



TIMOTHY VINCENT

Prince of Blue Castles

VINCENT

Ames set the paper aside and considered the view from his kitchen window. The morning sun was bright against the bay glass and hanging ferns in the nook's apex. This was Ames' favorite time of day; before the rush, before the silliness, before the barbarism. He sorted through the mail, separating the bills from the junk. He stopped briefly when he came across the plain white envelope with no return address. It was addressed to the *Suadela Consulting Agency*, attention Wilson Ames. He opened it and looked briefly at the short business letter, then carefully put the letter and the envelope in his day planner on the kitchen table.

He heard his wife moving up in the loft and sighed. Turning back to the paper he neatly folded it in half and laid it next to his orange juice. He picked up his fork and knife and began to cut his eggs in small tidy pieces making sure they didn't run into the petite sausage. Everything about Ames was neat, tidy, pressed, from his

pressed bathrobe, to his manicured nails, to his brushed back and well-moussed hair. He flipped his supple wrist over and glanced at his watch: 6:45; she was starting early this morning; or more likely, finishing late.

A half hour later, Mrs. Cynthia Ames wandered into the kitchen *cum* dining area. She was dressed only in a thin silk bathrobe, her auburn hair pulled in a loose pile atop her head. She sat across from Ames in an identical wrought iron chair with flowered cushions on the seat and backrest. She crossed her long legs, tucking the short robe under her thighs and bouncing her sandaled foot up and down. She pulled a cigarette from the pack with her long red nails and lit it with lazy self-possession, turning her head slightly to blow the smoke to the side. She looked briefly across at Ames, then looked away, her expression a mix of boredom and inertia.

"Morning, dear," said Ames. He was reading his paper and having his last cup of coffee.

"Hmm." Mrs. Ames looked for an ashtray, frowned as she remembered her husband didn't like her to smoke inside. She stood suddenly and walked to the sink, taking quick draws from the cigarette while she ran the water. She put the tip of the cigarette under the water and then tossed it down the disposal.

She turned back to her husband her expression

changing from sleepy boredom to careful reflection. On the other side of forty she could pass in the right light for ten years younger. Careful diet, exercise, good genes, and frequent trips to the parlor kept her figure trim, her skin reasonably tight and wrinkle-free; cosmetics and surgery hid the rest. Mother had taught her the value of good posture; it was all about the shoulders, look at the dancers. Men made a point of talking about her eyes: green flecked with yellow gold, capable of feline passion, wonderment, or amused allure, with equal intensity. Wilson said it was her eyes that had first attracted him.

“Something to eat, dear?” asked Ames, looking up from his paper. “I put out some Danish.”

She looked to the plate and hid a shudder. “No, thank you.”

She walked back to the dining table and sat down on the edge of the chair, crossing her legs again and resting her chin in her right hand. The long fingers of her free hand tapped distractedly against the glass table idly. “Something to drink, I think.” She poured herself a short glass of orange juice, took a small sip and set it down again, stared at the table.

“How was your night?” asked Wilson.

She looked up quickly, but Wilson was behind his paper again. “Oh, a bit long to tell the truth. Edith wanted

to see the new club. We ran into some friends there and then there was just nothing for it but she must do the town.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I ran into Ted last night,” she said, watching the paper carefully. It remained in place. “He wants us to come tonight. I said we would.”

Ted, thought Ames, the new one. “Sorry, dear,” he said pulling down a corner of the paper to give her a regretful look. “It looks like I’ll be out of town on business. Just got the notice.” He hid behind the paper again so he didn’t have to watch her ill-conceived pleasure at this announcement.

“Well, I suppose I could cancel,” she said hesitantly.

“Nonsense,” said Ames distractedly.

“I’ll ring Edith then and we’ll make it a threesome at the club.”

A part of Ames wondered if it would be a threesome, though certainly not for dinner. No, he thought, more likely Edith would never get the call.

Cynthia Ames stared at the wall of paper between them, raised her stenciled eyebrows briefly in sardonic irony and covered a sigh. Wilson Ames, her husband, she thought; the fastidious, the neat, the naïve, Wilson Ames. He was not unattractive in a clean, orderly sort

of way, and he certainly looked money. She had spotted the well-groomed, immaculately dressed figure at a high-end party and assumed that anyone that put together, that mannered had to come from money. God, what a mistake that had been. Six years later she was still sitting in the same tiny kitchenette in their little bungalow on the East End and carefully rotating her limited wardrobe and jewels for weekend gatherings with Edith and the girls.

Of course, the apartment was in a very nice part of town and Ames was generous with his funds. Cynthia was aware he sacrificed to keep her in fashion. But there was always that underlying calculation, that careful attention to just how much and how often. There was money, and then there was money, thought Cynthia. And if you have to think about what you are spending then you didn't really have money.

Of course there were other distractions. Like Ted. She had no delusions that he meant anything more than what he was: a club pro ten years her younger; an idle, guilty distraction. Ted had sniffed around her for months, playing the happy flirt, making improper but never serious suggestions in the back rooms and small spaces. This was the good time. She had come to appreciate the guilty pleasures of forbidden pursuit for its own end. Tonight would see the conclusion of that pursuit, and for a

time that would be nice as well. But in the end she would dump him (or he her; that was happening now more often than she cared to admit) as the newness of the thing wore off and the routine set in.

She took a sip of orange juice, made a face. God, she needed a cigarette—or a real drink.

“Where are you off to this time, Wilson?” she asked.

“Dayton, Ohio.”

“How droll. Poor thing.”

Ames put his paper down and smiled at her. “It's called the Gem City; birthplace of Aviation. Maybe I'll take in the museums. Shouldn't be more than a few days.”

“You do that dear,” said Cynthia standing up and coming over to stand beside him. “I'll manage here. I think I'll catch a little more sleep now.” She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek, her robe opening slightly to show a perfect tanned breast.

Ames tucked the robe up gently, and met her eyes. He could smell the night before on her; the perfume, the cigarettes, and other intangible remains. “Get your beauty sleep, dear. Not that you need it.” He brushed the back of his hand slowly along her cheek making her smile.

He heard the flick of her lighter as she disappeared up the stairwell. He put his paper down and pulled the mechanical pencil from his day planner. He looked out

the window for a while, and then turned back to his paper. It shouldn't be long now, he thought, looking to the phone on the wall. To pass the time he quickly and skillfully sketched a mountain and seascape along the top fold of the paper. The pencil was a special gift he gave to himself; the lead in blue. He liked to work in blue. He started to draw a castle in the arms of the mountain when the phone rang.

He picked it up before his wife could get it.

"Mr. Ames?" said a voice he didn't recognize.

"Just a moment." Ames waited for the inevitable click as his wife picked up the receiver. He put his hand over the mouth piece. "I've got it Cynthia; just business." He listened for the click that meant she was off again.

"Yes," said Ames.

"You received our letter?" said the stranger.

"I did."

"Can we count on your services?"

"I think we can arrange something."

"Good. Stop by our branch downtown this afternoon. You will be expected."

"I understand."

The stranger hung up. Ames listened just a moment longer to be sure no one else was on the line. He sat back at the table and finished his sketch, then carefully filed the

paper away in his collection.

Before leaving the house, Ames confirmed his appointment time with the head of Marketing at Hollings Enterprises. Yes, he could have 25 precious minutes of the Director's time and would Mr. Ames please be sure to arrive promptly? Of course, said Ames, and much appreciation.

He then met a representative from his new client at the back of Jerry's Restaurant and Bar. They sat in a booth together and ordered drinks.

"We don't think he'll be much of a problem," said the representative, a tall man dressed in a black suit who carried a briefcase. "But he has a reputation."

"That's fine," said Ames and slid a small piece of paper across the table. On the paper was written in pencil: *discuss no details; assume someone is always listening; use Hollings Enterprises as subject; write any specifics on paper.*

The tall man read the note, looked around the sparsely populated lounge and raised an eyebrow. "We know the owner," he said.

Ames nodded and took the paper back, folded it carefully and put it in his jacket. "For everyone's protection," he said, "I like to maintain strict confidentiality. On the

off chance that this conversation is being recorded, or should you or I have to appear later in a court of law...”

“Okay,” the tall man sipped his drink. “You have a reputation as well, one the company appreciates.”

Ames bowed slightly.

“Hollings,” continued the representative with slight emphasis and choosing his words carefully, “is a new player in our market. We want you to follow up on a deal we offered a while back. They...agreed to the terms, took our investment, but now seem to have cold feet. The deadline for...signing is long passed. Our company is still interested in...rescuing the relationship, if possible. We...” The man sighed, then pulled out a notebook and wrote furiously. He tore out the paper when he was finished and handed to Ames who read it, nodded, and put that paper alongside the first.

