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The man with the overcoat

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THE MAN WITH THE OVERCOAT

“But it is plain you must have a new overcoat.”

--The Overcoat, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol

Skip Gerber exited the elevator at 6.18 pm on an until-then ordinary late October Tuesday and took the overcoat handed him by a man standing just outside the intricately tooled brass Amerongen Building elevator doors. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have done such a damn-fool thing, but he was preoccupied – with what thought or thoughts he had no time to recall in the stoked hours that followed.

Was his preoccupation to do with anything that had happened as he left the office where he referred to himself (ironically and, he hoped, humorously) as a “legal eagle”? Were his thoughts concerned with something his administrative assistant Brianna called after him? Something on his calendar he needed to see about? Pick up? Drop off?

Was it some tiresome legal query – or, worse, client – he'd been unsuccessful at pushing to the back burners of his (sometimes he thought) burnt-out mind? Something about his career in general he'd been unsuccessful at ducking? Did it have to do with speculating, as he often did, on how his legal-eagle (no irony necessary) dad, Gabriel Martin Gerber, would have handled similar cases?

Was he trying to recall what information he'd promised to look up for his mother, Bernice Sawyer Gerber – not even for *her*, for her *friend* Gussie Slotnik? (This was his life.) Was he wondering if he'd taken his cellphone? Had he just patted his pockets to verify that he had?

Was he dwelling on his funny (or not so funny) general existence as a guy who used to enjoy being the life of the party but had reached an unfortunate point where he no longer had time for parties, let alone serve

as the life of them?

Skip Gerber couldn't say what he'd been contemplating, and as a consequence of his ruminations being elsewhere, he had accepted the unusually heavy, thundercloud-grey overcoat just like that, no hesitation, no questions, no confusion.

He simply allowed someone he'd never seen before in his constantly evolving, and too habitually revolving, days to hand him a coat and say "Here you go, and be very careful with it" in a tone of voice he wouldn't describe as soothing – gravelly, more like.

Why would anyone – he was soon to ask himself innumerable times – take a coat from a complete stranger only because it had been offered? (Foisted off? Unloaded?) Come to that, why would a complete stranger hand him a coat in the first place – as if a night-club patron to a checkroom clerk – and warn him to "be very careful with it"?

When Skip – red-faced as a circus clown with annoyance after realizing what he'd gone and done – tried to return the overcoat to its brash donor, the gesture was futile. The man had boarded the elevator, or Skip assumed he had. The doors had shut behind him and on any other passengers aboard.

Who knows where in the skyscraping Amerongen Building the man was headed? Who knows how time-consuming and complicated it would be for Skip to track down the unasked benefactor and return the blessed item?

Skip – born Edward Raymond Gerber thirty-seven-years-and-change earlier and nicknamed by Uncle Moe, who got a kick out of his four-year-old nephew skipping all the time – wasn't even certain he could identify the cheeky coat-bestowing bastard. Nor could he count on any of the passengers to verify the culprit. By now they'd all completely dispersed.

Near as Skip could say, the man was of middling height (maybe five-ten, five-eleven), full head of salt-and-pepper hair – Skip was fairly sure of that – had a long face (or was it square-ish), was dressed in a suit and tie. He was of indeterminate age, anywhere between thirty-five and fifty-five, Skip would have estimated.

But screw it all, that description would fit just about every second or third man who charged into or hurtled out of the busy midtown Fifth

Avenue Amerongen Building at any time of the day between 8 am and 8 pm or, for that matter, at odd hours during the late night and early morning.

If pressed further for a police sketch, Skip might have said that in his fleeting glimpse he thinks he noticed the man had a one- or two-day's beard and looked fatigued. But that description, too, could fit almost any of the lean and hungry workaholics populating the no-available-space Amerongen Building.

Middling height? Signs of greying hair? Suit and tie? Thirty-ish? Forty-ish? Workaholic? Good grief, he could have been describing himself, as he often had in his more comically desperate misgiving moments.

All Skip could be sure of – at, checking his knock-off Rolex, 6.21 pm (why buy the real thing when you can get a substitute for so much less?) – was that he hadn't been lumbered with the coat by a woman. Or could it have been a woman gotten up as a man? Probably not. The features he'd scoped for only a split second didn't look as if they were a woman's. No, not a woman's. Skip wouldn't have said that.

Not that he was thinking only about describing the man to anyone as he stood facing the closed elevator doors with the (what's the opposite of "purloined"?) coat in his left hand and his briefcase in his right hand and as people streamed past him or clustered around him waiting for the doors of one or more of the other seven Amerongen Building elevators to part.

Not that he was thinking only of locating the man, either. He was thinking: What the hell! What the hell is this? What the hell do I do now?

Ah-hah, he flashed: ID. There might be some sort of identification in the coat, maybe even a wallet – though he didn't think it was likely. Maybe, failing that, a card saying "If this coat is found, please return to _____ at _____ or call _____ or text _____. Maybe, failing that, a letter addressed to the (disappeared) owner, maybe a name embroidered inside, maybe at least initials, which would give him something, but not much, to go on.

(Skip had read his share of police procedurals and watched them on television enough to understand that having no more information than

the manufacturer could serve as enough of a lead.)

He put down his briefcase in order to check the inside of the coat for a haberdasher or a designer. It was double-breasted and made of a sturdy but soft woolen material in an almost imperceptible small herringbone pattern so dark and darker grey it was almost black. The collar and lapels were generously wide. The sleeves ended in wide cuffs and, like the front closings, featured horn buttons. The hem looked as if it would fall just below a man's calves. There was a double seam at the back that, from what Skip could tell, gave it a flare and a flair.

The coat, then, had been smartly styled. At an earlier time, it might have been termed a great coat, or greatcoat, if he was using the word properly. That, in Skip's assessment (which was still rife with agitation), was what rendered it a quality classic. It quietly announced it wasn't just for one cold-weather spell but for many, a big overcoat that would last decades and perhaps had, since it showed only modest indications of wear.

It could be vintage. Yet, there was no label either at the nape of the neck or sewn onto an inside breast pocket that would establish anything of its origin, its provenance, its history – and no evidence that any had been removed.

Skip was taking this in without having stirred from the spot where he'd stopped short. A man brushed by him and said, "Nice overcoat you got there." The man kept going a few steps, humming an unidentifiable tune under his breath and giving the impression he was headed to another part of the lobby. He looked back at Skip for a second and threw him a grin reminiscent of Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, a grin reminiscent of Jack Nicholson in anything.

Skip didn't like it. He didn't like it at all. He liked it even less when the man made a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn, headed back towards the street doors and said, passing Skip for the second time, "Very, *very* nice overcoat. Take good care of it."

Does he think I'm holding it up for display? Skip wondered, as he slipped his right hand into the right-hand front pocket and finding nothing. Or, Skip wondered further, does he have something else in mind? That grin might have suggested the man – who wasn't wearing a

suit and tie but a black leather blazer and an open-collar maroon shirt exposing a thick, corded neck – was getting at something else.

It was almost as if the man knew something about the overcoat. Otherwise, why would he say “Take good care of it” right after the first man had made almost the same admonishment?

Did they know each other? Were they in cahoots?

Okay, Skip thought – probing the left-hand front pocket – it’s nothing. Why wouldn’t he say “Take good care of it.” It’s a good-looking coat. It deserves good care. This is just a coat that fetches compliments, and that was just a guy who’d come into the building, remembered he’d forgotten something, turned around and, as he left, handed out a bit of friendly advice.

Rummaging in the left-hand front pocket, he felt something soft and something hard. He pulled out the contents. A pair of black kid gloves and an unopened roll of Halls cough drops.

Not too helpful. How many men in Manhattan or visiting Manhattan own black kid gloves? A DNA analysis might definitely point to someone in particular, but Skip wasn’t about to get involved with all that. As to the cough drops, what did they convey? That the owner had a cough but had purchased the pack so recently he hadn’t had occasion to tear it open yet? That the owner didn’t have a cough but was preparing for whenever he might develop one?

Was Skip about to wander through the Amerongen Building floor by floor, listening for a man with a cough – hacking or otherwise? He didn’t think so. He returned the gloves and cough drops to the left-hand pocket and resumed his search. Nothing in the breast pocket, either. No wallet anywhere.

But hold it, hold it! The two inside breast pockets each had a double tab secured by two buttons. Skip released the right-hand tab and reached into that pocket. He detected a small rectangular piece of heavy paper that could have been a business card.

He took it out. It was a business card – off-white, printed on one side in a tasteful serif font. (Garamond, Skip thought. Why he couldn’t say, and if he were correct, what good would that do him anyway?) On the top line was printed the name “Miles Rogers Havilland,” on the second

line “Private Consultant,” on the third line “9 West Forty-seventh Street, Suite 2200.”

That was it – no further information and, when Skip turned the card over, nothing additional on the back other than an ink-stained fingerprint that looked too indistinct, too smeared for corroborating anything.

Skip put the card back in the pocket and invaded the left-hand inside breast pocket with its double tabs and two buttons. These tabs were already undone. He removed a piece of flimsy white composition paper that had been ripped from a larger sheet. It was wrinkled, as if someone had crumpled it up with the intention of discarding it but then decided not to. Or maybe someone had found it and smoothed it out as best he or she could. Written in pencil on it was an address: 1021 Fifth Avenue. Below it, the initials am S.

AMS, Skip thought, AMS. Did anyone’s name pop up that might have meaning for him? Nothing occurred to him? Would it be helpful if one did? Then something did come to him: Albert M Schweitzer? Arnold M Schwarzenegger?

That was a big help. One was dead and gone, the other had better things to do than drop a big overcoat on him.

But he did have a start – two starts: two specific addresses. G. d. it, Skip thought, if this guy thinks he can pawn off his coat on me as some stupid kind of practical joke, he’d better think again. I’m not above tracking him to his midtown digs – which happen to be only a five-minute or less walk away – or to his Fifth Avenue crash-pad and returning the bulky item with a curt “Thanks, but no thanks!”

He might even add an equally curt, “Do you think I look like someone who can’t buy his own overcoat?”

Knowing where he was bound, Skip draped the coat over his arm and picked up his briefcase. For the first time in the minute or three it had taken him to look through the pockets, he noticed people still eddying around him. He took in that the music floating through the lobby was an easy-listening (Lite-FM?) arrangement of the infectious early nineteen-forties chart-topping “You Are My Sunshine.”

As Skip stepped to the weighty bronze-and-glass Amerongen Building doors, humming along with the perky ditty and seeing himself as a

wronged man on a mission, he was aware of the overcoat on his arm. It was big, heavy, cumbersome. He'd be better off putting it on.

Yet he hadn't been humming along with "You Are My Sunshine" for more than a few measures – is that the tune the humming man had put in his head? – when the lyrics had him thinking about the weather. Sunny weather. Warm weather. Not greatcoat weather.

Carry the coat? Wear the coat? Carry the coat? Wear the coat? Skip knew from experience – as all men will tell you – that heavy as the coat may be, it would feel lighter worn rather than carried.

He put the briefcase down, put the coat on. When he was holding it up, poking through it, he'd gotten the impression it was a size or two too large for him – but at that, not large enough for Arnold Schwarzenegger's broad shoulders.

At five-feet-ten-inches and one-hundred-seventy-five relatively well-proportioned pounds, Skip normally wore a thirty-eight long suit or overcoat – perhaps, depending on brand idiosyncracies, forty long. But without really giving it much thought, he'd taken the garment for a forty-four long, maybe even a forty-six long.

Now he'd put it on. He'd shrugged his shoulders so the coat would fall comfortably in place. It fit him perfectly. It was as if it had been custom-tailored for him – he hummed, not hummed, to himself. It was as if he'd slipped into a bespoke coat, which was something he'd always thought he'd like owning but had never pursued on the assumption he wasn't the kind of man who wears custom-tailored anything.

Still: It is a handsome coat, and I probably look good in it, he thought. Not, he hastened to assure himself, that he intended to keep it. Not that he had any intention of being "very careful with it" for any length of time. He had the two addresses. To unburden himself of the unwanted thing, he'd visit both if he had to. Even if the man who'd palmed it off on him was still in the Amerongen Building and hadn't gone back to the West Forty-seventh Street suite. If he hadn't, Skip would leave it with a receptionist or a secretary – an executive assistant, as they were dubbed nowadays – assuming Miles Rogers Haviland had a receptionist or an executive assistant.

Thinking these things while headed towards the doors, he spotted

Gordon, the lobby man in his gold-trimmed brown uniform. He greeted him and asked, “Gordon, a few minutes ago, did you, uh, notice a man standing by the elevators, um, holding a coat?”

Gordon – whom Skip always credited with high-level job satisfaction for his consistent good nature – said, “You know, I can’t say, Mr Gerber. There’s lots of men passing by me holding coats, putting coats on, taking coats off. What kind of coat we talking about here?”

Skip felt foolish saying he was now wearing the coat. What would that sound like? He said, “Uh, a coat looking like this one. Give or take.”

Gordon took a closer look at the coat. “That’s a nice coat, Mr Gerber. Can’t say as I’ve ever seen you in it before. Can’t say I seen another one like it here recently. But like I say, lots of coats go through here of a day. Maybe not as many in this weather, but still lots. Why you asking, anyways?”

Skip wasn’t ready to answer that one. He couldn’t think of a response that wouldn’t make him sound, well, *unsound*. He said, “I thought it was someone I knew who I need to find out some information from. Nothing important.”

Gordon said, “I tell you what, Mr Gerber. I see a man holding a coat just like that or wearing it, I’ll tell him you was looking for him.”

“Thanks, Gordon,” Skip said. “I appreciate it.”

What was he going to say – that Gordon wouldn’t see a man wearing a coat just like this one, since this was the one? He picked up his briefcase, pushed one of the Amerongen Building doors open, went through and was almost immediately blinded by the late afternoon sun.

He halted to get his bearings. As he did, he felt the hard impact of another body. “Watch where you’re going, bud,” warned a husky guy who looked as if he’d played football in high school. Then this fullback in mufti barked with an unmistakable sneer, “What’s with the coat? It ain’t a bad-looking coat, but you’re rushing the season.” For what he must have deemed good measure, he punched Skip on his right biceps.

Despite the coat’s thickness, Skip felt the uncalled-for blow. Rubbing his arm, he decided to cross Fifth Avenue to the west side of the street. He was smarting from the punch as he stepped off the curb and simultaneously heard the squeal of tires. He looked to his right and saw a

black limousine coming towards him.

To avoid it, he leaped backward. The heel of his right foot caught the curb, causing him to fall with a jolt on the pavement. The limo, missing Skip by inches, picked up speed and zoomed past.

As it did, Skip looked up and saw the driver staring straight ahead at the road with a grim and determined look. Through the rolled-down window at the back seat, he saw an older more distinguished man who, Skip would have sworn, was mouthing something while looking (leering?) at him.

What could he be saying? When his mouth was moving, could “overcoat” have been one of the words he was forming? Was it something along the lines of “Take *very* good care of it”?

Coulda been.

Could not 'a been.

Quick, Skip thought as he sat on his bum, which was now additionally padded by the compliment-inviting coat, I'll figure out the make of the car. Who manufactures limousines, anyway? I'll memorize the license plate numbers and letters.

To no avail. The limo turned left into the next cross-town street. It was as gone as the man who'd handed him the coat – as gone as were the devilish grinner in the lobby who'd mock-admired the coat and the lug who'd punched him on the biceps.

Before it vanished, Skip thought he picked out the first letter on the rear plate – F. Big deal. Thousands of New York State license plates begin with an F, Skip happened to know. It was a piece of useless information he'd acquired years back – along with the names of typefaces – but what good did it do him now when he needed it? It was doubly useless.

And what about the black limousine? What about its very existence – how it pulled out going hell-for-leather as he stepped into the street? It was almost as if it were waiting for him. *Was* it waiting for him? *Was* the man at the wheel a seasoned getaway driver? *Was* the man in the back seat leering at him by design?

“Are you all right?” Skip heard. He was so involved with the limo from Hades that he hadn't noticed several people standing around him with fretful looks on their faces – none of them, he noticed, wearing overcoats.

Embarrassed that he was still in full plotzed position, Skip tried to stand but couldn't. Two men offered their hands. He let himself be pulled upright.

"Are you okay?" a second person asked.

"Yes," Skip said, despite his rear-end hurting like hell (never mind the padding), despite his right biceps aching, despite the lightning bolts of pain along the arm he'd put behind him to break the fall, his left arm. He felt obliged to say, "Sorry, I don't know what hit me."

"Don't you mean what didn't hit you?" a woman said. "That car looked like it was coming *right* at you."

