

ONE

The man with the rubber boots stepped into the elevator behind me, but I didn't see him at first. I smelled him though – the pungent odor of smoke and cheap wine and life on the street without soap. We were alone as we moved upward, and when I finally glanced over I saw the boots, black and dirty and much too large. A frayed and tattered trench coat fell to his knees. Under it, layers of foul clothing bunched around his midsection, so that he appeared stocky, almost fat. But it wasn't from being well fed; in the wintertime in D.C., the street people wear everything they own, or so it seems.

He was black and aging – his beard and hair were half-gray and hadn't been washed or cut in years. He looked straight ahead through thick sunglasses, thoroughly ignoring me, and making me wonder for a second why, exactly, I was inspecting him.

He didn't belong. It was not his building, not his elevator, not a place he could afford. The lawyers on all eight floors worked for my firm at hourly rates that still seemed obscene to me, even after seven years.

Just another street bum in from the cold. Happened all the time in downtown Washington. But we had security guards to deal with the riffraff.

We stopped at six, and I noticed for the first time that he had not pushed a button, had not selected a

floor. He was following me. I made a quick exit, and as I stepped into the splendid marble foyer of Drake & Sweeney I glanced over my shoulder just long enough to see him standing in the elevator, looking at nothing, still ignoring me.

Madam Devier, one of our very resilient receptionists, greeted me with her typical look of disdain. 'Watch the elevator,' I said.

'Why?'

'Street bum. You may want to call security.'

'Those people,' she said in her affected French accent.

'Get some disinfectant too.'

I walked away, wrestling my overcoat off my shoulders, forgetting the man with the rubber boots. I had nonstop meetings throughout the afternoon, important conferences with important people. I turned the corner and was about to say something to Polly, my secretary, when I heard the first shot.

Madam Devier was standing behind her desk, petrified, staring into the barrel of an awfully long handgun held by our pal the street bum. Since I was the first one to come to her aid, he politely aimed it at me, and I too became rigid.

'Don't shoot,' I said, hands in the air. I'd seen enough movies to know precisely what to do.

'Shut up,' he mumbled, with a great deal of composure.

There were voices in the hallway behind me. Someone yelled, 'He's got a gun!' And then the voices disappeared into the background, growing fainter and fainter as my colleagues hit the back door. I could almost see them jumping out the windows.

To my immediate left was a heavy wooden door that led to a large conference room, which at that moment happened to be filled with eight lawyers from our

litigation section. Eight hard-nosed and fearless litigators who spent their hours chewing up people. The toughest was a scrappy little torpedo named Rafter, and as he yanked open the door saying ‘What the hell?’ the barrel swung from me to him, and the man with the rubber boots had exactly what he wanted.

‘Put that gun down,’ Rafter ordered from the doorway, and a split second later another shot rang through the reception area, a shot that went into the ceiling somewhere well above Rafter’s head and reduced him to a mere mortal. Turning the gun back to me, he nodded, and I complied, entering the conference room behind Rafter. The last thing I saw on the outside was Madam Devier shaking at her desk, terror-stricken, headset around her neck, high heels parked neatly next to her wastebasket.

The man with the rubber boots slammed the door behind me, and slowly waved the gun through the air so that all eight litigators could admire it. It seemed to be working fine; the smell of its discharge was more noticeable than the odor of its owner.

The room was dominated by a long table, covered with documents and papers that only seconds ago seemed terribly important. A row of windows overlooked a parking lot. Two doors led to the hallway.

‘Up against the wall,’ he said, using the gun as a very effective prop. Then he placed it very near my head, and said, ‘Lock the doors.’

Which I did.

Not a word from the eight litigators as they scrambled backward. Not a word from me as I quickly locked the doors, then looked at him for approval.

For some reason, I kept thinking of the post office and all those horrible shootings – a disgruntled employee returns after lunch with an arsenal and wipes out fifteen of his co-workers. I thought of the

playground massacres – and the slaughters at fast-food restaurants.

And those victims were innocent children and otherwise decent citizens. We were a bunch of lawyers!

Using a series of grunts and gun thrusts, he lined the eight litigators up against the wall, and when their positions suited him he turned his attention to me. What did he want? Could he ask questions? If so, he could get anything he damned well pleased. I couldn't see his eyes because of the sunglasses, but he could see mine. The gun was pointed at them.

He removed his filthy trench coat, folded it as if it were new, and placed it in the center of the table. The smell that had bothered me in the elevator was back, but not important now. He stood at the end of the table and slowly removed the next layer – a bulky gray cardigan.

Bulky for a reason. Under it, strapped to his waist, was a row of red sticks, which appeared to my untrained eye to be dynamite. Wires ran like colored spaghetti from the tops and bottoms of the sticks, and silver duct tape kept things attached.

