

THE
STINKING
RICH
VIRUS

A FINANCIAL FABLE



ALAN ROBBINS

Also by Alan Robbins

Sci-Fi Mysteries

Following the Trail of Blood
Stories at the Edge of Time
A Small Box of Chaos
An Interlude in Dreamland

Interactive Mysteries

The Secret Of The Gold Jaguar
On The Trail Of Blood
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The moon belongs to everyone,
The best things in life are free.

The stars belong to everyone,
They gleam there for you and me.

The flowers in spring, the robins that sing,
The moonbeams that shine, they're yours, they're mine.

And love can come to everyone,
The best things in life are free.

Henderson and Brown

PROLOGUE

“First off, it’s Jacq not Jacqueline.”

“Fine,” said the fat man, eyebrows low.

“Second, I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Okay then,” he said, eyebrows curving up.

All that meat made the fat man’s face seem impassive but the brows always gave away his inner feelings, at that point some mix of amusement and distrust. He was setting up a laptop on the only table in the bare room and facing it towards Jacq Horner who was sitting on the only chair.

“You were saying?” the fat man said, testing the sound.

“I didn’t care about the money,” she said flatly.

“Damn lot of money to not care about,” he said, checking his own image on the screen to make sure the camera was working.

“I was so damn sick and tired,” she added, “that I just didn’t care.”

“Of what exactly?”

“Of being sick and tired.”

“Well you sure changed that,” the fat man said, eyebrows bouncing gaily. “Do you know how many people commit murder every year?”

“No idea, Sarge,” she said.

“Me either. But it’s a lot of damn people.”

“I didn’t kill him,” she protested. “I keep trying to tell you all that. I didn’t kill anyone.”

The brows bounced bullshit like semaphore but it was the same look she had seen on plenty of faces in the last few days. Disbelief with a touch of pity because what she was saying was so clearly a lie.

“So where is he if you didn’t kill him?” the fat man asked, looming over her.

“If I knew where he was,” she said, “I wouldn’t be here talking to you. Why would I kill him anyway? It makes no sense.”

“For the money, like you said.”

“But I already had the money,” she insisted.

Stepping back for a wider view, the fat man studied the features of the woman sitting across from him. She was a great-looking gal, he thought, trim and handsome with dark hair and deep blue eyes. Not soft and blonde like all the Ukrainian shampoo models but with a kind of firm, solid beauty. Dolled up and on the town, maybe even stunning in a boyish kind of way.

But he knew from long experience that the beauties were the worst liars. Years

in the confession biz taught him that. People had the faces they had to have in order to live with themselves, not the ones they deserved for who they really were.

For her part, Jacq submitted to this scrutiny for a few moments, then moved back into her own shadow. The fat man seemed to be measuring her moral fiber by the dollar and it made her feel cheap.

“How much money was it?” he asked.

He knew the answer but wanted to hear it from her because it was so incongruous compared to the dank room they were sitting in.

“Doesn’t matter,” she sighed. “It couldn’t buy the one thing I really needed.”

“Which was?”

“Imagination.”

The fat man smiled. He liked that; it was quotable. Maybe this case was not going to be so bad after all, he thought. A notorious murder by a smart, sassy, attractive perp involving more money than anyone could imagine. Crime of the millennium indeed. Much better than your average swindle gone sour, his usual beat.

“I’m sure you did okay,” the fat man said.

“It wasn’t enough, Sarge, it never is.”

“A real Cinderella story.”

“Cinderella was a sap. Always hated her. Why didn’t she just up and leave... start a catering business with Little Red Riding Hood or something?”

“Are you ready?” he asked.

She was.

More than anything, she wanted to get the whole thing off her chest. Not the grand confession they were waiting for but her own story to set the record straight. Tell the tale, prove her innocence. She always wanted to be a writer anyway and now she had the chance to tell a real whopper. And in any case, she was a prisoner there in that room, all dim and dingy, and she knew that they would never let her go until she spilled the beans.

“Then begin at the beginning,” the fat man suggested. “How did it all start?”

Jacq Horner took a deep breath and began to tell the story of the virus and the plan and the money and the murder. Everything she could recall. Hoping that, by the end, it would be clear – to her at least – if it had been worth the fuss.

CHAPTER ONE: POCKET CHANGE

It was the cleanest murder in history. Neat as a pin, no violence at all. Not a drip nor drop of blood. The killer never got up from his chair, never laid a hand on the victim, never even raised his blood pressure above 160. No mess, no fuss, no muss. Impeccable.

And quiet as hell.

No bang or scream or thump. No sound at all. Anyone overhearing the crime in progress may have detected a slight squoosh as the murderer tapped the icon on the screen. But probably not. It was Sunday afternoon and a dog barking at no one in particular drowned out even that.

Yet the havoc was real enough. It was murder through and through, as furious and final as the ones on the cop shows. Or the ones in real life even. And when it was done, in a few nanosecs, the victim was just as stone cold dead as any other dead man who ever lived.

It was beautiful in the way that Euclidean geometry or a Bach cantata is...or the complexity patterns that emerge from a few lines of computer code. And the best part of all was that there would be no witness for the simple reason that there was nothing to see. Not a thing to notice, no evidence of any kind. All traces had been destroyed, utterly and absolutely, as part of the murder itself. No clues.

Oh yes, and one more thing.

There was no body either.

Doctor Goodpasture – not his real name – looking like one of those tubby nerds who win science fairs, giggled at the neatness of it all, in the way that cloud computing is neat.

No corpus, no delicti. Nothing to rot, no biotracers to trace, not even a thermal ghost. All that remained of the victim was a teensy dataset buried in the oceanic depths of the web, no more. You could swim right into it and not detect it. The victim was gone – poof! – just like that. Vanished without a trace.

It was almost too perfect to believe.

Goodpasture got up from his chair and looked at his hands. Musical hands, he thought, like a conductor. And he waved them in the air as a kind of grand gesture to himself. Those hands just murdered someone soon to be wanted by the police, a loner who would be missed by no one, and who even wanted desperately to die. And all this without the slightest possibility of ever getting caught. He suddenly felt a rush of adrenaline better than the one you got from a pill or winning a game of

8schess because it was genuine and difficult and real. Orchestral in its complexity.

And smart.

So smart.

Focusing on the music playing in the background, he began to dance a little. Not gracefully, of course – he was a geek after all – but forcefully. There was nothing to stop him now. The years of preparation had paid off and he did not feel the slightest tinge of regret. After all, the murder was only the first step in a master plan and the easiest part in some ways. The rest of it – creating a new websona, finding some dupe to test the system, and then of course taking over the world – was a bit trickier. But all in due time, he told himself. There was a moment now to bask in his own evil glory. He began to rock back and forth, swing his ponytail, shuffle his feet, and snap his fingers to the beat as the music slid into his spinning cortex.



Gil Westin, looking yummy with cocoa eyes, mocha skin, and La Rocca suit, looked out of place on Canal Street, bustling with vendors and vendees. He had been at court downtown listening to closing arguments on a corruption trial and was on his way to take the subway back to his apartment.

On the corner of Canal and West Broadway, a crowd caught his attention and he knew instinctively that a monte scam was in play. Even in New York, city of a million hustles and pitches, a cardboard box, three playing cards, and a man with a mouth could still attract a crowd.

Westin nudged his way through to find the familiar players...the mechanic, the shills, the mark. Was there anyone left in the city who still thought monte was legit? Of course not. But New York was the land of tourists and immigrants, all hoping to make it here, to win something in the Great American Lifestyle Bazaar. A car, a career, twenty bucks...it didn't matter. Something, anything.

Lucror ergo sum...I win therefore I am, he thought.

College had not been wasted on Westin.

The mechanic was going at full tilt, juggling the three cards and rapping about how easy it was to find the red lady and double your money. He was a skinny guy with graceful moves and a voice as smooth as chrome. The marks were a middle-aged couple standing right in front of him, wearing hick like a fashion statement... the man in a yellow shirt and plaid pants and the last barbershop haircut since Ohio and his wife with square walking shoes and a coat three inches too long for the season. They both had that open, trusting look that crooks spotted three blocks away. Too bad, Westin thought. They were targets and did not even know it. They would get taken and go home thinking that New York was a bad place, full of thieves. That was true, of course, but it did not mean that you had to pay for it.

The mechanic was racetalking his way to the finish line, flipping the cards, and

looking around furtively. He seemed to be getting nervous, which was an act meant to heighten the tension. There was no need for him to watch his back, the two sliders working for him did that. If they spotted a cop they would balk and the dealer would just walk away from the kit.

Westin knew all this because it was his beat. He was a reporter for *NewYawk-Tawk* and knew the city from the ground up. His series on street scams in the Big Apple had been a big hit.

The mechanic stopped and looked up and around like a gopher. That was a trick meant to imply that you had to make the money now or never. It worked, of course. Yellow shirt already had his wallet in his hand. A woman with a baby had just won a lot of money and she was holding the bills in front of her and gushing about her luck. Another bystander, an older respectable fellow, was congratulating her and explaining how he could not bet because he was on a pension but wished that he could. Yellow shirt was hesitating and the mom and the retiree urged him on.

The reason, as Westin knew, was that the older man and the woman with the baby and a young kid who had just lost twenty bucks and was about to win it back, were all stalls who worked for the dealer. They were playing the standard roles of a small time loser, a big time winner, a chatter, all tugging at the mark's emotions. Duly tugged, the tourist put a hundred bucks on the table and Westin cried inside. He could try to stop him but why bother? The man was born to lose, if not today then tomorrow. If not at monte then during a card swap or the tired old Good Samaritan scam.

There were plenty of holes to fall into if you walked with your eyes closed.

In a moment, the dealer made his switch, tossing the top card down first. No one saw it and if anyone did, the table would get knocked over. Even if the mark somehow managed to win, he would be talked into trying again and then lose more. And if, by some fluke, he managed to get away, he would find later that his pocket had been picked on the bus and the money he had just won, and everything else, was gone.

All the shills leaned in to cover the last move and Westin missed the squeeze. All he could do was watch the couple turn and leave, pained looks on their faces. Westin felt sorry for them but it was a distant feeling, detached. He had seen it so many times before.

Still, it was amazing.

They could plan a colony on the moon, discover a thousand new planets in the Oort Cloud, perfect artificial retinas, and scramble genes to come up with a chicken you could milk, and still people fell for the monte swindle. Sucker born every nano. Fraud was still king even in the city of liquid dreams. It had all the elements of a great tragic-comedy...greed, pride, weakness, hope, despair.

Opera in a three-card shuffle.

Westin loved that.



I should start with my name...Jacq Horner. Go ahead and make the jokes, I've heard them all. Stick in your thumb, pull out a plum. You would think my own mother might have guessed the trouble it would cause me. But then, she called me Jacqueline. Thinking of Kennedy she said and not some dumb nursery rhyme.

But this story is not about me, which is good because to tell you the truth, I'm not very interesting. In fact, my bio could be sold as a sleep patch. Year after year, it's been the same old same old. Job, apartment, same old me. Lucky for you, this story is about the greatest scam in history. The biggest robbery ever pulled off.

And also that whole murder thing.

But I'll tell you right now that despite what the webzines and blogs are saying, I didn't mastermind it. The Virjos did. All I did was lend them my life...or lack of it. I was just the one who put the dupe in the duplicity.

In fact it was the utter normality of my life that led them to pick me in the first place. I was ordinary, a familiar nobody, who would never be noticed. A blank slate, so to speak, with the smallest websona you can imagine. My entire identity file – all purchases, assets, media blips, public records, everything that mattered about an individual in the 21st century – could fit on the head of a digital pin. In other words...it was easy to wipe out and even easier to revirus.

Oh yes...the virus.

We'll get to all that.

The whole thing started right after New Year's Eve, which I celebrated by breaking up with my boyfriend Mel, no Prince Charming he. No big deal. In fact, I was starting to see that his brown hair was mousey rather than moussed, his dark eyes distant not exotic, his neck clammy not manly. Like everybody in America, I was looking for something more and Mel was less. I needed an upgrade.

So instead of whining, I watched an episode of Drop Dead Rich. Ausable Peach was fabbing around the fab Riviera with the likes of Britney Spears and Quince Verdoux and the rest of the rich and famous living their fab lives. In the illusion of the tube I was actually there touring one of those houses on an island somewhere in the something sea. Hot tubs set into pools overlooking bigger pools, stables of gleaming cars, chandeliers like supernovas. And women tan as Merovia sandals lounging in sunlit alcoves sipping Ponce de Leons from Tinalio goblets.

The show was the biggest hit in the country; you could pretend you were someone and then go online and buy a few things the someones had. The show answered the prayer on everyone's lips: Oh Lord if thou canst hear me, grant me an enviable lifestyle. When the auction started, I tried to get my fab up but only felt fed up.

I know it sounds like heresy but rather than admiring all that I was growing to resent it. All those super-rich, super-young, super-everything people with their gleamy smiles and ocean villas, lapidary lives and pristine egos. Pretending to be in hotsy-totsyland hobnobbing with the win-crowd, all I could think about was stran-

gulation. Theirs, not mine. Who were these people to have it all anyway? How did they get to the top of the heap? What made Iolanda better than me, besides the fact that she was perfectly beautiful and rich?

I was starting to realize that shows like that only existed to make the rest of us buy with envy. It was some kind of scheme to keep the country moving. Yearning was the national obsession; purchasing was the new religion. And shopping had become a Holy Grail and Pledge of Allegiance all wrapped up in one. The higher your Consumer Index Rating – the more crap you bought - the more alive you were supposed to feel, the more American. They had rehab for people who weren't spending enough.

Life was simple now...it was all about the thump.



Goodpasture waited for the energy surge to pass.

It was a small surge, less than 50 angstroms on the scope, barely enough to poke a pixel. But worth thinking about simply because everything worth thinking about was worth it. And this was. Every peak and every valley and blip. Everything, that is, that put you in mind of the great chain of cyberbeing. Every byte out of the cosmic apple. Because it was all part of the God in the molecule, the Gaia consciousness, overmind, the butterfly in Tokyo whose wing beat on Tuesday causes a tornado in Toledo months later. All connected, all stewing together in the same Buddhabase, the cosmic soup-de-doo of all there is and ever was. Time blasting off in infinite directions at once from the Prime Pinpoint and carrying us with it willynilly, all the way to our final merging with the psychic sea.

Shit! he thought. This is really good regenated grass!

They were stirring some kind of limbic stimulator into the marijuana or something that blew your head the fuck off. But softly like silent fireworks.

Nice!

He took the red bandana off his head and undid the ponytail. He ran his fingers through his hair once, trying to steady his brain. He had not showered in two days and felt it, but there was no time for hygiene. There was still too much to do. Too many details left. And the slightest slip-up could crash the whole shebang.

The room he was in was a high-tech dungeon, harshly lit by bare bulbs. There was a cot near the wall, a knapsack stuffed with clothes, a tiny refrigerator with no handle, and an old MP3 player on the floor. In the middle of the room were a bunch of tables holding six Diamondchip Murawa mainframes linked into a neural net. Everything was running hummngly but there were still a few more steps to take before he could pick up his gear and get moving.

Step one was the murder which went off without a hitch as he knew it would. But the rest of the plan...that was all new. Never attempted before.

He took another hit off the reefer and descended into the zen of his own coughing. It was damp in the room which was twenty feet below the street and he could

feel the underground in the air. There were burial vibes there, like catacombs. Still, the cough felt good. Cleansing. The way first men were intended to breathe, all gurgly and raw.

Like a birth.

Goodpasture went to the refrigerator, kicked it open, and took out a can of flat NuCola. He downed it quickly – the soda was designed to slide – wiped the wet off his beard, then pulled his chair back to the array of screens. He studied the data patterns on them for a while then looked at the clock. It was 6 PM and time to contact the others.

Exactly 124 millisecs later, the series of message codes that he tapped into the keyboard there in the basement in Brooklyn, zipped through the fiber lines to the central station in Manhattan, then to the EarthNet command center in Jersey. There the message was packeted and tagged and routed through the cloud in a thousand different directions, eventually congealing at a nexus in Atlanta where it was bounced off a comsat in geo-orbit to seven other satellites, then over to G5351AneCRed over China and down through a fogbank covering half of Southeast Asia to a satellite dish on top of the Victoria building in downtown Hong Kong. Then down the optic channel to a mainframe server and on to one of the local terminals in the offices of Hollowell Imports on Cable Street with a nice view of the bay.

There his co-conspirator known as Doctor Beijerinck paused in the global currency exchanges to answer the electronic memo that just appeared. He typed his own sequence into the bitstream. Back and back and back through the entire system, the message found its way to Goodpasture's screen in Brooklyn.

It said "authorization to vaccinate."

This was the signal to release The Mazuma Program on the world.

Goodpasture tapped some more and the system exploded into a series of infinitely detailed diagrams. Like some pothead's vision of God's brain on Amphetabs, the entire cosmos flipped into cellular automata grids growing, changing, morphing. Goodpasture watched it deliriously as he crunched the soda can and waited for the call.

After a few seconds, Beijerinck's face appeared tiny in a corner of one of the screens.

"We're in business Doctor," the Beijerinck said.

"Say ahhh," Goodpasture replied.

"We were getting worried about you. Is everything all right?"

"Took more time than I thought. Those last few million lines were schizology, man. But I'm done and ready to rock."

"And the suicide?"

"I think of it as murder. My avatar was another person to me."

"How did it go?"

"Smooth as Sonson Gold. Official time of death was 7:45 AM on the morning of January 9th. Our condolences to the family."

“Why January 9th?”

“It’s my birthday.”

“Sorry to hear it.”

“You’re in Hong Kong?”

“Running financial apps for some multitis. This place is Wilson city, too rich for my blood. I’m heading back to the states next week. You?”

“Last leg and I’m outta here.”

“Find anyone yet?”

“Still trolling. But the deed is done so move on.”

“Peace and virology.”

Goodpasture went back to the screens with their waveforms and fractal patterns jittering like some kind of brainstem tic. He rubbed his eyes. He had spent five straight hours fine-tuning the system and the result was a near perfect flow of data across the neural net. You could see it in the rhythm of the images, feel it in the music of the displays. But the work had caused an optic migraine, lights flashing on the inside of his eyes. He closed his lids and began to hum along with the music, a kind of serenade to Mazuma, his master program, his grand creation, his genius germ.



The thump...I had my fill of that too.

To thump was to buy.

Did you thump today? Thump for your love. Be thumper, live large. Thump and show you care. Thump yourself, you deserve it.

It was all a marketing ploy...thump meant thumbprint. The whizkids had done away with money and credit cards and all that and come up with a device that could read your thumbprint in the store or online. Not just the whorls and swirls but the ridges too in three dimensions. Your own fingerprint was your account number and password all in one so every time you purchased something you pressed your thumb onto the scanner and – presto! – account balanced. Money was no longer something in your pocket, it was in your skin like a parasite.

It gave new meaning to the words *cash on hand*.

It was all part of the new science of emopsychology....the study of why people buy stuff, very important in the age of the Consumer Ratings Index. Complicated theories of economics and motivation and behavior, but it basically came down to the same three ideas over and over again:

Buy stuff for yourself and you’ll feel better.

Don’t let them seem happier than you.

Control what you can, not what you can’t, and by that we mean shop.

Plus one more rule that led to the invention of the thump...make the purchase as fast and speedy as possible. No time for second thoughts.

All very exciting to the mall crowd but it just wasn’t working for me anymore.

I always came back to my real life feeling emptier not fuller. The shrink said I suffered from “negative self-worth syndrome” and suggested that I buy some new clothes. But that wasn’t it; I was fed up with the whole shebang. The endless need to win and falling short: the boyfriends that disappointed, the blown chances at happiness, the lottery tickets with the lonely numbers. A million dead dreams. The case of mono I had was not mononucleosis...it was monotony. Ambition had been humdrummed out of me, buried in an apartment of things I never used.

I still looked pretty good – I had an ass like a 14-year old boy, a chest like 14-year old boy’s ass, and a face like an angel my mom said – but it wasn’t getting me anywhere. I had a job but it wasn’t going anywhere. Even with all those reality shows and Mels and upgrades and the Feds tracking my Consumer Rating Index like some kind of cold war code, I still wasn’t happy.

So I just gave up, gave in, gave out. I had not bought a thing in weeks and my Rating numbers had dropped down to a misdemeanor. That must have made some kind of fizzle on an array somewhere in the cloud but I was beyond caring about it. Or thinking that anyone else would care. It was a peedrop in an ocean of data.

Who would notice?

But that, of course, is precisely how they found me.



On the packed subway train, Westin closed his eyes and slipped into his own personal innerspace where it was quiet. There in the purple haze behind his eyelids, he located his desk and all his files. He was moving on from street hustles to white collar crime now that it was big business at \$300 billion dollars a year. More time with the lawyers, less with the grifters...the only difference being the cut of the suit.

