subordinated note. Kevin’s got \$500,000 in the deal. Salli’s got \$1.25 mil in the deal. Kevin and Jeff have

their life in the deal. If National blows up, your mother and I go with it.” He rose from the chair, straightened to his full height, pushed out his chest, and walked over to Jerry. He stood in front of him, hesitating as if deciding what to do next. Then he pointed his finger. “You’re making the big bucks now. And why? Due in large part to the money we gave you to go through Harvard. What was it, \$75,000?” His voice was deep and gravelly, the way it got when he wanted to boss people around. It was the voice that used to grind down Jerry and his brothers. “Your mother and I never hesitated. You asked and we gave. Well, I’m calling in my marker, Jerry. Nobody freeloads. Not in my brigade, not in my business, and sure as hell not in my family. We are in trouble. If you have to put your life on hold for one year to help us out of this mess, so be it.”

He turned and went back to his seat. His hand was shaking.

Jerry didn’t move, and was suddenly damp and hot. His father had not attacked him with such vehemence since he was a child, and his face was burning. This was the Fydodor Pavlovich Karamazov he had loathed growing up. The humiliation felt like steel bands constricting his chest and his throat. His father was under a lot of pressure, okay. He was the escape valve, okay. He sat in silence, knowing that all eyes were on him. Finally, he found something to say.

“How do you really feel about this, Jeff? We’ve never been able to work together without a lot of Sturm and Drang, have we?”

“No,” replied Jeff. He returned his nail clipper to his pants pocket. “But we don’t have any alternative. If you choose to take on the job, and the bank approves, I’ll work with you. You can count on me not to make your life difficult.”

Jerry went back to his silence. He wanted to stand up and scream that he didn’t create this problem, and he resented being drafted to solve it, but he was stuck. He slowly pushed himself out of the chair.

“I’m beat,” he said. “Let me sleep on it. We’ll talk in the morning.”

He really was beat, and drained. He had tried to organize his thoughts during the meeting, as the momentum of the discussion was moving in a direction he did not anticipate and did not want. But he could not stop the train. His father’s attack had shut down his brain and rerouted him straight back to age ten. As he emerged from the room, he noted that the women’s conversation stopped and they turned toward the emptying den. He averted his eyes. He did not want to talk. He put a smile on his face and told himself that he needed to be polite and cordial, just for a minute or two. He went over to his mother and kissed her goodnight, and said his perfunctory goodnights to Salli, Carolyn, Helen, and Mrs. Krimble. He made it up the stairs to the guestroom, where he planned to explore every possible avenue to pull himself away from this tar baby of a problem without becoming a pariah to his entire family. As he opened the door to his room, he could not help but acknowledge the fact that he was trapped.

