

ONE

Tom Weldon looks out on the lights of the city. Squinting, he imagines a moon-sparkled bay. *To be anyplace but here*, he thinks. The hour is late, but lamps still flare—from office towers, such as the one he’s still working in.

At the desk in front of him, a senior partner of the firm, Harrison Stith, attacks Tom’s draft with the stub of a red pencil. Each slash, to Tom, is like the drawing of blood.

“Tom Weldon, Tom Weldon,” the senior man says, as if lamenting the junior’s very existence.

“Yes, Harry?” says Tom. He’s long-legged and wary, with craggy features uncommon in a young lawyer, and the wavy brown hair of someone too busy to have it cut at a shop.

Harry stares at Tom’s name among the attorneys listed as “of Counsel” on the brief. “Should be an ‘e’ at the end, don’t you think? Should be *Welldone*. Know why it’s not?” He sits back in his chair, with plump cheeks and thinning hair, comfortable in his condescension.

“Probably was at some point,” Tom says.

“Not your name, fella. Your performance. Here. At the firm. You know why—regarding your performance—we cannot say well done?”

“We...?”

“The partners.”

Tom slides into the wing chair facing Stith directly. “Are you firing me, Harry?”

"We don't fire people. You know that."

"You're passing me over."

"In the vernacular, yes."

"At two in the morning, you're passing me over?"

"It's not quite two," Harry says. "And it's not just my judgment."

"You waited to tell me until we finished this brief? At two in the morning!"

"You had to be told," Harry says soothingly.

"That here, at this firm, I'm a dead man?"

"That's a fair summary, yes."

"I might be the best lawyer *in* this firm."

"Not for our purposes, no."

He stares up at Tom blankly. In the setting of his desk, his big leather chair, and the cityscape behind him, Stith looks like a figure in a diorama.

"Let's take the present situation as an example," Harry says.

"Of what? Your duplicity?"

"Your perfectionism, Tom. Why are we still here at two in the morning? Why, in fact, was this brief not sent to me until eight o'clock tonight? I don't know what you think you're writing. Or, for that matter, for whom you're writing it."

"We could have filed what I gave you," Tom says. "You haven't changed it *that* much."

"No, not that much," Harry acknowledges. "There wasn't time."

"To dumb it down."

"To reduce the risk that our particular judge, who is not genetically blessed—"

"With a brain," Tom notes.

"With a functioning one, yes, that's the point—will think we're talking down to him."

"What about the client?" Tom asks.

To which Harry restrains a guffaw. "The client? Give me a break."

Tom looks about him again, at Harrison Stith's living room of an office, and then back at Harry himself. Ironies abound. Stith is a man of long, stately, patrician lineaments, and lineage, lecturing Tom Weldon—equally long, but scruffy in looks *and* background—on the unwisdom of producing elegant work. Tom rises from the wing chair. “Are we done here?”

“You’re leaving me with this? Now?”

“Now it’s yours. You can take my name off it.”

“I want you to file it!” Stith says.”

“You mean stay here another two hours? Retyping and printing what you’ve done to my draft?” Tom smiles. “Give *me* a break.” He leaves, with Stith sucking the air.



Elena Riles waits for the reaction of five actors, a dramaturge, and two staffers of Playwrights Community, who, despite the late hour, have just workshopped her play. Actually, everyone waits on the dramaturge, Neil Offinger, who is also the Artistic Director of the institution. Neil, a small man of bent features, ordinarily speaks in institutionalese, as if his sentences were crafted for a grant application. When giving notes on a play, his remarks are briefer, though no less obscure.

“I think ...” Neil muses, and everyone leans, literally, his way. “I think ... it has moments, but it’s rather long, don’t you know.”

Elena makes a face. “Too many words?”

“Well, that would account for its length, yes.”

“Like *Don Giovanni* having too many notes.”

“Are you comparing yourself to Mozart?”

“The comparison was to the royal review, which is what, it seems, I’m being treated to here.”

The dramaturge is unfazed by the sarcasm. Indeed, he seems to fancy the allusion. “There’s another thing. Your work’s a bit ... derivative, don’t you know.”

“My *play*?” Elena says, standing. “*Derivative?*” Though scrawny and short, she’s somehow imposing, with her covergirl face framed by unstylish dark curls. She wears a denim skirt, tank top and overblouse. In a much earlier age, artists would have been commissioned to paint her in gowns.

“Calmly, Elena.”

“Derivative of fucking *whom*?”

He looks around. “Anyone on this? Let’s hear it. Todd?”

The actor whose name is Todd looks up, appearing stressed.

“I dunno. Beckett? Pinter?”

“Yes, well,” Neil says. “A lot of that.”

“This is bullshit,” says Elena.

“Now, now,” soothes Neil.

“You defend that!”

“It’s just a note, my darling, and everything in due time. Anyone else?”

People look sleepy. Sitting around a battered wood table on hard folding chairs, they also look as if they want to go home.

“We started too late,” Elena says. “Everyone’s tired.”

“I’m afraid discussion of the other plays did exceed the time allotted.”

“You booked too many, Neil. For one night, ridiculous. And mine last.”

“Yours was the longest. And we have only the one room, darling.”

“Oh?”

“I’m just saying.”

“No, you’re not *just* saying. You’re implying.”

“Perhaps we should dismiss the cast. Schedule discussion for when everyone’s fresh, has the time to think more about it.”

Elena starts to leave. “This is really bullshit.”

“Elena!”