The case at court that morning had been about a guy who bilked retirees out of their pensions through phony stocks. It was just a simple commodity scam – a pyramid scheme – newly upgraded to the world of the web. The con artists used to be known as yackers in the days when this was all done over the phone. Now that it was all online things had gotten more complex. They were called phlashers if they met you in person, phishers if they sent fake emails, pharmers if they lured you to phony sites, phinanciers with fake business models.

But the dupes were still called dupes.

In this case, all the players were Bosnian immigrants which turned it into an affinity scheme as well, ripping off people who trusted the cons because they were of the same ethnic background. Westin had seen it in the Pakistani community, the Korean neighborhoods, among Polish newcomers, you name it. It worked great. People tended to trust their own.

It was all an ode to the great Carlo Ponzi, the Italian con man in the 1920s who talked 20,000 other Italians into giving him \$10 million to invest in international postage. He promised a 50-fold return in 45 days and was pulling in \$250,000 a day. Of course, there were no investments. Money from new investors simply paid

off earlier ones enough to keep them quiet. It was ingenious until it all fell apart as it always did. Ponzi died a pauper in Rio at 66.

Westin was 42 and starting to think Ponzi died young.

A shove wrenched him out of his reverie. Someone sat too close to him and he instinctively touched his phone to make sure it was still there. It was hard to research this side of the human drama and not assume that everyone everywhere was on the grift, out to get something for nothing. Turning, he saw that it was a Hasidic rabbi in full furry regalia and he scolded himself for being so suspicious.

Then he checked the rabbi for sneakers.



Another bright Monday morning and all spiffed up in my trouser suit I was off to work, heltering and skeltering through the crowds, subwaying into Manhattan, and looking exactly like the kind of person you didn't notice yesterday and won't again tomorrow. Just another working chick going off to work.

One day they give you an ID or a laser pointer or a spot welder or whatever and off you go for a lifetime of days-in and days-out until the final punchout. Working hard, working your butt off, working like a dog. A working stiff from the first alarm to the last whistle.

That was me too.

In fact, if this memoir gets published, just make Work the title of Chapters 6 through 1,372 and you'll get the idea.

Standing on the train that morning watching the slush fall, it was easy to imagine myself already at my desk at MegaMedia, shooting paper clips at the window and trying to adapt it as a means of escape. I was called an editor but I really worked there as a reducer. Reducer, datapacker, factmasher. In the age of the cloud every company needed someone to take the flood of info coming in and squeeze it into a straw. No one had time to read anything, so they relied on me to wade through the oceans of information and find the stories. I read everything – financials, gossip rags, ebooks, weblogs, you name it – and compressed it all into tiny blips that even the dumbest boss could absorb.

There is a little known side effect to sifting through all that every hour of every day to produce condensations. Chronic tic sets in at only 1 MB of data but at 5 or more the mind goes cablooney. I read everything but had no knowledge, no wisdom, no grasp of anything. Just a vast and shallow scan of facts without form. The job had turned me into a voidoid, an empty-headed scanjockey.

Yet in spite of that – or maybe because of it – I obediently walked into the office that morning just like I had for the previous 1500 mornings. The receptionist gave me the same simpy glint. The BioFluor lights caused the same twitch. The guy at the next cubicle sighed the same sigh. Over the top of my wall I could see out the window into a sickly landscape where it was always raining, always dreary, always Czechoslovakia.



The balconies of all the south rooms at the new TrumpZermatt face the Swiss Alps. It is a majestic view, dwarfing the resort village itself. The sun there is also rich and hot and clear, and a brisk wind cleanses the skin. The sounds of shushing and chatting echo across the snow like nowhere else the world. Standing there at the right time of dusk, orange sunlight tickling the mountaintops, it is possible to believe in all the ancient myths, in Woden and the Lorelei and the rest of it. Even to believe that you can hear them calling you to this very spot, offering to make you more than you were, an Immortal lordling over the earth, touching clouds.

Something like that crossed Baron Szekesfehervar's mind as he stood on the balcony of his room sipping a sherry. He was tall and graceful against the panorama and in his gray Marcinko suit and royal blue turtleneck, he looked like an aging Teutonic prince reviewing his principality. At sixty-seven his hair was thinning but still worthy of a coif, his waist widening but still under control, and the remnants of his handsome younger face were still bankable.

"Yohoo, Baron! Down here," said a voice from below.

The Baron peered over the balcony to discover a woman in her late fifties, quite striking in a pink jumpsuit, red fur boots, and a white shag jacket. She was shapely, blonde beyond belief, her face maser-sculpted to resemble any number of screen idols, holding her own glass of sherry.

"Ah my dear!" the Baron said, forgetting her name for a crucial moment. "Come on up. The vista is breathtaking. Beverly!"

"You cut quite the figure standing there," she said, whisking herself into the building and up the stairs.

As she joined him on the balcony, the theme music to a soap opera rose up from somewhere and the Baron, graceful as a jewel thief, a term he disliked, turned dramatically to see her. She sighed and pressed herself into him as he intuitively bent forward and gave her some chest.

"My flight leaves in three hours. Isn't that the saddest thing?" she said.

"Not if we can spend them together," he said, with extra oil on the last word.

"You won't forget about me, will you?"

"Memory is a tricky business at my age, my dear. There's no telling what one will forget from one memory to the next."

He smiled. She pouted. They understood each other perfectly.

"Yes but the memories of our pleasures aren't stored up there. They are here," she said and gave him a playful tap on the coronary plate. "And the heart never forgets."

"Or lower," he bassooned and peered into her eyes for effect.

"You will come to Houston like you promised?" she asked. "I'm all alone now in a grand house. You would have your own wing practically."

"Of course. After my business in New York is finished, I will."

“This business about the gems?”

“Yes. I have some buying and selling to do. Then Houston. Or perhaps I shall stop in Mexico on my way to see you. To get some lamb fetus injections for rejuvenation.”

Beverly Wilshire, ex-wife of the couturier, pet project of the team at RoboSkin Inc, flushed at his use of the word *shall*. “That’s not something you need, Baron. You’re the youngest man I’ve ever met.” She touched his hip and triggered an inner rush in both of them. “Perhaps we have time for one more...”

“Game of backgammon?” he teased.

“I was thinking of a game that we both could win,” she cooed.

Her smile made crinkles at the edges of her mouth that betrayed decades of forgotten kisses. But the Baron did not notice them, or chose not to. His eyes said that he only saw the radiance of her desire and that was enough.

As they lay in bed afterwards, the Baron studied her tenderly. In her youth, she had been ravishing, a trophy for any number of big shots. Not that she was old now; the fifties were no longer what they once were. Thanks to NuSkin and maserwork and robosurgery and nuclear injections and all the rest, she seemed only a decade or so beyond the bloom. Sure there were hints of a lived life: the hot Texas sun had baked her skin into a hide; three divorces had run ridges between the eyebrows; three children had placed quite a burden on her staff.

On the other hand, he thought, the money left by her last husband more or less balanced all that out.

She was sleeping with her mouth open and making a tiny steady snore like a puttputt. The Baron touched her hair, her ears, her neck, sweetly. He was an expert at the gentle caress. He ran his fingers along the silver chain of her necklace. It was cool and sharp against her skin. It was held closed by a tiny screw lock. Kissing her shoulder with perfect softness, he unscrewed the catch. Then, running his chin along the lumpy folds of her back, he slipped the chain away and held it up in the light. In the middle of the chain was a diamond set into a silver shell. It was beautiful in the same way that she was...the right balance of maturity and innocence, perfection and use, nature and technology. He quickly coiled the necklace and shoved it under the mattress. She would never even notice it was missing. Then he rested his head lightly on her lower back and savored her smell. It was one of those endless moments. A snatch from the flow. Enjoy, he murmured. No need to rush into things.

There was plenty of time to figure out how to fence the damn thing later on.



“Jacq, I need you,” said a voice. “Pronto!”

It was Lum, my boss and director of the division, appearing on my computer screen. His real name was Larry Lum but he had transformed himself into one of

the special ones who get by with a single name. Like Rodan...the Japanese mutant not the French sculptor. He could never go by Larry for the simple reason that he was the quintessential Larry: the five o'clock shadow, the fat ass, the Oxfords with chunky soles. The kind of guy who thought that ten years of psychotherapy made him irresistible to women.

In his office, he waved me towards a chair while he continued wheeling a long distance deal on his headset. He loved to make people wait for him...pure Larry-ism. But it was a charade; he was no hotshot exec, just a slobby fat kid hiding under a red power tie and a fake Rolex. An ordinary shlep struggling to exude some kind of shleppervescence.

"Eighty-six thousand in one morning, you gotta love the guy," he said to no one in particular. "Balls is money. Shit."

"You said it," I said.

He flibbered his tie, which was Larry for trying to flirt. Sadly he had the sex appeal of a nostril. In spite of the tie – which was probably Xenon silk – he was just another guy with a small g. So small in fact that it could pass for a single sperm. He leaned back in his chair, arms behind his neck, showing two round wet patches where all Larrys sweat.

"But that's not why I called you in," he said swinging forward. "I've got a CIR on you. Says you're down 36%. Thirty-six, babe? You could get a citation."

"I know. I've been busy."

"Did you know that your Rating can infect the whole division?"

"No it can't."

"I'm just saying. Your attitude could."

"What business is it of yours – or anyone's – what I buy or don't buy?"

"I'm trying to look out for you here. Jacq...I like you. I want you happy."

"I am happy. Bubbling actually."

"First Mel dumps you, then the ratings people contact me..."

"How do you know about Mel?"

"You think I'm just this great guy sitting here jacking himself off?"

"Half right."

"I look out for my people, babe. And you know that I *want* you anyway."

"Are we done? I'm starting to get queasy."

"Any way I can help? Do you need a boyfriend? I'll do what I have to do."

"Do you have a paper bag?"

"All right," he laughed, "then let's get back to work. Time is money."

"I thought balls was money."

"Touché. I love it, I love you, I love me!"

Out of sheer courtesy I stopped by the bathroom and dry heaved there rather than in front of him. It wasn't just Lum in his lumity that got to me, it was the bigger picture. The whole rotten pizza pie and all the sausages who had somehow become emperor. Just another little piece of my whole rant against the winners. I pinged paper clips that afternoon until I got welts.



The evening light had turned into gloom over the abandoned buildings on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn. The wind hooted. Metal reinforcement panels flapped. There was no traffic and a cranky green light was the only thing shining anywhere.

Goodpasture was peering out through a hole in one of the plywood patches covering the windows. The world outside was all green as seen through his Infrared NightVision binoculars. This was pure paranoia; he knew no one could be stalking him yet but he still felt nervous. When he was sure there were no Feds, stray wolves, vampire gangs, or zombie zoots prowling, he tucked the glasses into his knapsack and went back to the array.

There before the digital glow, he tried to think of a few words to say for the deceased but nothing came.

It was awkward since the person he had murdered so neatly was himself.

His own websona, that is, the data version of himself. Djinn Thiebolt, born on a certain day, inoculated here and there, GPA rising and falling, and all the rest. But now as far as the web was concerned – and that was the only reality that really mattered – that person was dead. He thought of it as murder rather than suicide because that individual was a complete stranger to him in the same creepy way that a mirror image is a distant echo.

By killing this virtual ghost, Djinn had created a vacuum in the cloud, a hole to be filled by anyone he wanted. He was now scanning, searching for someone with just the right characteristics to fill that hole. And he thought he found her. The fizzle he had been watching on one of the screens was a data locus – a strange attractor in the complexity. It pointed to a set of numbers which pointed to an avatar which pointed to a real live human being. He had his dupe – right down to her thumbprint – and had sherlocked all that from a simple bundle of data points in the cloud.

Amazing.

Her name was Jacqueline Horner and she lived right there in Brooklyn. Soon he was looking at her websona in all its detail. She was 35, single, worked at one of the media companies. No family. Never been in trouble, never been sued. She lived small and was now in jeopardy of being cited for dropping too low in the emostream.

Ordinary as sin.

She was perfect.

CHAPTER TWO: FUNNY MONEY

The call came into the living room and Westin zapped it to the flatscreen on the wall so that he could take it on the couch. Lawrence L. Lum, assistant director at MegaMedia, was soon floating in his apartment. But even flat and virtual like that, Westin could still tell he was a pompous ass.

“How is the piece on the Virjos going?” the ghost asked.

“Slowly,” Westin admitted.

“What have you got so far?”

“Nothing but rumors. Maybe they were the ones who caused the 12-second stock market crash or maybe not. Maybe they engineered the collapse of Wusin Bank or maybe that was another gang. Hard to know.”

“I’m going to put you in touch with someone who might help,” Lum said. “Her name is Virginia Reed Lawrence. She’s on the board of Mega and rich as shit.”

“Of the Lawrences of Connecticut?”

“That’s right. Her family was the victim of a cybernapping last year that might have been the work of these Virjo guys. Another rumor but worth pursuing. Get in touch with her. Maybe you’ll find something even more interesting.”

“What do you mean?”

“She knows people.”

“What people?”

“Rich people.”

“So?”

“Don’t you read? There was this guy Fitzgerald who said that behind every great fortune there’s a crime.”

“That was Balzac.”

“I think it was Fitzgerald.”

“No, he was the one who said the rich are different from you and me.”

“Of course they are,” Lum summed, “they’ve got the money! And maybe if you hang out with them, you’ll find something more interesting than scams.”

“I like scams. They’re very writable.”

“Think big, win big,” Lum said. “The Lawrences and their ilk are Emphyrean, baby. There’s got to be some major crime in there somewhere.”

Emphyrean, Westin repeated.

He was talking about the 12 Realms of Consumerism, a modern remastering of Dante’s Circles. Everyone knew them by heart. Lowly, Earthly, Lunar, Mercurial, Venutian, Solar, Martian, Jovian, Saturnal, Starry, Crystalline, Emphyrean.

You started buying necessities, then you moved up through delicacies and baubles, then on up through the orbits to luxuries and extravagances, until you reached the twelfth level of the gods of enviable delights.

“Go for it, Gil,” Lum said. “The Virjo story is a good one but there may be something bigger to uncover. This has Pulitzer written all over it. I mean the prize not the beer.”



Swooping into JFK, the Baron took out the necklace and let the diamond sway before him. The light in the cabin broke the surface up into a dozen sparkling shards. It was a good stone, he thought, two carats probably, lightly feathered, oval cut. Worth about twenty grand.

He could take it to the Exchange on Tuesday. Or better still, return it to Beverly and play the hero. She would be thinking, like most filthy rich women, that someone of low character had nipped it. Then - presto! - in comes the Baron, the Baron thought, having found it wrapped up in one of the linen napkins. What a fine piece of good luck. Worth six months at the estate at least. In his very own wing too.

After all, the Baron was no simple thief. He had made himself an expert in the game of life by studying the things most men ignore...gems, brandies, European spas, casino games, foreign foods. Not to mention estrogen and female yearning. The sybaritic studies. He was a master of the secret of happiness...stretching out joy to the nth but not a moment longer than needed.

When the stewardess came with his pillow, the Baron shoved the necklace back into his pocket and beamed up at her as though she had just been crowned. He could zoom in on female energy like most fellows can follow a football.

“What a lovely face you have, my dear,” he said. “And so familiar. Are you in a reality show?”

”No,” she said, giggling. She knew it was a line but she liked it anyway. “I’m just an ordinary flight hostess.”

”Nothing ordinary about you,” he said. “You have what was once called classic beauty. I don’t know what they call it nowadays. Do you have a beau?”

“A bow?” she asked. She was only twenty-four and he was old enough to be her father’s father. Yet his attention and focus was riveting in any case. “Oh, you mean a boyfriend. Yes I do.”

He took her hand, tilting it in such a way that the age spots on his own became invisible in the light.

“Let me give you some grandfatherly advice, my dear. You get that boyfriend of yours to buy you a pair of garnet earrings. It would bring out those eyes of yours. And garnet has very good romantic vibrations. You think I’m crazy? I’m in the gem business, I know what I’m talking about.”

His smile was a time machine. It took thirty years off his age. His eyes spar-

kled. The specks of dandruff on the shoulders of his sharply cut blue suit seemed to vanish. He squeezed her hand and silently suggested an unfathomable link between them. She smiled knowing, on some level, that he did not mean anything by it. She sensed that he was no dirty old man.

In his own mind, he wasn't even flirting. Just living. Seduction was a way of life to him. A manner of comporting oneself. Rich women, young girls, men, doggies, it didn't matter. He knew a simple truth...that when you win someone over and make them feel good about themselves, you make yourself desirable. Younger, handsomer, taller, richer. That was the point.

To the Baron, flattery was his road to eternal life.

Yet even before her attention drifted, the Baron was already on to his next project. He slipped on a pair of half-cut reading glasses and opened his address book. He scrolled down the list which was arranged by city rather than surname and under New York he saw Beckworth, Dunning, Goldstein, Lawrence. Ah, Virginia Lawrence! The divorced sister of the Lawrence brothers. Billionaire investors in oil, real estate, beef, and cellular phones. She was worth at least \$100 million and lonely since her husband Dean left her for that actress and could not take it all with him. The Baron had not seen her since – when was it – that thing in Aspen? Nice lady, she was. Still active. The money had not spoiled her sense of fun. Damn fine horsewoman too. Maybe he would take a few brush-up lessons at the Riverside Stables.

Sleeping, the glasses slightly crooked on his nose, a light breeze from the air jet ruffling sprigs of hair, the Baron seemed kindly, almost angelic. What a nice, sweet, attractive older man, the hostess thought, glancing back. So charming, well-groomed, and kind.

And so rare in the world of men who only wanted something from you.



The elevator man at the Hilton Millennium was wearing a tux. It made sense, that being the Rolls-Royce of elevators, all oak and brass. Still, Westin felt bad for him, stuck in that box all day having to look like he gave a shit about the ups and downs of total strangers. He said nothing as Westin stepped in, then pressed the only button there was to press and up they went to the Pasha suite.

The vast living room there was filled with people but they were all there under orders – attendants, servants, yesmen, relatives – all drawn by the magnetic pull of wealth. The one thing rich people could always afford was other people. But they parted like the sea as Virginia Reed Lawrence came sweeping up to him in some kind of drapery a name designer made for her. Westin put out his hand and tried to put on his finest face.

She was softer looking than he expected, not at all pinched and with hardly a trace of a lift or zap or tuck. In fact she resembled his second grade teacher, Mrs. Marlinson, and that put him at ease.

“So you’re a friend of Lawrence Lum’s,” Virginia said with a trace of a magazine accent.

“Yes I am,” he said.

”Close friend?”

“Rather far actually.”

“Good, because he really is a pompous ass. Do you work for MegaMedia.”

“Only freelance. I’m a reporter but he hired me to do a series on money,” he fibbed, presuming that if he mentioned crimes and scams he would never get her cooperation.

“You’ve come to the right place,” she laughed. “He told you about our cyber-napping last year?”

“Yes. I’d like to find out about that.”

“We’ve got plenty of investigators working on it. I’ll introduce you to them. But please, make yourself comfortable,” she said and directed him to one of the five sofas near the window.

“Can we get you anything?” she asked, meaning the staff.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“Indeed you are,” she said leaning forward and making some extra cleavage in the move.

Odd, he thought. Was she really coming on to him? He must have been too young, too dark, and too insignificant to matter to someone like her. Too poor too. But maybe none of that mattered because rich women thought they owned the world and everyone in it. Rich men too. And beautiful women, come to think of it. Maybe everyone but Westin himself, Westin thought. In any case, he knew his manners – and his politics – and he bounced back his best young Harry Belafonte face instead.

“I hope this is not going to be another attack on the unfair distribution of wealth in the world,” she pouted.

“Of course not,” he said. But a hint of “you betcha” crept in anyway.

“It is unfair, everyone knows that. But what people don’t understand is that we still work for it. My ex-husband Dean and I worked very hard for what I’ve got.”

“I’m sure you did,” Westin said.

“Do you know Richard Ixsis?” she asked.

“I know of him of course.”

“He’s giving a luncheon on Sunday to raise funds for something or other. Why don’t you come as my guest? I can introduce you to a few people there. It may give you some ideas. And some leads. I’m not the only one who was victimized.”

“That would be great,” Westin said.

And they had mint tea and tiny little sweet cakes on silver platelets floating over frozen nitrogen ponds, all served by silent helpers in black suits. And the sun never set. And it was all so dainty and divine that Westin wanted nothing more than puke on the Tabriz Ultra-dye Persian carpet as a form of protest.



The first time I met Djinn I thought they left him out in the sun too long. A real nuthatch, this guy. Strange stranger from an alternate universe with a blazing goofball for a sun. He had contacted me about a job at another media company and I was ready to do anything to deLum myself. But he insisted that we meet in the middle of Grand Central station in the middle of the day and I stood there for a long time thinking I was being set up. Then this tall guy with long hair and wearing overalls and a beat-up denim jacket - like the guys who put up circus tents - came loping over.

“Jacqueline Horner,” he muttered.

“Jacq, “ I said. “And what’s with the James Bond?”

“The what?”

“Why are meeting like this?”

“Security,” he said, looking around as insecurely as possible.

“From what?”

“Everything.”