My first instinct was to bolt, to lunge with arms and legs flapping and flailing for the door, and hope for luck, hope for a bad shot as I scrambled for the lock, then another bad shot as I fell through the doorway into the hallway. But my knees shook and my blood ran cold. There were gasps and slight moans from the eight against the wall, and this perturbed our captor. 'Please be quiet,' he said in the tone of a patient professor. His calmness unnerved me. He adjusted some of the spaghetti around his waist, then from a pocket in his large trousers produced a neat bundle of yellow nylon rope and a switchblade.

For good measure, he waved the gun at the horrified faces in front of him, and said, 'I don't want to hurt anybody.'

That was nice to hear but hard to take seriously. I counted twelve red sticks – enough, I was certain, to make it instantaneous and painless.

Then the gun was back on me. ‘You,’ he said, ‘tie them up.’

Rafter had had enough. He took one very small step forward and said, ‘Look, pal, just exactly what do you want?’

The third shot sailed over his head into the ceiling, where it lodged harmlessly. It sounded like a cannon, and Madam Devier or some female shrieked in the foyer. Rafter ducked, and as he attempted to stand upright the beefy elbow of Umstead caught him squarely in the chest and returned him to his position against the wall.

‘Shut up,’ Umstead said with clenched jaws.

‘Do not call me Pal,’ the man said, and Pal was instantly discarded as a reference.

‘What would you like us to call you?’ I asked, sensing that I was about to become the leader of the hostages. I said this very delicately, with great deference, and he appreciated my respect.

‘Mister,’ he said. Mister was perfectly fine with everyone in the room.

The phone rang, and I thought for a split second he was going to shoot it. Instead he waved it over, and I placed it squarely before him on the table. He lifted the receiver with his left hand; his right still held the gun, and the gun was still pointed at Rafter.

If the nine of us had a vote, Rafter would be the first sacrificial lamb. Eight to one.

‘Hello,’ Mister said. He listened briefly, then hung up. He carefully backed himself into the seat at the end of the table and sat down.

‘Take the rope,’ he said to me.

He wanted all eight of them attached at the wrists. I cut rope and tied knots and tried my best not to look

at the faces of my colleagues as I hastened their deaths. I could feel the gun at my back. He wanted them bound tightly, and I made a show of practically drawing blood while leaving as much slack as possible.

Rafter mumbled something under his breath and I wanted to slap him. Umstead was able to flex his wrists so that the ropes almost fell loose when I finished with him. Malamud was sweating and breathing rapidly. He was the oldest, the only partner, and two years past his first heart attack.

I couldn't help but look at Barry Nuzzo, my one friend in the bunch. We were the same age, thirty-two, and had joined the firm the same year. He went to Princeton, I went to Yale. Both of our wives were from Providence. His marriage was working – three kids in four years. Mine was in the final stage of a long deterioration.

Our eyes met and we both were thinking about his kids. I felt lucky to be childless.

The first of many sirens came into range, and Mister instructed me to close the blinds over the five large windows. I went about this methodically, scanning the parking lot below as if being seen might somehow save me. A lone police car sat empty with its lights on; the cops were already in the building.

And there we were, nine white boys and Mister.

At last count, Drake & Sweeney had eight hundred lawyers in offices around the world. Half of them were in D.C., in the building Mister was terrorizing. He instructed me to call 'the boss' and inform him that he was armed and wired with twelve sticks of dynamite. I called Rudolph, managing partner of my division, antitrust, and relayed the message.

'You okay, Mike?' he asked me. We were on Mister's new speakerphone, at full volume.

'Wonderful,' I said. 'Please do whatever he wants.'

‘What does he want?’

‘I don’t know yet.’

Mister waved the gun and the conversation was over.

Taking my cue from the pistol, I assumed a standing position next to the conference table, a few feet from Mister, who had developed the irritating habit of playing absent-mindedly with the wires coiled against his chest.

He glanced down and gave a slight tug at a red wire. ‘This red one here, I give it a yank and it’s all over.’ The sunglasses were looking at me when he finished this little warning. I felt compelled to say something.

‘Why would you do that?’ I asked, desperate to open a dialogue.

‘I don’t want to, but why not?’

I was struck by his diction – a slow, methodical rhythm with no hurry and each syllable getting equal treatment. He was a street bum at the moment, but there had been better days.

‘Why would you want to kill us?’ I asked.

‘I’m not going to argue with you,’ he announced. No further questions, Your Honor.

Because I’m a lawyer and live by the clock, I checked my watch so that whatever happened could be duly recorded, if we somehow managed to survive. It was one-twenty. Mister wanted things quiet, and so we endured a nerve-racking period of silence that lasted fourteen minutes.

I could not believe that we were going to die. There appeared to be no motive, no reason to kill us. I was certain that none of us had ever met him before. I remembered the ride on the elevator, and the fact that he seemed to have no particular destination. He was just a nut in search of hostages, which unfortunately would have made the killings seem almost normal by today’s standards.