“I understand.”

The tall man considered Ames, noting his small frame and delicate hands. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like us to send one of our representatives with you?”

Ames smiled. “Thank you, but I like to work alone.”

“That strict confidentiality.”

“Right.”

“Anyway,” said the tall man, “it shouldn’t be a problem.”

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He stopped at the Starbuck’s in the airport lobby, ordered a tall mocha and took a seat in the back as far from the crowd as possible. He was dressed for the trip in a charcoal gray suit, pastel pure sea island cotton shirt with French cuffs, black Balmoral Oxford shoes, and a striped red tie held in place with gold pin—his one gesture to individuality. He had seen the barber after breakfast for his weekly trim and his salt and pepper hair was carefully coifed in mousse to lay flat and well-ordered along his head. He took a sip of his mocha and pulled out his planner and pencil and started to sketch another castle. It was an exercise in repression.

He didn’t generally like to use public facilities, especially in airports. The thought of all those strange hands, odors, and other sundry leavings made his stomach curl. But there was an interminable delay on the tarmac in NY and there was no other choice. He tried to reduce his exposure by going to facility out of the general stream of traffic, one that looked recently installed. In this he was partially successful as there was only one other in the men’s room when he walked in.

The man, obviously of Asian descent, was standing at the mirror holding a bloody towel to his nose. Ames would have turned around and walked back out but he

disliked such obvious gestures even more than public facilities. He walked way passed, noting the well-scrubbed floors and urinals, the spotless wood dividers with gilt trim, and the valiant effort to cover the usual smells and sounds of human waste with pine forest humidifiers and soft jazz. He finished his business as quickly as possible and left without looking at the man still standing in front of the mirror with his pile of bloody towels. Outside he cleaned his hands with hygienic wet wipes from his suit pocket. He was not about to wash up at that sink.

Ames was not particularly xenophobic, nor squeamish, but the sight of all that unexpected bright red running from the stranger's nose and soaked into the carelessly discarded paper towels had come as a shock. The red-stained towels scattered on and falling off the pristine marble of the sink were particularly upsetting.

In the soft light of the mirror the man's embarrassed, angry black eyes watched Ames as he passed, clearly frustrated at being discovered in such a state. Ames empathized with the man's plight, but at the same time he deeply resented the other for having put Ames in this awkward position.

He took another sip of his consistently prepared mocha, checked his cuffs, and took comfort in the dependable, constructed atmosphere of a well-maintained chain

of American commerce. It was not so much the coffee or the brand that he was looking for here, but the sense of order and predictability. He sighed and drew a line of beach around a thin tower pointing to a blue half-moon; the ordered, cool lines of the blue castle gradually replacing the afterimage of red vulgarity. By the time he finished his coffee the castle was complete and he was once more ready to face his task. He carefully put his mug back on the serving counter to the appreciation of the staff and left, the bloody man in the mirror now a forgotten memory.

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Cynthia had a point. The Midwest was not known for its glamour, even in a major city like Dayton. And it was raining. Ames checked into his hotel and stared out his tenth floor window overlooking the city. The steady downpour fell like a depressing gray curtain around the skyline, making the hard lines of the Dayton a still more somber prospect.

He turned from the view and went over the itinerary in his head. It was a short list: three addresses, including the Grisman Iron Works factory in Huber Heights; the Grisman downtown offices; and Connor Grisman's private residence. He had numbers for all three locations.

The downtown offices were the closest, but it was a Sunday. A quick call earlier from a public phone in the airport confirmed they were closed on the weekend.

He carefully laid out his wardrobe and tools for the day's tasks on the room desk. These included his day planner, mechanical pencil, two cell phones, and three new business cards. He carefully stenciled names and numbers on both of them. The third he left blank.

He went down to the hotel lobby and used their public office. He ran a MapQuest for all three addresses, and then had the hotel desk call him a taxi. While he waited he bought an umbrella in the gift shop. He had the taxi take him to a local rental company and used a company card to rent a black Camry.

The Grisman's lived in a nice part of town, their house located in a secluded neighborhood with well-maintained lawns and tree-lined sidewalks. The driveway was blocked off by a wrought-iron gate and a posting said visitors should use the call box located on the brick pillar to which the gate was mounted. The pillar was the start (or end) of the high brick wall that enclosed the property.

Ames dressed again in his charcoal suit, parked the Camry as close to the gate as possible. The rain was really coming down now. Under his umbrella he stepped slowly, carefully through the rain soaked pavement. He

pressed the call box button and waited.

After a minute a female voice answered. "Yes?"

"Mr. Ames to see Mr. Grisman, please," said Ames leaning close to the speaker. The rain was hammering against his umbrella making it difficult to hear.

"He's not here now."

"I see. When should I come back?"

"He's out of town; won't be back for some time. Who did you say you were?"

"Wilson Ames. I'm with the *Suadela* Agency. I have an important message for Mr. Grisman from one of his associates."

"Try his office on Monday," said the voice dismissively. "He doesn't do business at home."

"Thank you," said Ames, but the harsh crackle from the box indicated the other was already gone.

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It smelled like an iron works, despite the rain, and Ames thanked God it was not the height of summer. The grounds were closed off by a high fence topped with barbed wire. A heavy plastic encased gatehouse stood to the side of the main entrance: a sliding fence gate with more barbed wire on top. The iron works rose like a rusty insect behind the fencing and a broad parking lot. The

lot was empty. A part of Ames considered the wisdom of going forward. He preferred neutral sites and private offices in public places with prearranged times and dates. But this was not the first time he came unannounced or stepped on unfamiliar territory. But there was something menacing about all that hard, menacing metal. It went against Wilson's instinctive aesthetics, made him uneasy. Maybe he should have taken the tall man up on his offer.

Ames left his car in visitors parking. It was Sunday, and the factory officially closed, but there were two men in the gatehouse just the same. Serious, large men in black pullovers and windbreakers that watched Ames like predators as he stepped gingerly through the puddled rain water. One of the men stepped out of the gatehouse but stayed under the small awning out of the rain. He held a hand up to indicate Ames had come far enough.

"Wilson Ames of *Suadela* to see Mr. Grisman," shouted Ames over the rain pinging against his umbrella.

"Try his offices on Monday," said the man.

Ames smiled. "It is very important that I see Mr. Grisman. Could you tell him this concerns a recent transaction he made with a group out of New York? He will know what that means."

"Are you hard of hearing?" said the man. "I said clear off. Grisman is not here."

Ames sighed. "We both know Mr. Grisman will not be in the office on Monday to receive me or anyone else. Why don't you be a good fellow and give him a ring. Trust me; he'll want to see me. And calling him doesn't mean he is inside," added Ames with an understanding smile. "So you can keep up the façade."

The man looked Ames up and down, shrugged and went back inside. He made a call on his cell phone watching Ames closely the whole time. The other man stood stared broodily at the rain. Ames stood quietly under his umbrella.

The man on the phone hung up, spoke briefly to his companion and then waved Ames over, holding the gatehouse door open. Ames stepped under the awning, carefully shook his umbrella out and folded it up. He stepped slowly into the gatehouse.

The brooding man patted him down as the other watched Ames and the road. Both men needed a shave and smelled of sweat and grime covered with cheap deodorant and aftershave. The pat down was brusque and quick, particularly around the groin, a faint blush of red creeping along the heavy man's jawline.

"He's clean," said the man brusquely. "Just this." He held up the cell phone, Ames' small day planner and his mechanical pencil.

The other, the one who had made the call, looked to Ames.

“I need those for my meeting with Mr. Grisman.” The man took the cell phone and waved idly at the rest. The other gave Ames his planner and pencil. He tucked them in his coat pocket. “And the phone?” asked Ames.

“Follow me,” said the first man, tucking it in his pocket.

The fence gate rolled back and Ames followed the first man across the broad parking lot and into the heart of the works, confident he had found his man.

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Ted turned out to be a bit of disappointment. She sat on the bed in a towel, her wet hair wrapped in another, smoking a cigarette and listening to him sing in the shower. He had wanted to take one together, afterward, but by then she was already having second thoughts about the whole thing.

It wasn't that he didn't possess the basic skills or knowledge. She had enjoyed everything on a physical level. No, it was something else, something in his demeanor. It was like he was doing her a favor. He couldn't stop grinning.

She looked down her long tanned legs. They were

still shapely but now showed the wear and effects of too many years in the sun, too many long nights on high heels. Particularly depressing were her ankles and feet where the skin tended to bunch and wrinkle regardless of her care or pampering. God, what on earth happened to her toes? Pinched and shiny now with callouses they were strangers to her. She tucked them under the blanket.