He meant that. Our meeting was conducted on the move, wandering through the vast station, occasionally stopping so that he could check his phone for some data he did not share with me. It did not take long for me to realize that the whole job opportunity thing had been fake.

“So you’re not really a doctor and Goodpasture is not your real name.”

“Yes and no. I have a PhD from Stanford in Cloud Computing.”

“And Goodpasture?”

“He was a virologist back in the 19th century. My name is Djinn.”

“Jim?”

“No, like the booze,” but then he spelled it.

“What kind of name is that?”

“Gypsy.”

“You’re a gypsy?”

“No.”

“Okay,” I summed. “So then you’re weird as cat shit.”

“Cat shit’s normal. Happens all the time. Tell me something...do you like your job?”

“It is what it is.”

“Reading through all that crap and producing reports?”

“How do you know that? How do you know *me*?”

“Research.”

“There’s no job offer is there?”

“No, there is.”

“Then what is it?”

“I represent a group of people who are trying to change things.”

“Which things?”

“The fucked up ones. What if I said you could quit your job and live like a queen instead?”

But I misheard him.

“I’m not moving to Queens...”

“I mean live like you won the lottery.”

“I’m not a lottery winner type.”

”What’s a lottery winner type?”

“A winner.”

The conversation went on like that for some time...meaning in circles. Djinn never exactly told me what he was offering me, just kept talking about some kind of revolution he and his cronies were about to start and did I want to help change the world. And all I had to do to help them was to be rich for a while.

Like I said, a goofball.

A normal person would have raced for the exit. But not me. I don’t know why exactly. He was not scary at all and I found the whole thing both intriguing and annoying. Maybe I was just drawn to the mystery of it all or maybe I just wanted some drama in my life. In any case, I agreed to meet him again but the encounter left me in a foul mood and I spent the rest of the day alone, keeping some very bad company.



Richard Ixis was sitting at the dais listening to his own biography. It was good. He was the world’s first trillionaire having taken a mere 80 billion from his dad and really turned it into something. Among other things, he was the owner of the thumbprint system which made him the chief toll collector on the consumer highway.

He had imcloned RazorSilk hair, implanted Monet teeth, and VitaForm heel expansions. In other words under his fixes he was bald, snaggle-toothed, and two inches shorter than his own image of himself. In another life, a thirty-something somebody-or-other named Sidney whom no one thought much of. But no matter...this was this life and in it he was the great guru of the gospel of success.

The luncheon was being given on board the Valhalla, the largest private cruiser in the world, a 300-foot floating estate from destroyer prow to space station stern. It seemed to be carved from pure sharkbone and welded with platinum or just clout. And white. Not your white or mine but starwhite, the white at the center of desire. It had a helicopter, two speedboats, and an SUV on board.

In the audience some of wealthiest people in the universe were sitting before him while the skyline of Manhattan streamed by outside. As the Mayor wrapped up his intro, Ixis stood up, tucked his tie in, and shook the man’s hand. He smiled a smile that said thank you for that fine introduction, and especially for not mentioning my role in the TeleCom disaster and my affairs with Maylene Dulure and her twin sister. Then he took out a stack of index cards prepared by his staff and turned

to the luncheoneers.

“I want to talk to you today about a subject dear to my heart...money,” he said to an outburst of applause. “I often think that money is mankind’s greatest invention. Not the wheel, not the telephone. And not, as my son Cravis seems to think, Dynalog6000. But money, the mother of all achievements. It is what we are as a species...”

He went on about how without money there would be no culture, no history, no innovation. Nothing. Yadayada, Westin thought. The usual bullshit about what the world is from the people who own it.

“Even love is based on money,” Ixis said, “because it gives love a context. Love, family, faith...these things only work when they fit into the grander scheme, which is governed by money.”

Westin felt like an impostor there among the movers and shakers because he was used to the losers and fakers. Still he knew that he was in the right place to find out about how it all worked and who was trying to get it, legally or not.

“Above all,” Ixis said, “we don’t need to change the world with our money; the world is exactly the way it is supposed to be. We are just the stewards of it. What we need to do is give in to it, yield to it, obey it. And let the world take care of itself.”

Westin looked around at all those fat cats and imagined them sitting on piles of money. But if disgust rose to his face, he tried to suppress it when he caught Virginia’s glance across the table. Her expression was unreadable but it almost seemed to reflect his own. Rolled eyes? Could that be true, he wondered?

“I’m sure that God,” Ixis went on, “whatever we mean by the word, created money for a reason. And when we make it, enjoy it, spend it, we are carrying out the divine plan for the world. And we’re better off having faith in that than in our own imperfect selves. Worshipping money...that is the true cost of living.”



The first meeting with Djinn seemed silly, trivial. A chance encounter barely worth noting and too weird to register. But then again, I thought, small events make worlds happen. Like that one day, before there were days, when four random elements gooped up to form amino acids and proteins, then slimeballs and newts and, down through the eons, the inventors of the snooze alarm.

I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt but as he stood at the doorway to my apartment like Sasquatch’s goofy kid brother, I wondered if I had stumbled onto something or just stumbled.

“So this is where you live,” he said, looking around. “Good. This is perfectly... normal.”

“If you say so,” I said.

“So you’re willing to go along with this whole thing?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On what the hell you are talking about.”

“Oh that.”

At that point, I had no real intention of going along with anything. I was just curious and wanted to know what it was all about because it was so odd, so out of my monotony loop.

“It’s all illegal, right?” I asked.

“By some standards, yes. But no one will ever know. It’s fool-proof.”

“And you want me to be the fool to proof it. Why me?”

“Because you are so...ordinary. Stable. Single. Low impact. And because your Rating is in jeopardy.”

“So what?”

“So that makes you mutable.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It’s a computing term. It means you can be recoded.”

“Look Djinn. You’re a funny guy and it’s been fun listening to you rant. But you’d better get to the point of all this and pronto.”

“I’m part of a group of people who have been studying the cloud.”

“You’re weathermen.”

“The data cloud, the flux, the web. We’ve come up with a way to morph it. To fix things.”

“What things?”

“Wealth. The inequity of it.”

“You want to get rich.”

“No. We want to change the world. We think wealth has been hijacked, stolen by the rich, hoarded by the fancypants. The hedgefunders at the expense of the families. We want to change all that, shake it up, redistribute the money back to the people who need it.”

“It’s worse than I thought. You’re completely insane,” I diagnosed.

“We’re Robin Hoodlums. We want to take the money from the corporations and give it all to the non-profits,” he said, walking over to the front window and cautiously looking up and down the street a few times. He stopped when he noticed me noticing him.

“You want to redistribute the wealth in New York?”

“In the country.”

“Take from the rich and give to the poor.”

“Something like that but it’s more complicated. We want to shift the data sets from certain loci to other ones. Bankrupt EcoCon and give their money to the Cousteau Society, for example.”

“How do you do that?”

“I can’t explain it. You’ll have to come to my place and I’ll show you.”

“You want me – who you barely know – to come to your apartment so you – who I’ve met twice – can show me how you’re going to steal money.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh well, why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

During one marathon of reduction, I had read through all the money gospels. Napoleon Hill and *Think and Grow Rich* and the whole Sex Transmutation theory of wealth, Joe Karbo and *The Lazy Man's Way to Riches* with the Dyna/Psyc system of Daily Declarations, Norvell's *Money Magnetism and Mind Cosmology*, Og Mandino's *The Greatest Secret in the World* and the *Ten Great Scrolls for Success of Hafid*. Nutty stuff, all of it. Think rich, pray rich, practice rich, be rich.

But they all seemed like instructions for using a pencil compared to what Djinn was suggesting.

Naturally, I got directions to his place.



"Did you like that little speech," Virginia asked when it was all over.

"This is a very different world than the one I'm used to," Gil said with a laugh.

"Let's hope its time is up," she replied.

"Beg your pardon?"

"I said it's time to sup," she announced and signaled for the waiter to start serving dinner.

She had ordered *imbrogliata di uovo con pomodoro* because it gave her a chance to show off her Italian. But she was not eating it. After all, it was just an ordinary bacon and tomato omelette and not a very good. Most things were ordinary, under their titles, she thought.

"Were you able to find out anything more about this cybernapping ring?"

"No more than what you told me a few days ago," he said. "It's pure identity theft but on a much more sophisticated level."

"Are the investigators any closer to knowing who was behind it?"

"There are plenty of technothieves and cloudrobbers out there poking and probing the system for weaknesses. I've already written about the NeoNet Warriors who ran Operation Mobydick; they scrambled the signals of two of the Global Positioning satellites so a fleet of whaling ships couldn't navigate."

"That's clever," she said.

"And the Binary Pirates who infiltrated AFNet, the military network. They replaced secure files with recordings of Give Peace A Chance. The Dillingers rob bank assets."

"And don't forget the Mob. They're into this too."

"True," he said, surprised. She was the last person he expected to know that. "And then there's this group of hackers who call themselves the Virjos. They're all PhD rejects...a kind of Doctors Without Morals. But they may just be a rumor since they leave no trace of anything. No one can say for sure."

"Oh I wouldn't follow that lead if I were you," she said. "I've heard about them. They're just bogeymen that get blamed for everything. I doubt they even exist."

"You may be right."

"The Mob," she said. "That's my guess. Oh Baron! Come and sit with us."

The Baron walked over and kissed her hand. He sat down with his plate of shish kebab and seemed to enjoy it immensely simply because he enjoyed everything immensely, which was his gift.

“Meet Mr. Gil Westin. He’s the young man I told you about who is trying to stop criminals from stealing our wealth.”

“My pleasure,” the Baron said. “Did you enjoy the speech?”

“Not especially,” Gil said.

“Nor did I,” the Baron said. “I believe that he was quite off the mark. Food is much more important than money.”

“Spoken just like you, Baron.”

“Take this shish kebab for example,” he said and held a morsel on the tip of his fork like a specimen. “If memory serves me, shish kebab was invented by Armenian merchants taking the trade routes to the Middle East. They realized they could preserve the meat by marinating it first, then cooking over an open fire. Now don’t tell me that shish kebab didn’t do more for world culture than Turkish money.”

“Or the frank more than the franc,” Gil added.

The lunch was being served by black men in red vests with silver roll pinchers and ivory crumb scoopers. The people they were serving were all mostly white and money – except for Gil himself – both old wealth, crinkly and preserved, and new wealth, smooth as a fiber optic feed. The women there had names like Kimberley, Jennifer, and Carolyne with an e, whose lives were bright as Tiffany silverware, whose fathers ran funds and who were married to financial analysts named David and Stephen and Brent with hair shampooed by shampooers.

Gil was distinctly out of place there but no one seemed to care much because he was with Virginia and the Baron and on the right side of the serving and that seemed good enough for the moment.



The windows of Djinn’s building were boarded up with plywood and covered with spray paint. Old tires and other debris filled what was once a formal entrance. The front door was riveted shut with a large piece of sheet metal. Djinn looked around nervously, then ducked under the stoop and motioned for me to follow.

I did.

There was a door there, hidden behind a mound of garbage. Djinn stepped over the junk, pried open the door, and took out a flashlight as he led the way into the guts of the building. A second metal door inside the basement was as dilapidated as the first. But there was a box mounted at the side of it on which Djinn pressed his thumb. The red light on it went off and the door opened. I followed him inside to a dungeon filled with computers and glowing screens, a high-tech subterranean wonderland, troll’s version of the command center in Cheyenne Mountain.

There was a poem written in chalk on one of the concrete columns. It read:

*I really hate this damn machine,
I wish that I could sell it.
It doesn't do just what I want
But only what I tell it.*

"This is where you live?" I asked.

"No one would ever look for me here."

"Who's looking?"

"No one yet...but they will be. What do you know about computer viruses?"

"It could fill a Petri dish."

"Good. The less you understand the better."

"I thought you were going to explain the whole thing to me."

"I want you to understand what we are trying to do so you will help us.

Have a seat," he said, pointing to a spot on the floor.

I sat.

"This array," he said, waving his hand, "is running a complexity program. It takes advantage of the fact that complex systems have the capacity to self-organize given the right catalyst. It's called the Mazuma Program. It stands for Mutational Algorithmic Z-Unified Matrix Anomolist."

"Gotcha."

"Think about a genome. You know what a genome is, right?"

"One of those lawn statues?"

He frowned.

"Only kidding. I read, remember?"

"So a genome is the basic pattern of four peptides that clump into genes that form proteins. The complexity of life comes from the arrangement of four things. Well this program is kind of a technome, an artificial code...not biological but digital. It enters the system, follows its simple rule set, and grows into a complex algorithm."

"Like a virus."

"Right! But that's a kind of negative word. This is more like a good virus, a provirus. It's protagious too. It spreads."

A rat skittled along the edge of the wall. I jumped up and mounted one of the tables. Djinn watched it coldly and kept talking.

"But it isn't just a dumb virus, it's an A-Soc...an Artificial Society. The parts work together synergistically. It's biointelligent. Adaptive, intuitive, very smart. Once the program is inserted into the system, an alien intelligence is born inside the cloud that operates under its own sense of mission..."

He went on like that for quite a while, getting more pumped with every analogy until he was pacing and raving. By the time he got to describing it as a hyper-ninja/tech-sorcerer/algorithmic shapeshifter/sentient smartbomb kind of thing I knew we were off in some fantasyland. But for some reason I wasn't repelled, just puzzled. What on earth did this nutsy-fagen geek-genius want from me?

"Djinn!" I shouted, trying to snap him out of himself.

His head must have been spinning because he grabbed it with both hands to stop the momentum. Then slowly, as though trying to talk Goethe to a goat, I asked him:

“What...exactly...does...this...do?”

“Didn’t I tell you that?”

“Not in so many words.”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m a little zonked out after all this programming. It waits. It grows and grows and then waits for a signal and when it gets that signal it instantly recodes the datastorm to take money from some accounts and deliver it to others.”

“From the rich to the poor.”

“From the profit centers to the care centers. From the suits to the overalls. From the ones who only care about helping themselves to the ones who help care for others.”

“That’s impossible.”

“You can make it possible.”

“What can I do?”

“All you have to do is be rich for six months. Like a kind of burning ember. Trickle-charge. Then the signal will go out, the program will flip into action, and the bastards will owe trillions and the good guys will have them.”

“Run that by me again,” I said.

“Mazuma grows and follows its teleology for six months and waits for the signal to go into action.”

“Six months?” I said. “It only took God six days to make the whole universe.”

“I know. And just look at the mess.”

“And you need me...”

“During those six months, while the program is growing, we need an active account as a kind of Trojan horse. To keep it alive. But whoever has that account will have unlimited funds for that period of time because every single thump will be balanced, wiped clean, erased.”

“Meaning...”

“Meaning you can buy anything you want for six months and the system instantly pays for it. I’m talking bottomless, edgeless wealth. Incalculable because it’s all just data.”

“So why don’t you do it?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Without going into too much technical detail that would make things more confusing...I’m dead.”

“Swell. Then why me?”

“I told you, we need someone with a low Rating, low profile, low visibility.”

“But you don’t even know me.”

“Another plus. No connection between us. Even if I got caught – which I can’t – I could never implicate you.”

“And vice-versa.”

“Exactly. Besides, I know your data, which is better than knowing you.”

“This is a major Federal offense isn’t it.”

“Federal? This is a goddamn cosmic offense. The greatest fraud ever.”

“Yet you think that just because my Rating is in the toilet, I would go along with this?”

“No. Only because you think things are fucked up too.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because only someone fed up with the system would choose to defy it like you’ve been doing.”

He was right about that. And he had all the numbers to convince me: my flagging commitment to the whole consumer thing, the zillionth of a percent of the people who own a zillion times more than the rest of us, all the money hoarded that could be used for this or that.

“Six months of unlimited wealth?” I said.

“Yep.”

“Forget it,” I said. “I’ll end up in prison.”

“You’re already in prison, Jacq. Work, shop, work, shop. Don’t you ever want to break out?”

He had me on that one.

“And in the end we’ll change the world more than anyone ever has.”

“Sure,” I said, meaning no.

“Too bad,” he said, meaning...welcome aboard.



“Incredible,” the fat man said.

“Sarge!” Jacq jumped. She was so into her own story that she had not noticed him standing behind her. “Don’t creep like that.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“It’s okay...I need a break anyway,” she said standing and stretching. She took a walking tour around the table like it was wilderness hike.

“You’re saying that these guys, these Virjos, were complete strangers to you?”

“Complete,” she said.

“If that’s true then why would you even consider such a thing?”

“Dunno,” Jacq said. “He caught me at the right time. I was at a dead end. No-where to turn and a man comes holding an exit sign. That kind of thing.”

“But there in that basement. He could have boiled you or something.”

“Djinn wasn’t like that,” she explained. “You’d have to meet him. He was goofy not scary. We each had something the other needed. He needed me to take it to the next step and I needed him in order to get a life. He was like a fairy bytemother.”

“And you believed him.”

“I didn’t buy into his utopian bullshit, not at all.”

“No? You didn’t think he could fix the world?”

“No.”

“Because it’s perfect the way it is?”

“Because it’s completely beyond help.”

“So what then? You needed the money that badly?”

“It was never about the money. I told you. I just wanted to win.”

“Win what?”

“One round of life, that’s all.”

The fat man shrugged and turned on his heel. In a few steps, he made his exit and Jacq returned to the table, made sure the laptop was still recording, and picked up where she left off.

CHAPTER THREE: FILTHY LUCRE

As the days passed, I detected a hairline crack in the ice cube of winter. Sunshine slipped through the cloud cover. The wind let up. I stopped blowing my nose for a whole afternoon and even slept through an entire night without numb feet. It was the end of February, the woolly month, season of the itch.

It was all just a game, this hesitation. I was kidding myself since even I knew that it was inevitable I would give in. It was written all over my websona. Djinn knew that and that's why he picked me. Like a buzzy fly or a flappy moth, I was hovering too close to the web of possibility, moments away from getting stuck, with no way out.

All I needed was one last push.

"Been looking for you, Jacq," Lum said.

He was playing mogul with a silver pen as he looked me over from the far side of my cubicle wall. "Let's not pussyfoot around. I know what you're doing."

"Reading," I said. "That's what you pay me for."

"I mean feeling sorry for yourself. Everyone in the office knows about you and Mel by now. Believe me, I know what you must be going through."

"I'm not going through anything. He was a jerk."

"You've got to get on with your life, Jacq."

"I'm on with it."

"Especially now with the merger."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"I feel that it's the right time for you to move on."

"As in..."

"I have to let you go."

"You're firing me?"

"I have to cut staff and since I know you'd never quit on your own, I'm going to do you a big favor."

"By firing me?"

"For now. Give you time to work things out."

"There's nothing to work out."

"Why don't you contact me in a couple of months. We'll see what the figures look like and maybe I can do something for you. Meanwhile, work on your life. Try to get that Rating back up. Take a vacation or something. I've got your back, Jacq. Always have."

I wanted his too but on a torture rack. But then I thought about Djinn's offer

again.

It was wrong, of course.

It was theft and cheating and scamming and who knows what else. It would condemn me to hell. But a soul, I'd come to see, was a small thing compared to mounds of cash. And time is relative, we all know that. So who can really say if roasting in the inferno for eternity really feels like a long time at all. Maybe only a hot flash in the muggy pause between universes.

It all came down to a simple question. What did I want, the past or the future? Life as it was or as it might be? The probable or the possible? But that is a trick question, of course. The answer is...it depends. Desire can be either a vice or a virtue. Only when it lands you in the pokey is it clear which way it went.

So even though I detested all those rich folks, the celebs and the money crowd, and the life they danced out for you in the media. The centerfolds, the runway models, the sequined aerobic workouts, the power lunches. Supercolossal superstardom. Even though I hated it all, I still wanted it for myself. I wanted the chrome bedrooms and the mink socks. The ranches, jets, jewels, and a letter from the President thanking me for being me. All of it. In the end I wanted everything they wanted me to want. Just like every other poor slob of a nobody.

A man can do what he wants but not want what he wants. That was Schopenhauer, I think, but I was sure it went for women too. On the other hand, it's amazing how tasty one's own baloney can be. That was probably Mrs. Schopenhauer.

I made the call.

"I'm in," I told Djinn. "What do I have to do?"

"You're sure?"

"Sure."

"It means leaving tonight. The moment I give you the word. Leaving everything...your apartment, job, boyfriend."

"No problem."

"Then buy something. Anything. Even a bottle of water. That will initiate the sequence. You then have exactly six months – until midnight on September 1st – to spend any money you want on anything."

"Fine."

"But try not to own anything."

"How's that?"

"Rent, lease, sublet. But don't own."

"Why not?"

"Because you have to be able to walk away from it all at midnight on September 1st. Once you do, all records of your connections to that stuff will be eliminated and the Mazuma Program will begin. People will wake up the next morning to a new reality. Intertel will be worth nothing and Humanitas will be worth billions."

"What if I have to get in touch with you?"

"You don't."

"What if I go over the limit?"

“There is no limit,” he said, his voice drifting. Then he came back loud and clear: “That’s it. Done. The sequence has started. You’re the richest person in the world. Go live it.”