"Are you sure no one's after you?" one of the men who helped him up asked. Did they all think that, too? Skip must have pulled a worried face, because the man sniggered and said, front teeth shining in the late afternoon glare, "Just kidding."

But was he? Was he "just kidding"? Was this something to kid about? But who would be after Skip, and why? What had he done to have someone or someones after him? One thing he'd done was accept the overcoat and then put it on, the overcoat he was now rubbing the seat of to brush off any pavement scuzz that had stuck to it in the fall.

"Here," yet another onlooker said, "You dropped this." He handed Skip his briefcase, and Skip had a flash of it flying from his grip as he toppled. Lucky thing it hadn't broken open and sent flying the papers of the unchallenging, downright numbing three contracts he was preparing.

Having anyone pick up your loose professional papers is always an awkward enterprise. But these eye-glazers in particular! He took the briefcase, saying to everyone in general, "I'm okay now. Thanks for your help."

The small crowd disbanded as Skip added sufficient thank-you nods. Before leaving altogether, one of the male Samaritans said with a tilt of his head towards the recently acquired overcoat, "Expecting a sudden drop in temperature?" One of the women said, "You want to take better care of your coat. It's too nice a coat to treat the way you're treating it." Several of them chimed in with remarks about what a handsome coat it was.

Skip saw no reason to respond but once again – this time checking

oncoming traffic more vigilantly – stepped off the curb and crossed the street on his three-block journey north along Fifth Avenue.

He reached the other side with no mishaps, but as he was crossing and then as he was walking on the west side of Fifth Avenue sidewalk, he noticed he was doing so with apprehension.

As he thought about it, he could see no convincing reason. Yes, in only a matter of – what was it? five minutes at most – a number of unusual things had happened to him. But even taking into account the acquisition of the coat (he could hardly overlook that), nothing had happened that greatly exceeded mild inconvenience.

As he turned into West Forty-seventh Street, he concluded that if he was sweating – and he was – it wasn't nerves or stress (aside from his high-level everyday stress dosage), it was due to his wearing an overcoat on an Indian-summer day.

But he wouldn't be wearing it for much longer, he reminded himself as he passed several of the sparkling jewelry stores indigenous to the area – the Diamond Center.

Could the coat belong to a diamond dealer? Is that where he was heading? If it did, and there'd been a diamond or two in one of its pockets, that might have been a different story. He patted the pockets again. No diamonds he could ascertain.

No diamond dealer either. Not from the look of 9 West Forty-seventh Street as he reached it and entered a building that resembled any one of a hundred or more buildings in the area without trayfuls of precious gems in their ground-floor shop windows.

Through the metal-and-glass double-doors was a small marble-faced lobby. Directly ahead of Skip on a wall was a directory, one of those black ones into the grooves of which white plastic letters are pushed, sometimes letters from different letter sets. He stopped to look at it. He pulled out the business card to check the name on it against whatever he found on the directory – Miles Rogers Havilland.

He ran his eyes down to the H block. No Havilland. Nor was there any Miles among the Ms or Rogers among the Rs.

Doesn't mean Miles Rogers Havilland isn't here, Skip told himself. He knew commercial real estate and knew how often directories are

neglected in these Class B and Class C buildings. Tenants come and go, and often building managers don't get around to updating the directory for months at a time, years.

He turned right a few steps and walked round to two elevators on his left. He pushed the up button. The changing numbers above both elevators' doors – with their wrought-metal, half-circle scrolling – indicated they were going up.

Skip waited until they came down, passing time by betting with himself which would arrive first. Initially, it appeared as if the right elevator would win the competition Skip had concocted. Then the left one seemed to be overtaking the right. Skip put his imaginary money on the right one to regain the lead.

The left one arrived first. Why do I always get the elevator race wrong, Skip asked himself, just like I always get on the slowest supermarket line? Just like I'm getting so much else wrong lately. Whatever happened to my old self? He's gotta be somewhere. What I wouldn't do to get that guy back.

When the doors and then the gate of the left elevator opened, five passengers came out – none with an overcoat to pass off and leaving inside, sitting on a worn metal stool, an elevator operator in a shabby light-grey jacket with soiled white piping.

"Floor?" he said in a bored tone, while Skip – the only one getting on – noticed the operator's jacket was too large for him. Obviously, it was the musty one-size-may-or-may-not-fit-all jacket that the building's elevator operators shared.

"Twenty-second floor," Skip said.

"Twenty-second, it is," the elevator operator said with a slightly heightened lilt. The two rode in a silence broken only by the click of the floors as they went past at a drugged snail's pace. "Floor twenty-two," the elevator operator announced finally and stopped rotating the handle of the lifting apparatus. Taking his sweet time, he pulled open the metal gate and then the doors.

"Thanks," Skip, alighting, said.

"No problem," the elevator operator said as if it had been at the very least a slight problem. Closing the doors and gate as Skip was looking

around for Suite 2200, he offered, “Nice overcoat. I like to say so whenever I see one like it.”

Then he was gone. What did he mean by that – by “whenever I see one like it” – Skip wondered. How often does he see one like it? Skip answered himself. He’s working in a building populated by businessmen. He probably sees them in overcoats like this – or enough like this – to “like,” maybe go so far as covet, the kind of overcoat he may not have the wherewithal to buy, even in a resale shop.

Skip let the thought go. He had bigger fish to fry. He’d spotted Suite 2200 just to the left of the elevator and had gone to stand before its door – a wooden door with an unwashed glass panel in its upper half.

Old-fashioned, Skip registered, which was beside the point, really, since on the door were only the remains of letters that for the most part had been scratched out. Not the words “Suite 2200” but the name on the door and the description of whatever services were, or had been, rendered inside.

What was left on the top line looked as if it could have been three names adding up to “Miles Rogers Havilland” but not necessarily. On the line under it, Skip could make nothing out. It looked like either one or two words that could have been anything from “Claims Adjuster” to “County Sheriff” to “Dog Catcher.”

Skip doubted it was any of those, nor could he infer anything from what he saw through the window, other than there seemed to be two rooms, possibly more. The room immediately inside the door looked as if it could have been a waiting-room with a place for a receptionist’s desk, and behind it, through an open inner door, he could see what must be a larger office space.

But as for a purpose to which the rooms were put, anyone’s guess was as good as Skip’s. From what he could tell, both rooms were empty. Not quite. A lone piece of furniture stood in the first room, placed in a corner. It was a wooden coat rack, also old-fashioned. It rested on three wooden feet, was about five feet high with six curving wooden arms reaching out like tendrils. It was the type of coat rack that could have been purchased at any time in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Could that weathered coat rack have been one on which, regularly or

occasionally, had been draped the overcoat Skip wore?

No way to know. No way to know anything, Skip thought, although he did something he judged stupid even as he did it. He knocked on the door. Virtually certain there was no one inside, he still thought that if there were the slimmest chance of someone's being inside, his not trying to find out would be a mistake.

There was no response to his first knock. He knocked again, and then, even stupider, he tried turning the doorknob. To his surprise and unease, the door opened but, Skip was pleased to note, didn't creak. He entered, still saw nothing but the coat rack in the outer room. He went into the second room and caught sight of something. On the floor – the floorboards of which were worn almost white in some places – and not visible from the front door was a telephone with a rotary dial.

He put his briefcase down and picked up the rotary phone – a rotary phone with a rotary-phone dial in the center of which whatever number had been there was now only scratches made by a sharp object. A pin? A penknife? A letter-opener? The blade of a pair of scissors?

Skip was speculating on that when something odd happened. The phone rang. The obsolete phone in the empty office rang and rang so loudly that he almost dropped it. What was Skip to do? He lifted the receiver on the third ring and said an affectless, "Hello."

"Your overcoat is ready," a man's gruff voice said.

At least, that's what Skip thought the gruff-voiced man said. The words were garbled and seemed to be spoken in a foreign accent. Eastern European? Russian? "Who is this?" Skip asked. "What number are you calling?"

"Your overcoat is ready," the voice said again, thickly. Or had it said, "The older cat is shedding"? Or "The other colt is reddish"? Or "You can't get over that, Randy?"

Skip couldn't be sure.

"Who's this?" he repeated, but all he heard was the click of whoever was at the other end hanging up. He held the receiver away from him and turned slightly. As he did, he saw something else in the room. It was a battered wire wastebasket with something in it.

He put the phone back on the floor and went over to remove whatever

it was. He held up part of a yellowed page torn from a newspaper. A New York City newspaper, but which one? Weren't there nine dailies back when it looked as if these two deserted rooms were last occupied?

There was enough of the right-hand side of a right-hand page for Skip to see it was from an August 23, 1925 edition, page 17. But from the *Times*, the *Trib*, the *Daily News*, the *Journal*, the *Herald*? From the what? Good as he was on fonts, he wasn't that much up on typefaces used by newspapers, some of them long-defunct, to know.

He ran his eye over the news stories but was almost immediately distracted from them by an advertisement in the lower right-hand corner. Prominent in it was an illustration, an overcoat that didn't look enough like the one Skip had on to be the same model – for one difference it was single-breasted – but it was close in several other styling details.

The copy read “Top quality for only \$79.” Expensive for the time, Skip thought. He looked to the bottom of the ad for the name of the store or manufacturer and the address. That information had been torn off, as if – could there even be another explanation? – whoever tore out the page had then torn away the name and location to follow up on. All that was left were the tops of two letters. The first could – *maybe* – have been a capital “I” or “J” or “L,” the second a capital “C” or “S.”

Lacking further details, Skip wondered what he was inclined to do next. What he was inclined to do was pocket the ad – it went into the right-hand pocket – and get out of the office to head uptown for 1021 Fifth Avenue.

What had he learned, anyway? The only occurrences had been the sighting of a coat rack on which the coat he was wearing had possibly hung, a possibly coat-related phone call on an antique phone and a possibly, if only partially, enlightening advertisement.

He left the office – which had been no more than a tease – closing the door behind him. Noting that the click accompanying the door as it was pulled to close sounded ominous, he went to the elevator and pushed the button with purpose.

While waiting for one of the cars to arrive, he checked the make-believe Rolex – 6.46pm He also replayed what had just happened. For some reason, the incident had a familiar ring to it – not a telephone ring,

a déjà vu ring. Ah, that was it. It was as if he'd just played a scene from a '40s film noir, something Humphrey Bogart could have starred in.

I've been thrust into an old movie, Skip thought. A thriller. The Case of the Big Overcoat. Funny thought, too, Skip mused. More interesting than anything else that's happened to me lately.

He had a hearty laugh at that and thought, That's the first good laugh I've had in a while – in too long.

The thought passed when, a minute later, at 6.47 phony Rolex time, one of the elevator cars got to him. It was the right elevator, on which he hadn't bet with himself this time.

The laugh had precluded the bet.

When the elevator doors and gate opened, the elevator operator was the same bored-to-near-catatonia employee who'd previously been in the left elevator. Or was he a twin? What could that mean? If he was a twin, he was also shrinking in a jacket too large for him.

Skip entered, noticing that the elevator operator looked at him with no sign of recognition. "Excuse me," Skip said, while the car began descending, "can you tell me anything about Suite 2200?"

Bogey would have done the same thing, Skip thought and was amused again. Indeed, he not only amused himself, but as he did, he felt something flow through his body. Unidentifiable at first, and then it came to him. I think they call this a frisson, he said to himself, and as far as I can tell, I've never had one before – or if I have, it's been so long, I don't remember when.

While he was – what? – enjoying, yes, actually enjoying this frisson, he heard the elevator man reply to his Suite 2200 question. "Like, what do you want to, like, know?" the elevator man said in the bored-out-of-his-gourd tone with which Skip was now finding familiar.

"Like who the occupant is or was?" Skip continued, Bogey-style.

"No idea," the elevator operator said without turning to Skip. "Somebody – I forget who – once said something about it being a limestone commission headquarters. Whatever that is. But I'm only here a few years, and as far as I know, that space has always been empty. People look at it a lot, but no one ever takes it, as I guess you saw. There's people in and out of here all the time."

“What people?” Skip asked.

“That, I couldn’t tell you,” the elevator operator said, still gazing in front of him at the gilt-lined, burlled wooden elevator wall as if he’d never seen it before. “People like you look at it. You know, the kind of people who want to rent space in a building like this. I never ask them. It’s not my job.”

He’d reached the ground floor. He said, “This is my job.” He pulled the gate back noisily and the doors parted. Skip realized it was his cue to get out. He did and said thanks.

“No problem,” the elevator operator said and, “Nice coat. The kind of coat you want to take good care of.” He remained sitting on his metal stool with the gate and doors open, since no one was getting on and apparently no one from a floor above had called.

Skip went towards the door to the building. He opened it and stepped out about two feet when another question for the elevator operator crossed his mind. He turned on his heel and stepped back inside to quiz the elevator operator on the additional query.

As he did, he heard through the doors the reverberating sound of something hitting the pavement outside – something crashing into the pavement that he was all but certain would have crashed into him had he not retreated when he did.

For a second, he stood where he was, patting himself with his left hand just to make certain he was all right. Then he swung round again. As he did, he saw a few pedestrians running up to look at the fallen and now shattered object. One of them was wiggling a pinkie-ringed pinkie finger in one ear, as if quelling tinnitus started by the reverberant sound of stone on concrete.

Skip pushed open the door to join them.

They and he were peering at several scattered parts of something. “It’s a gargoyle,” one of them said. Another added, “A limestone gargoyle.” It clearly was a gargoyle, a limestone gargoyle.

(Hadn’t Skip just heard the word “limestone”? Isn’t life filled with those kinds of peculiar coincidences?)

One half of the limestone gargoyle’s body, perched on a thick pedestal with its frightening taloned feet, rested not too many inches from the

other half of the body, which had, protruding from the back, a pair of narrow triangular wings. The gargoyle's head had rolled about a foot from both sections of its cruelly severed body. It was still wobbling a bit, but as Skip and his fellow witnesses watched, it stopped, face up.

It glared at them from eyes that suggested this was a gargoyle with an enlarged thyroid. Just as compelling, if not more, was the wide, blubber-lipped mouth. From under a flattened nose, it featured a blood-chilling grimace.

It was a grimace Skip thought he'd seen recently. But where? He knew where. It was the look he'd had from the bruiser in the Amerongen Building lobby and from the man focusing on him from the back of the speeding automobile. It was a look that cautioned, I know something about you, it's not good, and I'm going to do something about that. It was a look that accompanied the "heh heh heh!" of every mustachio-twirling villain in a nineteenth-century melodrama.

But what could be known about Skip that couldn't have been known before this last forty-five or so minutes? And why had this gargoyle seemed to have swooped at him on those two stone wings?

As that thought hit him, he looked up – so did the others, as if in soundless harmony – to see from where the gargoyle came. He and they (and other passers-by, too, wondering what was so interesting above that they had to look) saw a row of gargoyles poking out from just below the building's cornice.

One was missing, of course. No, it looked as if there were spots where gargoyles had been and were now missing. Also missing in Skip's view was any vantage point from which a gargoyle could be pushed or – were a very strong man involved – dropped.

His edgy reverie was interrupted by the elevator man (one of the two elevator men?) who'd come out of the building but hardly on the run. Skip looked at him more imploringly than he would have liked.

"Uh-oh, not another one," the elevator man offered.

"Another one?" the bunch of them sang more or less in unison.

"There was another one, like, recently," the elevator man said.

"You'd think they were migrating south for the winter and lost their bearings," one of Skip's companions inserted, pointing up towards the

roof.

“Yeah,” the elevator man said without looking up. “The other one fell about this time, too, about three weeks back, but no one was, like, hit. The building management has been talking about seeing to it. Listen, gargoyles are falling all over town. They been at the tops of buildings too long. Age. The weather.”

“All over town?” Skip said.

“That’s what you hear,” the elevator man said. “Other buildings in this neighborhood. I haven’t seen them. So I can’t say.” He looked at the fallen gargoyle again. “I, like, gotta go do something about this. Get the janitor or something. If he’s even here.”

Without further ceremony, he went back in.

His departure ended the fallen-gargoyle-gazing gathering. The others split off but not without individually and collectively mentioning they admired Skip’s overcoat. As they did, they looked around them – and, more to the point, at the surrounding buildings – to make as sure as they could that they were out of harm’s way.

Skip was too shaken to move off entirely yet. But in order to think in some safety, he did step under the overhang provided by the receded doors.

Was he safe? he asked himself. If a gargoyle had fallen from 9 West Forty-seventh Street once before, then he couldn’t be the target, could he? If they were falling all over town, he’d be even less likely the object of something or another.