Ted finished up and preened himself in the mirror. He had a good body; no wrinkles there. But then he was almost half her age and spent most of his time on the court. He was obviously posing for her, a towel wrapped precariously low and loose around his hips. He brushed his thick curly black hair with his fingers glancing to her with that stupid grin. She wondered how often he had to shave his chest and legs.

He jumped on the bed like a little boy, almost knocking her cigarette from her hand. As he stretched out beside her he laughed and pulled mischievously at her towel. She swatted his hand away while she put her cigarette out. He laughed again, leaned back against the headboard with his arms crossed behind his head.

“Well, Mrs. Ames, I'd say that was the best lesson we've had yet.”

She smiled mechanically, wondering if he came up with that line in the shower.

“Don’t call me that,” she chided gently. He looked sideways at her, dropping the grin for just a moment. “It makes me feel old,” she explained patting his arm.

The grin was back. “Are you kidding, Cynthia?”

She didn’t like her first name on his lips any more than the other but what could she do. Had he always been this...what was the word? Juvenile?

“You put woman half your age to shame,” he continued. “Believe me I know what I’m talking about.”

She sighed. There it was. Even his compliments were a hash of ego and damning faint praise. She suddenly thought of Wilson’s hand along her cheek that morning and drew out another cigarette absentmindedly. She wondered if Wilson suspected.

“Mrs. Wilson Ames...how’d that happen?” Ted rolled over on his side and watched her idly with his head on the pillows. “I mean, I just don’t see you with *him*.”

“He can be charming when he wants to be,” she answered. Everyone always asked her about Wilson eventually. Edith had been after her about a divorce for years.

“Charming,” said Ted rising up and leaning close with that silly grin. “Charming won’t do for something this hot.” He laid his left hand on her leg, brushed it up under the towel.

She almost groaned. Hot, she thought; he actual-

ly said hot. Like something out of a B-movie. And to think, she had felt sorry for Wilson and his droll little trip to Dayton. She lit her cigarette, blew the smoke coyly in Ted’s direction. He made a face and drew back, taking his wandering hand with him.

But maybe Wilson’s trip wasn’t so droll, she thought. What if he was doing in Dayton exactly what she’d just done with Ted in NY? She didn’t suspect like others—Edith for one—Wilson’s sexuality. Wilson could actually teach Ted some things on that score. But why was she so sure Wilson was faithful to her?

She chuckled, which Ted interpreted as a sign of play and started to pull at her towel again. She was sure about Wilson because it was Wilson: steady, unimaginative, and ever predictable Wilson.

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They passed two more men in black windbreakers outside the Works central offices. They stood up quickly from their folding chairs as Ames and his guide approached. Scattered at their feet were cigarette butts and food wrappers. One of the men hastily tucked a Portable PlayStation in his pocket. Ames’ guide picked up the pace and they were by the two men before they could get a proper menace to their pose.

Ames was disappointed, but not surprised, when they passed through the small Air Conditioned lobby, into and then out the back side of the short hallway of office doors and into the vast, high-ceilinged enclosure of the works itself. They walked down a flight of corrugated steps onto a slick concrete floor full of dark stains and flash marks. Built along the walls of the enclosure like market stands were metal partitioned cubicles. Inside some of the cubicles were fabricated metal projects in various stages of composition. All were dark and empty of workers, reminding Ames of pews in an empty church.

There was little light in the compound and most of the factory was lost in shadow. They walked through byzantine clumps of machinery, piping, and iron plated containers, a labyrinth of industrial metal and conveyor belts. The smell of soldering and cold iron pervaded everything; their steps echoed on the concrete flooring. The guide weaved them through the outer layers of the metal maze and to the heart of the compound, a large square of heavy machinery enclosed by fencing and littered with warning signs. Two more men, openly carrying semi-automatics and standing in front of the gate, let them in without comment. They were obviously expecting them but Ames noticed the chairs off in the shadows with thermos and still more food wrappers sitting along

the floor.

Now the machinery was colossus, their tops disappearing in the shadows of the high ceiling, their dark metal forms sitting like giant, rust-covered predators waiting to stir to mechanical life. They need only Vulcan's bellows, thought Ames. The air smelled of burnt metal and dangerous, potential force. They walked to a back corner of the fenced square, their destination a soot-covered metal desk with a large, balding man sitting behind it. Whether in compensation or preference the man wore a light ginger beard and moustache. They failed to hide either his heavy jowls or his pasty skin. Dressed in a button down shirt open at the collar and revealing more ginger hair tufting from his t-shirt like so much burnt sedge the man watched Ames and his escort approach with eyes as hard as the iron structures around him.

"That's far enough," said the man behind the desk, his voice surprisingly high for his size.

"Sir," said Ames.

Grisman looked to Ames' escort.

"He's clean," said the other. "He brought a phone." The guide put it on the desk and stepped back.

"Anyone else?"

The guide shook his head.

"Call Bill," said Grisman. "Make sure, and stay on

line with him until this is over.”

Ames heard the guide make the call and mumble in the phone. “Bill says everything is clear.”

“Stay on the phone with him,” repeated Grisman watching Ames closely. “Any sign of trouble you tell me. Stand behind this one.” Ames felt the looming presence of the guide just behind his shoulder but didn’t turn around. He was watching Grisman, waiting.

Grisman returned the look, a veiled hint of amused dismissal in his dancing green eyes. “Sit down,” he said to Ames gesturing to the chair across the desk.

Ames looked doubtfully to the worn leather and metal chair. “I’d prefer to stand.”

“Sit down,” ordered Grisman.

Ames slowly removed a handkerchief from his pocket and laid it out on the ripped leather seating over the front edge. He sat down on the edge of the chair, careful to keep his pants on the handkerchief.

“Doesn’t like our accommodations, Stu,” said Grisman sarcastically. The guide, Stu, grunted.

“If I may?” asked Ames, his hand to his coat. Grisman looked again to Stu, then nodded brusquely to Ames. Ames removed his day planner and pencil, opened up the planner and took out the three business cards. He picked up the first one and placed it carefully on the desk.

“Mr. Grisman,” said Ames, “I’m here representing...”

“I know who you represent,” interrupted Grisman, picking up the card with thick, ginger-covered fingers. He glanced at it quickly and then tossed it back on the desk.

Ames nodded. “There is a matter of some outstanding debt. Now the client I represent...”

“Can go fuck himself,” finished Grisman casually.

Ames looked to Grisman, assessed the eyes that looked back at his. He did not like to concede even in difficult circumstances, but over time he had learned to read such expressions: this would not end well.

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Edith insisted on lunch the next day, ostensibly to discuss an upcoming charity event they both sat committee on. But Cynthia knew what she really wanted to hear.

“So?” asked Edith, her eyes dancing with mischief as she sent the waiter away.

Cynthia feigned exasperation, as was expected, but part of her was already tired of the game and wondered why she had agreed to the luncheon. She looked across at her friend; was she her friend? The same age as Cynthia, Edith dressed and acted the part of a woman of means. Everything was in place and of the highest standard, from

the \$600 hairstyle to the haute couture blouse and slacks to the simple but breathtakingly expensive natural pearl necklace. But where Cynthia was a carefully packaged form of age-defying sensuality, Edith was a round mound of self-assured contentment. She came from money and had married money and believed the most important thing in life was how one carried oneself in and out of “bad weather,” a luxury she could afford as bad weather for Edith was being outbid at Sotheby’s or an imagined slight in the various and enigmatic circles she traveled. Cynthia was a special circle of one, occasionally shown off at appropriate parties or events (but never the most exclusive) and a source of vicarious private pleasure for Edith in luncheons such as this.

“Spill darling,” teased Edith.

But Cynthia knew that part of the game required her not to spill, not just yet. “What are you talking about, dear?”

Edith leaned in, as if to whisper, but her laugh and tones were if anything, louder. “Why, Ted, of course.”

Cynthia tilted her head in wonder, again an act. “How do you know these things?”

Edith chuckled. “I have my ways. By the way dear, you simply must come with me to see this new act in the Village. He is simply delicious, and he would be all over

you in an instant.” She leaned back in her chair, fingered her necklace with soft red nails. “But maybe that’s unnecessary now,” she continued with a sly smile. “Do we have a replacement for the Mysterious One, or is it just another notch on your well-whittled bedpost?”

“Edith!”

“I’m envious, dear!” insisted Edith, reaching out to pat Cynthia’s hand. “My own is as whole as the tree it came from.”