“Good lord,” I said.

And for the first time in my life, I really meant it.

After all, what was a miracle anyway besides something that happened when you least expected it.

Of course, I see now that it holds for calamity as well.



They made a nice couple as they walked down Fifth Avenue. The Baron in his azure Carlo Armani, like a duke strolling his dom, and Virginia Lawrence in a yellow Pau Wenhau, the very picture of money buying back time. People walking by assumed they were somebodies and turned back to check.

The sun was out. The city seemed chipper and crisp, a Disney version of itself, all whistling, all spinning. The clanging of the streets smoothed into a hum. The dour buildings seemed to preen in the snappy sunlight. The Baron, an appreciator of architecture as of all things lovely, pointed out the neat details: the garrulous bump of a masonry cornice, the arching arm of an old streetlamp, the stone head of a gargoyle over a doorway, the didot yellow of the cabs in the street, the flow of the crowds pressing, the whiff of sauerkraut.

The stores all along the avenue were filled with expensive goodies and the Baron admired them all, silky suits and sterling urns and crystal servers. They stopped at designer windows and breathed on the glass. Things to buy, to own, to have and to hold. More varieties of Starlight sunglasses than beetles in the woods. Stuff you simply had to have whether you could afford it or not. Usables, possibles, mustables. New ones to replace the old, or old ones that were better than the new. Wearables and whenables.

Gil Westin, walking a few paces behind, saw it differently. The country had been conquered, he thought, and no one was putting up a fight. The rich people were the generals in a vast army. They were the new hordes, marching under the dollar sign, gobbling up all values in their path. He was repulsed by it all and so turned his attention back to the notes on his phone. Thanks to some of his new connections – the security people working for Virginia’s friends – he now actually had some of the Virjos communications and was studying them on the small screen.

The Virjos logged on to Cybertek or the Iron Feather Journal or one of the other standard hacker sites and texted using Snibber or Chatter or Shadowland or other underground networks that coded the calls and sliced them into undetectible little nuggets. In this way, they could make their plans and plan their schemes without denting the datawave. They could hide inside the cloud.

The ones he was studying has been decrypted but they still made no sense. They were Joycean and nuts. “A very fairworded instance of falsemeaning adamel-

egy.” Things like that. Lovely jibberish. “O thou, o worldly word that taketh maketh breaketh.” All sliced and diced together into a chat thread. A chunky word stew cooked up by some Lewis Carroll who had mixed blather into the soup.

The investigators who had intercepted them assumed that this was all some kind of second level code but Gil was not so sure. As a writer, it seemed too literary for him, too tricky for its own good. Keep looking, he thought.

“Gil my darling,” Virginia called back to him. “Join us?”

“Are you sure he can be trusted?” the Baron whispered to her.

“In what sense Baron? He’s a reporter, of course he can’t.”

“Do you trust him to keep your secrets secret?”

“What secrets? My life is an open book between the lawsuits and the blogs. What else can he disclose?”

“What else indeed,” the Baron said but at that moment he was thinking more of himself than her.



Funny how things stick. Stupid little things like that raggy wool sweater I found in the park but could never throw out. Or the creak in the floor near the kitchen never fixed. The radiator that pinged but never got hot. The smudge on the living room wall, the rusty outlet. As though memory were a kind of superglue, instant and permanent, gumming you to your own past.

Not funny haha.

Funny dreadful.

It was time to leave my apartment for good. But at the doorway - tedium on my side of the threshold, adventure on the other - I could barely push myself to cross over because there was no way to tell if I was on the verge or on the brink of something. Then I thought of Mel and Lum and a dozen other sticky things on the crap side of mulling and out the door I went.

I took the train into Manhattan and going over the bridge watched the one and only outline of the city ahead. It had been cut that night by a master silhouettist from violet paper and set against a shocking glow of orange that slowly shaded, as it arched over the city, into the deep purple between dreams. In front of this drop, lights like crystals glinted, thousands of them. A diamond-studded veil. The buildings pointed fireworking fingers nightward. Above them, a sliver of a moon had been pasted - a mere clipping from the lunar nail - then heated to incandescence. Below the skyline, the blue velvet water caught pinpoint points of light, fuzzed and smeared them, and scrambled the sight into its basic brush strokes. In between these - the mulberry facades and their shimmering twins - red ribbons of cars on the highway curved and swerved and twirled.

It was luminous, that gleam of lights, the hazy mirror of the river, ocher tugboats, the deep amber girders on the bridge, the emerald bursts of safety lights, the amethyst roadway with the dotted gold line, the red horse with yellow stripes gal-

loping faster than the train.

Red horse?

I watched that horse pass my window then get overtaken by a blue one with orange dots. When the train came to a stop in the middle of the bridge, both mares were standing together on the roadway. Snorting and panting, silver frost billowed from their noses. They were standing in front of a large – possibly four thousand pound – pumpkin on wheels with doors, footmen and kerosene lamps, and a luggage rack made of twigs.

A TV commercial being shot no doubt.

The train jerked, wheezed, sputtered, screeched and then lunged ahead. I pressed my cheek flat to the window to keep watching as we rolled on. A woman in a white gown was being helped out of the pumpkin but I could no longer see her clearly. As my angle got more extreme, the scene was slowly being erased by bright lights and eventually by the dank mud of the underground.

Two women, all furs and rhinestones, were walking ahead of me into the Plaza Hotel. I held the door for them and couldn't understand their irritation until I realized that it was a revolving door. CEOs and centerfolds stood marvelously in the lobby. Sets of matching luggage dotted the parquet floors. In shiny surfaces - mirrors and doorknobs and sconces – there were a hundred dumpy me's as out of place as winos in the White House.

There were plenty of luxury hotels in the city...the Waldorf, the Millenius, the Trump Floating Palace. But I always had one in mind when I thought about it and that was the Plaza, the classic hotel/condo at the southeastern tip of Central Park. Perfect spot to start my new life, I figured. The man behind the desk was still and sure, like a lizard getting a tan.

"I'd like a room," I said maybe for the first time ever.

He worked out the details then set the scanner in front of me. With great anxiety I slowly pressed my thumb onto it. I held my breath. If it went through, I was home free. If not, bells would go off in Sing Sing. But instead of bells there was a bip and bip and a bop and beleebop boip on his screen and he gave me a rather odd look.

"I see that you have an empyrean account. Are you sure you wouldn't like something a bit more...more?"

"Such as?"

"We have a suite on the fifth floor facing the park."

"Okay."

"And a double suite on the top floor."

"That's fine too."

"And then there's the Triplex in the Sky."

I heard of that, everyone had. They managed to jerry-rig this mini-palace atop the building. It seemed ridiculous to stay there but then I recalled that Djinn had said something about not thinking too small. And I thought...anything for the revolution.

“Sure!” I said but noticed that he was gazing past me not at me.

“And your people?” he asked.

“Of course I’m people,” I said, dimly.

“Where are they?”

“Um...you mean back in Lithuania?”

We were at an impasse until it hit me what he meant.

“Oh my people! My peeps! My entourage. Taking a much needed break.”

“When will they be joining you?”

“As soon as I find them,” I said but he missed the truth of that statement.

“And luggage?”

“I travel light,” I bragged.

The elevator was paneled in mahogany with mirrors and oak railings and had its own freshening desk. At the top, I followed the red carpet down to golden doors that opened onto a reception area big enough for a game of celebrity dodgeball. Along one wall was a Chinese silk tapestry, apple blossoms on a mountain path on which a monk, no larger than a subway token, was walking. Along another wall was a low lacquer table with ivory inlay. It held a collection of Ming or Ling or Chang vases. Massive flowers bloomed in every niche. Near the entrance, a console of closed circuit cameras and intercoms screened the guests from the assassins. In the center of the room was a spiral staircase. It wrapped around a fifteen-foot tree set into an iron tub rusting elegantly on the marble floor. Up the carpeted stairs, around the tree, to the main floor: bedroom with full projection TV console, boudoir with pedicure station, dining area already set with gold china.

The tub in the big bathroom was deep enough for snorkeling. The bathroom also had a stately oak desk in case one got the nocturnal urge to compose a papal bull. In the corner was a shower stall with jet sprays and a window that overlooked Central Park, upper Manhattan, Vermont, Canada, Baffin Bay and the Arctic Circle. For that lofty sudsing of which one is so fond.

To stave off claustrophobia, there were more floors. More bedrooms and bathrooms, a game room, a sitting room, a standing room, a kneeling room for getting down on your knees and thanking the heavens that you were the kind of person who could live like this. The closets would have been rented out in normal homes.

I poured wine from a crystal decanter into a round goblet and posed before the large picture window and the sputtering hustle, fuss, and bustle of the city below. I giggled. There I was, above it all at last. I swirled the juice loosely and sipped. Then I shifted my weight to the other foot and tried holding the glass lower. Giggled again. Then arms folded, glass in the crook of the elbow.

Hands on hips, glass on floor.

And finally... collapsed on the couch, glass empty.



I had it made.

Comfy as you please in the flabby lap of luxury.

But it didn't seem to matter. It was all a sham. I felt no different than before, just higher up. An affluent sap! Years of reality shows and unreal ads had left me a mere spectator, a skimmer through life with a flat existence. What I knew about the good life could fit into a shlepton, a particle so small it has neither mass nor the will to live.

Comme un fou se croit la future, nous nous croyons la presente, as the French say.

I read that once. It means when a fool something something the future, we something about belief or something. The fact is, I was alone and lonely and the vast penthouse only made it worse. So I called a few friends of mine but only Aly – who was still single – was willing to drop everything and hang with me. That was lucky because Aly fit in perfectly. She was tall and pretty and had an air of privilege even though she was just another kid from Brooklyn. Even her named sounded right although it simply stood for Alabama. Her parents were immigrants and wanted the kids to sound American so they named them after states....Ari, Tex, Cal, Penny.

We stayed around the penthouse for a week, ordering in, wandering, playing slapball from room to room. But the place was so big it still felt wrong. So I did the unthinkable. I bit my lip, swallowed my pride, and made the call. Nope, not to Mel. I called my Mom and asked her to stay with me. Not that we got along so well but I needed her in some strange way. Protection? Attention? Aggravation? I wasn't sure but I figured that the place was so big we at least would not get in each other's hair.

Lottie Horner, stout of frame and outlook, appeared at the door like a maitréd. She seemed suspicious of the whole thing so I took her on a full tour of the domain which she inspected like a professional, attentive but unimpressed.

"So?" I finally said when she had said nothing for long enough.

"It's nice."

"Nice? This is the San Simeon of hotel rooms. Did you see the tapestry? The triple Jacuzzi?"

"Very nice."

"What about the dinnerware? Some plates."

"And some cups," she said, taking my hands in hers and leading me over to a couch in the main room.

She sat down neatly, just like she used to do after a parent-teacher conference and I felt the same grinding in my stomach that I did back then.

"All right, honey," she said. "What's going on? Who's paying for this and why?"

Are you involved with a drug dealer?"

"I won a kind of lottery."

"You won more than a lottery. This suite costs a million a night."

"How did you know that?"

"I asked. Now what exactly did you do to get that kind of money? You don't have to tell me but if you don't then I won't know how to help you get out of prison."

"Why do you assume it's something I can't handle? You always do that."

I got up and stormed over to the picture window but it took a full ten seconds to get all the way across the room and the delay took a bit of the fury out of the storm.

"Look honey, this may be a lot of fun for you but I'm your mother. I'm concerned with your safety. That's my job. Now tell me exactly how much trouble you're in."

"I resent the fact that you assume I must be in trouble in order to have accomplished something. I'm not in any trouble," I pouted. "I just came into extra money to spend and I intend to spend it."

"How much extra money?"

"How much money could you spend in your entire life if you could spend as much money as you possibly could?"

"A lot of money."

"More than that."

She paused for a moment to study me, knowing that I could be as stubborn as she could.

"This is worse than I thought," she said. "You need to be watched. I'm staying to the bitter end."

I knew that she was just trying to protect me but she was also running her fingers over the fabric on the couch and I felt that she might have another motive.

"But I don't want to interfere," she continued. "Maybe it's not a good time. Maybe you're too busy at the job."

"The job?"

"Don't bother bluffing. I know that dope Lum canned you."

"As you can see, I'm much better off unemployed."

"Okay...so where's my room and what's for dinner?"



Life at that point consisted mostly of ordering meals and deciding where to eat them. But that got boring quickly – even a penthouse can become a cell – so Aly and I decided to go out for a walk on Fifth Avenue. But my mom intercepted us.

"You're going out like that?" she asked.

"Like what? We're just going for a walk."

"In that outfit? You look like a refugee. Don't you have any other clothes?"

“I left them with my former life.”

“Well with this kind of money you should at least have a choice of rags.”

She was right and I was happy to admit it because it gave me something to do. So I went online and did some research. It turns out that you can rent anything and anyone in this city. A service that reported on where visiting royalty, star performers, and sports figures were likely to be eating each night of the week. A florist who arranged designer flowers in your suite twice a week for \$40,000. And for the price of a sailboat, Brandon Cates from *The Love Rash* would walk from 5th and 61st to Madison and 47th with you to attract attention. Bernice Lunes (*The Best of the Best for the Best*) gave a millionaire’s horoscope of only good news for \$26,000.

And then there was Oscar De La Rented who rented wardrobes to millionaires who were going to be in town for a while and didn’t want to haul their walk-in closets around. They kept an entire line of clothes on file, all pressed and blocked.

Giorgio, tall and sleek and with a Neapolitan nose and an aristocratic chin, showed up the next day. In a former life, a cigarette smuggler in war-torn Vienna; in this, couturier to the stars. He made the barest whirl of a wind as he swept into the room wearing a nipped-in, built-up, steam-pressed, pin-striped suit.

“Don’t panic, Ms. Horner,” he said, “we’ll have you jotted down in a few moments. You’ll be out of these pajamas in no time.”

Giorgio laser-measured me while circling like a helicopter around the Statue of Liberty. More attention than I had gotten from a man since that time Mel remembered that we hadn’t had sex in weeks. Then he set up a laptop so that I could go through his catalog and chose clothes but I had never paid much attention to that kind of stuff.

“I’m not that savvy about it,” I said. “Why don’t you just pick it out for me?”

“For what occasions Madam?”

“I dunno,” I said but my mom wouldn’t leave it at that.

“Any and all,” she said. “Don’t mind my daughter Giorgio, she’s a bit wealth-challenged. Luckily for her, I am not.”

“Fine, then you pick for me,” I told her.

“And the money is...”

“No object,” I said.

But she sat there and glared at me for a long time until I finally got the hint.

“Okay,” I said. “Right. A whole wardrobe for me and for my mom too. And Aly. Duds all around.”

They delivered clothes by the barrelful, rolling wardrobes of slacks and tops and dresses and shoes, all top of the line, all custom fitted. Manolo Blahnik had been replaced by Lazlo7 so I simply had to have \$225,000 worth of shoes, not counting the turquoise ostrich skin cowboy boots he threw in for free. And French Ultrasilk shirts in the dazzling colors of Paris after the rain or at least of those oil paintings they sell in art stores. There was a Roche Kabuki dress – a quarter mil as a knockoff – that looked like my Aunt May’s apron but in diamond black. A white

fur coat made of regened polar bear and clouds. A MaxMara trench designed by the guy who designed the uniforms on the QEII, a Tagheuer Lepton watch, more accurate than the solar system, and of course that must-have \$16,000 pair of Duccini sunglasses, rose-colored of course. Plus assorted leather jackets, satinese suits, terry robes, chamois gloves and the Milanese blue jeans specially cut and tapered to my behind.

I put on a pair of pointy Italian hand-brushed leather shoes in cream with cocoa wing tips, the cuffs of my russet Kalahandra pants just brushing the heel. Neat creases up the leg ended at two front pleats formed by the casual flow of the fabric below an alligator belt. Topped off with a billowy eggplant colored shirt under black suspenders and that chocolate and a mocha herringbone jacket with tiny cherry specks. Hair trimmed, parted and gelled by Helena.

But of course, there was nowhere to go.

I didn't know anyone, didn't do anything, and didn't have any connections to anything. So mostly we tried on clothes and modeled them for each other and oohed and aahed and ordered dinner again.



Back in the lobby to sign up for a pomegranate and platinum skin treatment at the spa one morning, the guy at the front desk got my attention.

"Ms. Horner...there was a man looking for you."

"What man? I don't know any man."

"He didn't say. He was just inquiring if you were a guest here. I told him no."

"You did?"

"The privacy of our guests is of utmost importance to us. He just left. Perhaps you can catch him."

I walked outside to the line of waiting limos but none of the drivers seemed to care much about me. The chauffeur in the first limo continued to read the news. The one sleeping at the wheel of the grey stretch kept snoring. The cabbie helping the pregnant woman into the back seat of his taxi did not stop to notice me at all. The tall man with the severe face and the pointed ears looked at me, through me, then behind me, and continued leaning against his Mercedes.

I went back inside.

"Did you find him?" the clerk asked.

"No," I said.

"I can help you I think," said a voice to my right.

I looked down the counter and saw an older man, in his late sixties perhaps, quite elegant in an oatmeal suit and beige turtleneck. He was tan and robust with perfectly neat and polished white hair parted down the middle with a ruler. He might have been put together by a committee of Rothschild, Oleg Cassini II and Enrico Bolla from the various commercials.

"You see," he said in a generic European accent, "I was here at the front desk

this morning making a phone call when this fellow came in asking for you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I took notice of him because of a bandage he wore around his right wrist. What do you call them?”

He twiddled his hands like a paddle wheel.

“Ace?”

“Yes, exactly. An Ace bandage. He was a very tall man. Quite thin and severe looking. Big ears as well. You know, like Kafka,” he said and pinched the top of his own in a perfect imitation of the writer.”

“How did you notice all that?”

“I tend to notice things. It’s a little hobby of mine.”

“Well thanks a lot...Mr..”

He reached into his breast pocket with all the concentration of a dentist and produced, not a length of floss, but a business card.

It said:

*Baron Urgadz Szekesfehervar
Szeged, Zurich, Paris*

“How do you do, Baron,” I said with a curtsy I had seen in old movies.

“Quite well indeed,” he said and he thrust out a flat palm. “And whom do I have the pleasure of?”

“Jacq Horner. Manhattan, Brooklyn, Manhattan again. But where exactly is... Szeged?”

“Ah. Like most Americans, you don’t know your maps I see,” he chided with a wiggle of a boney digit. “Szeged is a small principality on the border of Hungary and Bulgaria. You’ve heard of them I take it? Do you know paprika?”

“The singer?”

“Ha! I mean, do you like paprika?”

“Oh sure...fine.”

“Well yes. The finer the better, as we say in paprika. My family owned the finest paprika works in the entire world. Capsicum Magnifore.” He kissed the trace that lingered on his fingertips. “But just after the revolution we lost it to the estate of Karl Marx, as it were. But that is all ancient history, no?”

“Yes?”

“Care for a pinch? I usually carry some,” he said, tickling himself through all eight basic pockets but finding nothing.

“I thought we were doing facials,” my mom said, walking out of the elevator.

“Mom, I’d like you to meet Baron Szek...”

“Baron is good enough,” he said taking her hand and pressing his lips to her knuckles. “But surely your *name* is Mom, my dear. You cannot possibly be old enough.”

“Charmed,” she said. “No, the name is Lottie.”

“The charm is all mine,” the Baron oozed. “Or did that come out wrong?”

She blushed.

“Are you this young girl’s chaperone?”

“I’m sort of her sidekick it seems,” mom said.

“Aha! A psychic!” he misunderstood perfectly, then put out his hand with the palm up. “You would like to read?”

Mom twisted her own hand awkwardly to get a second grip on the jutting mitt and shook it vigorously again.

“Whenever I have the time,” she answered incoherently.

The Baron gave her a squinty wince and withdrew his hand.

“Some other time perhaps.”

“Sure. Why do you ask? Did you just finish something?”

“Very good! I did indeed. But I’m mostly curious about the future. As we all are.”

He looked at me knowingly.

“Thanks anyway,” mom said, “but I don’t read too much financial stuff. Best-sellers mostly.”

“Oh,” the Baron said, examining his own palm lines for something. But the object of his search was lost in the give and take, along with the point of the entire conversation.



The Baron was having tea that afternoon with some friends and invited us to join them. I was reluctant at first but my mom pointed out that we had nothing else to do and nowhere to wear our fancy clothes, so I agreed.

At a table in the Palm Court, newly refurbished down to the original gilt or-molu, the Baron was chatting with Virginia Lawrence of the Lawrences and Gil Westin of *NewYawkTalk*. She was classic old money elite and he was drop dead gorgeous, the kind of guy who would have been named Jordan in the trash novels. His skin was perfect, the color of cappuccino, and his eyes like chocolate morsels. Teeth like mints. Or maybe I was just hungry. No...check that. I wasn’t hungry, I was starving.

Just not for food.

“What line of business are you in?” Gil asked. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

His voice was deep and soothing and I cupped my ear to focus on the sound. Also closed my mouth so she wouldn’t hear the echo of my aorta thumping.