Or were the unmoored gargoyles related?

And where did the overcoat, he once again remembered he was wearing – and in which he was now perspiring profusely – fit in? If, while fitting him so commodiously, it did fit in. What was the reason, if there was one, for his current ownership of it?

But wait. Something occurred to him and it was this: What would Bogart do in this situation? Were he Sam Spade, would he worry about his safety?

As Skip Gerber, he undoubtedly would, but, he suddenly realized, being the recent and not-so-recent Skip Gerber had begun to wear on him recently. Why not do something about it? Why not take something

– whatever it was – in his own hands? Or was he already doing exactly that?

He, Skip Gerber, had the Fifth Avenue address, didn't he? He – not Humphrey Bogart, not William Holden, not Harrison Ford, not Matt Damon – would go there. That had to be where he'd find out if and why the wool was being pulled over his eyes, no matter how rich the well-cut wool from which the coat on his back had been constructed.

He ran a hand down the coat's front. It was very supple, the kind of inviting suppleness top-grade material acquires over time.

Giving the broken gargoyle one last gaze and retreating from it, Skip headed towards Upper Fifth Avenue, where, he believed, gargoyles were scarce. Off he trotted to Madison Avenue and a cab, feeling the weight of the overcoat as he did.

He reached Mad Ave, where men dressed like him – but overcoatless – jostled and jockeyed for taxi-flagging positions. Overcoatless women in suits did the same. He waved at a cab someone in front of him grabbed. He waved at another and another, only to be outdone. On the fifth try, an unoccupied cab swerved towards him, cutting off another cab.

Is he coming *for* me or *at* me? Skip wondered.

For him, evidently, because the driver made a graceful last-second careering maneuver, placing the back door right where Skip stood but with sufficient space for Skip to open it.

He climbed in and – when the cabbie said, “Where to, Mister?” – commanded “Straight up Madison Avenue” in a tone he didn't entirely recognize.

(Was it his from a long time back?)

“How far straight up?” the cabbie asked with the merest soupcon of attitude.

“Good question,” Skip said, a feeling of magnanimity flowing through him now that he was comfortably settled. “I'm trying to get to 1021 Fifth Avenue. Do you have any idea what's the best cross street?”

“Happens I do,” the cabbie said. “East Eighty-third Street.”

The answer came so swiftly at Skip in the cabbie's Bronx-thickened speech that he looked more closely at the back of the man's head and what he could see of the profile. He saw curly black hair with only some

grey strands in it that flowed over the collar of a bold orange-red-and-green jacket. He saw a low brow, a nose like a baby squash, fat lips, not much of an unshaved chin.

“Okay, my good man, let me off at Madison and Eighty-third,” Skip said. (Where, in heaven’s name, did the “my man“ come from? Skip mused. Had Bogie ever said it wryly? Or William Powell as Nick Charles?) “You really know this town, don’t you? I ask you the best uptown cross street. You have the answer at the ready.”

The driver had stopped at a red light. He turned to Skip and said, “You won’t believe this, but you’re not the first dude asked me about that address. Anyways, I think it was that address – or something close to that address.”

“What?” Skip asked.

“Swear on my daughter’s life,” the cabbie said. “You drive a tub like this long enough, you realize it’s a town full of coincidences. I can’t begin to tell you how many times I’ve picked up the same people in different parts of town going to the some address I took someone the day before or the day before that.”

The light changed, and the cabbie pushed on through the not-so-helpful late-ish rush-hour traffic. “That’s right, Mister. I’d say at least three times in the last month, maybe month and a half, two months at the outside, I had fares heading to 1021 Fifth Avenue, I’m pretty sure that’s what they said. So I finally figured out the best cross-town street is East Eighty-third. Guys that looked like you, too. Nice-looking fellas in suits, wearing overcoats like you got on or, in really warm weather, carrying them. Then again, this time of day on the East Side, what you mostly pick up is businessmen. Or women. What line of business you in, anyway?”

Skip was thinking about the cabbie having numerous fares aiming to 1021 Fifth Avenue. With overcoats. “I’m sorry?” he said.

“I asked what business you’re in.”

Skip was still thinking. Sure, it could be coincidence, but what if it wasn’t? But what if it was? But what if it wasn’t?

They’d come to another red light. “You don’t know what business you’re in?” the cabbie persisted, turning around to give Skip the fish-eye.

“Oh,” Skip said, still distracted. “Lawyer. Real estate law.”

“Has to be interesting,” the cabbie said. “I’m interested in real estate. Who isn’t? Not that I have any.”

“Sometimes it’s interesting,” Skip permitted, “sometimes it’s just boring.” Skip didn’t like lawyers who talked about law being boring. This didn’t mean he wasn’t bored with it himself. Good as he was at it – and perhaps that was the problem – he was (often?) bored to distraction by it. As a matter of fact, at that particular moment, he felt he was as bored with it as he maybe had ever been.

Was he so bored he’d begun to look to others like the elevator man at 9 West Forty-seventh Street looked to him?

God forbid.

He wanted to cut short any idle banter on the subject. Part of it was that something disturbing was taking place outside the cab. He’d noticed that at the red light, they were next to a black limousine from which he was being watched by both the driver and the male occupant in the back seat.

He was almost certain he’d seen them before. They looked like the same two men in the limousine that had nearly run him over on Fifth Avenue. Uh, they seemed to be watching him, and they seemed to be the same two men. He was *almost* certain but not *absolutely* certain.

The light changed, and the cabbie, eyes once again on the avenue, pulled out. So did the suspicious limo, and as it did, the man in the back seat was mouthing something as he had before – or as the other man, who Skip thought could be this man, did.

Am I being followed by a black limousine or a fleet of them? Skip asked himself. If he were – if someone were on his trail, on his tail – what should he do, and how could the cabbie help? And if he were being followed by a limousine or, wow, a fleet of them, wasn’t there something *exciting* about it?

Hey: *frisson nombre deux*.

Should Skip ask the cabbie to speed up or hang back? He imagined himself saying – as they do in the movies that not only Bogart made but all those endless others – something like “I’m being followed by that car. Can you lose it?” But he couldn’t imagine himself actually saying it.

What he did say to the cabbie was – thinking it a clever ad lib – “See

the black limousine just ahead of us? I think the driver is drunk or something. I know the traffic is dodgy, but why don't you just let it get ahead of us?"

Then – oh, what the hell? – he outright said, "Or it may be following us. Can you lose it?"

"Yeah, I noticed it," the cabbie said. "I notice a shitload of limos on Madison Avenue this time of day, but I didn't see the driver was under the influence. But anything you say. You're the boss."

"Just to be on the safe side," Skip said.

"You're never safe from those mothers," the cabbie said. "I always keep an eye out for them."

Skip had a thought. "Do you ever notice their license plate numbers?" he asked. "Like the one I'm talking about? You didn't get it by any chance, did you?"

"You one of those license plate freaks?" the cabbie asked. "I get a lot of them in this boat, too. No. Me, I know cars. I could care less about license plates – unless they cut me off. Then I look at them and make a mental note. Don't do much about it, though. Who has the time?"

Skip wished the black limo had cut them off. That way, should he need it – he might, who knows? – he'd have a license plate number, thanks to the cabbie. But it had disappeared, something the cabbie must have seen to while Skip was thinking license plate numbers.

The cab was nearing Eighty-third Street. "Right or left side?" the cabbie said, and then again, "Right or left side? You must want the left, if you're going to Fifth. Or I could make the turn. The street goes west."

Skip said, "Leave me at the near corner. That'll be fine."

The cab stopped. Skip got his wallet out of his inside right-hand breast pocket. It was an Alfred Dunhill and not something he'd have bought for himself. It had been a gift some years back from someone. He'd forgotten who. One of his ex-girlfriends, probably.

Not Faye. Faye Reisbach. The current squeeze. All right, she was more than that. His fiancée. His *sort of* fiancée.

Realizing he was flush with cash, he didn't know whether he should be eased or nervous in the circumstances.

Maybe he should be exhilarated.

Why not?

He pulled out a twenty, handed it to the cabbie and told him to keep the change. The cabbie thanked him.

Skip got out, looking around to check if a black limousine was anywhere to be seen.

Nothing. Nowhere.

He started towards Fifth Avenue, once again aware of the overcoat's heft and thinking he'd soon be rid of it. Buoyed by the prospect and those recent inaugural frissons, he quickened his pace. Light was fading and shadows he might not have found portentous on any other early fall evening made him quicken his pace that much more.

On this typical elegant Upper East Side street, he saw nothing out of the ordinary, but he heard something – a weird melody as if from an organ grinder. Wait a sec. He knew the tune – “The Theme from ‘Never on Sunday.’” It was his cellphone. He'd brought it with him, after all.

He pushed back the overcoat, which he'd never bothered to button, and reached into the left breast pocket of his suit (Adolfo, purchased at Century 21, a few years old now), pulled the cellphone out and, before he clicked, noticed the caller ID...

Faye Ever-loving Reisbach, the fiancée, or, more precisely, the fiancée by what he and, he imagined, several of their friends took to be tacit agreement. Faye Reisbach, about whom his feelings could be so mixed that they all but blurred.

He knew why she was calling. He was supposed to meet her. Was that what he was thinking about when the elevator was on its way to the Amerongen Building lobby? Maybe, maybe not.

Nonetheless, he knew he was supposed to meet her at a hot new restaurant she'd discovered called, of all things, La Rochefoucauld, where she couldn't wait to be relegated to the bar for an unendurable period of time by a haughty hostess bidding her time before snootily informing them that their reserved table was now ready,

He activated the cellphone and said with as much firm nonchalance as he could, “Hello.”

“Where are you?” Faye poured into his ear. “You were supposed to be here half an hour ago.”

“Complications,” Skip said as he continued towards Fifth Avenue and passed another pedestrian speaking into a cellphone.

“What complications?” Faye demanded.

“Nothing important,” Skip said, “but too complicated to explain right now.”

”If it’s not important, how can it be too complic–,” Faye started to say, but Skip headed her off.

“Doesn’t matter,” Skip said. “It should be cleared up in a matter of minutes. Then I’ll catch a cab and be right with you.” He was calculating that if he could pass the coat back to its audacious owner or even to a doorman, he could flag a taxi and get to the restaurant on East Sixty-fifth Street with all due alacrity, overcoat adventure over, normal life resuming, Faye presiding.

He pictured her long auburn hair flowing over the shoulders of whatever tailored Chanel or Armani suit she had on. He could hear her tapping the toe of a stiletto-heeled shoe on a polished floor. She’d be darting silent this-is-wacked-out signals at Brenda and Bob Hartley, the couple with whom they were dining.

“Step on it,” he heard Faye saying. “We could lose the table, and we had to book too far in advance to have that happen.”

Through the cellphone, Skip was certain the nasal voice he was hearing above the background din – the clink of glasses, a pianist diligently resurrecting standards – belonged to Brenda Hartley. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be there before Bob has the chance to order his second Dewar’s on the rocks.”

“Straight up,” Faye said, easing up on him enough to laugh her peanut-brittle laugh.

“Straight up,” Skip said. “Let me go now.”

She articulated some sort of agreement, and they both hung up.

As he slipped the cellphone back into the breast pocket from which he’d retrieved it, he rounded onto Fifth Avenue, checking for the marquees and marquee-less doorways.

What he found included a few prewar residential buildings flanking a post-war residential building with a hardly traditional entrance set back from the street by several magisterial (or so some architect must have

thought) yards. Casting his glance wider, he took in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, directly across the street, hulking and brooding, even slightly menacing now that it was closed for the day.

What he didn't find in the immediate cityscape was 1021 Fifth Avenue. Near as he could tell there was no 1021 Fifth Avenue. Perhaps, there once *had been* a 1021 Fifth Avenue in a gentle, more pleasingly esthetic time before sedate, not to say, characterless high-rises and the few not-so-sedate high-rises became the *de rigueur* Upper Fifth Avenue thing.

But there wasn't one now. No extant 1021 Fifth Avenue Skip could locate. Perhaps he was mistaken. Perhaps he'd misread the address on the slip of paper he'd found. He reached into the pocket where he'd replaced it, pulled it out and re-read: 1021 Fifth Avenue. There was no mistaking it. Even though the address was written in pencil and therefore could potentially smudge, it hadn't smudged.

Reluctant to accept the confirmation, he walked the length of the block and back again and then back again. No satisfaction. He was beginning to cover the ground yet again, when, passing the post-war, set-back-entrance building, he heard, "Hey, fella."

A doorman in blue livery was talking.

Skip stopped and pointed at himself. "Me?"

"Yes, you," the doorman, who was broad as a boiler, said. "You looking for something on that slip of paper?"

Skip was embarrassed at being caught casing the area by a doorman who clearly regarded himself as an Upper Fifth Avenue vigilante. Nonetheless, he was not to be taken as unsure in any way. No private eye would. So he said with authority, "Why, yes, I'm looking for 1021 Fifth Avenue, but it doesn't seem to be here."

"Or anywhere *near* here," the doorman said with a smile Skip thought was almost a sneer but not quite. "Not for a while, anyway, but you'd be surprised how many people come looking for it."

That took Skip aback, whatever posture "aback" is supposed to assume. "Come looking for 1021 Fifth?" he asked.

"Yeah," the doorman said, "but they're just a few years too late, and by that I mean a few decades. There's no 1021 Fifth Avenue now. There was once." Skip must have screwed up his face in a way signaling

gentlemanly confusion. “Yeah, before it was torn down to make room for this monstrosity.”

The doorman aimed a gloved thumb at the building behind him. “I know, I know. I should have more respect for the building I’m looking out for, but I’ve never cared for it. Don’t get me wrong. I like the people here – most of them, some of the others are doozies – but the building’s no arc-y-techur-al beauty, wouldn’t you say?”

Skip hadn’t paid much attention to the entire building, he was that wound up with the one he’d hoped to find at 1021 Fifth Avenue. Out of the politeness of the architecturally uninformed, he started to look at it more broadly.

The doorman cut in. “Nope, it’s no beauty, and the developers who put up this pile of rocks knew that. You can’t see them from here, but there’s a line of photographs in the lobby showing the former row of old-time buildings. The two corner ones were originally robber-baron mansions. They tore the ones on this site down to build this place. In the photos there’s a house that says 1021 above the old-fashioned door. Maybe hanging up old pictures makes the developers feel better about themselves.”

The information was interesting to Skip, but he could feel his mind boggling over what he could or should do with it. He didn’t get far into sorting out the challenge when the doorman, squaring his epauletted shoulders to make himself even more commanding, said, “You might think a doorman wouldn’t be interested in these things, but I am, and I do have a fair amount of time on my hands during the quieter hours. I’ve looked at the writing under these photographs. Many times. You might want to read ’em, too. Others going in and outta here have.”

Skip had nothing to lose and thought he’d better take advantage of anything that might help him get the God-forsaken (or forsaken by someone other than God) overcoat back to its owner.

“Sure,” he said, “yes, okay. Definitely.”

Whereupon the doorman gave a small bow and a wave of his gloved hand to show Skip in, then made a couple of fast steps to precede him. Skip went in and down a short corridor where, opposite the elevators, hung six framed turn-of-the-century photographs.

“Take your time,” the doorman said. “I better get back to the door.”

Sure enough, the photographs showed a stretch of an Upper Manhattan block during the four seasons. The trees in front of the buildings were snow-covered or had leaves on them. In one there were flowers blooming in large pots on austere stoops. Men in top hats and women in long skirts glided along the sidewalks.

The captions beneath them, typed on what Skip took to be an old machine, claimed the photographs had been taken between 1893 and 1907. Skip had no reason to doubt the dates.

One photograph and its caption was of particular interest: “Among the residents on the block was the financier Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant, who lived at 1021 Fifth Avenue. Mr Sturtivant’s philanthropies were many and are the reason for a statue of him having been erected along the Central Park Mall in 1937.”

Still holding the slip of paper, Skip said to himself, “Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant.” He looked at the paper. “AMS,” he read again. “AMS. Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant. Could be. Maybe not, but maybe. No, must be.”

Realizing he wouldn’t be leaving the overcoat at any of the premises on this block – surely not with the friendly but on the *qui vive* doorman here – he figured that perhaps, though it was a long shot, he ought to take the hint and check further into Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant. What else did he have to go on, and what better place to start than by taking a gander at the designated statue?

Consulting his cut-rate homage to Rolex, he saw it was 7.10 pm, and the outside light was fading fast. Skip determined he’d hustle as quickly as he could – that is, as quickly as he could in the overcoat – down to the Mall ten or twelve blocks south and locate the (presumably) bronze Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant.