They laughed, though Cynthia had to work hard to make hers sound genuine. The waiter brought their salads, which spared Cynthia for a time, but when he left Edith waved her on with her salad fork. That part of Cynthia which resented everything about social satire, a part she usually kept carefully contained behind a mask of fashionable irony, raised its angry head, if just a little.

“Really, Edith, it’s all just a big bore.”

Edith raised one stenciled eyebrow. “This from the woman married to Mr. Vanilla?”

Cynthia frowned at her salad. “The Mysterious One, Mr. Vanilla; you have such interesting and inconsistent names for my husband.” Edith looked carefully across the table, surprised at the unlooked for defense of their usual object of fun. Cynthia lifted her head. “I just don’t think it’s fair to Wilson. Do you?”

Edith chose not to take this as a personal rebuke (heaven forbid). What on earth was into Cynthia? She nodded vaguely and tucked into her salad. They ate in awkward silence for a time.

Cynthia sighed and put her fork down. "Sorry. I'm just tired." Then she wiped at her eyes with her napkin. This was even more shocking to Edith and for a moment she wondered if she *had* said something wrong.

"Now, dear," said Edith, reaching out and patting Cynthia's hand. "I...well, please, Cynthia. There. There."

Cynthia smiled around her tears. "Oh, don't pay any attention to this. I'll be alright."

"Of course you will." Edith checked again to see if she were in any way responsible for this uncalled for behavior and, satisfied that she was not, waited for things to return to normal. When Cynthia had dried her eyes and resumed her natural expression (if just a little drained, thought Edith) she ventured a new direction. "Darling, maybe it is time to leave him."

"Who, Wilson? For Ted?"

"Of course not," said Edith with exaggerated patience. "Anyone can see your worth, and it is far beyond the likes of candy like Ted. No, we need to find you a real man, someone stable...and filthy rich." She chuckled at this last bit and watched Cynthia carefully. There was hesita-

tion there, yes, thought Edith, but not outright rejection; and she liked the sound of money. Edith pushed her salad to the side and assumed her most authoritative tone. "Yes, it is time. I have just the man. He'll know what to do."

"Do?" asked Cynthia in confusion. "A man...?"

"Divorce lawyer, silly. It's best to get out there first and strike hard." Edith sipped her drink reflectively. "Though from what you tell me there's not much to strike with the mysterious Mr. Ames. What on earth does he do again?"

"He's a special consultant of some kind," said Cynthia.

"And what does that pay, dear?"

"Enough to keep us afloat, apparently."

"But not flying," said Edith. "We need you flying. Don't worry; Edith will take care of everything. And after a respectable time, we'll start the process of finding you a worthy companion. This is just my kind of thing. You'll see; where going to have great fun."

Cynthia smiled and shook her head. "You're sweet. A dear friend." Still not quite there, thought Edith, but considering.

"Lunch is on me," said Cynthia. "I've been just a bore."

"Nonsense, dear," said Edith. "Kenneth wouldn't know what to do if I didn't run up an exorbitant monthly

bill in the club. Let's him know I still care."

Cynthia managed a chuckle this time.

"You think about what I said, dear," said Edith. "It's just a phone call away."

*

Ames squared his shoulders and chose his words carefully. "Mr. Grisman, are you challenging the debt?"

Grisman smirked. "*Challenging the debt?* Here that, Stu?"

"I hear it," say Stu.

"Shut up," said Grisman, glaring over Ames shoulder. He turned back to Ames. "What's your role in New York? You some kind of lawyer? You talk like a lawyer."

Ames withdrew his second business card and put it on the desk.

"*Suadela Consulting Agency*," read Grisman, leaning over his desk but not touching the card. "Special Consultant Wilson Ames. Specializing in ADR, Mediation, and Private Courier Services." Grisman looked up at Ames. "What the hell is ADR?"

"Alternative dispute resolution."

"So you are a lawyer."

"No."

"What kind of name is *Suadela*?"

"She was the roman goddess of persuasion."

"Christ," said Grisman, leaning back in his chair and putting his big hands behind his head. "New York must be out of their minds to send a lawyer."

"I'm not a lawyer," repeated Ames. "I am, however, a licensed and bonded arbitrator."

Grisman frowned. "Licensed for what? I still don't know what the hell you do."

"I am hired to resolve difficult matters, and to deliver sensitive communications."

"So what's your message?"

"You entered an oral contract with parties listed on the first card," said Ames. "You are now in arrears of payment on half a million dollars with interest. The clients I represent wish their payment, now."

Grisman grimaced. "I'm sure they do. And what happens if I don't pay?"

Ames blinked reflectively but did not answer.

Grisman sat forward with a frown, crossed his heavy arms on the desk. "How did you find me?" he asked.

"It was not that difficult. You're not really hiding out, are you?"

"Sign says closed," pointed out Grisman. "Most people know to come to the office during working hours."

Ames smiled. "Your wife said as much. Excuse me; I assume it was your wife."

There was a long, sudden pause as Grisman looked Ames up and down, his bearing now pregnant with heightened concentration. “You saw my wife?”

“No,” said Ames. “I only spoke to her through your box.”

Grisman’s eyes grew hard. “So that’s the way it is. I expected something like this from New York. You don’t look the type, though.”

Ames looked momentarily confused, then raised a hand to clarify. “I should be clear: I provide a special service to clients. I do not work for any particular business, including New York, and I am strictly involved on a communications level. I mean no threat—I am no threat—to you or your family. And New York has sent me as a gesture of their good will to salvage this relationship.”

Grisman smiled sarcastically. “But if I say no, there will be others after you; others who are not involved on a...communications level.”

Ames nodded his head slightly. “As you say, Mr. Grisman, there may be others after me, though I don’t know what form or action they will take. For practical purposes involving everyone’s safety I stay away from such dealings—and discussions.”

“Practical purposes being deniability,” said Grisman with a smirk.

Ames nodded.

Grisman considered this for a time, then answered. “Well, I tell you what, *Mister Ames*. You wasted a trip. I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Ames looked Grisman directly in the eyes. “Mr. Grisman, I have been paid to deliver your reply. Is it your wish for me to state categorically that you deny the debt?”

“What if it is?”

Ames sighed. “I would not recommend doing so, sir.”

Grisman shrugged. “I don’t give a shit what you recommend. In fact, I’m beginning to wonder if you’re not some kind of shakedown artist. Maybe, I should be sending my own message—to you.”

“You can call the number on the first card and they will confirm my representative capacity and everything I have said. My phone,” Ames looked to the phone on the desk, “is at your service. Any trace of the call will be registered to my business account, which has established a legitimate correspondence with the New York party.”

“Christ!” yelled Grisman. “You mean to tell me this visit is on your goddamn itinerary.”

“No,” said Ames calmly. “That would not be responsible to New York or you. I am paid for my discretion in these matters. Officially, I am representing New York

on another matter altogether, one that has transparent authenticity.”

Grisman considered this. “But someone will know someone called from my factory,” he said finally with a calculating look. “Is that your plan, Mr. Ames: establish you were here, for protection? No I don’t think I’ll make that call just yet.”

Ames blinked once, slowly. “That was not my intention, and a trace is a very remote possibility, one that would only be warranted if the situation should deteriorate and come to the attention of unwelcome eyes.”

“The situation being I how I answer New York—and what I do with you?” Grisman waited for Ames to respond. “Nothing to say? You’re either brave or a fool. I’m guessing the last one.” He looked Ames up and down, suddenly bored. “So you don’t think I should tell New York to go to hell. Go on: let’s hear the rest of the pitch.”

“There’s no pitch, Mr. Grisman. I’m here to arbitrate, to find a solution for all parties concerned.”

“There doesn’t sound much in it for me so far.”

Ames lifted his head slightly. “Mr. Grisman, over the last few years you have made it very clear that you would like to be a part of a certain elite circle of business. There are rules and conditions to being accepted into that circle. Regardless of your personal feelings toward New York,

other members of that circle would have no sympathy or desire to do business with someone who did not pay their debts. You can understand that.”

Grisman chewed his lower lip angrily. “I *pay* my debts. I told New York the goddamn Cleveland contract fell through. It wasn’t my fault. I was counting on that money to get square.”

“New York is aware of your difficulties. I have been authorized to suggest an alternative solution. New York is prepared to clear the debt in exchange for 50% of your company.”

“50%! Are you out of your goddamn mind?” Grisman leapt from his chair and circled the desk. Standing, he was even more imposing, a heavy mass of red and white anger. He grabbed the two arms of Ames’ chair and leaned in close, his face inches from Ames’ passive expression. “This is my company, asshole. Nobody is going to muscle in. Period.”