“I’m a splurgant. I splurge for a living,” I explained.

“Ah, my favorite kind of person,” the Baron said. “A fellow appreciator. Remember what Confucius said: to know is not as good as to love but to love is not as good as to enjoy.”

“Are you a connoisseur, monsieur?” my mom asked, trying to show off some culture.

“No my dear,” the Baron said. “A connoisseur has formed an expert opinion and is done experimenting. Like that impossible cousin Fritz of mine who is the

expert on French films. Incapable of learning anything because he believes he already has the answers.”

“The Baron is more of a hedonist,” Gil suggested.

“All these words,” the Baron explained, “hedonist, voluptuary, sybarite - each was useful in its own time to denote a pleasure lover. But the world has changed since they were coined. It’s more complex now. I prefer appreciator. Oh, don’t look now but Deborah Muldavia just came in. Shall I say hello? No, I’ll let her eat in peace. What were we saying?”

I had no idea.

It was all just chalk and tatter....I mean talk and chatter. I was stammering and, frankly, not paying attention. All I knew was that Gil Westin was the yummiest thing on the menu and for all he knew, I was this rich babe in fancy clothes and that, I assumed, just had to be appealing.

That was when I flashed on that famous quote from Hobbes – you know the one – and I thought to myself yes life is poor, nasty, brutish, and short. But sometimes.

Only sometimes.

CHAPTER FOUR: WRETCHED EXCESS

A few days later, I woke up to find that the penthouse suite – so empty and vastly vacant before – was suddenly filled with people. They were all bustling around taking care of things and doing what they were doing. They barely noticed me when I walked out.

“What is all this?” I asked. “Who are these people?”

“Your people,” Aly said. “With this kind of wealth, you need a staff.”

“To do what?”

“Take care of things.”

“What things?”

“The things they take care of. Don’t be dim.”

Aly introduced me to my chauffeur, my private secretary, my mom’s secretary, my social media administrator, my spiritual advisor, my personal trainer, and my rehab counselor.

“Rehab? But I don’t have a drug problem!”

“The rental agency threw him in for free. Everyone has one now. You never know.”

“Who’s the woman doing my mom’s hair?”

“Mrs. Kopotnick, your hair stylist. She’s your mom’s friend.”

“I thought she taught fourth grade.”

“Change of careers. Very nice lady. I’m next. Oh and that’s Kemo,” she said, pointing out an enormous wall of a guy with a head like a popsicle. “He’s your new bodyguard.”

“Why would I need a bodyguard?”

“Wake up, Jacq. Rich people are kidnapped all the time. And there’s always paparazzi to deal with. Overzealous fans. Lunatics on the street.”

“What am I supposed to do with all these people?”

“Don’t worry about that. I saved you a chunk of change by agreeing to be your personnel manager myself. I’ll handle the staff, you just run your life.”

“What life?”

Then the call came in.

I didn’t take it – my secretary wouldn’t let me – but it seems that Gil Westin was inviting me out to the clubs that night! I was beside myself with excitement and took the day off – from not doing anything, that is – to get ready.

I took a beauty nap, a beauty shower, a beauty crap. I forced my mom to assess

six different outfits from the baby blue jumpskirt with white scarf to the charcoal pin-stripe evening dress with lavender epaulets and a lace bra to the ivory toreador with matching narrow skirt, pearly pearls, rhinestone earrings. White gloves with lace around the wrist and a snow white beret with the ruby butterfly pin.

“What time is this date?” my mom asked. “I don’t think I’m going to make it.”

“How do I look?”

“Gorgeous,” she said.

“You always say that.”

“Maybe you should spend some of this drug money on psychoanalysis.”

“We’ll need a limo too,” Aly said and she was suddenly wielding an iPad like a wedding planner.

“We?”

“We’ll we can’t all fit into a taxi.”

“I thought he asked me out?” I protested.

“It was more of a general you, meaning all of us.”

“Swell,” I said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my mom said. “He wants to see Jacq again, not her entourage.”

“Thank you!”

“So get something special for the two of them,” she added. “And get a limo for the rest of us.”

Online we looked through dozens of fancy cars from MG’s and Hispanas to Excaliburs and Lamborghinis. Maserati, Ferrari, Aston Martin. A 1937 Mercedes Benz, a retro-charged 540K Roadster Cabriolet. A 1928 H6B Hispano-Suiza, one emir-length long with silvered head and sidelights for illuminating Xanadu.

All rentable at a moment’s notice with the right thumbprint.

We settled on a 1927 Type 41 Bugatti ‘Royale’ Berline de Voyage. The Golden Bug. A kind of rolling chateau. It was yellow like the Shah Jahan’s ailing wife, with ecru seats the color of Andrew Carnegie’s gums. In the back the fenders joined together to form a razor cut flip under the spare; in the front there was a touring cabin with separate doors for the driver and the driven. Both sections were protected from the harsh world by a leather convertible roof. Metal ribs bulged underneath the skin like furrows in a pompadour. A graceful sideburn of a running board sweep along the jawline.

The front window of the car was square and sectioned like bifocals. It seemed perched on the slender snoot of the engine which came to a snub end between the front fenders. Grand fenders they were too, ebony nostrils at the sides of a president’s nose. In front were headlights that a jeweler had stuck into the sneezeholes. And there were roly bike tires, friendly as dimples. Champagne cooler. 169 inch wheelbase, straight-eight, 13-liter engine, overhead cam, natch. Spiffy and ridiculous, the kind of car that won the first World War for the upstate estates. Only six were ever made. More money to rent than Detroit was worth in a good year but of course nothing at all to me.

They delivered it within the hour.

The evening had just begun to whisper sweet nothings. Venus was on the rise. Cobalt traces of the sky were surrendering to the mauve dome of night. In the park, I saw trees toss crimson punchouts of the foliage onto the grass. A remnant breeze gave a final spin to two plastic garbage bags, then tickled the topmost leaves and left.

Hormones raged, disguised as sweat.

Desire seeped into my Polenka SatinNight undies.



New York at night is a study in fission.

The city explodes with the energy locked in every brick and stone. There are outbursts everywhere. Taxis, high-stepping couples out on the town, bums rumbling, lines to get in and get out, workers under the pavement. The buildings shimmer with a million dreams sharply seen. Flair is the rule. You can drop dead in the street, but in Manhattan at night you'd better do it with zip, or risk an eternity in limbo.

Style, not sincerity, is the key.

Oscar Wilde or someone.

Of course it is hard to make your own impression in all this. Everything you can imagine has already crossed the street. Already happened. It is a known fact that while going crosstown after hours, one is propelled around the sun 30 mph faster than the planet itself. Everyone is part of this motion. Even asleep in bed it gets you. Just knowing that the crowds are leaving Lincoln Center, that dancers live here, that the restaurants are brimming, shows being shot, grocers cutting green beans, bakers baking, newsrooms booming, papaya stands glaring, lovers murdered. All night long while you dream, while you drift.

New Yorkers are the only people on earth who yawn when they wake up.

Still, we managed to make an impression in the Bugatti. People by the carload passing by flattened their noses against the windows to gape, wave, wow. In front of the hotel, a crowd of onlookers looked on, pictures were taken, someone asked me to sign something.

Plus, we were immediately ushered in to every club.

New York is the cosmic epicenter of night. New clubs open by the minute, that 24-hour minute that starts at nightfall and ends at moondown and leaves no whim dangling. We went to a bunch of them...The Tunnel, Pyramid, the Sand, AM-PM, Babaloos. They were packed everywhere. As though no one had a job or a kid or a deadline or anything to do other than rock and roll.

At the hottest new club, Fission down by the piers, we joined the hopeful and the jaded. The dulled and the voracious. The neo-hipsters, the hyper-yuppies, the Madonna sims, the Andy Warholics, the cyberwingers. They were all there in

a timeless dimension, a nextdoor world filled with fragments of ours taken from shattered TV programs, ad holograms, and rock videos. All mixed and mismatched and dancing together under the thermonuclear woofers.

In a thick crowd there, a man in a dark suit came up to me. He looked Amish in that light but did not stand out because he seemed too serious to be noticeable. He had his hand in his jacket like a mobster and seemed about to hand me something. A bullet perhaps? An indictment?

Kemo, my bodyguard, started to intercept him but then pulled back when the guy took out a tissue and blew his nose. His own, not Kemo's. But he didn't ask me to dance and instead just stood there close enough to share germs with me.

"You better watch your step, Jacq," he said but I could barely hear him over the music.

"I'm sorry. It's crowded in here."

"They may be on to us. Keep on your toes."

"No thank you, I'm with someone," I said motioning to Gil.

"You may have to abort sooner than we thought."

"Board? Not at all. This place is fun."

"If I contact you and say go, you go!"

"Oh well...nice talking to you."

And he slipped into the crowd.

"Who was that?" Gil shouted.

"No idea. Some maniac trying to make conversation."

The date did not end until dawn, which is really quite nice and wasted on the trash men and the fishmongers. We parked the car near South Street and walked to the river, Duke Ellington coming from some soundtrack. The sun came up over Brooklyn and quickly turned the sky into a ripe peach, the buildings into young carrots, the water of the East River to choppy grape juice.

Maybe I had breakfast in mind by then but I slipped my arms around Gil's waist to get close and he put his arms around my shoulders but I still wasn't sure if he was responding to the heat in me or to the chill in the air.



At Chez Marseilles a few nights later the Baron waved us over to a table near a massive tapestry of an elephant hunt. By now it was like two tribes meeting at a watering hole. Gil and Virginia were already there and Aly and mom and I arrived together. After the vaudevillian round of handshakes and hugs over, under, around and through, the Baron directed us to our seats. Then he casually unbuttoned his double-breasted jacket and sat down.

"Enjoy your dinner, everybody, it's my treat!" I rasped without couth.

"But the Baron has been kind enough to invite us," my mom explained.

“No no, that’s fine,” the Baron said. “How very charming of you, my girl. I never argue with hospitality.”

“And the best wine in the house for my friends,” I announced over the heads of several tables.

“That would be the 1966 Chateau Montrose I believe,” the Baron offered. “It’s quite good.”

“Do you know wines?” I asked him.

“I know of wines what I know of everything. The great secret one learns with age. Always the same. And that is...”

“If you can remember it, go for it,” my mom suggested.

“How to savor,” the Baron concluded. “In fact, I saw the wine list before you came and for \$1800 a bottle I assume it must be savory.”

He put his hand firmly over my mother’s, covering her amethyst ring with his naked pinky and said: “What a lovely outfit Lottie. You must be quite the expert shopper.”

“She wants to be buried in the West Edmonton Mall,” I explained.

“Like your daughter then...an appreciator of fine things,” the Baron said.

“I do like to enjoy,” she said, squishing her whole body into a giggle.

“Marvelous! You know the great secret at your young age then,” he said and concluded with a heartyharhar.

Virginia for her part did not seem to care about this shift in the Baron’s focus. On the contrary she seemed more interested in Gil than in the Baron and I found myself competing with her for his attention.

Throughout dinner I also studied the Baron like a pupil, watching him spring into action. After all, here was a man – not just a man but a Baron! – who knew the ways of the world and the world of the rich. If I wanted to get the most out of the next few months – not to mention get anywhere with Gil – I figured that I needed his help.

He was a master at a certain kind of social transformation...his stiff hair took on a matinee idol’s gloss and his needle nose seemed aristocratic and imperial, the kind that make a great hit in France. His eyes took on a youthful gaiety. He told amusing anecdotes about Old Europe, listened with charmed attention to the dullest prattle, and seemed to enjoy everything immensely. He had a great talent for keeping a flimsy thread of chitchat twirled into a lasso. When he discussed his family estate, he did so with an uncanny sense of dismissal. When he spoke about paprika, he made sure to catch and hold all eyebeams with his. When he laughed at a joke, he was somehow able to hide a gaggle of yellowing teeth.

He was particularly attentive to my mom, who had spit-curled her hair for the occasion and looked like a slightly over-the-hill Betty Boop. In fact, he didn’t remove his hand from hers until the dessert. And although she had to make a massive effort to read the menu, chat, and gesture – and turn to him to talk – he kept it pinned to the table.

Pausing to catch his breath after a reflection on great capital cities of the world,

the Baron put his hand squarely on the pillow of her thigh and said, "But enough of me, my dear. Let us talk about you a bit. How do you find me, hmmm?"

"Delicious," she said but that was a bit too much. "I mean...delightful."

"What a marvelous *joie de vivre* you have," the Baron told her.

"I'm not too *je ne sais croix* on all that," she said, thanking the gods for high school French as she nodded, gushed, drank and generally wallowed in the ooze of his attention.

"Perhaps I can tease you away from New York for a few weeks," he said. "Skiing in the Alps?"

"Can't," she said. "My daughter needs me. But it's very sweet of you to offer."

"Too sweet?" he asked.

"*Pas tout de suite*," she cooed. "*Pas de tout*."

Yes, I watched the Baron's every move, studying his style and method. But in light of what was to come, not nearly as carefully as I should have.



Back at his apartment, Gil Westin was stuck. He had uncovered nothing about hidden crimes behind the great fortunes. Of course there were the cutthroat business practices and secret deals and power gambits you would expect, but nothing nasty enough to give him a scoop. Nothing to write about.

The hackers who had blackmailed Virginia and some of her friends out of a few million dollars left no traces. The Virjos may have been responsible but there was no clear evidence pointing to them. And in any case the scam was small potatoes in the world of the big con, which Gil knew all about because he was fascinated by people who could convince other people to believe in them; his heroes formed a rogues gallery of skeezers.

There was Ponzi of course, but also John Law who created the Mississippi Company. He floated dud stock and falsely claimed that it was backed up by huge gold and silver supplies in Louisiana. He wound up bankrupting France in 1720.

And there was Ivar Kreuger, the Swedish match king, so rich that he loaned vast sums of money to a dozen nations but he forged securities and bonds and had duped banks and whole companies to the tune of a quarter of a billion bucks back in the 1920s.

There was P. Takis Veliotis, the executive who looted General Dynamics in the 1980s, and Mark Rich and Pincus Green indicted in 1983 for evading \$48 million in taxes, and Robert Vesco who swindled investors out of \$224 million in the 1970s and ran to Cuba.

Ivan Boesky, the arbitrager in the 1980s created junk bonds at Drexel Brunham Lambert and wound paying a \$100 million penalty for insider trading.

Not to mention Nicholas Leeson who swindled his way through the Nikkei and destroyed the British firm Barings to the tune of more than \$1 billion.

Bernie Madoff...\$18 billion.

Crooks and creeps all yet there was something soothing to him about these names and numbers as he trolled them in his mind, eyes closed, feet up on the coffee table. But drifting off into a pleasant nap, it was not fraud and scam that came to mind. It was a pretty young woman with dark hair and light eyes who seemed oddly untouched by all the money she had. Almost amused about it in some way. Very different from the entitled daughters of the superduperupper class he had met recently.

Almost as though she stole it in the dark of night and was waiting, like most scammers, to get caught. Could there be a story there? Ridiculous. His hobby was becoming an obsession.

On the other hand...



“Ah, two enchantresses,” The Baron announced as he approached us at the table.

My mom and I were at The World, where the sheer density of glamour should have been rubbing off big time. All the faces that mattered, or gave the impression of mattering, were there. Famous faces, gorgeous faces, rich faces basking in their own spotlights or squinting at the light of another. Celebrities, costars, anchorpersons. And a supporting cast of press, publicity, and PR agents all vying for each other’s attention.

Nikos Neonopolis was there, his bald head beaming, and Angelina, the star of Frangiattelli’s films of the 90s. Erica Snood, the gossip blogger, was talking to the ex-mayor and his son. Three platinum blondes of uncertain importance were at a table with that old-time TV star whose name no one could recall. Ertugan Kashgrabbi, or whatever his name was, talked quickly with a wolfhound in a mink jersey, waved to Mr. Entertainment, in a corner nursing a cold.

But it was all beyond me, some kind of shiny reality on the far side of the glass. The Baron, however, recognized them all and gave the subliminal impression that they knew him as well. He nodded in one direction, mumbled a name, and we turned to see someone chewing or scratching a nose. Then we turned back to find him jiggling his fingers in another direction. But when we looked, that gesture too seemed lost in a sea of indifference.

“Let me propose a toast,” the Baron said and raised his glass, mulled a few quips over in his broad skull, then lowered his gaze and settled on one. “May time go slowly when we are having fun and quickly when we are not.”

“May time go find someone else to pick on,” my mom added, not to be outdone.

“To the great Dom Perignon,” the Baron corrected. “A hero of mine. Think of it, my dears. Devoting your whole life, as a religious act, to the pursuit of a bubbly tingle.”

We toasted.

“You seem somewhat distracted, my girl,” the Baron said. “Why don’t you tell your Baron all about it.”

“Things aren’t going the way I planned,” I said.

Not that I had a plan but some kind of plot was forming and it included Gil, who seemed less than impressed by me. Heels over head? He hadn’t called me in days and I thought I knew what the problem was. The fraud behind the façade was starting to define me; I felt like a clown with a crown and I needed help.

“I don’t know anything,” I groused.

“What thing for instance? Oh look. That’s what’s-his-name from the movies. I don’t actually know him but I know people who know him. I wonder if he’s still... but no. He wouldn’t take the chance. What were we saying?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nor do I.”

“About money. About the good life.”

“But how can that be *pour une si riche*?”

“Her riche is pretty nouveau,” mom said. “She’s not really equipped.”

“But that’s the beauty of living the good life,” the Baron explained. “There’s nothing to know. In fact, the less you know the better. The less you know about life, the freer you are to just live it.”

“Herman?” said a portly woman startling the Baron from behind. He instinctively rose to greet her, dropped his napkin, then suddenly stopped himself.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Herman, is that you?”

“You must have me confused with Herman Luxor, the actor. It happens all the time.” He bowed graciously and started to sit down again.

“It is you. Isn’t it? Weren’t you married to...”

“No but he was, I think. They’re divorced now.”

“This is crazy. Didn’t you sell...”

“I’m sorry, Madame, but I’ve never been sailing in my life,” he concluded, tapping her on the wrist and returning to the table.

Very soon after that the Baron suggested that the menu was not what it was in the old days and we moved on to La Bournese where I ordered the panache of salmon and bass with Bourgogne Aligote and a bottle of Louis Roderer Cristal Rose in which to drown my troubles.

After that, the Baron took it upon himself to be my mentor in all things extravagant. Under his guidance we spent the next two weeks going hogwild in pig heaven. We overdid everything New York had to offer from 25,000 restaurants and 1,500 museums and galleries, auctions, openings, walking tours, shows and conventions, atriums, public gardens, jazz clubs. And everywhere the Baron took the lead - pointing, noticing, savoring.

By the end of that time, I was able to reduce New York to a simple recipe. You start with three basic ingredients: mania, stamina, and insomnia. You will also

need a pot to piss in. Mix everything up, fill every hour, add a dash and stir until you drop. And there it is...a magnificent impossibility. A great hyperstew, sparking and bubbling in all dimensions at once, that just so happens to have a mayor.

We took it all in and the Baron was our guide and savoring was our itinerary. Needless to say, I had much to learn.

That Mustique was an island not a fragrance and that no one went there anymore. That a \$600 cup of PersiaNegra was worth the delivery time. That an emerald-cut fancy violet diamond ring with Pave-set novadiamonds and Tsavorite garnets was nothing to sneeze at, that Tignanello had a moon calfskin bag to die for, that Mercedes made a titanium car but it didn't corner well, that Topps had a diamond gum that tasted like butterscotch without the butter or the scotch.

That at an auction at Barnett's recently a sneezed-on napkin by some uber-celebrity had just sold for 300 million bucks at a germ auction, the latest craze for those who have everything.

Above all, I was learning a simple truth about having money...that it was all show. All facade. Cut from Hollywood and tied with vine. Media over matter. All one long jingletoot on the showboat of the American dream.

So was it my dream now?

Was I happier now?

I didn't even know anymore.



Another thing I learned from the Baron was to seize the moment, damn the torpedoes, take the plunge. Leap before you look. So with that in mind, I had my people call Gil and ask him out on a date – just the two of us – and to my amazement he said yes. Or so they told me.

I was in high goober that night, a combination of thrall and terror that made me talk too much, glance too often, and laugh too loud. I really wanted him to like me so I put on a killer outfit and had my driver take us on a long, slow ride through Central Park.

As we passed 57th and Fifth, the greatest corner in the universe, where Louis XIV would have loitered if he had not had Versailles, we were lit by a supernova. I noticed the light spill onto Gil's cheeks, slip over the smooth column of his forehead, skip across the caverns of his eyes, then slide along the mounds of his cheekbones and down the slope of his jaw.

I crossed my legs so that the slit in the skirt broke to reveal that my thigh covered with a white crystal pattern all the way down to my ankles and toes wrapped in three strands of beige leather. Then, when I thought he hadn't noticed, I crossed them the other way.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" he said.

"Shoot."

"How did you get so rich?"

"I'm not that rich."