He double-checked the caption to make sure he had registered the info correctly, turned on his somewhat worn-down tassel-loafer heel and left the building, thanking the doorman as he departed.

“Don’t mention it,” the doorman said, and touched the bill of his cap with his right index finger. As Skip quick-stepped across the sidewalk to the curb, the doorman called after him, “By the way, it’s the one closest to

the Naumberg Bandshell.”

What does he mean by that? Skip wondered for the split second before what was meant struck him. Dummy, he means the statue. Must be that many people – maybe all, maybe just some – seeing those photographs for the first time head immediately to scope out Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant. The doorman must be used to giving helpful directions. He knew not only to specify the bandshell but to identify it as the Naumberg Bandshell.

As he was going, but, having taken in the earlier lesson on crossing streets without looking first, he did look both ways: two Fifth Avenue buses – one already pulled into a stop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; myriad cabs, occupied and empty; no suspicious cars, although he was becoming unsure about what he should deem suspicious and what he could comfortably disregard.

The light at Eighty-fourth Street was red. By all accounts, it was okay to cross mid-block even though he'd have to weave through the stopped traffic. He began weaving and was pivoting between two cabs when the one in front of him bumped backward at the same time as the one behind him bumped forward – as if responding in a taxi-cab square-dance *chassée*.

“Hold it,” Skip hooted, realizing that if either of the cabs had leapt another six inches, he'd have been leg granola. What are the chances of such an occurrence? he wondered as he edged out from between the cabs and heard a voice yelling over the noise of exhaust and distant honking, “Hello, man in the big-deal coat, watch where you're going!” and another voice shouting, “You wanna get killed, asshole?”

No, he didn't want to get killed. It's what he very definitely *didn't* want. He was on the go here. He was out to accomplish something, and he meant to do it – whatever “it” was.

But did someone else have a different plan for him? He turned to look into the cabs, and saw two cabbies glaring at him. In the back seat of one, a man and a woman locked in an embrace were giving him a pair of what looked like matching sneers.

The thought that went through his jarred mind as he bounded to the Met Museum side of the street was that he'd never been sneered at so

often in his life – and such concentrated sneers, as if fiery vengeance was behind every one.

Then again, how many men on missions get used to being sneered at? He didn't know, but he was going to be among them.

Gaining the sidewalk and its milling pedestrians, he stopped to pull himself together and to give some consideration as to how he would travel the ten or slightly more blocks to the Central Park Mall. Should he walk straight down Fifth Avenue, where every passing car would be able to see him – watch him, if that's what, to his bafflement, was taking place? Or when he reached the park entrance at the Met's south end, should he take advantage of it and, in the gathering darkness, enter and leave himself exposed to anyone who might be lying in wait?

For what? For him, because he was wearing the unasked-for overcoat? Because he'd taken the thing? For him, because he was who he was and, for some reason, had suddenly acquired a high-sneerability quotient? For him, because who-knows-what?

Unable to decide, but vaguely invigorated by the developments, he chalked the indecision up to a renewed ringing in his ears. Oh, right, his cellphone. Faye. "Hello."

"Where are you?" she asked in an agitated tone Skip had heard before – and not just during the previous phone call. "The Hartleys are becoming impatient. So am I."

Skip imagined her holding – in the hand that wasn't holding her cellphone – whatever substantial earring she'd removed before making the call. He said, "It's taking longer to wrap things up than I thought. Why don't you claim the table and order? I'll be there as soon as I can."

"As soon as you can isn't soon enough," Faye retorted, "but all right."

"I'll wrap things up," Skip said and rang off but not without hearing Faye start to say something sharpish to the Hartleys. About whom he wasn't that crazy. She was okay, but he – Bob Hartley, who only knew to go on and on about hedge funds.

Yet, the word "wrap" he'd just used gave Skip an idea. He saw himself "wrapped" in the overcoat, and thought he could easily wrap things up by unwrapping himself. He could end his unexpected idyll right there.

He'd come to the park entrance, and without thinking, he'd walked

through it. Now that he had, he looked for a bench – not to sit and think but as a handy place to drape an overcoat. Because he'd had a hasty thought: He could just leave the coat here and head directly to trendy La Rochefoucauld, join Faye, the Hartleys, the jolly hedge-fund badinage.

He saw what he was after not twenty-five feet into the park and just outside the children's playground. Making a beeline for it, he took the coat off – it's a heavy mother, he thought – and on the bench (one in a series of only slightly battered park benches with metal memorial tags on them) he folded the coat carefully and, hey presto!, placed it just so.

Now he could walk towards Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant with his briefcase and without a care. But why even walk towards Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant? He was only interested in Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant in relation to the unwanted apparel no longer in his possession, the unwanted apparel he'd conveniently discarded.

Relieved of it, he could retrace his steps to Fifth Avenue, hop into a southbound cab and, yes, greet Faye and the Hartleys, Brenda and Bob, at hoity-toity La Rochefoucauld.

But what's this? He had to acknowledge that joining Faye and the Hartleys, Brenda and Bob, wasn't what he wanted most in the world to do. Or, for that matter, joining Faye were she alone. Some days – and this was turning into one of them – he didn't know what he wanted for himself, what he wanted for the Skip Gerber he'd become.

No, he didn't want the @#.!x?c!*^& coat. That was for sure. He was glad to be rid – uh, relieved – of it. Let somebody else see what light Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant might shed on its origins.

But on the other hand, he found himself thinking, Now I have no excuse not to join Faye, no reason not to get to the contracts I have in my briefcase – the one revising the earlier one inherited from Dad regarding reevaluation of the land leased by the forty-eight-story East Fiftieth Street office building; the one regarding the hotel sale where the buyers are repeatedly delaying the closing for who-knows-what suspicious reasons; the one covering the West Seventy-first Street brownstone where the sellers aren't living up to their commitment to vacate the building.

He thought, Each different from the others, and yet each a variation

on exceedingly familiar... Interrupting himself, he had a contrasting thought about what the effect of acquiring the coat was having on him that had nothing to do with Faye Reisbach...

He didn't complete that sentence in his head either. Instead, he halted in his tracks on the other side of a stone underpass he'd just sauntered through, trying to figure out what in hell he did want. While thinking it through, he was slowly tuning into a voice coming towards him. When he had, he heard, "Mister! Mister! Aren't you forgetting something?"

Skip looked behind him and saw at about twenty-five or thirty yards away – and getting closer while racing through the shadowy underpass – a beanpole-thin man of indeterminate age carrying (what's this?) an overcoat, that overcoat, the overcoat.

What do I do now? Skip begged himself. His first impulse was to run, then not to run. He'd proceed hurriedly without looking as if he was trying to avoid this newest apparent pursuer but instead looking only as if he were hastening somewhere he was due and didn't hear the man behind him.

But in which direction should he walk?

Trying to reach a conclusion, he did nothing and now realized there was nothing to do in the way of avoiding the beanpole-thin man who was only several feet away and who, at this shorter distance, looked to be somewhere in his thirties. He had a face as thin as a parenthesis with a two- or three-day beard, sunken cheeks, a thin mouth and piercing eyes.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" the man, stopping in front of Skip, repeated, this time with a heightened accusatory inflection in the "forgetting something."

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" Skip said, attempting to fob himself off as mildly flustered but not in the least annoyed at the intrusion.

The thin man was wearing a cheap suit of an indeterminate dark color with a soiled white shirt open at the collar to reveal an Adam's apple that could have passed for a swallowed hatchet. The sleeves on the jacket were too short, and his thin wrists hung below them. The pants were also too short and were cropped above white socks.

"You left this overcoat on a bench back there," the thin man said. He didn't indicate what he meant by "back there," but Skip knew what he

meant, of course.

“Oh, er...” Skip started to say.

The thin man, his mouth becoming wider and thinner-lipped, was not to be interrupted. “Don’t try to tell me you didn’t. I saw you. What were you thinking? That somebody who needed it more than you would come along and find it. Somebody like me. A little condescending, wouldn’t you say? Figuring somebody less fortunate than you would be happy to have a hotsy-totsy overcoat like this here.”

He held up the coat for perusal. “Just because you’re some kind of freaking bleeding-heart liberal, you don’t get rid of a coat so easy, pal. If you want me to have an overcoat, buy me a new one.”

With that, the thin man shoved the coat into Skip’s chest, grabbed Skip’s left arm and forced him to hold on to it. Skip was so startled he said nothing.

“You’re not going to *thank* me?” the thin man said. “Just what I thought.” He did an unctuous about-face and set off in the direction from whence he’d come.

Skip, clutching the coat to his chest, was nonplussed. This was the second time in – what? – an hour, maybe a little over an hour, maybe two hours, that someone he’d never met had handed him the garment.

Who were these guys?

A word was forming in the back of his mind and had been for a while. It was pushing itself towards the front of his mind like the words “coming attractions” zooming towards the front of the frame in a movie trailer.

The word was “conspiracy!”

Then another word emerged. Not a word, a thought – a thought about having been handed the coat twice, a thought that – could this be? – that he was meant to have it, meant to do something about having it, meant to follow the leads, if that’s what they were, to some, some...some whatever.

Or was he just making this up, grabbing onto the notion – he had to smile at this one – because it was a more inviting alternative to dining with (whoopee!) Faye and the Hartleys at La Rochefoucauld?

Skip rejected the concept as fast as it came at him, but it insisted on coming at him again. Again he rejected it. Again it came at him. This time he accepted it. Whatever was going on – whatever was afoot? – Skip

knew he couldn't stand there just holding the coat. Neither could he discard it on the nearest bench or even in the nearest bin, given that the thin man or a confederate would sure-as-shootin' pluck it out.

It wasn't just a coat he'd been handed. He'd been handed something else, something much less tangible, less palpable. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he couldn't ignore it. He realized he didn't want to ignore it. Ignoring it meant he was left with Faye and the Hartleys, he was left with his contracts. He wasn't prepared for that, God knows.

Nothing to do but put the overcoat on again and keep going to the Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant statue, which was now only a matter of six or seven city blocks away.

Heading there, Skip was more attuned to his surroundings than was generally the case with him. Not only did he think it wise to keep an eye – peripherally – on anyone he passed or noticed occupying a bench at this crepuscular hour, but he was keyed in to sounds and scents he normally wouldn't register.

He heard the crunch of fallen leaves. He smelled the aroma they wafted after recent rainfalls. What was that scent? A phrase came to him that previously never had. It was the tang of autumn.

He would have almost appreciated the sensations – he would have almost slowed his pace to take it all in – had he not felt obliged to remain on the overcoat-caper trail. But he did feel that obligation and continued to feel it as he reached the plaza dominated by the Bethesda Fountain, the double staircase proceeding from it up to the Seventy-second Street transverse over the tiled underpass through which he could also walk to mount the wide alternate staircase leading to the Naumberg Bandshell and the Cross Park Mall.

Which should he take? If he chose to cross the transverse, a car (cars?) could be waiting for him, cars he maybe wanted to avoid. If he elected to advance through the vaulted underpass, someone (someones?) could be loitering there until he arrived.

I'll flip a coin, Skip thought, and, without thinking further, put his hand into the overcoat's left outside pocket. He'd felt in there before, of course, finding only the black kid gloves and the Halls cough drops, but this time – had he been too hasty earlier? – he located a coin that had

apparently escaped his clutch.

He pulled it out. It felt like a penny. He looked at it to affirm its denomination. It was a penny, all right, but it wasn't just any penny. He held it up for closer scrutiny to make sure that in the little light thrown by the lampposts he was seeing what he thought he was seeing.

It was. It was an Indian-head penny. When had Skip last seen one of those? Had he ever seen one of those? Or had he only heard about them? In his huge left-brain store of useless information, he knew that Indian-head pennies were manufactured from 1859 to 1909, no earlier and no later.

It was a lucky penny. He'd pulled it out of the overcoat pocket heads up, which, to his way of silly thinking, made it doubly lucky, not to say valuable. And if it was really lucky – why not decide it was? – then he ought to flip it. Whatever it told him would be the path to follow.

Or would it?

Why not see?

Okay, Skip thought, heads the underpass, tails the transverse.

He flipped but too wildly. When he reached to catch the penny, he knocked it away from him. He heard a muted metallic semi-thunk somewhere near – a few feet to his left, where leaves were littered.

He should look for it, shouldn't he? Or should he? If he bent down to feel for it among the leaves on the plaza's brick floor, would he be vulnerable to – to what? But if he didn't, he wouldn't know what the penny, heads or tails up, instructed him to do.

More than that, he wouldn't have in his possession an Indian-head penny that could be worth a couple hundred dollars. Not that it was his possession. It belonged to the coat. It belonged to whomever the coat belonged to and who must know the penny was there and perhaps knew its potential value. If he was determined to be rid of the coat, to return it to its rightful owner, he couldn't claim rights to anything he found in it, not even as payment for the inconvenience caused.

So here's a howdy-do.

While confessing to himself that he was being superstitious, and accepting, as he'd claimed to do for years, that superstition is foolishness, he wanted to believe – needed to believe – the penny was lucky, that it

would bring him luck when he hankered for it, which was right then with the overcoat and its holdings temporarily in his possession.

Walking away from the penny, not returning it to its place in the coat pocket could be opting for bad luck. Retaining the penny was all part of whatever he was caught up in.

Was “journey” the right word? “Wild goose chase”? “Funhouse ride?” “Investigation”?

Yes, investigation. That’s what he was committing himself to. Not because he wanted to. Because he must. But because he must, he wanted to. In other words, funhouse ride.

He wasn’t just blowing off Faye and the Hartleys.

Or was he?

He’d locate the penny, although the thing to do was not to cast his eyes down for it but to feel for it in the vicinity of where he believed it had come to rest. That way he could keep a lookout for suspicious encroaching activity.

He moved a few feet left, dropped on his haunches. The overcoat billowed around him. His eyes scanning as much of three-hundred-sixty degrees of surrounding park as he could, he began methodically fingering the leaves and the brick floor – as well as taking in the blend of urban-woods odors around him.

Touching nothing that felt like a penny, he realized there were other objects he might not want to touch. He didn’t want to itemize them, especially if they pertained to dogs on or off a leash. Thinking on this, he wondered whether he should devote too much more time to Indian-head-penny hunting.

Five minutes earlier he hadn’t even known it existed, and what he hadn’t known, he couldn’t miss.

He was about to give up when, lo and behold, he felt something like a penny. He grasped it, picked it up, looked at it. It was the penny, and it was heads up. Only now he couldn’t recall to which direction he’d assigned heads up.

He returned the penny to the pocket, and as he did, he heard the sound of laughter. He looked up to see the laughter came from several teenagers – or were they tweenagers? – coming through the underpass.

If they could do it without apprehension, so could he as his new emerging self.

He rose and took, as he now saw it, the path of least resistance. In several blinks of the observant eye, he was at the top of the stairs, looking past the bandshell – the Naumberg Bandshell – and the rows of chairs towards the Mall.

He could spot, if dimly, the statues lining the walk at discreet distances. Some stood on their stone plinths, some sat in chairs on them. The nearest one, the one he took to be Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant, was standing.

He walked up to it. He faced it. He tilted his head up at the bronze stand-in for the man who had lived so philanthropically at 1021 Fifth Avenue. The statue commemorated a tall man who looked at one and the same time dignified and relaxed, although Skip couldn't know what liberties the sculptor was asked to take. Or took it upon himself to take.

Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant was shown in his late fifties or early sixties. He was dressed in a three-piece suit from the post-Great War years. He wore a shirt the collar of which would probably have been detachable were it real. Sturdy shoes. A monocle hung in front of what was visible of his waistcoat. His right arm was akimbo, the fingers of his right hand curving backwards, giving him the stance of a man at ease with himself. His left arm was at his side and in it he held a piece of (bronze) paper that had slightly curling edges.

Skip wondered whether pigeons ever perched on the dignified man. There was evidence they had sojourned on his full head of neatly combed bronze hair, which was parted in the middle as if in a style held over from a former era.

Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant's bronze head was tilted upwards. His face was fleshy. His eyes gave the appearance of taking in as much as they could of a world with which he was reconciled and at which he was smiling.

Those were among the statue's salient features. The most salient – impossible not to notice, certainly noticed by Skip – was the greatcoat draped over Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant's shoulders. It had a wide upturned collar and wide lapels. The sculptor had also used his chisel

to suggest by way of delicate economical incisions here and there that it was a herringbone pattern. It fell to just a foot above the sturdy shoes. Of course, it was the color of aged bronze.