It was precisely the kind of senseless slaughter that would grab the headlines for twenty-four hours and make people shake their heads. Then the dead lawyer jokes would start.

I could see the headlines and hear the reporters, but I refused to believe it would happen.

I heard voices in the foyer, sirens outside; a police radio squawked somewhere down the hallway.

‘What did you eat for lunch?’ Mister asked me, his voice breaking the silence. Too surprised to consider lying, I hesitated for a second, then said, ‘A grilled chicken Caesar.’

‘Alone?’

‘No, I met a friend.’ He was a law school buddy from Philly.

‘How much did it cost, for both of you?’

‘Thirty bucks.’

He didn’t like this. ‘Thirty bucks,’ he repeated. ‘For two people.’ He shook his head, then looked at the eight litigators. If he polled them, I hoped they planned to lie. There were some serious stomachs among the group, and thirty bucks wouldn’t cover their appetizers.

‘You know what I had?’ he asked me.

‘No.’

‘I had soup. Soup and crackers at a shelter. Free soup, and I was glad to get it. You could feed a hundred of my friends for thirty bucks, you know that?’

I nodded gravely, as if I suddenly realized the weight of my sin.

‘Collect all the wallets, money, watches, jewelry,’ he said, waving the gun again.

‘May I ask why?’ I asked.

‘No.’

I placed my wallet, watch, and cash on the table,

and began rummaging through the pockets of my fellow hostages.

‘It’s for the next of kin,’ Mister said, and we all exhaled.

He instructed me to place the loot in a briefcase, lock it, and call ‘the boss’ again. Rudolph answered on the first ring. I could envision the SWAT leader camped in his office.

‘Rudolph, it’s me, Mike, again. I’m on the speaker-phone.’

‘Yes, Mike. Are you okay?’

‘Just fine. Look, this gentleman wants me to open the door nearest the reception area and place a black briefcase in the hallway. I will then close the door and lock it. Understand?’

‘Yes.’

With the gun touching the back of my head, I slowly cracked the door and tossed the briefcase into the hallway. I did not see a person anywhere.

Few things can keep a big-firm lawyer from the joys of hourly billing. Sleep is one, though most of us slept little. Eating actually encouraged billing, especially lunch when the client was picking up the check. As the minutes dragged on, I caught myself wondering how in the world the other four hundred lawyers in the building would manage to bill while waiting for the hostage crisis to end. I could just see them out there in the parking lot, most of them sitting in their cars to keep warm, chatting away on cell phones, billing somebody. The firm, I decided, wouldn’t miss a beat.

Some of the cutthroats down there didn’t care *how* it ended. Just hurry up and get it over with.

Mister seemed to doze for a second. His chin dipped, and his breathing was heavier. Rafter grunted to get my attention, then jerked his head to one side as if to suggest I make a move. Problem was, Mister held

the gun with his right hand, and if he was indeed napping, then he was doing so with the dreaded red wire held firmly in his left hand.

And Rafter wanted me to be the hero. Though Rafter was the meanest and most effective litigator in the firm, he was not yet a partner. He was not in my division, and we weren't in the Army. I didn't take orders.

'How much money did you make last year?' Mister, very much awake, asked me, his voice clear.

Again, I was startled. 'I, uh, gosh, let me see —'

'Don't lie.'

'A hundred and twenty thousand.'

He didn't like this either. 'How much did you give away?'

'Give away?'

'Yes. To charities.'

'Oh. Well, I really don't remember. My wife takes care of the bills and things like that.'

All eight litigators seemed to shift at once.

Mister didn't like my answer, and he was not about to be denied. 'Who, like, fills in your tax forms?'

'You mean for the IRS?'

'Yeah, that's it.'

'It's handled by our tax division, down on the second floor.'

'Here in this building?'

'Yes.'

'Then get it for me. Get me the tax records for everybody here.'

I looked at their faces, and a couple wanted to say, 'Just go ahead and shoot me.' I must've hesitated too long, because Mister shouted, 'Do it now!' And he used the gun when he shouted.

I called Rudolph, who also hesitated, and so I shouted at him. 'Just fax them in here,' I demanded. 'Last year's only.'

We stared at the fax machine in the corner for fifteen minutes, afraid Mister might start executing us if our 1040's didn't hurry along.

TWO

Freshly anointed as scribe for the group, I sat where Mister pointed with the gun and clutched the faxes. My buddies had been standing for almost two hours, backs to the wall, still joined together, barely able to move, and they were beginning to slouch and slump and look miserable.

But their level of discomfort was about to rise significantly.

‘You first,’ he said to me. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Michael Brock,’ I answered politely. Nice to meet you.

‘How much money did you make last year?’