Ames tried not to grimace at the smell of stale coffee, cigarettes, and some kind of sausage spilling from Grisman’s mouth. He kept his eyes straight ahead, looking at Grisman’s blotched cheeks. “I take it you refuse their offer.”

Grisman literally lifted the chair a half-inch off the ground and pushed it away spilling Ames from the seat

and sending his day planner flying. He glared at Ames on the floor, his breath coming in shallow, angry eruptions, a twisted hungry smile on his face. This was a man who enjoyed hurting things, thought Ames.

“Put this son of a bitch in the utility cage, Stu,” said Grisman, his voice threatening to break like a tightly wound spring.

Ames felt two powerful arms lift him and start to drag him away.

“Wait!” yelled Grisman.

Ames was swung around again.

“Did you know we have a blast furnace here, *Mister* Ames?” asked Grisman the hunger in his smile dancing now in his eyes. “Do you know how hot a blast furnace gets? 3600 degrees Fahrenheit is no problem. Any idea what that could do to the human body?” Grisman grinned at Stu. “Stu here could sweep you up with a broom and dustbin and dump you in the trash and no one would be the wiser.”

“Is that something you are likely to do, Mr. Grisman?” Ames met Grisman in the eye as if they were still discussing terms over the table.

“It wouldn’t be the first time, heh Stu?” Grisman watched Ames with that growing sense of hunger. It was an expression Ames had seen a thousand times before, on

the playground and occasionally in the boardroom, but much worse: Grisman wanted to break Ames. Something hardwired into his personality lived to dominate men like Ames or anyone they saw as weak.

Knowing this did not make the danger to Ames any less real. He knew there was little he could do to deflect Grisman immediate hunger. His skills were in negotiation and mediation, but these would serve little use here. Grisman was a predator in the full frenzy of the kill. Ames only ally was distraction; he needed Grisman the animal to retreat temporarily and later, hopefully, refocus in the cool light of reason. A gesture then, something to give the lion pause. With aplomb developed over a lifetime Ames stood straighter in Stu’s brutal grip and deliberately brushed the dust from his suit, meeting Grisman’s hungry gaze with his own cool detachment.

Grisman sneered at the gesture, walked deliberately up to Ames and punched him in the stomach. The blow was delivered with force and skill and Ames folded over like a lawn chair, gasping for breath and reeling at the pain.

“You dropped a name,” said Grisman leaning over to whisper in Ames ear. “That got you in the door. But you’re just a suit, a pansy one at that by the look of it. I’m going to send New York a return message all right,

Mr. Suit. The best part about it is you're a hired gun, so there's no blood debt on that end and by your own admission no one else really knows you're here. You're meat, Suit; nothing more than meat."

Ames tried to talk but couldn't find his breath.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking," said Grisman, breathing his rotten sausage breath in Ames' ear. "You want to tell me that someone does know. You want to threaten me with consequences, maybe even the law. It's a little late for that, and honestly it doesn't make a difference. You came and left, see? I have witnesses. And the authorities, or whoever, are welcome to dig through the dumpster all they want to prove me wrong. Nobody's going to miss another suit."

Ames was still struggling for breath as Stu bodily dragged him away.

•

Cynthia watched the sun go down outside the kitchen bay window, tapping her nails lightly against the frosted glass table. She didn't like down time. She liked to be where people were, or at least the illusion of activity. But today was different. Today, she found herself sitting idly in the kitchen wrapped in a strange malaise of indecision. What was she to do? What was she to do about Wilson?

She sighed and tried to enjoy the sun on the glass. Wilson liked the view; he *liked* down time. He could sit for hours in the morning or dusk just watching the view and doing his silly sketches. A part of her was envious of his character; another part hated him for it.

Did she ever love him? She smiled ironically. What is love anyway? She certainly had affection for Wilson, and the thought of leaving him—actually *leaving* him—was suddenly more difficult than she imagined. Damn Edith anyway. Why did she have to meddle?

But it wasn't Edith. It was her. She had been coming to this crisis for some time. She was just caught off guard by how hard it was now that the moment of decision was actually here. It was one thing to have an occasional romp with the Ted's of the world; it was another to actually walk away from Wilson. He was...what was he? Dependable? Calm? Giving? Safe? There were worse things in the world. What had she thought the other morning: fastidious, neat, naïve? She supposed the difference between the two lists would always be a moment to moment degree of distance from and to Wilson. Now absent him, however temporary, she saw him in a more favorable light. Which one was the real Wilson Ames? Which one was the real Cynthia? Would she come to realize leaving Wilson was a mistake?

But she knew she couldn't go on much longer as things stood; could she? The Ted's of the world had only been a form of putting off the inevitable. It wasn't just a matter of age, or boredom—guilt? She knew something was rotting inside her with every cuckold of Wilson, but it had never bothered her so much before. Why? If he knew about the men (and she suspected now he did) he clearly didn't care; and if he didn't know it was obvious he wasn't about to go looking for trouble. Could it be that it was something in Cynthia herself, something—decent? could she say that?—something that she had stifled over time but was now making its presence felt, demanding her attention and action?

She sighed, pulled out a cigarette, and then remembered Wilson's distaste for smoking in the kitchen. She smiled softly to remember how he let her know. He only brought it up once. He was typical Wilson, full of apology for her feelings and needs but would she consider not smoking at the kitchen table (not mind, not understand, but *consider*, as if she really had a choice). It was Wilson the self-deprecating gentleman making a reasonable request. She blushed as she remembered her reaction, which was to throw a silent tantrum pitching the whole pack of cigarettes in the trash and glaring at him from across the table. He had immediately apologized for

his inconsideration, fetched the cigarettes from the trash (an almost unbelievable act for the hygienically obsessed Wilson) and practically begged her to light up right then and there. Then she apologized, but he would hear nothing of it. Smoking at the table was her right, he said. It was her home after all; end of discussion. But she resolved to herself to change anyway. Of course, she still forgot from time to time. Wilson never complained.

She left the cigarette unlit. Who was Wilson Ames? Edith called him the Mysterious One, among other things. And for all his simple air there was an air of mystery around Wilson. It was nothing immediately apparent. One had to know Wilson to know there was more to him. But like everything else the mystery was a carefully maintain, fastidiously guarded element of her husband. Six years after they first met she still could not say what made Wilson, well Wilson.

Maybe she was just projecting this air of mystery, searching for reasons to make him more appealing, searching for reasons to stay just a little longer. Sitting in the kitchen he loved, trying to figure out what made it so pleasing to Wilson, she thought this last might finally have the ring of truth to it: Wilson wasn't hiding anything; there was no real mystery to Wilson, at least nothing more than what everyone had in relationship to

another. No, Wilson was just a simple man who was never going to go any further, never make any major contributions or connections, and never question or forsake Cynthia in any regard. He was Wilson; her Wilson.

The question really then, she thought, is this: do I want to spend the rest of my life with that?

•

Stu tied him up by the wrists to the fencing with utility chord. It was not too tight but he situated Ames' arms above his head so it was not comfortable either. Finished, he inspected his work and gave it a few testing tugs.

"Your boss is not thinking this through," said Ames, wincing as Stu drew the chord tighter.

Stu shrugged. "He has a more direct approach. And you don't want to get him angry. You made him angry."

"I assure that was not my intention," said Ames with a touch of irony.

Stu chuckled. "You're either very brave or very stupid, coming here alone. He's been working himself up for some time now waiting for New York to call. You weren't what he expected. The unexpected tends to make him angry."

Ames sighed. "Your boss seems to be easily angered."

"I saw that picture in your book," said Stu. "Did you

draw that?"

"Yes."

"It's pretty good."

"Lots of practice."

"My sister draws. Never saw much use it in myself."

"It helps keep me grounded," said Ames.

"How so?"

Ames considered his answer; what was safe to share, what had to be left out. "In my profession I can't go around making notes or writing things down, on paper or the computer. I can't even discuss them with a priest or psychiatrist. My clients pay to have their secrets protected in every way. But you have to let it out some way. My way is to sketch castles."

Stu scratched his cheek. "You better draw some pictures in your mind then," he said. "You're not going to like what comes next." Then he caught Ames' eyes. "Unless the Cavalry is coming?"

"There's no Calvary," said Ames, shaking his head. "But New York will have its answer one way or the other. Then they'll act. And the next group won't be like me. If you think a few factory workers dressed in matching windbreakers are going to stop them you're deluding yourself as much as your boss."

"It won't be the first time we've been tested that way,"

said Stu.

“Not this way.”