“I’m not buying you another room.”

“No one’s suggested—”

“Y’know, Neil. You’ve got a lousy hand, and you just overplayed it.”



Robertson Riles, a handsome man of unimposing physical stature, gruff style, and immense wealth, waits in an unlit office for his daughter to call. The office building, which he owns through a personally controlled REIT and leases to his firm, Riles Whitney & Co., sits on a side street in the west end of Hell’s Kitchen. It’s an architecturally undistinguished steel and glass structure, except that it’s taller than any building within blocks. As a result, Riles enjoys an unobstructed view of the rest of Manhattan from the top floor. In the darkness of his space, the city lights float up like clusters of the galaxy. Riles owns many other shafts of those lights, and the feeling of proprietorship is deeply satisfying. His daughter’s tardiness produces quite the opposite effect.

There are issues to discuss. He has two sons-in-law in the business; however, they’ve already demonstrated their incapacity to lead it anywhere but into Chapter 11. Elena has the genes, if she would but use them. And while he badgered her into business school, she’s remained adamantly opposed to joining the firm. Tonight, he means to corner her again on the subject. She said she’d be late. He said, “Try to make it before sunrise.”

“Why tonight?” she asked.

“Just be here,” he said. “I’ll wait.”

If not tonight, he thinks, she’ll have another excuse for tomorrow—and the next day. It’s important that he speak to her now.

For one thing, he’s about to launch the biggest and possibly bloodiest takeover fight of his life. The target, whose stock he’s been secretly buying for months, is General Technology & Media, headquartered on Sixth Avenue in a dark glass building

as tall as his own. His rival for that prize is Jockery Holdings Inc., which occupies the entirety of the building adjacent GT&M's—twin peaks disturbing the perimeter, and serenity, of his view. Riles's company will be the "white knight," since he has a relationship with GT&M's largest stockholder. But, at the opening of the market that day, an as yet undisclosed "black knight" bought a block of GT&M shares even larger than the tranche seized by Jockery Holdings. Riles wants Elena in on the battle if for no other reason than to learn the rules of the "kill," how it's best done—and the thrill of it.

For another thing, there is churning in him this night a feeling of more than normal disquiet. He believes himself to be an extraordinary person, but one susceptible to extreme whimsies and premonitions. He's learned to honor these. It's not that his whimsies are always gratifying or that his premonitions always come true. But either signals that something important is about to happen in his life that his consciousness hasn't picked up on yet, some opportunity, or threat; something he damn well better be ready to pay attention to. And call to the attention of the person who matters most to him.

As for his promise, that he'd wait all night for her call, he thinks he might have to make good on that too, when, finally, his private line rings.

"Dad, I'm leaving. Five minutes. Seven max."

"I'll be downstairs," he says.

He delays a few moments. It's that disquieting premonition. Sharper now, more pronounced. It's not opportunity, but danger. As if it might be the last night of his life.



Tom Weldon traverses an empty and relatively dark street. No cabs to be found, he's bound for Tenth Avenue. He's not overly fond of this walk; it's uphill and uninteresting, crammed with low grungy buildings and graffiti-scarred walls. Then he arrives

at the block where the one skyscraper incongruously looms. It's the ostentatious home of Riles Whitney & Co., standing out like a beacon.

The street is the one Tom normally takes, having just a bit gentler uphill slope and, given the Riles building, a little more activity, though he expects none at this late hour. Just as he passes the entrance, however, several surprising things happen almost simultaneously. None other than Robbie Riles, a recognizable gray-haired figure who famously owns most of the company, strides out of his skyscraping castle. Then a young woman, turning the corner from Tenth Avenue, begins waving as Riles appears. And, most unanticipated, a cab signaling empty, passing her, heads directly toward Tom.

Tom runs forward and waves, not at Robertson or the young woman, who passes him on the other side of the street, but to flag the taxi. It guns by him too, halting abruptly in front of the building, and proves not to have been empty at all. Two men jump out of the vehicle; one grabs the young woman and tries to shove her into the back seat. The other goes for Riles, who is already swinging his arms at his assailant. Instinctively, Tom hurls himself at the woman's captor, which is almost the last thing he remembers. The very last thing he remembers is being hit by a punch delivered professionally to the left side of his head.



Near the top of Time-Warner Plaza on Columbus Circle in Manhattan, in one of the most expensive condominium apartments in the world, a bald man of considerable height and an overall thickish, sleek appearance lies without sleeping next to a beautiful woman half his age. She generally calls him Rex, though that's not his name, and professes to be in love with him. He accepts both the sobriquet and the displays of affection. His own displays are delivered less warmly but in

marketable form. The arrangement suits both of them. As does the fact that most nights she's there she sleeps easily while he lies awake. He'll sleep eventually. But four hours is all he needs.

One of his mobiles gyrates on the night table. Rising from bed, he takes the phone with him to the window. "Yes?" he says softly.

A calm male voice on the other end says only, "It's done. First phase."

"Thank you," Rex says and hangs up. Always good, he thinks, to be courteous to everyone, even, or maybe especially, to henchmen.

His bedroom complex, a wraparound windowed corner suite, frames views of the park to the east, and of downtown and the Hudson River to the south. He can just make out the top few floors of the Riles Whitney building southwest of him. He smiles, contemplating the corporate commotion no doubt already going on there as he settles himself back into bed. Relaxed by this thought, he feels himself sink into his mattress. Like a drug, he thinks, drifting off into slumber. A job well done *is* like a drug.