‘I’ve already told you. A hundred and twenty thousand. Before taxes.’

‘How much did you give away?’

I was certain I could lie. I was not a tax lawyer, but I was confident I could dance around his questions. I found my 1040 and took my time flipping through the pages. Claire had earned thirty-one thousand dollars as a second-year surgical resident, so our gross income looked quite handsome. But we paid fifty-three thousand in taxes – federal income and an amazing variety of others – and after repayment of student loans, Claire’s educational expenses, twenty-four hundred a month for a very nice apartment in Georgetown, two late-model cars with the obligatory mortgages, and a

host of other costs naturally related to a comfortable lifestyle, we had invested only twenty-two thousand in mutual funds.

Mister was waiting patiently. In fact, his patience was beginning to unnerve me. I assumed that the SWAT boys were crawling in the air vents, climbing nearby trees, scampering across the roofs of buildings next door, looking at blueprints of our offices, doing all the things you see on TV with the goal of somehow placing a bullet through his skull, and he seemed oblivious to it. He had accepted his fate and was ready to die. Not true for the rest of us.

He continually toyed with the red wire, and that kept my heart rate over a hundred.

'I gave a thousand dollars to Yale,' I said. 'And two thousand to the local United Way.'

'How much did you give to poor people?'

I doubted if the Yale money went to feed needy students. 'Well, the United Way spreads the money around the city, and I'm sure some of it went to help the poor.'

'How much did you give to the hungry?'

'I paid fifty-three thousand dollars in taxes, and a nice chunk of it went for welfare, Medicaid, aid to dependent children, stuff like that.'

'And you did this voluntarily, with a giving spirit?'

'I didn't complain,' I said, lying like most of my countrymen.

'Have you ever been hungry?'

He liked simple answers, and my wit and sarcasm would not be productive. 'No,' I said. 'I have not.'

'Have you ever slept in the snow?'

'No.'

'You make a lot of money, yet you're too greedy to hand me some change on the sidewalk.' He waved the gun at the rest of them. 'All of you. You walk right by me as I sit and beg. You spend more on fancy coffee

than I do on meals. Why can't you help the poor, the sick, the homeless? You have so much.'

I caught myself looking at those greedy bastards along with Mister, and it was not a pretty sight. Most were staring at their feet. Only Rafter glared down the table, thinking the thoughts all of us had when we stepped over the Misters of D.C.: If I give you some change you'll (1) run to the liquor store, (2) only beg more, (3) never leave the sidewalk.

Silence again. A helicopter hovered nearby, and I could only imagine what they were planning in the parking lot. Pursuant to Mister's instructions, the phone lines were on hold, so there was no communication. He had no desire to talk to or negotiate with anyone. He had his audience in the conference room.

'Which of these guys makes the most money?' he asked me.

Malamud was the only partner, and I shuffled the papers until I found his.

'That would be me,' Malamud offered.

'What is your name?'

'Nate Malamud.'

I flipped through Nate's return. It was a rare moment to see the intimate details of a partner's success, but I got no pleasure from it.

'How much?' Mister asked me.

Oh, the joys of the IRS code. What would you like, sir? Gross? Adjusted gross? Net? Taxable? Income from salaries and wages? Or income from business and investments?

Malamud's salary from the firm was fifty thousand dollars a month, and his annual bonus, the one we all dreamed about, was five hundred and ten thousand. It had been a very good year, and we all knew it. He was one of many partners who had earned over a million dollars.

I decided to play it safe. There was lots of other

income tucked away near the back of the return – rental properties, dividends, a small business – but I guessed that if Mister somehow grabbed the return he would struggle with the numbers.

‘One point one million,’ I said, leaving another two hundred thousand on the table.

He contemplated this for a moment. ‘You made a million dollars,’ he said to Malamud, who wasn’t the least bit ashamed of it.

‘Yes, I did.’

‘How much did you give to the hungry, and the homeless?’

I was already scouring his itemized deductions for the truth.

‘I don’t recall exactly. My wife and I give to a lot of charities. I know there was a donation, I think for five thousand, to the Greater D.C. Fund, which, as I’m sure you know, distributes money to the needy. We give a lot. And we’re happy to do it.’

‘I’m sure you’re very happy,’ Mister replied, with the first hint of sarcasm.

He wasn’t about to allow us to explain how generous we *really* were. He simply wanted the hard facts. He instructed me to list all nine names, and beside each write last year’s income, then last year’s gifts to charities.

It took some time, and I didn’t know whether to hurry or be deliberate. Would he slaughter us if he didn’t like the math? Perhaps I shouldn’t hurry. It was immediately obvious that we rich folks had made lots of money while handing over precious little of it. At the same time, I knew the longer the situation dragged on, the crazier the rescue scenarios would become.