Stu tilted his head, shrugged. “If I see the opportunity, I’ll give him that message.” Then he left, closing the gate behind him and locking it.

Ames’ only companion was a utility closet with more warning stickers. The closet doors were guarded with a padlock, not that Ames could have done anything with it even if his hands were free. He stood as far away from the fencing as he could to protect his poor suit. He didn’t think it would be long. Grisman would want to feed his fire while it was still hot.

Poor Cynthia. What would she think? He had no doubt she would land on her feet; she was imminently competent. But she might have a bad spell for a time if Ames were suddenly to disappear without explanation. Grisman was right about some things: the police would soon drop the matter if there was no trail; so, too, would New York, at least where he was concerned, though they wouldn’t forget. Grisman would soon learn that. Would his wife hire a private investigator? Ames suspected not. How long before she married again? Was Ted his replacement waiting in the wings? He certainly hoped not. Cynthia could do better. Competent as she was, though, Cynthia needed things she didn’t fully understand herself.

Wilson was one of those things. He knew that from the day he saw her in the ballroom so long ago, surrounded by preening admirers and hopefuls, looking for all the world as if she belonged there in that way, but to Ames’ careful eye so mournfully lost. She needed him, someone like him, to give her the ground on which she could stand while the rest of her fluttered in imagined worlds of importance. He doubted his wife would look for a similar model the second time around, but the Ted’s of the world would be a disaster.

Of course she would be surprised by the will. It was a tricky business but she was set for life. He trusted that she would be sensible and see the gift for what it was and not ask a lot of questions. The offshore accounts were not strictly legal. The infusion of monthly cash should more than compensate for any hurt feelings. Of course, he couldn’t tell her about that up front—any more than he could tell her about his moonlighting career.

He shook the thoughts from his mind and concentrated on his situation. The best thing for Cynthia (and him) was to get home in one piece. He had started something with Stu, on instinct. Maybe Stu could get Grisman to start seeing reason again. If Stu relayed the message; if Grisman listened. There were just so little options with a man like that.

When Grisman came, he was smiling again and carrying Ames' planner. Stu unlocked and opened the gate but remained outside. Ames tried to read his face but the bodyguard was as stoic as a stone.

Grisman showed Ames the planner, opened to one of his sketches, a vast castle overlooking a field, all done in blue.

"Stu likes your drawings," said Grisman, still smiling. "Maybe that's why he's taking such a shine to you. Or maybe he's just a pansy like you." Grisman didn't bother to look around at Stu who remained the embodiment of stone. Grisman tossed the planner casually in the corner. "Nothing in that book of yours but drawings. What kind of planner is that?"

Ames marshaled his resources, every pore of his being open to the nuances of Grisman's body language and facial expressions, every instinct, all his training focused on his intended audience. This, if any, was his opportunity.

"I never keep notes, Mr. Grisman," he said calmly. "For my protection and my clients."

"The Prince of Discretion," said Grisman mockingly.

"A quality proven over time, and one I'm sure a man in your position can appreciate."

Grisman lost his sardonic smile. "That's true enough. You can never be too careful." This time he did glance

at Stu. Ames watched, waited. Grisman folded his heavy arms across his chest. "So you think the boys from New York will run through my men like shit through a goose."

"I'd hoped it wouldn't come to that," said Ames.

Grisman grunted. "I'm sure you do." He stepped closer to Ames. "Now, I don't want you to get false hope, Mr. Ames. I'm not having a change of heart, no matter what Stu says. I'm just trying to decide if it is worth having Stu work a soldering gun on you for a time first. What do you say, Mr. Ames, you have some secrets to spill?"

Ames felt a flush of white-knuckle panic, like a sudden drop in a transatlantic flight. He was going to die. Grisman was going to kill him, as casually as stepping on a bug; if he didn't stop to pull the legs off first. He saw the recognition of this fact reflected in Grisman's hard, gray eyes and the pleasure this gave the man. Something long buried in Ames maybe never to be born but for this moment reacted to the utter remorselessness of Grisman. He felt an intensity of emotion like nothing he'd ever experienced before: he hated Grisman. He hated his gritty fingernails, his rotten sausage breath, the gleam of drool just in the corner of his worm-like lips. He hated Grisman the bully, the sociopath. He hated the very idea of Grisman and his pathetic little world of crime.

But even as it took life it died again like a spark still-born. Another emotion moved to take its place and when Ames returned Grisman's look it was with disdain.

"There are no secrets, Mr. Grisman," he said flatly.

"We'll see about that," snarled Grisman, once more frustrated by Ames reaction. "Stu, get the gun."

Ames sighed. "Mr. Grisman, you are a disappointment."

"Here that, Stu!" called Grisman after the retreating figure. "Guys about to lose his toes one at a time and he's disappointed." He rolled a malignant eye over Ames, measuring again for a reaction.

"Do you really think your actions won't have repercussions?" asked Ames.

"You were here. I got the message. I responded." Grisman shrugged. "I told you: your disappearance is New York's problem, not mine."

"New York is expecting to hear from me tonight, in about..." Ames twisted his head around to look at his watch above his head, though he had already checked earlier. "One hour from now. If they don't hear from me they will assume you have declined their offer. They will also know something about your business ethics."

"So maybe I let you make that call," said Grisman assertively. "Here; with me right beside you."

Ames nodded. "A possibility considered by New York. Which is why I also have to report in person Monday to confirm our arrangement and make my final assessment."

Grisman scoffed. "I'm sure you do. You should have thought of that line earlier."

"Nevertheless," said Ames, "it is the truth. You can confirm it by calling that number on the card I gave you."

"Back to that trick again, huh? No thanks, buddy. New York is going to have to deal directly with me. That's my answer to you."

"As you will," said Ames slowly. "Either way they will know something about you."

"I'll take that chance. They'll come around when they get some money."

"Yes, they will want the money," said Ames, his voice cold, dispassionate. "But they will never deal with you as an equal after this. That precious circle you want so much to be a part of will be closed off to you forever."

"Over a messenger?" scoffed Grisman.

"I told you my services are very valued in that circle, Mr. Grisman. Discretion combined with genuine neutrality is a rare commodity anywhere, but very prized in that particular community. It could work for you as well. After today, no matter what the outcome, you will know

that.”

“You’re just trying to save your skin.”

“And yours, believe it or not.”

Stu approached then, a heavy soldering gun in his hand and an extension cord over his shoulder. He plugged the cord in a nearby hanging socket and then put the other end in the bottom of the gun. He handed the gun to Grisman who was watching Ames carefully.

“Take his shoe and sock off,” said Grisman.

Stu grabbed Ames right leg, pulled it up and with one brutal motion pulled the shoe off without undoing the lacing. Then he did the same for the sock.

“It takes just a few minutes to warm up,” said Grisman waving the gun. “Any particular toe you feel attached to?”

“It is not too late, Mr. Grisman,” said Ames, standing on one foot to keep his sock clean. “Let me go. I will call New York and tell them you are willing to deal. I promise you, I will forget all this in my report. As I said, my reputation for discretion is beyond reproach. If I tell you I won’t mention it, you can be assured I will not.”

But Grisman was looking at the glowing tip of the solder gun, a small, malicious smile slowly crossing his face. “They always beg when they finally see the gun, heh Stu.”

“He’s not begging,” said Stu.

Grisman lost his smile, gave Stu an angry look. He turned to Ames, studied him. “No, you’re right. He’s not begging. You’re a cool one, Mr. Ames.” He stepped close. “Hold him.”

Ames saw Stu swallow a sigh, then grab Ames leg once more, this time holding his foot in a vice-like grip around the ankle.

“Hold it tight now,” said Grisman quietly. He too grabbed the foot, holding it around the arch. His powerful hands squeezed the foot until Ames thought it would break. “I think we’ll start with the little one this time. Now don’t go passing out on me, Mr. Ames.”

“What question am I supposed to be answering, Mr. Grisman?” asked Ames, trying to keep the tremor from his voice.

“What?” asked Grisman, momentarily confused.

“You said you wanted some secrets,” continued Ames. “Secrets about what?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know nothing about New York than what I have already told you,” said Ames. His foot was beginning to fall asleep and he felt a dangerous tightening along his hamstring. “That is one secret to my success. I have no wish to have one or more of my toes amputated so if

cessation of your actions is dependent on my cooperation then I would greatly appreciate if you pick a topic I can cooperate with.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Grisman. “You sure do sound like a lawyer. Forget the secrets. This is just for being a pain in my ass.” Then he brought the gun down on Ames little toe and opened the door of pain.