On the metal plaque below the patrician figure was:

AMBROSIUS MANLEY STURTIVANT

Financier–Philanthropist

1859–1928

Taking it all in, Skip was thinking that if Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant’s coat suddenly dropped from his shoulders and Skip were able to pick it up and compare it more closely to the coat he wore, they would look uncannily alike.

They’d look like the identical coat, Skip was thinking with such absorption that when he heard his cellphone ringing again, he had an inkling “The Theme from ‘Never on Sunday’” he’d put on it months before and hadn’t gotten around to changing had already been playing for more than a few seconds.

Faye?

He filched the cellphone from the suit jacket breast pocket.

Not Faye.

“Yes, Mother.”

“I don’t like your tone,” he heard the redoubtable Bernice Sawyer Gerber say. He would have wagered she was sitting on the edge of her bed – the bed covered with the designer percale sheets she’d saved “good money” buying on Stanton Street.

Knowing his tone had been sharp, impatient, adventure-tinged, he said, “What tone. Mom?”

“You know perfectly well what tone, Edward,” his mother said. “The tone I’ve heard your entire life when you think I’m getting in touch with you unnecessarily.”

“Ma, I’m sorry to tell you I wasn’t thinking of you at all.” He knew the instant he said it that he shouldn’t have.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” his mother said. “When do you ever think of me? But we’ll let that go.” Skip heard her take a breath and had a pretty good idea what was coming. “What are you doing anyway? Where are you? It sounds as if you’re outdoors.”

Skip wasn't about to tell his mother he was in Central Park looking at the statue of a man wearing an overcoat eerily similar to one he'd accepted for no good reason a few short hours earlier. She wouldn't believe him. Who would believe him? He half didn't believe himself.

He didn't fill her in but said – because it was somewhat true – “I'm on my way to dinner.”

‘With Faith?’ his mom asked.

“Faye,” he corrected, not for the first time and not, he would have bet the farm, for the last. Bernice made a policy of never hearing the names of the women he dated. He knew it was because she figured there was no need to. They weren't “keepers” – a word she'd never used to him but others had. It was exasperating, and more exasperating is that to date she proved right every fucking time.

She was – the thought went through his head like a shooting star – possibly right this time, too, certainly the way he was feeling about Faith, er, Faye at the moment. If he stopped to think about it – which he made a point of never stopping to do but had been doing for the last jam-packed hour or two – there was plenty about his life he could change besides Faye's presence in it.

Bernice said, “I'm not calling about her. Faye. I want to know if you found that answer for Gussie. She's been hocking me a chinik all afternoon.”

“No, Ma, I didn't have a chance yet,” Skip said. “I'll get to it when I get to it. I have other things to do with my time.”

“What other things?” Bernice prodded, as if the query were a stick and she was poking it into his chest through the airwaves. “I know you better than you think. You have a routine, and you stick to it. You always have.”

“Routine.” She was right again. The word made him shudder. “Ma!” Skip raised his voice to say, and noticed, as he gazed around, that people nearby were looking at him funny.

Was it what he'd just shouted, or was it something else?

“Gussie!” she repeated. “I'd appreciate it if you look it up for her sooner rather than later.”

“I promise,” Skip said, “and now I have to hang up.”

“Such a macher,” Bernice said. “Give my regards to Freya.”

She did it deliberately. He knew that. “I will,” Skip said.

He clicked off and, having lost his train of acquired-overcoat-related thought, recapped the previous couple of hours. Yes, he’d been looking at the Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant statue and thinking how the man’s overcoat resembled the one he was wearing – which was making him feel clammy now that a chillier breeze was stirring the leaves at his feet and the ones left on the oaks and elms.

That the two coats – the real one and the sculpted one – were alike illuminated nothing. Neither did the plaque with its basic facts. Would it help if he did a bit of research? The Museum of the City of New York? The Forty-second Street library?

Too late for any of it.

What about Googling Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant?

Skip was thinking about that when his eye caught the statue’s left hand, the hand holding the piece of bronze paper. He wondered what it might be. Again checking around him to ascertain if he was being watched, which he didn’t think he was (more than ordinarily), he walked up to the statue and around it to get a better look.

Now he expected to be watched by at least a few strollers, since someone looking so closely at a piece of paper a statue is holding could be expected to arouse at least mild curiosity in someone.

Let them look, Skip thought as he leaned in. He thought – and almost spoke aloud – Adventurers like me *should* be watched. He peered up about four feet at the paper. At first he couldn’t discern what it was, although he could see there were lines on it – a drawing consisting of interlocked right-angle rectangles.

To get a better idea, he leaped up about two feet. The piece of bronze paper was meant to depict a blueprint. Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant holds a blueprint. It was a blueprint on which there was writing.

Not caring how many gawkers might observe him jumping up and down alongside a bronze statue in the park, Skip leaped again. Since the print was large enough for him to make out – had been designed by the sculptor to be legible, perhaps as a stipulation of the commission – he read 185 Vesey Street. He also realized the image of a skyscraper had been incised on a corner of the bronze paper.

Skip was looking at the ground-floor plan of a building at 185 Vesey Street in lower Manhattan. As that recognition sank in, it also came to him that the bronze Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant, his head tilted at that angle, had been crafted as if gazing at the building. It was a building that obviously came about at the financier-philanthropist's command. The Sturtivant Building?

Speaking of commands, Skip thought, is Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant dictating another of them right this minute. Am I supposed to return the coat to 185 Vesey Street? I'd better find out, he thought. Checking his, um, Rolex (7:36 p. m.) as part of getting his bearings, he looked around to figure if he was being watched as well as to decide how best to quit the park.

Jogging the straightest line he could, he headed to Fifth Avenue. (When was the last occasion on which he'd actually jogged?) Ready to flag down the first unoccupied cab that might come along, he was making good time when his cellphone went tuneful.

He fumbled for it, thinking "not Faye again." It wasn't. It was someone with whom he was possibly even less eager to chat: his brother Jerome.

Funny how many thoughts go through your mind – like fast-motion headlines around the Allied Chemical Building in Times Square – before you depress the cellphone thingamabob to say "hello." Not to mention the range of inflections that, as a consequence, are packed into that brief "hello."

One of Skip's thoughts was, "Now what?" Another was "Why now?" That one was followed by "Of course, now, when I could use it least." Others compounded those, like his knotted feelings for Jerome. Jerry to him. Jerry, the older brother, whom he'd idolized throughout their childhood, despite being aware – intuitively – that Jerry was the child Bernice Sawyer Gerber favored.

She made no bones about it, even though the favored Jerry had yet to "find himself," as they used to say, and, pushing forty, was still looking God-knows-where.

Never mind.

Bernice talked about Jerry as "special" and found excuses for his string of business mishaps. As she assessed them, they had nothing to do

with his shortcomings – “Uh-uh,” she insisted. They were all tied up with the failings of deceitful others or with unfortunate timing or both.

Often in the same breath, she’d attribute Skip’s remunerative career (no matter how little he enjoyed it) to luck. This was nothing unusual to Skip. He’d spotted it more than once in other families where of two sons, the older one was anointed golden boy while the nose-to-the-grindstone younger was deemed to be on an unbroken lucky streak.

Furthermore, every family where he’d noticed this, well, syndrome, was Jewish. Go figure. And go figure why his commitment to real estate law was so largely predicated on getting Bernice Sawyer Gerber to give him a break in the favorites ranking.

“Jerry, hello,” Skip said into the phone matter-of-factly, although he didn’t feel so matter-of-fact as he surveyed the immediate vicinity for any unusual stirrings that could involve him.

“I hate to bother you,” Jerry said. “I wouldn’t if I didn’t absolutely need to. Urgently.”

“What is it, Bro?” Skip said, fairly certain the man heading towards him in shorts, a sweaty T-shirt and wiping a towel on his left thigh was finishing a run rather than coming after him. “What do you need, and when haven’t you needed whatever it is you need urgently? I figure it’s money, although it would be great if for once what you needed didn’t require my writing a check. It sure would be nice if, just for once, what you urgently needed was only an encouraging brotherly hug.”

“Can you spare a thousand?” Jerry asked. “I know I owe you the five thousand, and I promise I’ll get it to you, but if the extra thou works out the way I’m pretty certain it can, that could mean me paying you back the entire sum even sooner.”

Skip didn’t have to mull asking Jerry what the money was for. What would be the point? He knew it was some hare-brained scheme. It always was, and Skip always came across with the sum, because Jerry was his brother and he loved him, despite everything. He also admitted to himself that having Jerry in his debt caused him a kind of satisfaction about which he only felt the faintest guilt pang.

Still more deeply than that, he sometimes had to repress the notion that Jerry’s unending search to “find himself” was more honest than

Skip's pretending he'd found himself by settling on his increasingly unsettling law practice.

Skip snapped out of his mental diversion and, remembering the oddball fun he was having, said into the phone, "I don't have much time for this, Jerry. "I'm in the midst of something. Where are you?"

"Can you meet me at the southeast corner of Eighth Avenue and West Twelfth Street?" Jerry asked. Skip didn't question this either, since he was accustomed to Skip's street-corner reconnoiterings. "Where are you anyway?"

Feeling no obligation to be specific, Skip said, "Uptown. I'll catch a cab and be there quick as I can." As he clicked off, he heard Jerry say, "You're the best" and start to say something else he knew would be a meaningless declaration of gratitude and remorse.

He realized that other than to shuffle back and forth on his feet, he'd stood still through Jerry's entire once-a-month-if-not-more-often supplication. No time to waste, he thought, and resumed hurrying to a cab.

Nearing an opening in the stone wall bordering Fifth Avenue, he passed a homeless man – or someone looking as homeless as makes no difference – who eyed him and said, "Hubba, Hubba! *Some* coat."

Skip pretended not to hear him but once again wondered why the coat was getting such raves. Did New Yorkers, no matter at what social stratum, have nothing better to do than remark on each other's apparel? Or was something else going on?

And did he hope it was? Or fear it? Or hope/fear it? Or love it?

No time to think about that now. He had a cab to catch to Vesey Street with a stop – he could shake Jerry – along the way.

At Fifth Avenue, he saw, to his mitigated joy, several cabs with their unoccupied lights on. He raised his hand, and the first of them came to a halt. As he was getting in the car, he noticed that a second cab had been hailed by a man standing not fifteen feet behind him.

Why wouldn't there be? People hail cabs all over town. Nothing out of the ordinary about that. Unless there was.

Closing the door, he said to the bald-headed driver, "I'm going to 185 Vesey Street."

“World Trade Center territory,” the driver said.

“Right,” Skip said, realizing the cabbie had it right. It was the past, present and future WTC area. “But I’ve got to make a quick stop on the way at Eighth Avenue and West Twelfth Street.”

“You got it, bud,” the cabbie said and picked up speed to catch as many green lights down Fifth as he could. “Nice night.”

“Yes, it is,” Skip said and caught himself. “No, it isn’t. I mean, it is. It could be. Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know.”

“You better make up your mind, bud,” the driver said.

Skip thought maybe he better had. Whatever else he decided, he decided he should stop thinking out loud. He did when the tinny bell indicating a text message went off. It was from Faye and read, “We’re @ table, tho our 4th hasn’t arrived. No need 2 respond.” Skip didn’t like the sound of that but conceded there was nothing to do about it at the moment.

“I don’t mean to interrupt, bud,” the driver said, interrupting Skip in his thoughts, “but is there any reason why you might be followed?”

“What?” Skip asked. “What do you mean, ‘followed?’”

“What I said,” the driver replied, not turning his bald head in order to keep his eyes on the busy avenue. “It could be me imagining it, but there’s a black limousine behind us giving me a pain. The limo’s so close I can see him and his passenger in my rear-view mirror. I’m getting the creepy feeling they’re both watching us. Or you. But like I say, it could be my imagination.”

Without stopping to consider the advisability of such a move, Skip looked behind him through the rear window and, sure enough, saw the limousine. Was it the same limousine he’d been seeing? Who’s to say, when all black limousines look alike – particularly when their one-way windows are up.

“No reason anyone would be following me,” Skip said, although, suddenly aware of the overcoat again, he could think of a possible reason. “Manhattan’s lousy with black limousines. All the same, maybe you might try to lose them.”

“Not a problem,” the driver said and with that careered through a yellow light onto the Sixty-fifth Street transverse, leaving the (stalking?)

limousine at the red light. “I love these challenges. You don’t get half enough opportunities for them, I can tell you. It’s not like the years I was a cop. A’ course, you don’t get that many opportunities then, either, not as many as people think from watching too much television.”

The guy was an ex-cop. Should Skip say anything about the predicament he was in? That’s if he were in a predicament. Recapping in his mind what transpired for the last couple of hours, he sensed that if he recounted them, he’d sound like just another Manhattan paranoia case.

He probably was just another Manhattan paranoia case wearing a coat he’d never ordered. He held that thought as the cabbie/ex-cop took any number of arbitrary right and left turns on his zig-zagging journey south.

Maybe, Skip mused, he could get at his little involvement obliquely. He cleared his throat. “Asking you as a former member of the police force,” he said – sounding, he hoped, off-handed, “if a guy, theoretically, were being tailed, how could he know for sure?”

“Most times, you can’t for sure,” the cabbie said after only a second’s hesitation, “until whomever actually tailing you – if, theoretically, someone actually is – makes himself or herself known, one way or another. Usually, it’s not a pleasant way and can involve dangerous objects. But one way to defuse it would be to hire someone to follow him.”

Skip tried that possibility on for size and brushed it aside. “I see,” he said. “So, theoretically, if it was an actual stalker or whatever, you wouldn’t rate it as an adventure. More like a crisis.”

“Pends how you define ‘adventure,’” the cabbie said. “Way I see it, one man’s adventure is another man’s nightmare.”

Nightmare, Skip thought. He wasn’t in the midst of an overcoat nightmare, was he?

“It’s all attitude,” the cabbie said, “like everything else in life. My attitude is I like being around people. Not much difference, cop or cabbie. Maybe there is. Most people will talk to a cabbie faster than a cop. That’s why I’m here and not sitting alone in a warehouse somewhere on security-guard duty.”

“Attitude,” Skip thought. What was his attitude – his attitudes? Whatever it/they was/were, was it time to rethink them? There’s

something to chew on.

They were heading out of the transverse across Central Park West, and the cabbie said, "There you go. Whoever they were, they're history now, bud."

History, Skip thought, if only. Yes, if only, but then why was he feeling the merest twinge of a letdown?

The cabbie picked up where he left off. "Tell me this. You looking for someone to do that for you?" the cabbie said and darted a look round. "A tail job?"

Skip saw a pug's craggy face with a smudge of a nose in the middle, a heavy nine o'clock shadow and yet something comforting in it. "No," he said, "Just asking."

"I thought, you maybe being followed, maybe not," the cabbie said, "you might be thinking it over. I happen to do that kind of work from time to time, you know, on referrals usually. Maybe you want to take my card."

"You have a card?" Skip asked, not completely incredulously.

"A guy should always have a card," the cabbie said. "Here we are, bud." The cabbie hadn't stopped for a light all the way down Ninth Avenue. Skip looked out of the taxi and saw they were circling out of lower Ninth and onto where Hudson Street morphed into Eighth.

Skip sighted Jerry there – Jerry pacing a pace Skip had seen many times before.

The cabbie said, "Maybe you should take my card. Whether you need it or not. You don't, you can give it to a friend, like maybe the guy waiting for you here."

"How did you know someone – ?" Skip started to ask but stopped himself. Jerry was hurrying towards the cab, assuring himself Skip was inside.

"That'll be fifteen-thirty," the cabbie said, handing Skip his card.

Skip looked at it. "Dermot McAllister," it said on the top line and under that "All jobs courteously handled," and below that a cellphone number and an e-mail address: mac@mcallister.com.

"Nice talking," the cabbie said, as Skip gave him a twenty and waved away change. "But, hey, we got to talking so much, I nearly forgot this is

just a stop on the way to 185 Vesey.”

By then, Jerry had opened the taxi door. Skip felt Jerry’s arm on his, pulling him from the cab. “Hold your horses, Jerry,” he said and then to Dermot “Mac” McAllister, “I’ll just be a minute.”

“You’re the boss,” Mac McAllister said.

Skip closed the taxi door and turned to Jerry. He was used to Jerry’s impatient and frustrated expression. He’d seen it before on a smooth-cheeked face that resembled their mother’s, just as he looked more like their late lawyer father, Gabriel of the thin lips.

Sometimes Skip thought he could trace Jerry’s gaze to the year in their adolescence – Jerry was eighteen, Skip was sixteen – when he grew the inch taller than Jerry and then two inches taller. As a consequence, he often conjectured, Jerry compensated by getting wider. Not plump, but wider, huskier and somewhere between casual and slovenly in his dress.