He hadn’t mentioned executing a hostage every hour. He didn’t want his buddies freed from jail. He didn’t seem to want anything, really.

I took my time. Malamud set the pace. The rear was

brought up by Colburn, a third-year associate who grossed a mere eighty-six thousand. I was dismayed to learn my pal Barry Nuzzo earned eleven thousand more than I did. We would discuss it later.

‘If you round it off, it comes to three million dollars,’ I reported to Mister, who appeared to be napping again, with his fingers still on the red wire.

He slowly shook his head. ‘And how much for the poor people?’

‘Total contributions of one hundred eighty thousand.’

‘I don’t want total contributions. Don’t put me and my people in the same class with the symphony and the synagogue, and all your pretty white folks clubs where you auction wine and autographs and give a few bucks to the Boy Scouts. I’m talking about food. Food for hungry people who live here in the same city you live in. Food for little babies. Right here. Right in this city, with all you people making millions, we got little babies starving at night, crying ’cause they’re hungry. How much for food?’

He was looking at me. I was looking at the papers in front of me. I couldn’t lie.

He continued. ‘We got soup kitchens all over town, places where the poor and homeless can get something to eat. How much money did you folks give to the soup kitchens? Any?’

‘Not directly,’ I said. ‘But some of these charities –’
‘Shut up!’

He waved the damned gun again.

‘How about homeless shelters? Places we sleep when it’s ten degrees outside. How many shelters are listed there in those papers?’

Invention failed me. ‘None,’ I said softly.

He jumped to his feet, startling us, the red sticks fully visible under the silver duct tape. He kicked his chair back. ‘How ’bout clinics? We got these little

clinics where doctors – good decent people who used to make lots of money – come and donate their time to help the sick. They don't charge nothing. Government used to help pay the rent, help buy the medicine and supplies. Now the government's run by Newt and all the money's gone. How much do you give to the clinics?'

Rafter looked at me as if I should do something, perhaps suddenly see something in the papers and say, 'Damn! Look here! We gave half a million bucks to the clinics and soup kitchens.'

That's exactly what Rafter would do. But not me. I didn't want to get shot. Mister was a lot smarter than he looked.

I flipped through the papers as Mister walked to the windows and peeked around the mini-blinds. 'Cops everywhere,' he said, just loud enough for us to hear. 'And lots of ambulances.'

He then forgot about the scene below and shuffled along the edge of the table until he stopped near his hostages. They watched every move, with particular attention paid to the explosives. He slowly raised the gun, and aimed it directly at Colburn's nose, less than three feet away.

'How much did you give to the clinics?'

'None,' Colburn said, closing his eyes tightly, ready to cry. My heart froze and I held my breath.

'How much to the soup kitchens?'

'None.'

'How much to the homeless shelters?'

'None.'

Instead of shooting Colburn, he aimed at Nuzzo and repeated the three questions. Nuzzo had identical responses, and Mister moved down the line, pointing, asking the same questions, getting the same answers. He didn't shoot Rafter, much to our dismay.

'Three million dollars,' he said in disgust, 'and not a

dime for the sick and hungry. You are miserable people.'

We felt miserable. And I realized he was not going to kill us.

How could an average street bum acquire dynamite? And who would teach him how to wire it?

At dusk he said he was hungry, and he told me to call the boss and order soup from the Methodist Mission at L Street and Seventeenth, Northwest. They put more vegetables in the broth, Mister said. And the bread was not as stale as in most kitchens.

'The soup kitchen does carryout?' Rudolph asked, his voice incredulous. It echoed around the room from the speakerphone.

'Just do it, Rudolph!' I barked back at him. 'And get enough for ten people.' Mister told me to hang up, and again put the lines on hold.

I could see our friends and a squadron of cops flying across the city, through rush-hour traffic, and descending upon the quiet little mission where the ragged street people hunched over their bowls of broth and wondered what the hell was going on. Ten orders to go, extra bread.

Mister made another trip to the window when we heard the helicopter again. He peeked out, stepped back, tugged at his beard, and pondered the situation. What type of invasion could they possibly be planning that would involve a helicopter? Maybe it was to evacuate the wounded.

Umstead had been fidgeting for an hour, much to the dismay of Rafter and Malamud, who were joined to him at the wrists. He finally couldn't stand it any longer.

'Uh, sir, excuse me, but I really have to, uh, go to the boys' room.'

Mister kept tugging. 'Boys' room. What's a boys' room?'

'I need to pee, sir,' Umstead said, very much like a third-grader. 'I can't hold it any longer.'

Mister looked around the room, and noticed a porcelain vase sitting innocently on a coffee table. With another wave of the gun, he ordered me to untie Umstead.

'The boys' room is over there,' Mister said.