*

A fire of determination was building in Cynthia. No, she would not spend another day wrestling with herself over Wilson. Something one way or another must be done. It was time. She could not continue to live her life this way...could she? No!

Almost she picked up the phone to call him then and there. But no, that was not fair to Wilson; sweet, gentle Wilson. You didn't leave a man like Wilson over the phone or by note. He deserved better. No, she would wait and confront him, here, across from the goddamn kitchen table. She'd make a full confession. Ted, the rest of it. Yes, and then at last she might see some answer to the mystery that was Wilson Ames. For all Wilson's careful demeanor he'd fall apart to know (or at least to hear it spoken aloud) his wife's infidelity. Hell, he'd crumble just to hear she was unhappy.

Sweet, gentle, unassuming Wilson. She felt miserable

for him just thinking about it.

*

His first thought was of Cynthia, a desperate need to find her, help her. His next was of the unbearable pain in his foot. It was as if his toe were on fire, a constant, unbearable burn that peeled his skin like dry paper and singed exposed bone. He groaned, unable to open his eyes to look at what Grisman had made of his toe.

“Who's Cynthia?”

It was a familiar voice, but not Grisman. Ames opened his eyes, saw Stu squatting beside him. Ames was on the ground now, one hand still bound to the fence. Grisman was nowhere to be seen.

“You called out to Cynthia,” continued Stu.

“My wife,” gasped Ames. He still could not look down at his foot, dreading what he would find.

“Passing out was the smartest thing you've done yet,” said Stu, standing up. He carefully put the soldering gun on the ground out of reach of Ames. “He only enjoys it when he gets a reaction.”

Ames finally looked, his need to know more compelling than his fear. The toe was an ugly red and black nub of charred skin and blood—but it was still whole.

“Where is he?” asked Ames.

“Calling that number I guess.” Stu folded his arms

across his chest. “I think you got to him after all. I didn’t understand at first, but you actually played him, didn’t you? You knew when to push his buttons and when to pull back. He’s not used to...subtlety. He’s about as subtle as a fist in the face.”

“I wasn’t so smart,” said Ames looking at his toe taking a long, trembling breath against the pain. It came to him suddenly that he had told Stu his wife’s name. That was a mistake. He needed to concentrate; he could not afford any more mistakes.

“That’s nothing,” said Stu. “He meant to do a lot worse. Tell me, how did you know we used to work for the factory?” he asked, leaning against the fencing.

“You have the look but not the depth.”

“Come again?”

“You look to be tough; I suspect you have done some things I could not. But the men who will come after me are professional. Cold professionals. You don’t have that yet.”

Stu considered Ames. “He might make a deal.”

Ames shrugged, grimaced again as the movement exacerbated the pain.

“But it won’t matter, will it?” asked Stu. “You’re going to tell them about this if he lets you go—or, like you said, they’re going to know something happened to you

if he doesn’t.”

Ames looked to the flooring, trying to will his way through the pain and concentrate on next steps.

“They’re going to come anyway, aren’t they?” sighed Stu. “You tried to warn him. He’s not smart like you, though. You did play him.”

Ames looked to Stu. “You’re name is Stewart, right?”

“Everybody calls me Stu.”

“Well, Stewart, if you have the chance I’d find another employer, and soon.”

Stu frowned. “Not likely.”

They heard the steps before they saw Grisman returning. He looked thoughtful, almost puzzled as he stepped through the gate. He folded his beefy arms across his chest and glared down at Ames.

“Well, you spoke true enough about the call. They’re waiting to hear from you.”

Ames looked to his watch. He must have been out for forty minutes. He looked up to Grisman. “I can still make that call.”

“But now you’ve got something more to say,” said Grisman bitterly, glancing at Ames’ ruined toe.

Ames took a big breath. “Yes.”

“What about your promise?”

“I promised I would forget everything up until the

point you went too far.”

Grisman sneered. “Doesn’t matter. Tell them what you want.” He turned to Stu. “Call in a few more boys. Make sure they know what they’re doing and see they have the firearms to do it with. It’s your ass if they don’t.”

Stu nodded, looked once to Ames. “And him?”

“Leave him to me.”

Stu nodded to Ames briefly when Grisman’s back was turned and then left. Grisman waited until he was gone then bent over Ames. He pulled out the cell phone Ames had given him.

“They said they would deal, but only if they talked to you.” He looked Ames in the eye. “If I let you go, will you play square?”

“In my pocket is another business card. Take it out.” Grisman carefully did this, looked the card over.

“It’s blank,” he said.

“Give me a pen.”

Grisman patted his shirt pocket, looked around, saw the tossed planner and mechanical blue pencil. He went over picked the pencil up and brought it back. He handed it carefully to Ames staying out of harm’s way.

“Now the card.” Grisman gave him this as well.

Ames held the card in his shackled hand and carefully wrote on it with the blue pencil. When he was finished

he took the card in his free hand and handed the pencil and card to Grisman.

Grisman took them, read the card. “What’s this?”

“My private business number. With that you can contact me and arrange for my personal representation in your future business negotiations, including the one with New York.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because a damaged toe will not mean much to New York or my other clients. My death would, however. If offering you my services avoids that then everyone makes out. I’ll see you get the best deal with New York. You get to see the inner circle. I get to walk out of here. Everyone gets something they want or need. That’s how this business works.”

“This is for real?” asked Grisman.

“It is.”

Grisman rolled his tongue around his cheek. “You’re right about their trust in you. Which makes me think you’re right about the rest of it. I want in, Ames. But I can’t afford to have them turn me out in six months, and that’s what fifty percent of my business means.”

“How much money can you get your hands on right now?”

“About a quarter million. But that represents my

rainy day fund.”

Ames gave Grisman an up from under look. “Mr. Grisman, this is that rainy day. If I can get them to take the two hundred and twenty five thousand and 25% interest in your business, would that be acceptable to you?”

Grisman grunted, countered. “The quarter alone, with interest, and I promise to have the rest by this time next year.”

Ames bit back new wave of pain, answered calmly. “No. They will not accept that.”

“Then fuck them!” said Grisman, standing up again. “And fuck you!”

Ames carefully moved his foot out of Grisman’s path raising new levels of pain as he did so.

“Mr. Grisman,” he said, channeling his pain into authority. Grisman spun around angrily, the dancing hunger momentarily back in his eyes. He glanced to the gun, then back to Ames. But something in Ames’ tone and demeanor held him back and the hunger died again to be replaced by frustration. “Twenty five percent is manageable,” continued Ames in a calm, professional tone. “You will still have controlling interest.” For now, thought Ames, but in a year you’ll be nothing more than a figurehead—if you’re around at all. “This is the price you pay for missing the deadline,” he repeated. Then, he dropped

the carrot: “And entry into the circle.”

Grisman wrestled with this for a time and then threw his hands up. “All right! Twenty five percent and the quarter. You make it happen, you get to walk out of here.”

“Agreed. Now, can I please stand and will you get me something for my toe?”

Grisman handed him the phone instead. “Make your call. Put it on speaker. After that, we’ll see.”

“Whatever agreement I manage over the phone will have to be confirmed by me in person tomorrow in New York.”

Grisman’s fat lips twitched like mating worms but he nodded.

Ames dialed the number. After that, it was just a matter of words, and in that much at least, Ames was sure of

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“Darling, whatever happened to your toe?”

“I stubbed it on chair, sweetheart. Nothing to worry about.”

Cynthia joined him at the kitchen table, her plans momentarily derailed by the sight of Wilson’s heavily bandaged toe at the end of his extended foot.

“It looks serious.” She tapped her fingernails against the glass table trying to put the distraction into place, her

prepared speech collapsing under the weight of this new and unexpected sight of Wilson. The bandage was so out of place on Wilson, so unlike his normal, put together self. It was almost a shock to see it there; like finding a finding a piece of rot on an otherwise whole fruit.

Ames looked from her fidgeting hand to her distracted face. Behind the distraction there was something else, something pressing.

“How was your trip?” she asked mechanically, obviously trying to center herself again.

“Boring. You were right to miss it.”

“Wilson....”

Those eyes, thought Ames. They reminded him just a little of Grisman’s eyes when they had finally parted. It gave him pause to see it echoed again in Cynthia. He tried to recall the significance of that last moment with Grisman and discover its purpose now in Cynthia—and why it disturbed him as much or more than anything he had gone through in the last two days.

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Grisman had Stu release Ames as promised, and Stu had even found a first aid kit somewhere and saw to Ames’ toe. When Stu pronounced him fit to travel, Grisman had stepped close to Ames and looked at him with the

same expression Cynthia wore now: a look of determined disassociation; an act of self-condoned revision, dismissal, and forwardness. What had happened, for Grisman, was a thing to be forgotten or if recalled seen only in the most positive, casual terms of merely business, something to be moved on from, now and forever.