"Is that so?"

"Not in the classic sense."

"Just a few extra million."

"Zillion," I corrected.

"I assumed that you inherited it. But there's nothing about you on the web. Nothing at all."

"You looked me up?"

"Of course. Didn't you look me up?"

"No," I said, embarrassed that I didn't think of it. "I don't date much. And I keep a low profile."

"Do you have a job? A career?"

"Not at the moment."

"So you don't really do anything."

"Believe me, wallowing is a full time job."

"And you don't give any of your money away?"

"Not yet but I'll start doing that very soon."

"So where did it all come from, if you don't mind my asking. Family?"

"Strangers really," I said giggling like a jerk.

"I don't understand."

"Join the club," but I could see in his eyes that I wasn't helping my case. "I'm just trying to enjoy my life. It won't be like this for long."

As luck would have it, we were just passing by some people living under an overpass in the park when I said that and could turn our conversation to something more tricky...like how hard life was for most folks. In fact, we didn't talk at all about money after that but instead just ordinary stuff like hopes, both fond and dashed. Two people finding their way with each other. We kissed at the end of the date, which I took to be a promising sign, but only a little, which I knew was a bad omen.

Back at the hotel, I was trying to avoid all human contact so I could collapse in the jacuzzi and brood. I had no real idea what I was doing other than confusing myself and probably Gil too. I was trying to seduce him with glamour but at the same time I wanted him to like the deep me inside the shallow glitz. And of course, I couldn't tell him the truth of my situation even though I knew that it meant trying to build trust on a lie.

I didn't get very far through the lobby when the guy at the front desk pointed to a man sitting and pretending to read a paper like a spy. I never would have recognized him with his short hair and dark suit but up close I saw the same goofball behind the mask.

"Djinn?" I said. "Is that you?"

"Of course it is. Why didn't you listen to me at the club?"

"What club?"

"Never mind. Listen, things have changed. You have to get out of here."

“Out of where?”

“This hotel. It’s too visible, too public.”

“What difference does it make? I thought you said..”

“I said what I said when I said it. It’s different now.”

“Are you in trouble? Are we? Am I?”

“Not yet but someone has been doing research on the Virjos.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means they might start to find out about Mazuma which means that we might have to end this whole thing sooner than expected.”

“It’s only been two months. You said six.”

“Exactly.”

“But that’s not fair. You said..”

“Forget all that. It’s not a problem yet but just as a precaution...I want you to go somewhere else. The Plaza is a lousy choice.”

“Why?”

“It just is. Go anywhere else, but stay in Manhattan. And if I contact you and tell you to abort, you abort. Understand? You walk away.”

“But you said..”

“Jacq! This is a fluid situation. The whole mission is at stake. I’m trying to see if I can initiate the Mazuma program earlier than we planned. It’s a risk but we might have to take it. If I say so.”

“This isn’t fair!”

“What isn’t fair? Starting Mazuma a few months earlier? That’s the whole point of this. That’s a good thing, right?”

“Oh. Yeah.” I said. “Right.”

CHAPTER FIVE: THE MONEY TRAP

“We’re leaving,” I announced.

“What do you mean leaving?” my mom barked. “Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“I’m too old to go running around the city like a nomad.”

“Then don’t come. But I’m going.”

“All right Jacq,” she said sternly. “But one of these days, when we’re all done with this silliness and I’m sitting on the visitors side of the screen trying to get you an appeal, I hope that you’ll have found the respect for me to be candid and tell me exactly what is going on.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“To protect you.”

“From what?”

“I don’t know.”

She glared at me with that wilty look that said she knew I was only pretending to be sick to stay home from school and that was one look I could never resist. I didn’t have a choice anyway. I had to trust someone and she was my mom. She already knew enough to testify. So I ordered a \$900 bottle of Chateau Haut Brion 1971 – the only wine for confessions I hear – and I sat down on the floor in the middle of the Crystal Room, and slowly and clearly I told her all about Djinn and the program and me.

“So this is all a way to fix the world,” she summed.

“I guess so.”

“And when that starts, this all ends. It’s temporary.”

“So he says.”

“And you can’t take any of it with you?”

“That’s the rule.”

“And I’m the only one who knows this?”

“Besides Djinn and me.”

“Okay honey. Then its Titanic Rules from now on.”

“Which are?”

“We keep dancing until we hit the iceberg.”

There were plenty of luxury digs around the city but of course I was only allowed to rent and that narrowed it down to places like the 19th century Colonial

with majestic lawns, towering trees, 100-foot natural stone pool, waterfall, heated paddleball court, greenhouse, stable. But it was in Westchester County. Or the spectacular turreted, stone Tudor with two-story beamed ceiling living room and minstrel gallery, five bedrooms, four baths, three-car heated garage and natural trout stream running through foyer. But in New Jersey. Or the former castle of the late Otto Kahn, with 170 rooms and 39 fireplaces in Cold Spring Hills, Long Island.

I had to stay in Manhattan, epicenter of all epis and home to one Gil Westin, and so I settled for the double coachhouse on East 81st Street near the Metropolitan Museum Of Art. The owners – John and Portia Steele - were subletting it while they went to Europe for a vacation. Portia, a greyhound in a scarf, took us on a tour of the house. I followed her like a goon in a salon from room to room, not knowing a vase from a *vahse*, a drape from a draperie, and pretending not to be thrown by lacquer and millefleur and chintz, Rococo and aubusson. All the while trying to give the impression that I too had commissioned a mural of myself sitting semi-nude in a primeval zoo.

The house had five floors. The tour started at the street level with a garage and full carpentry workshop. We ascended by spiral escalator to the 30 by 50 foot living room with live-in stone fireplace. Taking a stance with our backs to the twenty foot windows, we could gaze up past the ficus trees and the free flying parrots that inhabited them, to see the balconies of the next two floors. Those levels contained the master bedroom suite with full entertainment wall, the sauna and indoor pool set in a tropical atrium, the exercise room and the soundproof video room.

On the top floor, under three skylights, were the extra bedrooms, the computer room and the mini-observatory with passenger telescope and satellite dish.

Each room in the house had been created by a team consisting of an interior architect, a designer, a decorator, an art consultant, an interiors photographer, a floral expert, a lighting designer, and a magazine layout consultant. Like the steamy Hong Kong lounge with straw wall paneling, rattan chairs and a live monkey in a wicker cage. Or the Renaissance library with an elevator hidden behind a false façade of books, 17th century nautical maps and Regency armchairs. The dining salon was a 1930s fantasy of glazed wood and glitzy sconces surrounding a mahogany table seating 36 that once belonged to Jefferson Davis. A Tahitian workout center was guarded by full-size porcelain giraffes and contained a hot tub surrounded by Greek statues in jet-sprayed porticos. In the master bedroom there was a vibrating four poster with veils of chinoise pinned to the ceiling and fringy pillows. The kind of bed great gay divas die in.

Back in the living room, I leaned on a LaSalle coyote pillow (or so the label said), set my feet down on the mahogany and basswood inlaid floor, and waited for her to sign the papers at an immense gnurled desk on which one could easily stage a chinchilla production of *La Traviata*.

Oddly at that point, it didn't seem particularly outrageous to me.



“There you are, my girl,” the Baron shouted from a couch in the lobby of the Plaza as we prepared to leave. “I’ve been hoping to bump into you. Your mother says you are changing quarters.”

“We found a cozy little townhouse near the park.”

“All of you?”

“I guess so. Plenty of room, I suppose.”

“How fine,” he said but there was a hint of sadness in his voice.

“You should come and stay with us sometime if you have a...”

“Marvelous idea!” he said, grabbing me by the arm and giving my ulna a shake. “How fine of you to ask. I’ve been praying for a change of scene. I can pack in no time. Be down in a minute.”

“No, I meant...”

“What a happy coincidence running into you. Who was it that said no one should come to New York unless they’re willing to be lucky?”

“Oscar Wilde?”

“No, it was your E.B. White I believe.”

“Well I believe him too.”

The Baron joining us meant that I could continue my savoring studies, which was good, but it also meant that he would essentially be living with my mom, at least in the same house, which was gross beyond imagination. But she liked the idea when I told her and since she was now my only confidant, I had to go along with it.

We settled into the townhouse fairly quickly considering that there were eleven of us now including a chef and, at my mom’s insistence, a masseuse. But when Gil asked me out on another date, I decided to shoo them all to the upper floors and be alone with him for once. I was wearing a slinky dress, a choker of green stones, and red red shoes with white lace socks. The drape of the fabric in front barely veiled my nipples and the back formed a slithery frame around bare skin. Dressed to kill, in other words, any attempt by fate to undermine my desires.

Aly, who had arranged all the details, was hovering while I sweated.

“Ever notice,” I said to her, “how many US presidents have pornographic names?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Harding, Bush, Pierce, Johnson, Polk, Fillmore.”

“What is the matter with you?”

“I guess I’m a little on edge.”

“No shit,” she replied. “Don’t worry, he’s probably just as nervous as you are.”

“Why would he be?”

“He’s dating a zillionaire.”

“He is?” I blurted. “Who?”

“You, you idiot.”

“Oh that. Do you think he likes me? I can’t tell. I think he must be seeing Virginia Lawrence.”

“No. He’s just shy,” Aly said, kindly.

“Shy?? He’s too classy to be shy. You think he’s shy?”

“It’s none of my business but don’t you think you should tell him about the whole Mazuma thing? So he knows who you really are?”

“What?? How do you know that? My mom told you!”

“Kind of.”

“What does that mean?”

“Everyone knows. The whole staff.”

“Shit.”

“I just think you’d better tell him the truth before he finds out some other way.”

“I can’t. What if he only likes me for the money?”

“But you won’t have any.”

“Shit.”

In addition to the chef, Aly had hired two waiters, one busgirl, one wine steward, a dishwasher and Humphrey Wayne, the noted nightclub performer who, for \$45,000 plus cab fare would sing and play romantic ballads on the baby grand.

I was wearing long diamond-chain earrings that connected my lobes to my collarbone by glistening cables, a dash of glitter on each cheekbone, and some dazzle in the hair. Hoping, perhaps, to blind him with some glintage. He was wearing a rich dark brown suit and a black silk T-shirt trying, I hoped, to seduce me with texture.

The meal was served by the waiters with white gloves, one of whom played Dr. Stone on Love Hospital in between waiting gigs. Crumbs were immediately scooped up by the chubby redhead who was anxious to get back to her singing lessons. The wine steward poured studiously, even while thinking of his budding novel. No napkin was used twice, no glass out of reach, no candle too slobby with wax. We ate at the pace of an edible minuet, forks poised like gestures.

But as always Gil seemed pretty cool about the whole thing. When I tried to pin his hand as the Baron might, I found myself clutching bare tablecloth. A series of topics went undiscussed. And it seemed to me that when he laughed it was never with true abandon. Instead of capturing his eyes with mine, I got the distinct impression that he was judging me.

“Is everything all right?” I asked, with the nonchalance of a psychoanalyst.

“I feel a little uncomfortable, Jacq. I’m not used to this kind of service.”

I excused myself and, in the kitchen, reprimanded the entire staff for taking too long, not taking long enough, hovering too much and too little.

“That should take care of it,” I said, returning.

“Did you send them away?”

“No. But it’s their first night. They’ll shape up.”

“I’m sorry Jacq, I can’t help feeling a little strange about all this. It doesn’t seem right.”

“Is something missing?” I asked.

“Restraint.”

“You’re right,” I said and went in to reprimand the staff for that too.

My earrings danced a necky tango, the candle flame swayed, Humphrey sang a torchy *Love Got Me Comin N’ Goin*, and I finally decided to pop the question.

“I hope this isn’t too personal but...are you and Virginia Lawrence a thing?”

“You mean a *thing* kind of thing? Of course not.”

I exhaled.

“That’s funny because I thought you and the Baron were,” he said.

“Yuck. He’s old enough to be my grandfather,” I said.

Gil took a deep inhale as the candles flamed and the room suddenly warmed up a few degrees.

“And anyway, I think he’s after my mom,” I added.

“I’d keep an eye on him if I were you. Did you see that diamond necklace he gave her. I bet it’s stolen. I did a little research on our friend the Baron. You know his paprika farm in Szeged on the border between Hungary and Bulgaria?”

“Yes.”

“They don’t grow paprika in Szeged because there is no Szeged because Hungary and Bulgaria don’t have a border.”

“Why are you poking your nose into his lies?”

“Because he’s a con artist.”

“Of course he’s a con artist. That’s what I like about him. He’s so full of fun.”

“He’s full of crap.”

“But it’s fun crap. And anyway, my mom can take care of herself.”

“Yes but can you?”

“Not at all,” I said and swung the earrings to bounce the light and tried to make some extra cleavage with my shoulders.

And for the first time that night, Gil leaned into the table and looked me right in the eyes, which made moisture all the way down the pipeline.

I cut into the chicken Kiev and laughed when the liquid gushed out. I licked my lips and watched - you bet! - as his pale mouth opened for each moist forkful, nibbled on the tidbit, then closed over it as it melted. By the end of the first course I was running a red fingernail through the juice and slipping it between my lips. When he reached for a slice of bread, I watched his neck tendons come and go.

We had drinks on the roof as the stars came out.

Small talk, smaller talk, tiny talk, talk so miniscule it would bore a neutron. Nice thing about that is how close you have to get to hear each other over the sounds of the city. Then a vacuum formed between us that pulled me forward and delivered me onto his lips. I know I moaned and thought...yes.

Yesyes, I thought.

Yes yes!

It was all a quote from the last page of some book but I meant it anyway.

"I hope I still respect myself in the morning," he said, running his fingers along my neck.

"You could sleep late," I offered and put my hand on his hip.

The knob of flesh there fit perfectly into my palm. He put his arms around my neck and arched forward. I skied the fingers of my other hand up the bumps of his backbone. In the brass cover of the sideboy I could see our embrace, like a copper cameo, and his long arms around me and my leg twisting around his.

We stayed like that for a long time, rolling tongues, mushing lips. He touched my knee and I went gaga, then slid his hand up to my thigh, then along the cone of my upper thigh, passing over areas of heat and cool on the way. At the top there was no elastic, no satin, no string. Instead, a curly scratchy muff shaped like an ocean wave.

Soon I was sitting on the table, dress curled at my hips. He was stepping between my legs, nuzzling his tip against my plashy slit. I was wet there, not watery but oily. Like the goo they use on Olympus for massages.

He had me in the palm of his hand and so, all dressed and wrapped, he began the slow, deliberate, exquisitely gentle process of entering. The slight parting, the minute spreading, the minor adjustment for angle, then the meek push of the bulb into its place. With each extra millimeter of intimacy, I shivered and shook, crunched my eyes, gripped his back, squeaked. When he was fully inside, he hugged me closer and we kissed.

Filled up and sealed in, we stayed just like that for a while before I turned to primal slime.

The rest is mere detail: the salty taste of the pucker around his right nipple; the glimmer of sweat that formed along his neck muscle; the pool of warm butter that formed where we had been sitting on the counter; the moment he bit my shoulder so hard it pushed me over the edge. One of us let out a coarse howl while an inner thumping faded into a heartbeat.

Then in the rooftop hot tub watching the fire in a small brick fireplace with two huge snifters from the brandy cart. The orange light from the flames glimmered through the greens and reds of the bottles and created fruity rainbows. The cherry in kirsch, the pear in poire, the raspberry in framboise, the plum in mirabelle, the apple in calvados, the grape in cognac. Strawberry, blackberry, elderberry, other-berry. The fire fanned as muted shades, the ghosts of butterflies, frolicked across the water. By a curious chemical reaction, the syrups combined with the love chemical and the water and the smell of Gil's body to turn my brain to ooze.

Dusk in New York.

The next night.

The color hums, the lights tune in, the garble gives way to a secret hesitation. A pause. As though something unexpected were right around the corner. Something quite fantastic. A rustle of leaves in a brick courtyard. Or a strip of maroon

sunlight dashing across black tar. The memory of seven cool notes on a flute. Or a musty shadow where no shadow can be. Something great. Something mysterious. Giggle down an elevator shaft.

It's all there. You can savor it any time you like. No bill of fare, no dues. Just attention to the details, that's the ticket. You have to stop where you are and notice. You don't need a nest egg or a windfall, only time to waste, time to watch things pass into the present.

Free time.

The yellow edgelight went to a windy blue; the kind of blue you would expect to find smackdab at the center of the moon. The surrounding buildings turned to amber, then crimson, then blood as night rose up from the rim of the earth and glazed the view with plum. I watched the windows light up. One by one. Nova of peach, rocktan, bananablast. The local bricks nodded off, dreamt of their earthy past - sand, straw, shore, lava.

It was all there, glittered by dabs of this color and that one. Bright spots and dark patches. Swirls. Smears. Twilight of the gobs. Then, straight above and right on cue, a sizzling star, white as space dust and shimmied by a drifting breath of cloud.

My city, the metropolitan diddle. The Big Apple. New York at dusk. No subway crime, no shakers and movers, no flat tires on crosstown buses. No broken heels or promises. No tube socks. Just a swell of colors flecked with electrondash.

A strange feeling that I couldn't quite place. Exhaustion? No. What was it? Satisfaction? Serenity? No, it was suspension. The suspension of dread. A sudden vacancy, like the end of a screeching siren. Breathing space. It didn't matter what happened next. Or if there even was a next. The moment, that was the key. Any moment. Every moment. One moment at a time. I knew it flew in the face of fact, but it seemed to me as I was lying there watching dusk swell, that there were times when things didn't fall apart, when the center held just fine, and the only thing slouching toward Bethlehem were the usual bunch of old slouches.



"I knew that was coming," the fat man said but this time Jacq did not jump.

She was softening to the idea that other people, strangers, would be hearing the whole story, even the most intimate parts. Either that or she was preparing for life as a notorious felon.

"I was falling in love," she explained.

"With Gil or with your own delusion?"

"Is there a difference?"

She looked sad sitting there in the dark and he decided to cheer her up.

"Did you know that Jack Horner was a real person?"

"You mean the riddle kid?"

"No, I mean the guy the riddle was based on."

“Really?”

“He was the steward to the Bishop of Glastonbury. The Bishop sent Horner to King Henry VIII with the title deeds to 12 estates but they were hidden in a Christmas pie for safety. On the way, Horner lifted the piecrust and pulled out a “plum” – one of the deeds for an estate – and kept it for himself. It was the source of his family’s wealth at Mills Park, England.”

“Swell.”

“In other words, your namesake was a crook too. Maybe you were fated to be one.”

“Thanks for that.”

“One thing I still don’t get though,” he asked. “You say this Djinn fellow by then had warned you twice that things were falling apart.”

“He didn’t say they were, he said they might.”

“Two warnings but you still didn’t think to get out while you could. Instead, you stayed there right out in the open.”

“I didn’t know where to hide or even how to hide. Or who to run from.”

“You could have walked away from it all right then and there.”

“Maybe...but I didn’t want to believe it would end.”

“I thought you hated Cinderella. Thought she was a sap.”

“She stayed because she was a sap waiting for her prince to save her. I stayed because I was falling in love.”

“With Gil or with your own delusion?”

“Is there a difference?”

CHAPTER SIX: CASH COW

Gil Westin was barely listening as two of Virginia's friends who were doctors discussed doctorly matters. He had gotten nowhere with the coded communications of the Virjos and was on the verge of giving up on them when a word suddenly caught his ear.

"It was in a virjo," the one doctor said.

"Is it a virus then?" the other one asked.

"It's an unusual kind that has positive effects on the body. A provirus."

"I'd like to read about that. Where did you see it?"

"Not sure. A research review in one of the virjos. I'll track down which one."

Gil's ears twitched.

"Did you say Virjo?" he asked.

"That's our shorthand for one of the virology journals," the doctor explained. "There are a bunch of them...east coast, west coast, national, international. Cutting edge research."

Gil immediately logged onto the web with his phone and began digging. In a few minutes he had a whole list of virjos and was interrogating the two doctors, surprised at his sudden interest, about them. One in particular attracted his attention simply because neither of the doctors had ever heard of it. It was called simply The Virology Journal but when they looked at the content, they said it made no sense. The messages posted there were clear enough, but they had nothing to do with medicine.

So that was it, Gil thought.

The Virjos, his legendary gang of cybercrooks, were hiding in plain sight and this online journal was the way they communicated with each other. All the rest of it – the intercepted messages, the Twitter threads, the Gibbet feeds, the coded nonsense – was all a distraction. The Virjos were communicating right out there in the open through a public website. The virus, the inoculation, the testing strategy... it was all there. If you thought the site was about germs, then that's what you read; if you were thinking cyberattack, then there it was.

A few hours later, Gil had tracked some of the players behind the fake names they were using – Goodpasture, Beijerinck, Fraenkel-Conrat and other notables in virological history. It seems that they were all part of a geek fraternity in the ivies called Gamma Beta Tron, which was an early hacker club. They were mobile, living and moving all over the world, but one of them seemed to mostly stay put. He lived in Brooklyn and his name was Djinn Thiebolt but there was a bit of snag. He was

dead, killed by an intruder three months ago in Brooklyn on his own birthday. What a coincidence, Gil thought.