Umstead removed the fresh flowers from the vase, and with his back to us urinated for a long time while we studied the floor. When he finally finished, Mister told us to move the conference table next to the windows. It was twenty feet long, solid walnut like most of the furniture at Drake & Sweeney, and with me on one end and Umstead grunting on the other, we managed to inch it over about six feet until Mister said stop. He made me latch Malamud and Rafter together, leaving Umstead a free man. I would never understand why he did this.

Next, he forced the remaining seven bound hostages to sit on the table with their backs to the wall. No one dared ask why, but I figured he wanted a shield from sharpshooters. I later learned that the police had snipers perched on a building next door. Perhaps Mister had seen them.

After standing for five hours, Rafter and company were relieved to be off their feet. Umstead and I were told to sit in chairs, and Mister took a seat at the end of the table. We waited.

Life in the streets must teach one patience. He seemed content to sit in silence for long periods of time, his eyes hiding behind the glasses, his head perfectly still.

'Who are the evictors?' he mumbled, to no one in particular, and he waited a couple of minutes before saying it again.

We looked at each other, confused, with no clue what he was talking about. He appeared to be staring at a spot on the table, not far from Colburn's right foot.

'Not only do you ignore the homeless, you help put them in the streets.'

We, of course, nodded along, all singing from the same sheet. If he wanted to heap verbal abuse on us, we were perfectly willing to accept it.

Our carryout arrived at a few minutes before seven. There was a sharp knock on the door. Mister told me to place a call and warn the police that he would kill one of us if he saw or heard anyone outside. I explained this carefully to Rudolph, and I stressed that no rescue should be attempted. We were negotiating.

Rudolph said he understood.

Umstead walked to the door, unlocked it, and looked at Mister for instructions. Mister was behind him, with the gun less than a foot from Umstead's head.

'Open the door very slowly,' Mister said.

I was standing a few feet behind Mister when the door opened. The food was on a small cart, one of our paralegals used to haul around the enormous amounts of paper we generated. I could see four large plastic containers of soup, and a brown paper bag filled with bread. I don't know if there was anything to drink. We never found out.

Umstead took one step into the hallway, grabbed the cart, and was about to pull it back into the conference room when the shot cracked through the air. A lone police sniper was hiding behind a credenza next to Madam Devier's desk, forty feet away, and he got the clear look he needed. When Umstead bent over to grab the cart, Mister's head was exposed for a split second, and the sniper blew it off.

Mister lurched backward without uttering a sound,

and my face was instantly covered with blood and fluids. I thought I'd been hit too, and I remember screaming in pain. Umstead was yelling somewhere in the hall. The other seven scrambled off the table like scalded dogs, all yelling and digging toward the door, half of them dragging the other half. I was on my knees, clutching my eyes, waiting for the dynamite to explode, then I bolted for the other door, away from the mayhem. I unlocked it, yanked it open, and the last time I saw Mister he was twitching on one of our expensive Oriental rugs. His hands were loose at his sides, nowhere near the red wire.

The hallway was suddenly filled with SWAT guys, all clad in fierce-looking helmets and thick vests, dozens of them crouching and reaching. They were a blur. They grabbed us and carried us through the reception area to the elevators.

'Are you hurt?' they asked me.

I didn't know. There was blood on my face and shirt, and a sticky liquid that a doctor later described as cerebrospinal fluid.

THREE

On the first floor, as far away from Mister as they could get, the families and friends were waiting. Dozens of our associates and colleagues were packed in the offices and hallways, waiting for our rescue. A loud cheer went up when they saw us.

Because I was covered with blood, they took me to a small gym in the basement. It was owned by our firm and virtually ignored by the lawyers. We were too busy to exercise, and anyone caught working out would almost certainly be assigned more work.

I was instantly surrounded by doctors, none of whom happened to be my wife. Once I convinced them the blood was not mine, they relaxed and conducted a routine exam. Blood pressure was up, pulse was crazy. They gave me a pill.

What I really wanted was a shower. They made me lie on a table for ten minutes while they watched my blood pressure. 'Am I in shock?' I asked.

'Probably not.'

I certainly felt like it. Where was Claire? For six hours I was held at gunpoint, life hanging by a thread, and she couldn't be bothered to come wait with the rest of the families.

The shower was long and hot. I washed my hair three times with heavy shampoo, then I stood and

dripped for an eternity. Time was frozen. Nothing mattered. I was alive, breathing and steaming.

I changed into someone else's clean gym clothes, which were much too big, and went back to the table for another check of my blood pressure. My secretary, Polly, came in and gave me a long hug. I needed it desperately. She had tears in her eyes.

'Where's Claire?' I asked her.

'On call. I've tried calling the hospital.'

Polly knew there wasn't much left of the marriage.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'I think so.'

I thanked the doctors and left the gym. Rudolph met me in the hall and gave me a clumsy embrace. He used the word 'congratulations,' as if I had accomplished something.