Skip had an explanation for that, too. He’d continued dressing well, thinking that would help obtain Bernice’s approval, while Jerry knew no matter what he did, he already had it and would stop at nothing to prove he’d never lose it.

“That took you long enough,” Jerry said by way of greeting.

Skip flashed on the joy ride McAllister – Mac to handyman clients – had just given him. “Traffic,” he said duo-syllabically.

“And why’s the cab idling here?” Jerry went on.

“I asked him to wait,” Skip said. “I’m due downtown.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Jerry said. “Only worth a wham-bam-thank-you-sir?”

“I wouldn’t be here at all if you hadn’t called with one of your usual bail-out requests.”

“I wouldn’t do the same for *you*?” Jerry said, heavy on the inflection.

“I’m sure you would,” Skip said, “but you’ve never had to.”

“You’re going to hold that over me?” Jerry said, and Skip saw Jerry’s round cheeks get redder. “This is a tit-for-tat discussion?”

“No arguments, please, Jerry,” Skip said, “I have enough on my mind right now.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing you need to know about,” Skip said, “but if it’ll make you feel

better, I'll let the cab go. I can always get another one."

"Suit yourself," Jerry said, which Skip knew meant, don't suit yourself, suit me. He went to the cab, had Mac roll down his window, told him he wasn't needed after all and paid him with some loose bills he located in one of his trouser pockets. He included another large tip.

Before Mac drove off, he said, loudly enough for Jerry to hear him, "Don't forget, bud, you need something done, you got my card. Use it for whatever, whenever."

Just to get the cabbie/ex-cop on his way, Skip mumbled something about not forgetting.

"What was that about?" Jerry said.

"What was what about?" Skip asked.

"If you need him for anything, et cetera."

"Oh, that." Skip said. "He responds to pick-up calls and is aggressive about it. Now. About the money you need." He put down his briefcase in order to pull out his checkbook.

Recognizing what Skip was doing, Jerry said, "No, no, no, Bro. Cash. No check. Cash."

"I haven't got that much cash," Skip said. "I don't carry that kind of money around with me."

"I didn't think you would," Jerry said and nodded to his left, where, on the side of the corner apartment building, Skip saw a row of three ATM machines. "That's why I asked you to meet me here. You can withdraw the thousand dollars, and don't tell me no. I checked online, and it's one of the FAQs – one of the frequently asked questions. What's the withdrawal limit? By lucky coincidence, it's a thousand even."

Skip dipped into his right hand suit pocket for his wallet to get at his bank card, got it. He picked up the briefcase and walking to the nearest cash dispenser – none of the three was occupied – he said to Jerry, "I'm not even going to ask you what you need a thousand dollars in cash for."

"Glad to hear it," Jerry said, "because I wouldn't tell you if you did. I'm your brother, and like Mother always says, blood is thicker than water. If I need it and you have it, why wouldn't you give it to me? I'm good for it."

Having inserted his card, pushed all the required buttons and begun waiting for the fifty twenties to issue forth, Skip stifled the urge to ask

Jerry how he figured he was good for it when so far he'd allowed his debt to mount up to a cool five thousand.

"Nice coat," Jerry said to pass the time. "I don't believe I've seen it before, have I?"

Skip looked up from the ATM. Jerry was eyeing him with one of his familiar leers, a leer close enough to a sneer to pass for one.

"You look like a million bucks in it," Jerry said. "I bet you paid plenty more for it than the thousand you're about to lend me. Whose is it? Ralph Lauren? Ermenegildo Zegna? Brioni? If you can pay that for a coat, you shouldn't begrudge me a mere thousand."

"Begrudge?" Skip said. The thousand dollars coughed out. Skip handed them to Jerry, who started counting the twenties. "Where do you get 'begrudge'? I arrive at a designated street corner to hand you cash – not the first time and not the last, either, I'm sure – without even asking what you need it for, probably because if I knew, I'd get angry. And you're telling me I'm '*begrudging*' you?"

On the "begrudging," Skip put up the index and middle fingers of both hands to signify his italics. Jerry, who'd stopped counting, looked at the gesture with disdain and said, "I said '*begrudge*' because I'm your brother, and you think handing me money –" He waved the thick stack at Skip. "– is all you need to do. For fuck's sake, you even have a cab waiting for you –."

This was enough for Skip, who said, "I let the cab go."

It wasn't enough for Jerry, who continued undeterred, "You have a cab wait for you so you wouldn't have to spend more than five minutes with me. Did you ever stop to think that if I didn't need a few bucks once in a blue moon, I would never see you? We'd never see each other?"

Skip was thinking over whether to correct the "once in a blue moon" part or point out that Jerry was free to call at any time he didn't need the quick loan.

He didn't get the chance to do either or both, because he was abruptly distracted. A shot rang out from somewhere nearby, possibly a car passing by at a good speed up Eighth Avenue. At least, it sounded like what Skip believed a ringing-out shot must sound like.

He flinched reflexively and so noticeably that Jerry said, "What's the

matter, Bro? You afraid somebody's gunning for you?"

Skip tried to pull himself together but – too mired in wondering whether somebody was gunning for him – didn't feel as if he could quite shake the feeling.

"It was only a car backfiring," Jerry said, and then, as if reverting to their childhood when he could always sense Skip's fear and play off it, said, "Anyway, I *think* it was only a car backfiring. Maybe it was a gunshot."

Jerry had hardly finished the sentence when another sound-burst identical to the first split the air. Skip flinched again and looked around for somewhere to take cover.

As he turned, Jerry grabbed him by his left arm, and said, "Holy shit. There could be a bullet hole in a wall near here or in the pavement." He started patting himself and then patting down Skip. "Maybe one of us is hit."

Not comfortable with Jerry's hands on him – on the coat – Skip pushed them away.

"What's the matter, Skippy?" Jerry asked. (Jerry was the only person who ever called him Skippy. Skip hated it and liked it.) "You don't like me touching you? You don't want me touching your expensive new coat? You want to take shelter from a car with a faulty exhaust and me?"

Skip didn't want to answer the question, because the answer was "yes." He didn't quite know why, but it was so. He did know that part of the reason was if someone with a gun was shooting at him, he didn't want to remain standing where he was for another split second.

He was thinking of Jerry, too – to his partial chagrin.

Adventure or no adventure, he hadn't engineered this, but if this was what adventure was starting to mean, was he ready to stand up to it?

Unable to stop himself from brushing the coat's sleeves where Jerry had rubbed them and him, he said, "Look, Jerry, I've got to go. You have the money. I'll call you. We'll have a real talk. You'll tell me if you've heard from Doris and what's going on there."

Skip said this while hurrying into the street to get the next cab he could and face up to (face down?) whatever was coming his way. He snagged one, and as he climbed in, he saw Jerry watching him with a

knowing look that rubbed Skip the wrong way, worse than the unsolicited literal rubbing he'd just received.

As Skip was opening and closing the door, he heard Jerry saying, "Nothing's going on there. Anyway, Skippy, since when are you interested?"

Have I been uninterested? Skip wondered. I wasn't aware I'd shown a lack of interest in Jerry's divorce from the grating Doris. Jerry himself had begun to show a lack of interest after the first two or three years of their marriage. He remembered one loan Jerry needed to pay off an assistant – a scheming secretary – with whom Jerry had gotten in over his head. Skip had come through then as always.

But maybe that still didn't make him a good brother. Maybe that made him only a brother using money to buy off fraternal obligations.

"You're headed to 185 Vesey Street, right," said the cabbie, to whom Skip had given no destination and at whom he hadn't looked. He'd been too busy thinking about Jerry and irritated that yet again his errant brother had inserted himself between Skip and something more pressing, more invigorating, more positive despite its negative aspects.

Now he looked at the cabbie to see what kind of driver knows where you're going when you haven't said. Could it be someone involved with the overcoat plot, if indeed there was a plot? Should he be thinking of jumping out at the next red light or remaining exactly where he was?

The prescient driver was Dermot "Mac" McAllister, who threw him a meaty smile and said, "A real coincidence, huh? Okay, it isn't. When you sent me off, I had the feeling you didn't really want to, but the guy you met wanted it. So I drove around the block a few times. Straight to 185 Vesey Street now?"

"Yes," Skip said.

"You got it, bud," Dermot said, "and I'm getting the feeling you've got things on your mind. From here on in I button my lip."

Skip wasn't about to quarrel with that. He still felt funny about the situation and thought that by this time – he looked at the ersatz Rolex: 8:21 pm – he had been feeling funny about whatever the situation was for over two hours. Trust Jerry to insert himself into the midst of something – Skip looked at the coat again, felt it – just when Skip needed

to concentrate fully elsewhere.

He wanted to put Jerry out of his mind and hoped time and distance – the time it took to cover the distance between Hudson and Twelfth and World Trade Center territory – would do the trick.

It did, when Mac McAllister, who'd held to his word about keeping mum, said, "Here we are, 185 Vesey Street, the Sturtivant Building."

Hearing the announcement and, particularly, the word "Sturtivant" spoken aloud, Skip was jolted out of the Jerry sidetrack. "What made you say 'Sturtivant'?" he asked Mac. "Do you know the building? Do you know something about Sturtivant?"

"It says 'The Sturtivant Building' over the doorway," Mac said and chuckled. "I know a lot about this town from driving around it every day, but I don't know every last building. Near as I can recall, you're the first fare I ever brought here. Brought many fares to buildings near here, but not here. And speaking of fares, that'll be seven-fifty."

"Oh, yes, right," Skip said. He'd been switching his gaze from the building to Mac but remembered why he was here. All right, he didn't know precisely why he was where he was, but he recalled he was on a quest that could end here and possibly even in an exciting manner.

He got out of the cab, handed Mac a ten through the right front window. Mac nodded thanks and said, "Don't forget. You need my help, you got my card. Don't hesitate to use it whatever, whenever."

"I certainly will," Skip said, just to get the cab away so he could size up the Sturtivant Building. Scanning it from bottom to top, he recognized it was a three-dimensional realization of the rendering on the bronze blueprint he'd seen forty-five minutes or so earlier. Chiseled into a foundation stone at the left corner of the ground floor was the legend "Erected in 1915. Cass Gilbert, architect."

So, Skip said to himself, the idea Sturtivant had was to have the man who designed the Woolworth Building, not much more than five hundred feet away, do something similar for Sturtivant, but what, if anything, did that have to do with the coat?

To the left of the doorway was a brass plaque that said, "The philanthropist Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant (1859–1928) had this building constructed in 1916 by the architect Cass Gilbert. It is one of

the finest examples of Neo-Gothic architecture in the city and often considered an improvement on Gilbert's Woolworth Building, completed in 1913. In a concession to its acclaimed predecessor, the Sturtivant Building is fifteen feet shorter. Known for a gentlemanly approach to his life and financial career, Sturtivant allowed Gilbert and the chain-store magnate Frank W Woolworth this humble bow. In many other aspects the 782-foot-high, 54-story, limestone and granite edifice elegantly reflects the prevailing architectural style of the time. Its Moorish lobby and exterior ornamentation are especially noteworthy."

Though Skip found the information interesting, he had no more than a neutral reaction to what he was reading until he got to "limestone." That word, again. And then to "ornamentation."

The word was especially chilling. Neo-Gothic ornamentation. Did that mean gargoyles? He scanned the facade slowly, bottom to top. What he saw wasn't very different from many other buildings of the time. After eighteen or twenty stories there was a set-back and a second set-back after several more stories. At the top, he saw a cupola with slender columns and a spire piercing the ink-blotched night sky.

But what was it he noticed at the corners of the limestone or granite (given his meager acquaintance with architectural niceties, he had no way of knowing) balustrades surrounding the set-backs and presumably the terraces at those two levels?

Gargoyles, that's what he noticed – gargoyles looking to be on the point of flying or leaping in fury from their perches.

Or falling from them.

That put Skip's feet in motion. He'd been thinking his next step – or steps – should be entering the building to see what turns up. He'd been thinking maybe the lobby was where he'd find further clues. Maybe the directory would show an office occupied by Miles Rogers Havilland.

Now he wasn't so sure about the wisdom of advancing. Once he'd spotted the gargoyles, his first impulse was not venturing – or adventuring, as he was calling it in his evolving frame of mind – into Ambrosius Manley Sturtivant's humble nod to Frank W. Woolworth.

Besides – and this came to him as a relief – he'd just noticed that the three revolving doors were locked in place. The building was closed. That

was all Skip needed to see before retreating across the street, from where, he reasoned, he'd also have a better view of the building as he gazed up.

The angle was decidedly more favorable. Besides, although he hadn't noticed it before, he was in a small, neatly laid-out square. Little in Manhattan strikes the inhabitant – or certainly the tourist – as pastoral, but this pleasant acre, deserted at this time of a weekday evening, had that effect.

From it, Skip thought, maybe he'd see something in a window that would have meaning for him. Maybe there'd be a sign he could read, maybe a deluxe tailor shop. Maybe, despite the building's appearing to be battened down, someone would signal him from one of the two terraces, which he gauged to be wide enough for occupants' use.

He even had a fleeting fantasy of someone using a lamp or flashlight to send a message in Morse code, the way they do in mystery-island movies. What good that would do Skip, he didn't know, since beyond SOS, he had no grasp of Morse code. For the first time in his life he wished he did.

Starting at the ground floor, he decided to run his eyes slowly from left to right and right to left and from floor to floor. The ground floor housed an otolaryngologist group practice. Skip wracked his brain for any connection between the coat he had on and an ear-nose-and-throat partnership.

He came up with nothing there or in the darkened smoke shop occupying the other ground-floor space.

There was no movement inside either of them.

He scanned upward to no avail until he got to the cupola. Was something occupying it he hadn't taken in when he looked at it the first time? A cupola, if it were accessible, would be a very promising spot for someone to wave and summon – also from which to fire a pistol.

Madmen are always attracted to those kinds of vantage points.

Skip tilted his head far back to examine the cupola more carefully, thinking at the same time that maybe, rather than paying attention to it, he'd be better off hiding himself from it. If someone was up there watching him, he (maybe she) might even have a better vantage point.

While Skip was weighing the pluses and minuses of shuttling himself off – the minuses seemed far fewer than the pluses – he became aware of

something happening behind him, scuffling noises he couldn't place but that didn't sound enticing. Or was it simply that paranoia was kicking in more acutely?

He turned around to find out what was going on and saw three people just inside the postage-stamp park's farthest corner. They were engaged in some ambiguous activity.

It didn't remain ambiguous to Skip for long. Two men in street clothes had waylaid a woman in a business jacket and skirt and low heels and were attempting to take her purse.

This wasn't a skirmish in which Skip by dint of initial impulse wanted to involve himself at all. Then again, that was his old Skip Gerber impulse. In the last hours, his tried-and-true impulses were shifting. Right now, he didn't see how he could avoid butting in and maintain his shaky self-respect.

One way to keep out of it was to alert a cop, but looking around, he didn't see one. With the thought "Where are the cops when you need them?" going through his mind as if it were a banner being pulled behind a Piper Cub, Skip did something he wouldn't ever have bet on his pre-overcoat self to do.

He started running towards the entangled threesome, shouting, "What's going on there?" A wayward thought was that the coat might impress them as belonging to someone powerful with whom they wouldn't choose to wrangle.

Perhaps he was someone powerful. He certainly felt a powerful urge propelling him, an urge far surpassing a mere *frisson*.

The men who were attacking the woman – one behind her trying to keep her still while the one in front of her tried to get her to surrender her shoulder bag – looked up without letting go. They took Skip in, conferred with each other by means of slippery facial maneuvers and resumed the struggle.

Skip thought they must have decided he was alone – he was, of course – and presented no problem if they got what they wanted immediately and then fled.

That made Skip angry. He continued towards them, and as he approached, he did something he knew could be foolhardy. He did it

anyway. He put his left hand – the one not carrying the briefcase – in the left overcoat pocket, took hold of the Halls cough drops package, pressed it forward and said, as he'd heard it proclaimed in too many crime flicks to enumerate, "I've got a gun."

Then, for good measure, "And I'm not alone!"

What if either or both of the robbers also had guns? He'd be a goner, and so might the woman be, but he'd already committed himself to the act of, for him, unusual derring-do.

He was close enough now for them to see the bump the Halls packet made in the coat pocket and for him to see they were two high-school-age or slightly older kids – one white, one black – in hoodies and running shoes and she was a red-headed woman in her late twenties, maybe early thirties.