“You didn’t tell New York about that,” said Grisman, glancing at Ames’ toe and giving him a knowing look.

“It wasn’t important to the negotiation.”

“Will you tell them later?”

Ames looked at Grisman. He was not out of the factory yet but he didn’t think Grisman was likely to stop him now. There was too much on the table for him. He could answer him honestly, without fear. He did so knowing the other would misinterpret it anyway.

“Mr. Grisman, what good would it do?”

Grisman grinned. “You’re all right, Ames. I can see why they use you. I’ll remember, and keep this.” He held up the card. “No hard feelings?” He held out his hand.

“May I have my pencil and planner back, sir?”

Grisman took back his hand slowly, his grin growing in amusement. “Sure. Stu.”

Ames put the planner with pencil under his arm, met Stu’s eye briefly. Stu continued to imitate a stone.

Ames eventually stopped by the actual Hollings of-

fice as arranged, to complete the cover. The people at Hollings were sympathetic about his injury and listened politely to his pitch. They promised to contact New York soon with an answer. And the meeting was on the record.

Back in New York he sat in a private room. He was assured it was clean, but at Ames instance they still spoke in terms of Hollings.

“*Hollings*,” said the gentleman in the suit across from him, “sent over the contract today, along with the upfront fee. Thank you. We are pleased with outcome.”

“Happy to help.” But Ames did not look happy.

“You have some concerns about the...Hollings partnership?”

Ames nodded. “My assessment of the situation is this: Hollings represents a high-risk investment. They are very aggressive but lack the portfolio and experience to manage at the next level.”

“Do you see them as potential competitors to our market?”

“They would very much like to be a major part of your market. In fact, I would say they would like to own your market.”

“Serious competition, then?”

“The most serious. But more important, they represent an unknown quality; very volatile, one that might

create collateral damage to your organization.”

“And you would recommend aggressive action on our part to cut-off this potential competition?”

“The most aggressive.”

A pause. “This assessment is your professional opinion? Not one colored by personal experience or bias?” A look to Ames’ foot. He had noticed the limp.

“I only offer objective, professional opinions in these matters. My personal opinions are never voiced or take part in my assessment. This is a quality I believe you have come to appreciate over time.”

“We have. Thank you, Mr. Ames. The secretary has your fee outside.” The consultant fee for the Hollings contract—for the record. Ames knew the real money for his work with Grisman would be sent to his private account in the Caymans.

Later on the plane home, he sketched a castle in the clouds. He hadn’t lied, he never lied. His assessment had been objective, accurate; but Ames took a certain guilty pleasure in knowing that his words may have started an unpleasant chain of events for Grisman and Grisman Industries.

He drew a cloud covered turret and remembered the hunger in Grisman’s eyes as he held the cold, hard gun to his toe. He used the pencil edge to brush a hole in the

castle wall, remembering the smarmy self-confidence, the disgust and utter disdain Grisman had for Ames as he said goodbye. Grisman believed the likes of Ames could never really hurt him or had any real significance.

Ames finished the sketch before they landed and put it away. With it went the memory of Grisman and his dancing, hungry eyes, his terrible gun, his foul breath and hairy arms.

Then it was just a matter of getting through arrival and coming home to his other life. The hospital had said he would keep his toe and had given him some wonderful pain killers, cautioning him to take more care in his hobbies in the future. And that should have been that. An unpleasant memory, one recorded and then forgotten in another blue castle sketching, and a return to normalcy.

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But now, sitting in his kitchen across from his wife and seeing a distant echo of Grisman's determination—however nuanced and removed from that nightmarish individual and time—that similar/different compulsion to ignore the past, to ignore Ames, to move forward regardless of cost...

Ames knew again the white-knuckle terror of no control, of falling without recourse. His world was about

to take another turn, maybe an irreversible one, but one that would certainly upset his carefully maintained sense of well-being and order. He didn't want to hear what she clearly so wanted to say. He wanted instead to find his pencil and paper, to draw another escape until the matter went away on its own and things returned to normal.

But looking at the fidgeting, determined Cynthia he knew that was not possible. He must act, and act now. Instinct or a sense of synchronicity led him to again seek first distraction, to force retreat and open the door of doubt.

"There was one thing," he said, before she could speak again. She hesitated, holding back her fire for just another moment.

"Yes?"

He watched her lean closer, a look of hopeless expectation in her eyes. He wondered briefly if he had driven her to this point. He thought again of her standing in that long ago room of admirers, smiling at all and none, seemingly in control and in her element but in reality a butterfly touched on the wing and grounded against her will. Wilson had recognized even then her conflicting needs for safety and freedom, control and abandon, and had provided it all for her in his unimposing, constant self. He looked across the table, trying to see if that

trapped butterfly had changed yet again and if he should risk all—all his secrets, all his other truths—to keep her. He knew he would if it were necessary; if that would be enough. If that was really what was required now. He shuddered at the implications if it were not.

But first one last attempt at distraction and doubt, a familiar ploy he'd relied on in other, more dire circumstances. A call to retreat and reconsider; the whip crack test of resolve. It was Grisman all over again. Only it wasn't. It was Cynthia. It was his well-ordered life.

"Yes," he said slowly, watching, assessing. "A very disturbing moment, actually."

Cynthia looked away, absent-mindedly fetched a cigarette and tapped it on the table, looked back. She was growing impatient.

"I stopped in the airport bathroom," said Ames. "There was a man there bleeding profusely from the nose. Bloody paper towels were everywhere. I almost walked out, it was so disturbing."

Cynthia stared at Ames, her face twisted in shock, confusion. She had no basis from which to understand this story, or more importantly fit it in her plans for confrontation. Yet Wilson sat there watching her expectantly, as if waiting for her to respond in kind. She looked to the kitchen sink, dumbfounded.

"I've disturbed you, darling," said Wilson suddenly and reached out a hand to cover her own. "I'm so sorry. Forget I said anything. On to more happy thoughts: how was your dinner with Edith...and Ted?"

"Ted..." started Cynthia, an image of Ted standing naked in the bathroom filling her distracted mind. "We... Wilson, there is something I have to tell you."

"Yes dear," said Wilson, squeezing her hand. And again, the subtle stab of distraction, redirection. "By the way, you were right, the trip was miserably boring. But it was successful. There's a little extra in the account. Why don't you buy something nice and we can take in dinner and a show this weekend. Would you like that?"

"Yes...but..." She looked down to the well-manicured hand holding hers, looked up to see Wilson smiling at her; safe, dependable, naive Wilson.

"You could even ask Ted and the rest of them along if you like."

A sudden image of Ted sitting next to Wilson almost sent her reeling. "No dear, not Ted," she said distractedly. "He turned out to be a bit of a bore."

"Poor darling. Then just you and me. Of course," Wilson smiled shyly, "I'm afraid you must think me even more a bore."

She looked again to Wilson: safe, dependable, *trusting*

Wilson.

But no, not boring. Never boring. There would always be a bit of mystery behind that well-maintained appearance of stability, trust, fastidiousness. The safe, dependable mystery of Wilson Ames, which she knew in some ways was hers and hers alone, whether she solve it or not.

Wilson gave her that, and more as well. He gave her stability...and yes, let's be honest, an illicit freedom. One that would never be questioned, one that was not being questioned even now in his kind, trusting expression and silly stories of bloody noses in bathrooms. How typical of Wilson to be so totally out of the moment.

And what was Edith's meddling but vaguely disguised jealousy? No, she realized with sudden assurance, she did not want to solve or give up just yet on Wilson, the mystery, or the constancy.

"Dinner and show with you would be wonderful, Wilson," she answered with a smile. "Only, can I take a rain check? Edith wants me to see this new lounge act in the Village and she simply won't go without me. And you wouldn't want to go, Wilson. Not your kind of act at all." She hesitated, raised an ironic eyebrow. "I could still use that new dress though."

Her smile was a thing of playful irony masking a

deeper, not altogether resigned acceptance, a willful, almost pleased return to apathy.

And it was enough, he thought. "Of course, dear."

He beamed in humble gratitude, genuinely relieved. He patted his wife's hand, then picked up the paper. He retreated then as well, safe in the knowledge that his world was once again in place, all visible accoutrements neat and tidy.

Later he would capture the rest—the left over, the unnumbered, the unwanted—capture it all in blue lines and soft shades of other, then put it away.

For now he would remain, at least for the near future, Wilson Ames, Prince of Blue Castles.