'No one expects you to work tomorrow,' he said. Did he think a day off would cure all my problems?

'I haven't thought about tomorrow,' I said.

'You need some rest,' he added, as if the doctors hadn't thought of this.

I wanted to speak to Barry Nuzzo, but my fellow hostages had already left. No one was injured, just a few rope burns on the wrists.

With the carnage held to a minimum, and the good guys up and smiling, the excitement at Drake & Sweeney waned quickly. Most of the lawyers and staff had waited nervously on the first floor, far away from Mister and his explosives. Polly had my overcoat, and I put it on over the large sweat suit. My tasseled loafers looked odd, but I didn't care.

'There are some reporters outside,' Polly said.

Ah, yes, the media. What a story! Not just your garden-variety on-the-job shooting, but a bunch of lawyers held hostage by a street crazy.

But they didn't get their story, did they? The lawyers escaped, the bad guy took a bullet, the

explosives fizzled when their owner hit the floor. Oh, what could've been! A shot, then a bomb, a flash of white light as the windows shattered, arms and legs landing in the street, all duly recorded live by Channel Nine for the evening's lead story.

'I'll drive you home,' Polly said. 'Follow me.' I was very thankful someone was telling me what to do. My thoughts were slow and cumbersome, one still-frame after another, with no concept of plot or setting.

We left the ground floor through a service door. The night air was sharp and cold, and I breathed its sweetness until my lungs ached. As Polly ran to get her car, I hid at the corner of the building and watched the circus out front. There were police cars, ambulances, television vans, even a fire truck. They were packing and leaving. One of the ambulances was parked with its rear to the building, no doubt waiting to carry Mister to the morgue.

I'm alive! I am alive! I said this over and over, smiling for the first time. I'm alive!

I closed my eyes tightly and offered a short but sincere prayer of thanks.

The sounds began coming back. As we sat in silence, Polly behind the wheel, driving slowly and waiting for me to say something, I heard the piercing clap of the sniper's rifle. Then the thud as it found its mark, and the stampede as the other hostages scrambled off the table and through the door.

What had I seen? I had glanced at the table where the seven were staring intently at the door, then back to Mister as he raised the gun and pointed it at Umstead's head. I was directly behind him when he was hit. What stopped the bullet from leaving him and getting me? Bullets go through walls and doors and people.

‘He was not going to kill us,’ I said, barely loud enough to be heard.

Polly was relieved to hear my voice. ‘What was he doing then?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What did he want?’

‘He never said. It’s amazing how little was actually said. We sat for hours just looking at each other.’

‘Why wouldn’t he talk to the police?’

‘Who knows? That was his biggest mistake. If he’d kept the phones open, I could’ve convinced the cops that he was not going to kill us.’

‘You don’t blame the cops, do you?’

‘No. Remind me to write them letters.’

‘Are you working tomorrow?’

‘What else would I do tomorrow?’

‘Just thought you might need a day off.’

‘I need a year off. One day won’t help.’

Our apartment was the third floor of a rowhouse on P Street in Georgetown. Polly stopped at the curb. I thanked her and got out, and I could tell from the dark windows that Claire was not home.

I met Claire the week after I moved to D.C. I was just out of Yale with a great job in a rich firm, a brilliant future like the other fifty rookies in my class. She was finishing her degree in political science at American University. Her grandfather was once the governor of Rhode Island, and her family has been well connected for centuries.

Drake & Sweeney, like most large firms, treats the first year as a boot camp. I worked fifteen hours a day, six days a week, and on Sundays Claire and I would have our weekly date. Sunday nights I was in the office. We thought that if we got married, we would have more time together. At least we could share a bed, but sleep was about all we did.

The wedding was large, the honeymoon brief, and when the luster wore off I was back at the office ninety hours a week. During the third month of our union, we actually went eighteen days without sex. She counted.

She was a sport for the first few months, but she grew weary of being neglected. I did not blame her, but young associates don't complain in the hallowed offices of Drake & Sweeney. Less than ten percent of each class will make partner, so the competition is ruthless. The rewards are great, at least a million bucks a year. Billing lots of hours is more important than a happy wife. Divorce is common. I didn't dream of asking Rudolph to lighten my load.

By the end of our first year together, Claire was very unhappy and we had started to quarrel.

She decided to go to med school. Tired of sitting at home watching TV, she figured she could become as self-absorbed as I was. I thought it was a wonderful idea. It took away most of my guilt.

After four years with the firm, they started dropping hints about our chances of making partner. The hints were collected and compared among many of the associates. It was generally felt that I was on the fast track to a partnership. But I had to work even harder.

Claire became determined to spend more time away from the apartment than I did, and so both of us slid into the silliness of extreme workaholism. We stopped fighting and simply drifted apart. She had her friends and interests, I had mine. Fortunately, we did not make the mistake of reproducing.