The phrase "damsel in distress" danced nuttily through his brain – not that she looked like a damsel, more like a capable woman in a jam. And she and the two young men were looking at Skip with – was it fear? disbelief? hilarity? – with whatever-it-was on their faces.

Skip got lucky. Having given him the wary once-over, the boys looked at each other, let go of the woman and raced out of the park as only their high-priced running shoes could hurry them.

The episode – or that part of it – ended so rapidly that Skip's marveling at his accomplishment was only hazily marred by the thought that the entire incident could have been a setup.

But a setup for what?

He wasn't able to pursue the thought, since the red-headed woman, gathering herself together, was speaking to him. She was also glaring at him. "You could have gotten both of us shot," she said, "if not killed."

Pulling the Halls packet out of his pocket and holding it up for her to see, Skip replied, "This *could've* been a gun. Want one?"

"But it isn't," the woman said. "That trick only works in movies."

"Apparently not," Skip said.

"It worked this one time out of the movies," the woman said. "I'll give you that. So I suppose I owe you thanks. But what if they'd had guns or a wire-cutter they intended to cut the strap on my bag with?"

Skip's immense pride at pulling off the rescue was taking a blow

from these questions. “None of that happened,” he said, his new-found derring-do deflating, “and now the two thugs are gone, and we’re here.”

A voice behind Skip said, “Is this guy bothering you, Ma’am?”

Neither Skip nor the woman had heard whoever it was approaching. It was a policeman who stood about five feet five inches tall and may have been at most twenty-five. He *had* a gun – in the holster strapped to his thick belt. His hand was on it.

The red-headed woman spoke first and said, “No, Officer. He was actually helping me.”

Skip said, “She was being attacked by a couple of thugs. I scared them off.” He pointed in the direction where they’d disappeared. “They went that way.”

Skip – who’d almost said, “They went thataway” – half expected the cop to give chase, but the cop stayed where he was and asked, “Do you want to come to the precinct and give us a description, Ma’am? Were they one white kid and one black kid?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Both about my size, maybe a little taller, and wearing running shoes and hoodies?”

“They’re the ones,” the red-head said.

“Yeah,” the cop said, “we know about them. They use the same *modus operandi* but not in the same place twice. We’ll catch them, maybe sooner, maybe later.”

“I hope sooner,” the redhead said, “so no one else has to go through what I went through and whoever’s gone through it before me.” She indicated Skip. “If this gentleman hadn’t come along, I could now be without my bag and everything in it.”

Skip started to say, “I *pretended* to have a...” but was stopped by the redhead who said, “He *pretended* to be my boyfriend, and look at him in that impressive overcoat. They must have figured he’d overwhelm them. So they took off.”

“Okay, then,” the policeman said, “I’ll see you two out of the park, and we can all be on our way. I’ll keep a lookout for those kids, too. One of these days they’ll trip up – uh – worse than they did tonight.”

They’d reached the street where the cop tapped his cap, said “Have a

good night” and left.

Skip and the redhead stood looking at each other. She said, “I think I owe you an apology. I was rude back there. You helped me, and I went after you. I guess I was upset by what had happened and had to take it out on somebody and there you were.”

Skip didn’t know what to do but thought gallantry might be his best shot. He regretted resorting to the thought of a “shot,” but went on. “It’s okay. I understand. It’s the modern world. Women can take care of themselves. Maybe you had an exit strategy, and I interrupted it because I’m locked into pre-feminist thinking.”

At that, the redhead laughed, and Skip realized she was extremely good-looking. In addition to the red hair, she had green eyes, a sloping nose, a wide mouth and pert chin. With the full-bodied laugh as well as, he saw now, the kind of fullness of body he went for, it all added up to something. He would have said she was awesome, if he ever used the ramshackle adjective.

“No, I didn’t have an exit strategy,” the redhead said. “I was just angry, and now that I’m over it, I realize I’m thrown and, I hate to say it, frightened. Something bad could have happened there.” She pointed behind her without turning round. “But thanks to you, my hero, it didn’t. Now I think I’m going to start shivering. Not from the cold – well, maybe that, too – but from the delayed shock.”

She looked Skip over and then directly in the face with the kind of look that she had to know contained the power to melt a man’s heart. She said, “Do you think I could borrow that terrific coat of yours for a minute?”

Skip’s unspoken thought was, I’ve never been called a hero before. Maybe I am – maybe even an existential hero, which from time to time since he was a kid he’d contemplated being, though not quite knowing what constituted being an existential hero.

Then he thought, Is this why I have this coat? To put over this woman’s shoulders? Then he thought, Is this what I maybe shouldn’t be doing with the coat? Then he thought, Get over the existential hero business, get over the to-be-or-not-to-be with the coat.

The lady needs it.

He set down the briefcase he’d never let go of the entire time, took off

the coat and helped put it round her shoulders. As he did, he again felt the heft of the coat and expected it would appear far too big on her, that she'd appear to be shrinking inside it. Not so, though. When she had, as he'd done, shrugged it into place, it looked as if it fit her well enough.

Or maybe it wasn't as large as he'd first thought.

Or maybe it was all in his imagination.

"Nice coat," the redhead said. She folded her arms across her lovely chest and rubbed the sleeves. "*Very* nice coat. You must have paid a pretty penny for it."

Skip was about to say something but wasn't certain what. Should he tell her how he came by it? Somehow, pretending he'd purchased it, that it was part of his wardrobe, seemed to be dissembling – not that he'd had that misgiving with Jerry.

She beat him to it. Apparently seeing his hesitation, she said, "You don't have to tell me. It's not my place to ask. I was just commenting on how nice and warm it is." With that, she pulled it tighter, a gesture that had its own warming effect on Skip.

"By the way," she said, "I think I also owe you my name. I'm Sheryl Sherman."

She reached in her recently threatened bag and pulled out a business card. She handed it to him. He looked at it, read it. It said, "Sheryl Sherman" and under that "Family Advisor" and below to the left, two telephone numbers, one on top of the other. He put it in the coat's right-hand pocket.

"Please, no jokes about the moniker," Sheryl said. "My parents thought it was a poetic name for their little girl. There's nothing I can do about it now. Not even marry, since I am feminist enough not to want to take on a husband's name and be branded like a cow in a rancher's herd. My luck, it's one of the perils of feminism. Fifty years ago, I wouldn't have given it a minute's thought."

The name Skip suddenly saw plastered on a billboard in his brain was Sheryl Sherman Gerber. Nutty, he knew. Faye Reisbach Gerber had never been billboarded there.

Sheryl Sherman paused and inhaled showily. "That's enough of that for now," she said and stuck out her right hand, her left hand still holding

the coat to her. “You’re?”

Skip was so caught up in what she’d just said and how she looked in the coat – how she looked, period – that he had to think for a second. “I’m, uh, I’m...”

He fumbled long enough for her to say, “You’re a figment of my imagination, and so’s the coat, although it feels real enough.”

“I’m Edward Gerber,” he said and shook her hand, “My friends call me Skip.”

“What kind of friends would call you Skip?” she said, which Skip wasn’t ready for. She saw as much. “And what kind of a person am I to make such a crack on such short acquaintance. Skip is a perfectly nice nickname. My friends call me Sher. Like the singer, but with an ‘s’ instead of a ‘c.’ There’s no stopping them, either.”

She was looking directly at him. Skip had no idea what she saw. “But, okay, I’ll call you Skip for as long as we’re together, which shouldn’t be long, since you need your coat back, and I need to get home. No, on second thought, Edward Gerber, I don’t know you long enough to call you Skip. We’re not full-fledged friends yet. I’ll call you Edward for the next few minutes until we are.”

That’s when she smiled, and Skip (or Edward – whoever) got to see how the wide mouth and the green eyes worked together to charm a guy right out of his overcoat concerns.

If he were looking for adventure, here it was looking him straight in the eye. “No hurry about the coat,” he said and then, “Look, we’re both a little shook up by what just happened. Maybe you want to go somewhere for a drink or something.”

Why was he saying this? He had other things claiming his attention, although no, for the moment he only had this. He only had Sheryl Sherman. He looked at the passing-for-genuine Rolex: 9:22 p. m.

“You’re looking at your watch,” Sheryl said. “You have to be somewhere. I’m holding you up. So to speak, under the circumstances.”

She started to take the coat off, but Skip instantly lunged to stop her. There was an awkward moment when it looked as if he was trying to embrace her. (Was he trying to embrace her?) They both laughed it off in an awkward man/woman way, and she kept the coat on.

She said, "I'd better just get in a cab. Right now, I think I'll feel better in my own surroundings."

Not thinking – or not thinking too linearly – Skip said, "I can't let you go home alone. If you don't mind, I'll see that you get there safely. It's the least I can do. Your hero, you know."

"It's much more than you need to do," Sheryl said, ignoring the "your hero" ploy. She started to take the coat off again but stopped. "This is silly. I'm still shivering."

Good will surged through Skip. He said, "No arguments, please. I'm taking you home, wherever home is."

"I'm way up on the West Side," she said, "surely out of your way."

Without skipping a beat, Skip said, "I was just headed in that direction." He stepped into the street and waved at the only taxi in the area.

It stopped. Dermot "Mac" McAllister was not driving it. He helped Sheryl into the back seat, noticing she lifted the skirt of the overcoat as she got in and slid to the far side. He followed her in and said, "Where are we going?"

She leaned towards the driver and said, "458 West Eighty-sixth Street, please." When the driver repeated the address and Sheryl confirmed it, she said to Skip, "Really, Edward, I could have done this myself." Skip assumed a skeptical look but said nothing. "But I'm grateful to you. I'm grateful you were in the park when no one else was. What were you doing, anyway? Do you work in the area, too?"

Before he knew what he wanted to say and because he was still undone by what was transpiring, he said, "No." Not satisfied with that, he said, "I just happened to be there."

Without Sheryl, who had an enticing way of unconsciously tossing her hair back, saying anything, he thought better of what he'd said. Nobody in Manhattan "just happened to be" anywhere. He wasn't inclined, though, to say he was there in connection with a coat that had been pawned off on him and that he was determined to get to the bottom of finding out why or from whom.

Would she even believe him?

"I mean," he said, "I – um – thought I had a appointment with a client

in the Sturtivant Building. I'm a lawyer, see, but when I got there, I saw the building was closed and realized I'd gotten the date and time wrong. So I crossed the street into the park to get a better look up at his office to see if maybe a light was on."

"Why didn't you call?" Sheryl asked. "Presumably, you have a cellphone. I don't know a single lawyer who doesn't."

"Yes," Skip said. "My cellphone. Why didn't I think of that? Of course, the Sturtivant Building itself is so unusual. I also wanted to give it a proper look-see."

"Interested in architecture, are you?" Sheryl asked.

"I am," Skip said. For the moment, he'd run out of things to say, suspecting Sheryl didn't believe anything he'd imparted so far anyway. "You don't believe me?"

Why should she? He didn't believe himself. He faced the fact he'd reached a point in his ambulance-chaser's life that he allowed himself fewer and fewer interests. He really must broaden them.

"I believe you," she said. "Is there any reason I shouldn't? A strange guy comes to my rescue and then lends me his coat. I have every reason to trust anything you tell me."

Skip wondered if she'd trust his saying he was attracted to her but thought that wasn't something he was about to say. He also thought of Faye and how she might have some tart comments to make about his being with Sheryl when he was missing La Rochefoucauld, where, he'd been reliably informed, the French pundit's maxims were installed on the walls in discreet neon.

"Discreet neon." Isn't that an oxymoron? He wondered that but said, "If I were you, I wouldn't trust anything I say." He wanted her to take it as a joke.

"You know," Sheryl said, and Skip could see color coming back into her face, "you're the first guy who's ever said that to me, and the honest-to-God truth is every man you meet hands you some kind of line." She took time to give him a closer look. "But maybe you're different."

All Skip could think of was the number of lies he'd already told her, beginning, when he first saw her and the hoodlums, with having a gun in his pocket. The whopper that loomed in his head, however, was allowing

her to think the coat belonged to him. The oddest thing was he had a strong urge to tell her everything but couldn't bring himself to.

(This is on top of the lies he'd fed Faye about his not showing for the Hartleys and her.)

He said, "I'm probably handing you a line, too." As he said it, he thought of something he'd never thought about himself, or, if he had, he'd dismissed as not requiring further consideration: He always handed the ladies lines.

Sheryl was right. Men did that. He wasn't different. He figured it was expected of him – he figured, if you don't go along with the creed, you're letting down the side. Lies were so expected, they somehow ceased to be lies, were only part of the process.

The embarrassment he felt at recognizing that about himself was enough to make him turn away from Sheryl and look out the window at the passing West Side Highway. He hadn't even noticed that's how the cabbie had chosen to go uptown, and here they were, already in the Sixties. Ahead, he could see the towers of the West Side's bilious Trump development coming at him – coming at them – like gargoyles of a different genus.

"If you're handing me a line," Sheryl said to his back, "it's a good one. I won't call you on it."

He turned. She was smiling at him and looking good in the coat. For the briefest instant he was almost gratified that he'd had it to give her. He was beginning to think the coat was truly good for something, after all. What would he have given her to warm her up if he hadn't had the coat? His suit coat, probably, but it wouldn't have been as effective. She wouldn't have looked half so appealing.

Hold it! If he hadn't had the coat, he wouldn't have even been in the pocket park, and what would have happened to Sheryl then? It was almost as if he was meant to be there, as if the whole rigmorole was destined.

Was it? Of course, it wasn't. Or was it?

So much that had happened in something like three hours struck him as unreal. But he was in a taxi with someone calling herself Sheryl Sherman and wearing a coat he'd come by out of the blue and now,

looking out the front window, he saw they were nearing the exit that would get them to West Eighty-sixth Street.

“You’ve gone quiet,” Sheryl said. “Thinking of more lines to try out on me?”

“No,” Skip said, “I was just thinking.”

“Thinking is good,” Sheryl said.

“458 West Eighty-sixth Street,” the driver said. He came to a stop in front of the building.

“Here we are then,” Sheryl said.

“I guess we are,” Skip said.

“Then I think you’d better let me out.”

Skip was on the curb side. He had to get out first. “Right,” he said and swung into action. He got out, and gave Sheryl his hand to help her.

She had the coat around her and had picked up her bag, but on her good-looking legs now, she put it down again and started to take off the coat. “You’d better have this,” she said.

“No,” Skip said, “keep it on until you’re inside the building. I’ll take it then.”

He began leading her to her door.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” she asked and looked back at the cab.

“Paying the driver?” Skip said. “I thought I’d keep him and get to my next stop.”

“I mean your briefcase,” Sheryl said. And then, “It seems to me I can’t let you go so easily. For your troubles I should at least offer you a drink. Unless you’re in a hurry.”

Skip was in a hurry. He just didn’t know what he was hurrying to or from. But just then, he wasn’t in that big a hurry.

“That’s fine with me,” he said. “A quick, revitalizing drink would be great.”

He put down the briefcase he’d picked up at Sheryl’s reminder, got out the wallet and paid the driver. It was a good thing he’d been carrying a fair amount of cash, he thought, taking into account the mounting cab rides,

Sheryl had already crossed the sidewalk and was standing in front of

her building.

Obeying an impulse he wouldn't have had hours earlier, Skip looked up at the building's top. No gargoyles, although at both cornice corners, there were elaborate stone pots he didn't like the looks of.

Stepping quickly towards Sheryl, Skip noticed two young men in hoodies and running shoes passing. The white one said to the black one, "Some killer coat she's got on."

Skip looked at Sheryl to see what she made of it, but she'd been distracted by a neighbor who was coming out of the building.

Were the two boys who passed by the same two? They couldn't be. He wasn't sure and therefore wasn't reassured. The hoodies the boys from the park had on had shielded their faces. Though he was slightly throttled, Skip thought better of mentioning his suspicion to Sheryl. No need to upset her again.

What are the chances of seeing two kids so alike within a half-hour, forty-five minutes? Pretty good, actually. This was a town full of young white men and black men in hoodies. Hoodies, baggy pants slung low on the hips and running shoes were the unemployed urban man's uniform.

Skip shook it off and went to join Sheryl. She was standing in her building's antiseptic lobby and taking off the coat. She went to hand it to him and then thought better of the gesture. Instead, she indicated that he should allow her to hold it while he slipped into it.

She said, "It certainly is a nice coat, Edward. You're a man of good taste."

No matter what care he gave to it, Skip never thought of himself that way, not in the wardrobe department – possibly because Bernice was always going on about it. Until he went away to prep school (Choate, at his father's insistence), she'd picked out his clothes. To this day she continued to make unsolicited remarks about what he wore.

So did Faye, he noted.