The staff of Repast Perfect was serving up a little snacky-poo on the King William, the Royal Crystal, the Silvertine. Just your basic Belon Oysters from Charente, brioche de fois gras with petit cochon de lait Fortunoff, homard du Maine grille au beurre blanc with Le Montrachet, 1949. And a three-tiered orange, mocha, and peach mousse.

It was another of our house parties, which were nothing more than an excuse to spend some of the money before everything went poof at midnight. It never occurred to me that Gil might find it all distasteful rather than scrumptious.

“There’s such a thing as being too rich,” he said flatly.

“Being rich has nothing to do with money,” Virginia said. “It’s not what you have of value that matters. It’s what you value.”

“Unless, like most rich people, what you value is money,” Gil replied.

“I happen to agree with Virginia here,” the Baron said. “The best things in life aren’t things but experiences. You only need enough money to not have to think about it.”

“But when is enough enough?” Aly asked, motioning to everything in sight.

“You can’t only take care of yourself,” Gil said. “We’re all responsible to each other so we have to live responsibly.”

“And how would you do that, my young friend,” the Baron asked.

“By giving it away.”

“Good lord,” my mom said. “Let’s not be hasty.”

“Exactly,” the Baron agreed. “These matters of a just world are decided above. By you-know-who. There must be this imbalance for an imbalanced world to function.”

“Spoken like a Baron,” Aly said.

“Here we sit,” he continued undaunted, “blessed by the gods. Enjoying the finest life has to offer. Why? Because we are good? Because we are exemplary? Not at all. Simply because we have had the great good fortune to be who we are. It isn’t our fault that we have this opportunity.”

“What about the opportunity to help others?”

“He’s got a point there,” said the woman bringing the water. “Wealth should be more evenly distributed.”

“If I thought we could truly change the world as it is,” the Baron said, “I would agree with you. But at my age, I’ve seen too much to blind myself to the truth.”

“The guy’s right,” the first waiter said drawing up a chair. “Money is corrupting. There’s living well and there’s living obscenely well.”

“You said it,” the other waiter said. “The top one percent of the people in this country own more assets than the bottom ninety percent. It’s not right.”

“This is all quite fine in discussion,” the Baron said. “Believe me, my dears, I know your feelings well. This is the great socialist hope that I too expressed when I was a student at The Hague. But there is one problem with all of this. The fact is that wealth and comfort and worldly goods are very hard to part with. No matter how noble the heart.”

“Agreed.”

“Then how do you propose to make it more equitable? With a police force of Buddhists?”

“How about teaching compassion like we teach math?” Aly asked.

“Is there any huckleberry sherbert?” my mom asked but seeing that the serving staff was now seated around the table, she went to get it herself. “Anyone else want some?”

“Just a smidge,” the crumbboy said.

And on and on and around and around it went. Life, wealth, justice, greed. I didn’t say much. Not because I didn’t want to upset Gil although that was true. But because I saw it all so differently then. From my perch on a fragile column of mutable data, I realized that it all came down to luck.

Somewhere there was a book, grand in scope, thick as the Milky Way. With pages wide as comets. In the book was written all that ever will or would or could happen, neatly in columns, inscribed by the eternal. And somewhere on one of those infinite pages, in miniscule print, was my life. Yours too.

Don’t even consider taking a peek. Because all you will find there is a terrible injustice. The iniquities of wealth are nothing compared to the unfair distribution of luck that is recorded in that book, where a million little details separate those who get the breaks from the ones who get broken.

Sure if some heavenly socialist should come along with a plan for the fair sharing of fate, hand me a placard, give me a rock, sing me a chant. And point me towards the revolution.

But until then, I thought, I’ll take what I can get while I can get it.

When the front doorbell intervened, I was too preoccupied with fate to be cautious and I simply got up and opened the door. The man on the other side turned out to be a messenger delivering a fancy envelope. I stood there holding it like a dead fish not knowing what to expect but Aly came to the rescue.

“It’s an invitation to the Gala for the Less Fortunate. Looks like there’s going to be a big bash on June 24th at eight o’clock. Request the pleasure of Jacq Horner and guests.”

“That’s in three weeks. Where?” I asked.

“Here.”

“I’m not giving a gala,” I said.

“It’s being given by the owners of the house,” Aly explained. “To celebrate their return from Europe.”

“That’s the day after we move out,” I said.

“You don’t own this house?” Gil asked. “Then who does?”

“The Steeles.”

“I know them,” Virginia said. “Lovely people.”



The next few weeks flew by as we began the process of unknitting ourselves from the house and the staff. By June 23rd almost everyone had cleared out of the castle and moved back to their familiar lives, apartments, cats, electric bills. Except for me and my mom, of course, since I had nowhere else to go and my mom had no one else to babysit. But there was still a great commotion as an army of preparers marched in to set up for the Gala.

The Baron had moved on to an apartment he kept on the East Side but in the midst of all that he returned with great fanfare and a blocky woman in tow who looked like a pug in a smock.

“My dear girl,” he said to me, “may I introduce Polonisia. She is the greatest manicurist in the Balkans!”

“Charmed,” I said shaking her hand. But she looked at mine with a rotten expression.

“I have asked her to help you prepare for the gala.”

“I don’t do manicures,” I said.

“Oh but you must, you must” he insisted. “A woman with the right nails can conquer empires!”

“It’s really not my thing.”

“Oh you must make it your thing, my girl. Polonisia can turn a mitt into a velvet glove. Besides...a little secret? Men love a shapely nail.”

“Well, if you insist.”

“I do, my girl,” he said, and tapped me off for a session.

No harm, I thought, but I was surprised at how long the whole procedure took. Polonisia had me dip all my fingertips into some kind of stiff gel for twenty minutes until I thought I was going to coagulate. Then, checking my fingers, she had me put my right thumb back in the goop for another round.

The nails looked okay, I thought, but hardly the stuff of empire-building.

At nine o’clock the next day, all the guests began to arrive. They came in droves: the notables, the celebutantes, the famous and the near-famous, the fifteen-minuters. All vaguely familiar or at least famous in some generic way. People who did not do anything but live their own autobiographies. Or were having someone type it into the next bestseller. Or were on The Tonight Show or Oprah. Or were supposed to be but were cancelled at the last minute. Or were waiting for a chance to produce. Or, via the trickle of status, had screwed the man who had screwed the man who had once screwed Cherie.

They came by limo, these magnificent creatures, winners and doers, shaker-makers. These whom the gods adored, these sleek who inherit the earth. Graced

by luck and born in Brentwood not Bosnia, Palm Beach not Palestine. They of the trust and the fund, knowers of the stars, these blessed, breast without sag, tan without cancer, these perfect of bond and bill, world without end amen.

The Creeps came in full performance gear. Glenda Twelvetrees arrived with husbands seven and eight. And the model with the big chest who was having an affair with the Joint Chief of Staff. And Arlo Bargle, the financier. LaRoche who cruised into New York on a Gulfstream X Private Hoverplane. Peter Korn the composer and Constance Enamorata the dancer. Sulu Custabar just back from a tour. Oden, whose wedding cost more than the Peloponnesian Wars. And the Killborgs, the Lemurs, and the Winks. And Otto Milk, out on bail for stock manipulation and wearing a million dollar 87-carat diamond studded Piaget watch that didn't work but it didn't matter because he had no appointments to keep in prison anyway.

Lonny Bridges, the garbage artist, and Sheena, a sultry blackhead with neon lips who parked her Lamborghini Countach HydroGlide out on the street because if anything happened to it she would simply pick up another one anyway. And Dyan Leeds, the media sensation who, in a wiser world, would not merit a line in a carwash flyer. And of course Oscar De, who had come to take back all the clothes. Even Larry Lum, my old boss, because he knew someone who knew someone.

The bash was a tribute above all to Liberace, patron saint of overkill. It was the kind of orgy of indulgence only the rich can afford to lull time. Everything ever made in the universe seemed to be jammed into the main room, from bedouined waiters serving stuffed goat, to belly dancers, to a seal with a beach ball. The guests were packed so tight they were clinking incisors. And in the middle of this crowd there was a pyramid of 735 crystal goblets. A waiter perched on a ladder spent the evening pouring bottle after bottle of champagne into the topmost glass. It cascaded down the tiers in a waterfall of the bubbly that ended in a golden pond in which a live swan was sloshing.

I watched all this from the second floor balcony and tried to find the charity that was at the center of it but all I could see was that champagne flowing like a waterfall. In fact I found that inspiring in a strange way and went to the bathroom. But as I was closing the door an arm blocked it and someone stepped in with me. It was a large woman with bad hair and lumpy breasts.

"Excuse me!" I insisted.

"It's me!" Djinn said fixing his hair in the mirror.

"What are you doing here? And why the getup?"

"No time to go into that. You have to get back to Brooklyn and initiate the Mazuma program."

"What are you talking about?"

"Someone is onto us, tracked down the program. If they play it right, they could undermine the whole plan."

He had taken out lipstick at that point and was freshening up.

"We have to abort the Trojan horse," he went on. "So you've got to get back there and do it."

“You said we couldn’t get caught!”

“Yeah well.”

“Then why don’t you do it?”

“I can’t do it because I am dead. Or at least the me that was is. And it has to be your thumbprint.”

Someone was knocking on the door to get in.

“What if we don’t do it? Then what happens?”

“Dunno. If they catch onto us in time, game over. If they don’t, it might still work but we get caught. Either way, we can’t wait until the end of the summer. We have to go now.”

“Sweetheart are you okay?” my mom asked from the other side of the door.

“Just get back to Brooklyn and thump your thumb. You remember where the scanner is, right? That will cause the system to close down your account and start Mazuma now.”

“Jacq, who’s in there with you?” my mom said and started pounding.

“Leave now,” he said. “Walk away from all this, start the sequence, sayonara.”

“Then what?”

“Have a nice life.”

“What are you going to do? Live the rest of your life as a woman?”

“Why not, half the people on the planet do it.”

He opened the door and ran smack into my mom who was about to wrestle her to the ground thinking Djinn was some kind of stalker, which wasn’t far from the truth.

But Djinn being much bigger just shoved her aside, adjusted his dumpy dress, and vanished into the hoopla.



So that was it. Game over, my time was up. Midnight earlier than expected.

I figured there was only one way to end it clean and so I found Gil in the crowd and was all set to tell him what was going on...that the money was just a big fat scam but for a good cause and that I was about to end the whole fairy tale. Come clean, in other words, and let the chips fall.

“I have to tell you something,” I said, “but you may not like it.”

“Good,” he said, “me too.”

“Oh...then you go first.”

“I’m leaving.”

“In the sense of...”

“Look, Jacq...”

“I hate when people start with look,” I said. “Look means goodbye.”

“I really like you. Maybe more than that. But I’m a pizza and a beer kind of guy. All this goes against what I stand for. It’s too much to deal with.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“You can’t. You’ve lived a privileged life. Cut off from reality. To you I’m just another possession. A prince on a pedestal.”

“Yes. I mean no, that’s not true.”

“You care about what you own.”

“It’s all a big joke.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“No. I’m just an ordinary slob abusing a lucky break.”

“Please, Jacq, spare me the sarcasm.”

“I mean it. This is all a sham.”

“You may think so, but it’s not really funny. There’s a real world suffering out there.”

“I know, I live there. This is all fake. I don’t have any money at all!”

“That’s what I’m talking about. You live in a dream world. You haven’t learned anything with all your wealth.”

“There isn’t anything. No wealth to learn from. Not a single dollar bill.”

“That’s what you people tell yourselves to avoid any responsibility for it. Look at you. You’ve devoted your whole life to giving yourself pleasure as if there were no other problems in the world.”

“No pleasure. None at all. Until I met you. It’s this Mazuma thing. I got carried away with it I guess. But in the end...”

“In the end, just like Virginia and Richard Ixis and all these people here, you pick through truths like desserts. But I can’t live like that, Jacq. I can’t and I won’t.”

“Me either!”

“I’ll see you around,” he said and I was probably tugging at him but he slipped away.

“But it’s not even midnight yet!” I insisted.



I refused to run after him – that would have been too much even for me – so I went up to the roof to be alone for a few moments but leaning on the railing only gave me the impression of standing on the deck of a sinking ship. A rolling tide of acidity within threatened to become one with the sea. The wind rose, slapped my puss, then went on to abuse some other sap.

“Who slapped you, “ the Baron said, noticing the red cheeks.

“Fate,” I said.

“Cheer up my girl. You had a good run for the money. That’s all you can expect.” But seeing that that wasn’t quite enough, he added: “Life is a klodge, that’s all.”

“Is that anything like a pain in the ass?”

“A klodge, my dear, is a device that has a hundred moving parts that all need constant oiling, uses a lot of electricity, is terribly noisy and too big to carry around

and which, at the press of twelve buttons, shows heads for `yes` and tails for `no`”

“Why not just flip a coin?”

“My point exactly. Life is just an overly fancy way of getting from here to there. If you have some fun along the way, you come out ahead.”

“Not the way Gil sees it. He thinks I have too much money for my own good.”

“How can anyone possibly have too much money?”

“He thinks I’m a selfish, spoiled rich kid.”

“Yes but that’s exactly what’s so appealing about you!”

“Swell.”

“Just a joke, my girl. I’m quite sure that if you give him some time to think things through, he’ll change his mind.”

“That would be too wonderful.”

“Nothing is too wonderful to be true.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“May I give you some advice?” he said and placed an avuncular hand on my clavicle. “The real secret is to find a role to play and play it to the hilt. You have to invent yourself. Tack together a dandy fib and make it come true. Act the part. Believe me, anyone who’s anybody has done this. Remember what they said about Victor Hugo?”

“Not in so many words.”

“They said that he was a madman who took himself for Victor Hugo. We all must do that.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re a Baron! You have a paprika fortune. Lived all over the world. What have you had to invent?”

“Poor Jacq...do you always believe what you hear?”

“Always.”

“My girl, I’m too old for fairy tales and too young for memoirs. So I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Ten years ago I suddenly realized just how miserable I was. I had dreams and plans and spent my whole life watching them erode and crumble in the light of circumstance. I saw myself getting older and my chances diminishing. I was a 58-year old haberdasher – tie and hat salesman – living in Bayonne, New Jersey. With a wife and a mortgage and snapshots of the grandchildren on the dresser. I couldn’t stand it anymore. So I quit. I simply stopped being what I was and made a new life for myself. From scratch, as they say.”

“You’re not from Szeged?”

“A little invention of mine. I had lived all over Europe as a young man. But my wife was American and wanted to settle near her family.”

“There’s no paprika farm?”

“Only in the spicemill of my mind. Actually, I think one of my cousins does grow the stuff somewhere in Romania. But I’m not sure.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Thank you, my girl. Disbelief in the truth is a great vote of confidence in me. But what I’ve told you is accurate. Listen to me, everyone has the chance to create

themselves.”

“I tried. It didn’t take.”

“So far, young Jacq. Only so far.”

“Jacq!” shouted Virginia, appearing behind us on the roof. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

She grabbed me by the arm and swung me in the direction of the elevator.

“What are you still doing here?”

“Moping.”

“There’s no time for that. Weren’t you told to leave?”

I looked at her in shock.

“How would you know that?”

“Never mind,” she said. “Just get going and do what you have to do. You have to get there before anyone finds out or we’re all sunk. Take my limo downstairs. Now!”

I couldn’t believe it.

She was one of them...one of the Virjos.

Virginia Lawrence, heir to a fortune, grand dame of the high life, and queen of the Connecticut shore...was a mole!



Outside on the street I jumped into the car and gave the driver directions. There was traffic on the streets already and so it was slow going but even at that pace I had the distinct feeling that we were being followed so I had him take a circuitous path to lose them.

Up Madison, over on 96th, down Fifth, around on 72nd, right then left, always shadowed by this black car, a Mercedes I think. And not like the movies at all but instead a sluggish game of cat and mouse.

We jugged into an intersection, pulled back; the Mercedes appeared at the end of a street. We turned and turned again but only in time to see the rear bumper of the other car vanish around a corner. Like snails in a labyrinth, we inched and crept to the lumbering rhythm of steam from manholes, lights changing for no one, a distant pounding of a jackhammer, workmen shouting.

Up, down, parallel, perpendicular, askew but never meeting, we finally made a quick dash down 86th and over to the FDR drive. The Mercedes followed across 3rd Avenue, 2nd, 1st. Screech, screech. We picked up speed, soon going faster than the stream of traffic, looping between the slower cars, with the other car right behind. Cars popped up, slipped past, bit the dust. In a calm microspace between two Volvos, I recalled reading that there are a million ways to die but only one way to live.

Or was it the other way around?

And was this the one way?

To throw them off we went north past Welfare Island, Ward's Island, Randall's Island, then just missed the exit for the Triboro Bridge hoping to send them off to Queens but it didn't work. Whop, whop, whop. Nameless bridges joining Manhattan with the Bronx intercepted the sky. Barges on the Harlem River flew backwards with a twitch like home movies, then the George Washington Bridge. My driver pushed, pressed, nudged between bumpers, returned obscenities. Always checking the mirror for our shadow which was always there to be checked.

Suddenly, an opening. He moved towards it, floored the pedal and we were off again. Whizz whizz, around the overleaf, down the ramp. The engine screamed in the echoing corridor of the concrete walls.

Look out!

Down the West Side Highway, jolting over potholes. The Mercedes lost a hubcap. Past the sewage treatment plant on the right, that old building on the left. Then Grant's Tomb, Riverside Church, swaying trees, picnickers on the roadside, a kite, the sun rising over Jersey, an early Circle Line boat touring the Hudson. Hello everybody!

Zipzip.

The shoreline across the river condensed into one long grey streamer from palisade to mudbank, then interrupted by the docks, a great white ship, the Intrepid, the heliport, flapflapflap of the blades. Careful, there's a cop car! Whizz. Nothing stayed put. Each thing passed between blinks...bicycles and boxes quickly, boats and bridges more slowly. A few more jumps and bumps, a near collision and a suitcase in the middle lane as we raced past the tunnel entrance, Battery Park City.

Then a quick twist of the wrist and we were in the underpass around the tip of the island. The Mercedes almost missed that and went off towards South Street but out of the tunnel and back on the FDR again it was still there. Fulton Fish Market below. Ship masts, the tennis bubbles, the Brooklyn Bridge.

Then clear sailing.

The Manhattan Bridge loomed above but like a rotor on a monstrous fan - whizz - it was gone. We followed the curves of the road. The Williamsburg Bridge. Whizz. A bird swooped down near the riverbank, a jogger ducked, someone threw something, nice tree, the projects, a softball game, crack of the bat, the UN, whizz, Bellevue, brick and more brick. Baby carriage, Roosevelt Island, whizz, sounds of the wheels wheedling, Queensboro Bridge. Irregular jigsaws of sky danced in the crazy spaces between buildings with a glint and a flash.

Smoke, seagull, paper bag. We careened around a bend, shot between two motorcycles, leaped ahead. Pulled up, looked back. The Mercedes was still there.

We took the exit at 96th at the last minute. The traffic light was changing but we went through it and so did the Mercedes. We pressed to the left under the highway. The Mercedes was on our left. Press, press. Then at the last minute we veered right, missed and jolted over the curb and shot out onto the street. The Mercedes couldn't make it and ended up on the divider, covered in hot dogs.

Good move!

We were back to the legal speed; courteous turns and traffic etiquette. As

though nothing much had happened at all. Around us, the usual mass of cabs and cars.

So long, suckers.

My driver checked all the mirrors, then looked at the clock.

“Twenty six minutes to go completely around Manhattan,” he said.

But I was too busy reaching into my jacket pocket to search for a barf bag. That’s when I found the note. This was the same old jacket I had started the adventure with but someone had slipped this into the pocket. It was a neatly written note on nice paper made by someone who knew their penmanship. It read:

My dear girl,

Please excuse this hasty withdrawal on my part.

Circumstances, as they are so fond of doing, have created a few new twists and turns. Do not take my quick departure personally. Remember that though our paths may cross and recross, they are never the same path.

I want to tell you how delightful it has been to spend time with you. I have enjoyed your companionship immensely, not to mention your hospitality.

In light of which I have taken the liberty of borrowing a little something from you. Namely, your thumbprint.

I do hope you won’t mind terribly much. Just imagine all the pleasure it will be giving to me. I trust that you will have the good sense not to make any unwise reports to the authorities. You are, after all, a big time criminal yourself and have to watch your step. Above all, don’t be bitter. A few months of wealth is more than most people will ever know. Was it Balzac who said “Behind every great fortune there is a crime?” It was, I think. But also behind every great crime there is a sense of style. This it has been your great fortune to achieve.

Cheers and Regards,

The Baron

So that was it.

His manicurist was no beautician, she was a thumb thief. Polonisia of the Balkans had obviously made a mold of my thumbprint to capture the ridges as well as the pattern. That’s why he had been so insistent about it. And he knew – for how long I couldn’t say – that the whole thing was a sham and a scam and a crime. His cup of tea exactly.