I wish I had done things differently. We were in love once, and we let it get away.

As I entered the dark apartment, I needed Claire for the first time in years. You come face to face with death and you need to talk about it. You need to be needed, to be stroked, to be told that someone cares.

I fixed a vodka with ice and sat on the sofa in the den. I fumed and pouted because I was alone, then my thoughts switched to the six hours I'd spent with Mister.

Two vodkas later, I heard her at the door. She unlocked it, and called, 'Michael.'

I didn't say a word because I was still pouting and fuming. She walked into the den, and stopped when she saw me. 'Are you all right?' she asked with genuine concern.

'I'm fine,' I said softly.

She dropped her bag and overcoat, and walked to the sofa, where she hovered over me.

'Where have you been?' I asked.

'At the hospital.'

'Of course.' I took a long drink. 'Look, I've had a bad day.'

'I know all about it, Michael.'

'You do?'

'Of course I do.'

'Then where the hell were you?'

'At the hospital.'

'Nine of us held hostage for six hours by a crazy man. Eight families show up because they're somewhat concerned. We get lucky and escape, and I have to catch a ride home with my secretary.'

'I couldn't be there.'

'Of course you couldn't. How thoughtless of me.'

She sat down in a chair next to the sofa. We glared at each other. 'They made us stay at the hospital,' she began, very icy. 'We knew about the hostage situation, and there was a chance there could've been casualties. It's standard procedure in that situation – they notify the hospitals, and everyone is placed on standby.'

Another long drink as I tried to think of something sharp to say.

‘I couldn’t help you at your office,’ she continued. ‘I was waiting at the hospital.’

‘Did you call?’

‘I tried. The phone lines were jammed. I finally got a cop, and he hung up on me.’

‘It was over two hours ago. Where have you been?’

‘In OR. We lost a little boy in surgery; he was hit by a car.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. I could never comprehend how doctors faced so much death and pain. Mister was only the second corpse I had ever laid eyes on.

‘I’m sorry too,’ she said, and with that she went to the kitchen and returned with a glass of wine. We sat in the semi-darkness for a while. Because we did not practice communication, it did not come easy.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ she asked.

‘No. Not now.’ And I really didn’t. The alcohol mixed with the pills, and my breathing became heavy. I thought of Mister, how calm and peaceful he was, even though he waved a gun and had dynamite strapped to his stomach. He was thoroughly unmoved by long stretches of silence.

Silence was what I wanted. Tomorrow I would talk.

FOUR

The chemicals worked until four the next morning, when I awoke to the harsh smell of Mister's sticky brain fluid weaving through my nostrils. I was frantic for a moment in the darkness. I rubbed my nose and eyes, and thrashed around the sofa until I heard someone move. Claire was sleeping in a chair next to me.

'It's okay,' she said softly, touching my shoulder. 'Just a bad dream.'

'Would you get me some water?' I said, and she went to the kitchen.

We talked for an hour. I told her everything I could remember about the event. She sat close to me, rubbing my knee, holding the glass of water, listening carefully. We had talked so little in the past few years.

She had to make her rounds at seven, so we cooked breakfast together, waffles and bacon. We ate at the kitchen counter with a small television in front of us. The six o'clock news began with the hostage drama. There were shots of the building during the crisis, the mob outside, some of my fellow captives hurriedly leaving when it was over. At least one of the helicopters we had heard belonged to the news station, and its camera had zoomed down for a tight shot of the window. Through it, Mister could be seen for a few seconds as he peeked out.

His name was DeVon Hardy, age forty-five, a Vietnam vet with a short criminal record. A mug shot from an arrest for burglary was put on the screen behind the early morning newscaster. It looked nothing like Mister – no beard, no glasses, much younger. He was described as homeless with a history of drug use. No motive was known. No family had come forward.

There were no comments from our side, and the story fizzled.

The weather was next. Heavy snow was expected to hit by late afternoon. It was the twelfth day of February, and already a record had been set for snowfall.

Claire drove me to the office, where at six-forty I was not surprised to see my Lexus parked among several other imports. The lot was never empty. We had people who slept at the office.

I promised to call her later in the morning, and we would try to have lunch at the hospital. She wanted me to take it easy, at least for a day or two.

What was I supposed to do? Lie on the sofa and take pills? The consensus seemed to be that I needed a day off, after which I guessed I would be expected to return to my duties at full throttle.

I said good morning to the two very alert security guards in the lobby. Three of the four elevators were open, waiting, and I had a choice. I stepped onto the one Mister and I had taken, and things slowed to a crawl.

A hundred questions at once: Why had he picked our building? Our firm? Where had he been in the moments before he entered the lobby? Where were the security guards who usually loitered near the front? Why me? Hundreds of lawyers came and went all day long. Why the sixth floor?

And what was he after? I did not believe DeVon