It was a storybook tragedy...no goodies, no prince, and no money.

But what would happen now if I tried to terminate the program?

Would my thump even work if the Baron had it?

There was only one way to find out...



The neighborhood back in Brooklyn was just the same as I had left it four months earlier, only more so. The building was still boarded up and full of crap. The pay phone on the corner was still missing the pay phone. The brownstone was still crumbling, the limestone decaying. I told the driver to head back since I would be leaving the way I came in, a nobody with nothing.

I ducked under the front stoop and climbed in through the boarded door to the basement. It was dark inside. No commotion, no armed intruders, no hubbub. The air smelled like wet gym socks. The flashlight was just where Djinn had left it and I picked it up and made my way to the sealed room.

Like a time capsule, everything was the same inside that room. Lights blinked, fans hummed, mold spored. The only notable difference was that Djinn had finished the poem he wrote on the concrete column. It now read:

*I really hate this damn machine,
I wish that I could sell it.
It doesn't do just what I want
But only what I tell it.
Now here's a program I can use
Before my cash flow narrows,
To change, according to my whim,
Fortune's slings and arrows.*

But I had no time for doggerel or for clues or guessing games. I had only one thing to do. One mission. Thump my thumb and end my dream. I found the scanner and held my thumb up but hesitated and stared at it dumbly. Like an ape at a rocket launch.

What if I didn't do it?

What if I just let the program run?

What if the whole Mazuma thing actually came to pass and really did shift the winds of fortune away from some and over to others? Would the world really change? Would people? I doubted it. The good guys would just go sour and it would start all over again. The world, I decided, was too old to change and people just too greedy.

Was it all just an excuse to not lose what I had?

Sure.

But I didn't really know that then and so I stood there for the longest time not touching that scanner. In fact I was so focused on not doing anything that I completely missed the flash at the front windows, barely noticed the sound of the basement window being shattered, and was taken completely by surprise when the two men pounced on me and wrestled me to the ground.

CHAPTER SEVEN: EVEN MONEY

I was sitting in the back seat of the Mercedes with the two goons on either side of me. One of them was the severe looking guy with pointy ears who looked like Kafka and had an ace bandage on his hand. They didn't say a word to me, no Miranda, nothing.

We went over the Brooklyn Bridge again, just like I had at the beginning, but this time there was no pumpkin coach and no princess. All I noticed were the cracks, rifts, fragments, and holes which were nothing more than the dream breaking up, dispersing, and fading into actuality. All the pretty horses had turned back into rats, carriages into squashes, glitter to grime. Somewhere a pen ran out of ink before the last period could be piped.

The car left Manhattan and headed upstate. No sounds came in either, not the hum of a motor or the hoot of wind at the windows. Nor was there any shake or shuffle as we drove up the Henry Hudson Parkway through the verdant fuzz of Westchester and on up to the Saw Mill Parkway.

It was a beautiful day. The seat was as comfy as a bed of napping sheep and it really didn't bother me that this was going to be my last ride. I didn't even care that they had skipped the arrest, the hearing, the trial, the conviction and the sentencing.

The Baron was right.

It was style not substance that mattered.

Somewhere upstate, between rolling hills, the car turned off the main road onto a minor one. We followed a sinuous country path around a tractor, past an apple orchard, then down a straight lane with neat cypress trees fencing the sides.

We eventually stopped at a stone gatepost where a closed circuit camera surveyed us. A green light underneath the lens blinked and we continued on our way. Low hanging branches swept the windows as we passed through a flat field as prim as a golf course. On the right was a pond with ducks and geese and a weeping willow tickling the water. We continued up a slight hill, through a manicured glade, then around a circular driveway enclosing a rock pool.

At the far end of the round path there was a house. Not just any house but a figment of a house, the wish of all houses not yet made. It was a modernist castle, an immense combustion of proud stone and gleamy glass, with noble gables and lofty chimneys, concrete balconies dripping with flowers, and arched wooden doorways held together with bronze bolts.

The car made one loop around the path then turned off to follow another road around to the rear of the house which faced the mountains. Walls shot this way and that in impossible balances, forming shaded porticos and stark shadows. All of which converged on a central atrium, encased in a glass geodesic, with trees and an indoor waterfall. A network of rivers angled through the changing geometries. They went under overhangs, over floating blocks of stone, and in and out through the caramel and rust partitions that joined the structure to the surrounding land. A herd of goats with cubist faces grazed at one corner of the compound.

The car pulled into an empty courtyard beside a long concrete wall. Cutouts in the wall revealed an inner prairie with trees and peacocks. Further around, another bold thrust of concrete seemed to hover out over an enormous green wading pool. Water flowing from a fall on the roof splashed down rocks and moss, then followed a trough inside the wall to its furthest edge and gushed into the pool in a stream of bubbles. Two horses - one jet black, one silver white - lolled up to their knees in the bright water.

A man in a blazer opened the door of the car. He escorted me across a slate bridge to a patio on the other side of the pool covered with rich brown and black tiles scorched by fire. A riverlet with knobby goldfish wound through the tiles. I recall a helicopter too somewhere. And a hot air balloon in the shape of Pegasus. A strolling giraffe.

I don't know much, criminally speaking, but I was pretty sure this was not the State Correctional Facility at Fishkill.



Ducking under the arms of a metal sculpture swaying in the breeze, I entered the house through a wall of glass that parted automatically and led to one of the smaller rooms of the mansion, meaning large enough to board the Grand Army but not its caissons. Three stories above us, skylights let in warm shafts of light. I stood under them like a prisoner on the dock, ready for the verdict.

There were a number of enormously upholstered antique chairs scattered around the room. Three people were sitting in them. My escort walked up to one of them, mumbled something, then took a position near two robust nudes in a garden. The man he had spoken to got up out of the chair and walked towards me. He was smiling.

I knew who it was right away, recognized his face from countless pictures in the media. The smooth skin, the tiny nose, the square jaw. Boyish wave of too much hair. Narrow eyes like a reptile. Face of the guy in high school who was always trying to sell you a gold lighter.

“Hello Jacq,” he said holding my shake in his grip with both hands. “Nice to meet you at last. I’m Richard Ixis.”

“I know, Mr. Ixis.”

“You can call me Rich.”

“You can say that again.”

“I hope you enjoyed your ride up here. Beautiful isn't it? Cities should be built in the country where the air is cleaner.”

He ushered me into the room and introduced me to his associates Mike Mooney and Carmen Stock who were sitting in the other chairs.

“Sit down Jacq. Would you like something to drink?”

“Whatever you're having,” I said noticing that the clear liquid he was swilling in a goblet hadn't poisoned him.

“Bring our guest some water,” he said to the guard. Then he sat down in the plush chair opposite me. “So here we are at last. I must say, my people had a lot of fun watching you these last four months.”

“Four months?”

“Isn't that when it started?”

“You've known about me from the beginning?”

“We've known about that program ever since...what was the guy's name?”

“Djinn Thiebolt,” Mooney offered.

“Ever since Djinn died. He must have been quite a genius. A little on the rebellious side though but that's all right. We need them too. I admire anyone who tells the powers that be to go fuck themselves.”

“Me too,” I said.

“He had a brilliant program there,” Ixis continued. “But he made one mistake and his little Trojan horse – your account – triggered our alarm. We did a check up on him and decided he was worth keeping an eye on.”

“Why didn't you just stop him?”

“More complicated than that, Jacq,” Ixis explained and turned to Stock to explain the explanation.

“We didn't know exactly what the program was then, just that it was a hack. When Djinn died, we assumed he had associates but you were a very unlikely candidate. Which is probably why he picked you.”

“You could have gotten away with it, too” Mooney said. “It would have been impossible to trace it back to you. Luckily for us, you made a big blunder right away.”

“Which was?”

“You checked into the Plaza Hotel and thumped for it,” Ixis said.

“That was a blunder?”

“I own the Plaza. My people are always appraised of, shall we say, unusual guests. Like someone with an Empyrean account with no luggage who rents the biggest suite in the hotel. You seemed worth checking up on. And you were. We eventually made the connection to Djinn.”

I took a gulp of water.

“So that's that then,” I concluded and stood up. “Djinn is dead, the jig is up, and the end is here so I can go home. Right?”

“Sorry, Jacq,” Ixis said and I plopped back down again. “At this point it is essential that we turn you over to the proper authorities. It's in our best interest.”

“Why?”

“Spin,” Mooney said. “We’re heavily invested in the thumb scanning technology. Exposing the whole scam will prove that the system can’t be hacked.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Ixis said.

We all got up and followed him through doors that led to the atrium at the center of the house where an entire tropical rain forest had been recreated. Surging waterfalls, rock lagoons, waterspouts, coral jetties, and cascades fringed by leafy canopies, ferny topiary and weedy grassland. It was a private Eden, like the rest of Ixis’s world, a controlled environment. A place where the weather was never a problem only the when and the how much.

“I don’t think you really understand the scope of all this, Jacq,” he said. “Trillions of dollars pass through the financial networks every day and we’re going to manage a large chunk of that. A billion customers? It’s not out of the question. Do you begin to see what I’m getting at?”

We reached a swimming pool, a scale model of the China Sea. The rich blue water churned near a submarine spring, then flowed through inlets and bays carved into the rock and lined with Indonesian leaves. Ixis walked over to the wall and touched a button. The entire sloping glass wall on the north end of the room slid down on tracks and disappeared into the ground. What was an indoor ocean now became an immense watery portico opening onto a vista of the mountains.

“Now, all of this,” Ixis went on as he waved to some of his guests at the pool, “I mean all the customers and the banks and the money involved, the whole worldwide consumer payment system, depends on one thing Jacq. Can you guess what that one thing is?”

“Conspicuous consumption.”

“Trust. Trust in the system. Trust in the future. Trust in me. We have to show that financial transactions are protected. That’s where you come in, Jacq. That’s why you’re so valuable to us. We’ll have caught you trying to commit the computer crime of the century. Proof positive that it can’t be done. I want you to know that I really appreciate it.”

A pastel blue macaw, the color of night in ancient Macedonia, flew onto Ixis’s arm. He picked some seeds out of a ceramic dish and let the bird peck at his hand. Its yellow eye darted.

“This is crazy,” I said. “You can’t blackmail me.”

“Blackmail? We’re turning a felon over to the police. It’s our civic duty.”

“I’ll talk to the news people!”

“Would *you* believe the kind of story you’d have to tell them? Anyway, the whole thing is better if comes from us so we can use it to our advantage.”

We entered another room near an immense antique Chinese rug in which tweedy curlicues of clouds and delicate filaments of orange leafery wove an intricate labyrinth against a royal blue background. Was it the complexity of this design that was giving me the headache or everything else?

“Try to keep in mind what’s at stake here,” Ixis continued. He interlocked his fingers to make the point. “The stability of the free world is based on a smooth flow of financial information between people and governments and corporations. We can’t afford to let people lose trust in the system. It could lead to complete chaos.”

The black horse was standing with his nose against the rear wall. The wall was all glass, giving the illusion that he was within nuzzling distance. If only I had spent some of the money on riding lessons, I thought.

“Then why did you bring me here?” I finally asked. “Why not have the cops pick me up?”

“A number of reasons,” Ixis said. “First of all, I wanted to meet you. I like people who take risks, even foolish ones. Secondly, although our case against you is obviously airtight...”

“Evidence in a complicated scam like this has to be very precise,” Mooney continued. “We have to be able to prove that it was you who perpetrated the crime.”

“You need a confession?”

“We need your thumb,” he said and snapped his fingers at someone who walked over with a small black box.

It was a thumb scanner and Mooney held it front of me like a gift but I wasn’t sure how to think about it. Ixis knew about the scam and about me but did he know about Mazuma? Thumping might prove that I was who he thought I was and that would probably send me to the slammer. But would it also initiate the program and start the whole topsy-turvy wealth reset?

I had no idea but on the other hand, there was no other hand. They had me, I had my thumb, and that was that. So I delicately held it out and placed it on the pad. We all leaned in towards the readout. Bip bip bip.

“It doesn’t match!” Stock barked, examining the display.

“What??”

“It doesn’t match,” she repeated.

“Doesn’t match what?”

“Her fingerprint doesn’t match the one on file in the cloud.”

Ixis looked at Mooney who looked at Stock then at me, then back at Mooney.

“Try it again,” Ixis said and offered up the box one more time.

And once more I leaned forward and placed my thumb on it with the pomp of a royal highness. Bip bip bip, bebee bip.

“Still doesn’t match.”

“Do you know anything about this Jacq?”

“Honestly I don’t,” I said examining my digit in the light. “It was my thumb when I came here.”

“Well, it seems we have situation then. I’m not quite sure what we’re going to do about it. You’ll have to stay the night with us since we can’t wrap things up today as planned. We’ll have a bedroom upstairs prepared. Please feel free to wander around. Take a swim or a sauna. I don’t want you to feel like a prisoner here.”

“Sure...even if I am one.”



They put me in a nice bedroom with a veranda that overlooked one of the lagoons. A cool breeze came in through a slit between the doors. The only light in the room was the ambient sheen from the full moon framed by the upper left pane.

I sat up on the bed and noticed an empty glass on a table nearby. I saw it clearly...the perfect oval of the rim and the two drops of rosy liquid clinging just below it. I saw the warp of the wood grain on the table through defects in the glass itself. Then that speck of something or other as the shape curved down to the bottom. And the dashes of light that seemed to float above the surface. That bright spot where the complete ceiling fixture was reflected. The bands of grey just above the stem. And then the stem itself with its shimmers of shadow and slots of color.

Touching the rim produced a hollow ring. I ran the tip of my finger around the circle. A hint of screech. The round edge felt slivery against the skin.

There it was. Just there. I saw it clear as glass, so to speak. And empty as only an empty glass can be. Just a glass on a table. Not every glass. Not any glass. Not some or none or many glasses. Just that one there at that instant of glassiness.

Had I lost my mind?

No.

Actually I felt quite lucid. I was noticing a glass and not because it was a major glasswork or an expensive piece of glass art or my own wonderful glass. None of that. What was so very critical about it was that it was just a glass. And I was seeing it as it was. Without hope, without regret. I could feel myself seeing it. Everything else - anticipation, desperation, worry - all vanished like smoke in the typhoon of seeing. All that was left was me sitting there looking at a glass. Taking it in. Noticing what it was and enjoying it for that and nothing more.

Then, quick as a thought, I thought about Ixis and Djinn and my mom and the Baron and everything else I had in mind and the moment went - poof! - just like that. The world of time and temptation returned.

It all sounds crazy I know.

A glass.

But seeing it and noticing that I was seeing it struck me as some kind of feat. As though the greatest thing there is is nothing greater than just seeing a thing. The greatest richness nothing fancier than simple appreciating. You didn't need a roomful of things either. You could savor anything. Any single thing. A touch, a taste, even an idea. All you had to do was stop the headlong rush into the future and focus. Focus on what was right there before you - the qualities of the thing that made it at once totally unique and also completely common.

The glass, for instance.

A cloud passed across the moon, stopped for a picture, moved on. The rich smell of forsythia drifted in. A loon wooed. For a moment I was free of the torment of envy, the amassing mania. All the riches I could ever imagine were right there

all the time. In the space between the glass and me. The best didn't matter in the least. Nor the most, for that matter. All that counted was what you allowed yourself to savor. The ability to focus on what there was right before your eyes and ears and fingertips. Like an empty glass.

The Baron was right when he once told me that to someone living on it, the moon is always full.

That was real wealth in the flesh.

How to make a mountain of delight out of any old shitheap.



When morning came, I was escorted down the stairs to the main dining room. Ixis was sitting at the end of a long table with Mooney and a new woman who had the crisp look of a corporate attorney. They invited me to join them for breakfast. Strawberry pancakes and Eggs Benedict and sausage and lox and bagels and a tu-reen of fresh fruit.

I refused.

I wasn't really hungry having already had to eat crow, my words, and my hat all in one glub.

"Jacq," Ixis said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this so early on such a nice morning but our legal expert, Ms. Cayce here, has come up with an alternative plan. I'm afraid it's the only way to proceed. We're going to have to turn you over for the murder of Djinn Thiebolt."

"You can't do that!"

"It's the best way to tie you in with everything."

"But he's not dead! Djinn is alive!"

"I know this is a shock. But think about it. It's clear that you must have killed him and stolen the program. That makes the most sense."

"I'm telling you Djinn is alive. I just saw him yesterday. He was in a beige dress."

"You know, Jacq, in spite of everything, you're quite a lucky young woman."

"Blessed," I hissed.

"Just think of it. There are 35 million minutes in the average life. That's 35 million minutes in which to find out that you only have one minute left to live. But it rarely happens. Think of those odds. Things are definitely on the side of luck. Just getting through, minute by minute, is lucky. And you did even better than that for a while."

"You can't prove that I killed him. There's no body. I know because I've seen it walking around. No evidence at all."

"You're still not seeing the big picture here, Jacq. It doesn't matter. It's all about the spin, the story. Whether they convict you or not is beside the point. We're trying to weave a plausible tale here. For our customers."

"Then let me help."

“We are. The police will be here any minute.”

“No, I mean let me tell the whole story about what really happened. You can publicize that. It proves that this won’t work.”

Somewhere outside I heard the crush of tires on gravel. Then the gasp of engines being turned off and the whomp of car doors. Solid cars like the kind the cops drive. There was a knock at the door that sounded to me like the heavy fist of fate.

“See what I mean?” I pleaded. “You get the same story with the same moral but I stay out of prison.”

“I like that,” Ixsis said, “You’ve tried to write a nice ending for yourself. But this is really a cautionary tale. The moral is that dreams don’t always come true, at any cost. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I shouted as they handcuffed me. “Be smart. It’s better if I win in the end.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s the American dream. Don’t you watch television?”

“Goodbye Jacq.”

“My way is better.”

“Only for you.”

The officers eventually tugged me out of eyeshot but I kept talking anyway. There was no answer.

It’s terrible the way voices trail off into the void when no one is listening.

EPILOGUE

“All done?” the fat man asked, flicking on the light in the room.

Jacq had been staring into the screen for so long that the harsh overhead light burned her eyes.

“How long have I been working?” she asked.

The fat man consulted a pocket watch.

“About twenty hours. Have you gotten it all down?”

“I think so.”

The fat man turned off the computer and gave her a few minutes to adjust to the change of tempo. He fiddled with the power cord to give her something to do and watched her as she stretched and yawned and twisted and rubbed her hands, then looked around the barren room and sighed.

“I’ll miss this place,” she said with high sarcasm.

“Sure,” the fat man said, eyebrows bouncing.

When she seemed ready, he walked to the door and put a bulbous hand on the doorknob. Her expression reflected the uncertain future on the other side of the door but the fat man was low on sympathy by then because he had a deadline and he simply twisted the knob and swung the door open. She was surprised to see the door open so easily having assumed, in her gabby haze, that it would be locked, bolted, and sealed.

The fat man turned his palm to Jacq like a jailer ushering a convict back to the yard and she duly stepped over the threshold. The light in the outer room was softer, sunlight playing on the glass, and the rich summer green of the trees in Central Park filled the window on the far side of the room. Gil, standing there like a model in one of those shoe ads, turned and handed her a drink.

“Care for a Golden Slipper?”

“A what?”

“It’s a drink...apricot brandy and yellow chartreuse.”

“Great.”

“So that’s that,” he said.

“I hope so,” she replied.

“Pretty bizarre,” he concluded, shaking his head. “You knew about the Virjos all along. In fact, you were one of them in a way. Could have saved me a lot of time.”

“I didn’t really know that,” she said. “I just met Djinn and did what he told me to do.”

“And Virginia Lawrence helped,” he said. “She was one of them too. Although she completely denies it now.”

“Takes all kinds,” Jacq concluded.

“Is she done, Sarge?” Gil asked, turning to the fat man.

“Yup,” Sarge Warner said, waving the laptop in the air. “Mr. Ixis is very anxious to get this to his PR people. So I’m out of here. But you folks can leave whenever you want. You’ve got the suite until tonight.”

“No, let’s go,” Jacq said. “I’m sick of this place. I want to get back to real life. Were you waiting here for me the whole time?”

“Just for a couple of hours,” Gil said.

“What were you doing?”

“Watching the news. There was this weird story about some shelter for homeless mothers in New York that just got a mysterious endowment of a billion dollars. Crazy. Must be a hoax of some kind.”

“Must be.”

“I’ll have to look into that. It’s my area of expertise. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“What’s next?”

“No idea. All the bridges are burned.”

“Then there’s only one thing to do in a situation like this.”

“Which is?”

“Let’s go get a pizza and some beer.”

“Right now, that sounds like what I would call a storybook ending.”

About the Author

Alan Robbins is the Janet Estabrook Rogers Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Kean University in New Jersey where he is also the founding director of The Design Center, producing unique publications, award-winning online exhibitions, and innovative products.

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His card, board, and computer games – including 25 mystery jigsaw puzzles – have fans nationwide and his cartoons, graphics, illustrations, and photographs, have appeared in numerous publications.

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