"I hope you don't mind my calling you Edward," Sheryl was saying. "To me, you're still Edward, not Skip. I think I met you in an Edward mode. From the little I know of you, I'm not convinced Skip would have done the same thing."

Funny, Skip thought, I'm not convinced of it, either. "I don't mind,"

he said. "I'm usually Edward – or Mr Gerber – to people in my business dealings."

"Which are?"

They were at the elevator. Skip wondered who might get out. No one did. They got on. "I'm a real estate lawyer," he said.

"That must be interesting," Sheryl said. Her green eyes had caught the elevator's clever lighting.

"At one time, it was," Skip said. "I think. It can become routine."

"That's what I was thinking," Sheryl said and laughed. "I guess I was hoping it would be interesting for you. It sounds cut-and-dried to me, but what do I know?"

"You know more than you think," Skip said. "'Cut-and-dried.' That's the word, all right." He thought but didn't say, Maybe I'm cut-and-dried, too.

"You can always get out of it," Sheryl said. "You wouldn't be the first lawyer to do it. To go back to what they wanted to do in the first place. Was there something you always wanted to do in the first place?"

Skip had no quick answer to that. When he was a kid, he played the trumpet and thought he might become a musician, but not with Gabriel Martin Gerber and Bernice Sawyer Gerber frowning on the prospect, not when Gabriel Martin Gerber had once said, "When I was a kid, I thought I'd be a writer, but my father talked me out of that cockamamie notion fast enough."

They'd reached Sheryl's floor, and the doors opened. A woman in a robe and a bandanna on her head was passing with an empty bin. She'd been to the incinerator. She looked at Sheryl and then at Skip and said, "Hello, Sheryl." To Skip she said, "Some swell coat you got on. Wear it in good health."

"Hello, Annie," Sheryl said.

"Don't mind me," Annie said, "I'm just getting rid of trash." She indicated her bin. "If I was smart, I'd leave this at the incinerator door and throw myself in."

She continued left, while Sheryl, saying "Good night, Annie," went to a door at the end of the corridor. She unlocked it with a key she located in the depths of her pocket, waved Skip – Edward to her – in and said,

“Give me your coat – to hang up this time – and make yourself at home.”

If I only could, Skip thought, as well as, Shouldn't I be on my way – returning to this coat caper? Then, getting a load of a living room obviously decorated for comfort and not necessarily for show (as, for instance, Faye's was), he thought, Maybe I could make himself very much at home here.

He removed the coat, handed it to her.

She went to a closet just inside the apartment door and hung the coat on a padded hanger. “There,” she said, “safe.”

If only, he thought, and settled onto the end of a couch with an earth-colored shawl draped over it. Then he thought maybe choosing one-half of a couch would be too suggestive. He got up and moved to a chair upholstered in a burnished red-and-grey pattern.

“What can I get you?” Sheryl, who'd come in from the bedroom where she'd left her suit jacket, asked. “I can give you anything you want.” She realized what she'd said, and when the realization crossed her face, Skip realized it, too, but sensed it was best not to confirm it.

“Scotch,” he said. “Not much and not on the rocks.”

“Coming up,” Sheryl said, going to a breakfront at the far side of the room that served as a dry bar.

She prepared his Scotch and whatever it was for herself, handed him his glass, saying “To your health, Edward,” and went to sit not too near him and not too far away in a matching upholstered chair at the other end of the couch.

What ensued – with Skip only occasionally wandering away from their conversation to the overcoat and what he was going to do about it – was on the surface a neutral exchange. They talked about his law practice (which she reiterated he could choose to change), her work (she was a fund-raiser for a recently organized children's charity, which explained the “Family Advisor” phrase on her card) and their attitudes towards the city and the arts. They talked about the plays and movies they'd seen. She'd seen more than he had.

They did not, Skip noticed, talk about the restaurants they frequented – La Rochefoucauld did not come up for discussion.

That was on the surface. Underneath was a different story. Skip was

experiencing the kind of attraction for her he hadn't felt in he didn't know how long. Nor was he sure he'd felt it for Faye on even their first dates. He also thought Sheryl might be having the same feelings for him. He'd been told somewhere, or had read, that when a woman, talking to a man, continually pushes her hair back, it's an indication she's interested.

Sheryl kept pushing her hair back.

This had gone on for some time – well over an hour and a half when Skip checked the Canal-Street Rolex: 11:27 p. m.

Sheryl saw him looking at it and said, "You've got to be going. That came out wrong. You had to be somewhere, and I've kept you. Sorry, Edward." He loved the sound of her saying "Edward." "I've got to get to bed, too." She actually blushed when she said that.

Skip thought he might be blushing, too, since at the mention of bed, he imagined her with nothing on, her breasts, her legs, her reddish pubic hair. He feared his mouth would start watering. He imagined himself entering her. He fought to squelch further fantasies.

"It's a school night, you know," she said.

She was getting up, and Skip knew he had to, too – in such a way as to disguise the beginnings of an erection. He did so as gracefully as he could, not knowing what to say, knowing he wanted to say he'd like to see her again but also knowing that was out of the question.

Faye.

Or was it?

Could it be arranged?

After a pause during which they looked at each other – presumably aware they were looking at each other with thoughts they didn't feel comfortable expressing – Sheryl said, "I'd better get your coat."

Skip started to follow her to the closet but stopped. Sheryl retrieved the coat, shut the closet door and, something having struck her, put the coat on.

"I just want to wear it one last time," she said. "You don't mind."

Skip said, "Why would I?"

Sheryl said, "When I think of you, Edward, I'll think of you coming at me and those jerks. I'll see you with your left hand in your left-hand pocket holding your Halls cough drops pistol.

She put her left hand in the coat's left front pocket, patently having fun mocking his cavalier's cavalier gesture. Skip's impulse was to put his arms around her, devil take the hindmost, but before he could act on it – or not – Sheryl's expression shifted.

“Hello,” she said, pulling out the black kid gloves and the Halls cough drops and stuffing them in the empty right hand pocket where her card resided. She pulled out the Indian-head penny and said, holding it up before putting it in the right-hand pocket, “Hello, what's this? A lucky penny. I hope it brings you luck.”

When she said that, her green eyes twinkling, Skip's thought was, Maybe it just has.

He could see her continuing to feel around in the pocket. “How new did you say this coat is?”

“I didn't say,” Skip said. He couldn't. He didn't know.

Sheryl said, “It's old enough for this pocket to have a hole in it. You didn't know?”

She took her hand out and walked over to reach for his. He let her take it and put it in the coat pocket. Were they both thinking of the sexual implications? Skip knew he was, but then he wasn't. He'd located the hole and was thinking, What's this? What's this?

Sheryl let go of his hand and backed a few steps away. “Do you think,” she asked, “something has fallen through it? Have you been missing anything?”

Skip didn't want to say that nothing of his could be missing in the coat and only said, “Nothing's missing I know of.”

With both hands Sheryl had grabbed the coat just below the pockets and was jiggling it. She said, “Something could have fallen through and gotten caught in the lining. Funny those cough drops didn't fall through or your lucky penny. When I had the coat on before, I had the feeling there was something heavier on one side. This side, I think. You've never noticed it?”

Skip didn't think he had but then recalled that somewhere along the way he had had a vague feeling there was an imbalance on one side of the coat's bottom. He'd just thought it was the way the coat had been tailored.

“I guess I didn’t.”

“Here,” Sheryl said, taking off the coat and handing it to him. “See for yourself.”

Skip took the coat by its substantial collar and shook it. Now he did have the feeling that something about the heavy coat felt heavier than it should.

“Try this,” Sheryl said. She picked up the hem of the coat and began running her fingers along it where anything that had fallen through the hole would have settled. “Yes,” she said, gripping something and showing the lump of whatever she’d located to Skip, “there’s something here.”

Skip felt it. It was something lumpy. “What do you think it is?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” Sheryl said. “It’s your coat. You don’t remember missing anything?”

“Nothing,” Skip said. “What should I do – cut the lining free?”

“Don’t do that,” Sheryl said. “Maybe we can work it out through the hole.”

Suddenly embarrassed about the situation, Skip said, “It’s probably nothing.” He had a thought he kept to himself. He’d found the Halls cough drops in the pocket. Perhaps there’d been a second pack, and it had fallen through the hole. He probed the lump for length and width, but no, it didn’t feel like anything Halls manufactured.

He repeated, “No, probably nothing,” and started to put the coat on.

“Don’t be foolish,” Sheryl said. “You want to get it out of there. If it has sharp edges, it could tear the lining or even the wool. Give me the coat. I have smaller fingers than you. I might be able to work whatever it is up and grab it.”

Once again taken over by the overcoat, bamboozled by the hold it had gotten on him and the chase it was leading him on – including this warm-and-fuzzy Sheryl Sherman development – he handed Sheryl the coat. Not handing it to her would likely have led to his explaining why he didn’t want to. Explaining how he’d come by it and where it had led him was still something he wasn’t ready to do.

“Thank you,” Sheryl said, sitting on one of the upholstered chairs again, putting the coat over her lap, pushing the object up with one

hand and inserting her other hand into the pocket. "I'm getting it," she said. She'd furrowed her features, but to Skip she looked even more like someone he could go for – if he was in the market to go for anyone.

Was he?

"I've got it," Sheryl said. "Let me just pull it through the hole." She stretched the verb "pull" to let him know the effort she was happy to put into it. "And here it is."

She held it up.

"What is it?" Skip said.

"You don't recognize it?" Sheryl said.

I should recognize it, shouldn't I? Skip thought. At least I should if I were the owner of the coat. But I'm not, and I have no idea what it is.

"You mean someone else put this..." Sheryl held it up higher. "... in your pocket when you weren't looking?"

Skip thought, Yes, that's what happened. Whoever owned the coat – presumably, the man at the elevator who'd handed it to him – had put it in the pocket and must have forgotten about it.

Whatever it was.

What, for God's sake, was it?

Sheryl was holding up a rock for his scrutiny. A rock! The way she was holding it – upright with left thumb and forefinger – it was approximately two inches high, perhaps not quite two inches. At its widest point it was perhaps an inch and a half. It was shaped like a jar that narrowed at the neck and then flared to a lip not as wide as the widest part.

Was "amphora" the word to describe what it resembled? A tiny amphora. He motioned to Sheryl that he'd like to see it at closer range.

She handed it to him. Holding it now only a foot or so from him, he saw the stone was a mottled grey and brownish yellow. Was it sandstone? Skip had never had the slightest interest in geology – other than to know Manhattan was for the most part built on gneiss, shist and marble. Was it limestone?

The grey section which ran from the middle of the top to the bottom – looking somewhat like the state of Illinois – was smooth and contained various shaped spots of white. The brownish parts were like an

amorphous frame around it.

The stone's make-up wasn't its most compelling feature. Skip hadn't examined it for more than a few seconds when he decided he saw a face carved into it. Yes, towards the bottom of the stone, as if the top were an ornamental headpiece, was a stern face. Its mouth was a downward turning thin-lipped frown. Just above it the stone flared into a broad, flattened nose. To the left of the top of this seeming nose a brown dot within a flat grey oval that came to a point at both ends looked like a right eye. There was nothing to suggest a left eye, but just to the right of where it would be was a totem of three short and equal-length rolls that gave the impression of a clenched fist.

The entire effect was that of an ancient civilization's god (a Mayan god? Aztec? Incan?) regarding anyone who looked at him – and more pointedly, at whom he looked – with unalloyed disapproval, with a gargoyle's disapproval.

The question in Skip's mind was whether this curiosity dug from the depths of the overcoat was something that had formerly been dug from other depths.

Was this an artifact?

Sheryl said, "What do you make of it?"

"I don't know what to make of it."

"You've never seen it before? It isn't something you thought you mislaid."

"No," he said.

"Do you have any idea who might have put it there?"

"No, but now I realize I'd better get going. I'm keeping you up on a school night." While he was saying this, Skip was rubbing the back of the stone with his left forefinger. It was a nervous gesture, he knew. He felt he was on the spot with Sheryl and at the same time wanted to get going with this new – was it a clue?

While running his forefinger along the stone's other side, he felt something there, too. He turned the stone over. It was mottled grey and brownish-yellow as well, although the grey predominated and in it were odd markings. He raised the stone to see if he could make them out.

At first he could discern nothing other than crude scratchings.

Looking even closer, he saw they formed a name – Harold something.

Now he was squinting, and Sheryl noticed. “What are you trying to see?”

“There’s writing here. I think it’s a name. Harold something.”

She held her hand out to him. “Let me see it.”

He gave it to her with reluctance, although he hoped he was hiding that.

She took it, looked. She moved closer to a lamp at her left. “I see what you mean. Barely legible. Harold. Harold. I think it says, Harold Smith. Harold Smith! Do you know anyone named Harold Smith?”

She handed Skip the stone so he could look again, confirm what she’d seen. He took it and, stepping over to the lamp, squinted again. It did seem to say “Harold Smith.” Maybe “Harold Smits.” He said to Sheryl. “I don’t know any Harold Smith.”

“Everybody has to know a Harold Smith,” Sheryl said. There must be a million of them in the Manhattan phone book alone, and that’s only the listed ones.”

Why did Skip know that thirty-seven percent of New Yorkers with phones were unlisted? It was another of the factoids he had stored in his confounded legal brain that weren’t much use except at an unpredictable time like this when they were discouraging – discouraging because he was thinking about how he was going to turn up a Harold Smith, any Harold Smith, the right Harold Smith.

And that didn’t take into account the ones with no landline, only a cellphone.

Did the coat belong to someone named Harold Smith, who’d put a stone in its pocket that fell through the hole?

How was Skip to verify that?

And why was he thinking that going through these frisking motions with Sheryl was, well, just this side of enjoyable? No, make that the other side of enjoyable, the enjoyable side.

Sheryl said, “Don’t you think you should see about returning the stone to Harold Smith?” She was standing up. “I’ll get the phone book.”

“Please don’t do that,” Skip said. He was thinking fast. Much as he might like what was going on here, he couldn’t get her involved.

Telling her as much as he knew and had gone through already was too much for him to undertake. "You've done enough. Besides, it's late. I've kept you up, and I don't think it would be wise to wake up anyone named Harold Smith at this hour. I'll try to reach him – or them – in the morning." He thought for a second. "And find out how and why a stone with his named etched into it got into the – my – coat pocket."

"Your big beautiful coat pocket," Sheryl inserted.

He was reaching for the damn thing and looking at his make-believe Rolex. Could it be 11:42 p. m.? It could and was. "I think I've missed my appointment," he said, as he went to the door.

"That's my fault," Sheryl said. "I shouldn't have kept you."

Skip said, as she opened the door for him. "That's all right. It wasn't really an important meeting. Besides this was worth it. Meeting you. Perhaps we'll meet again."

"Next time I'm being held up, I'll expect you to be there," she said. "Edward Gerber, my Lochinvar."

She did have a smile that could steal a man's hardened heart, Skip thought.

And then thought, "Edward Gerber, my Lochinvar." The gentle, even affectionate, mockery she'd infused in the remark had the sound of finality for Skip, who was standing in the doorway and, like a sap, began to hear an old Jimmy Durante song his not usually song-loving father occasionally croaked, "Did you ever have the feeling that you wanted to go but still have the feeling that you wanted to stay?"

He didn't know what to do. He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to kiss her good-bye. If he did, he wouldn't want to stop there.

He held out his hand. Sheryl held out hers. They shook hands, It was as if they'd just concluded a business deal. Very unsatisfying to Skip, and as he turned to go, he couldn't tell if she felt the same way about him but hoped she did.

He continued down the hall to the elevator.

As he reached it, he heard her say, "Don't forget you've got my card," and then heard her door close. When it did, he felt as if something important had ended that should have only just begun.

But there he was, in his newly acquired but, he hoped, temporary

overcoat, his briefcase in one hand and a stone that looked as if it could be a museum piece in the other, an object that tipped him to someone named Harold Smith or possibly Harold Smits.

Getting into the empty elevator – his, um, Rolex said 11:47pm – he'd resumed rubbing the back of the stone as if he'd be able to turn it over and find the name Harold Smith clearer or even, by some magic, find additional clarifying information.

Skip had told Sheryl he thought it out of the question to call Harold Smith at this time of night, but he didn't intend to hold to that. He'd known he wouldn't as he said it, and when he reached the empty lobby, he put down his briefcase and studied the mottled stone again.

The (was it a?) god appeared as disdainful as before, just as disdainful as the broken gargoyle outside 9 West Forty-seventh Street. When he turned the stone over he found nothing new, just "Harold Smith," as if it had been roughly cut into it by a school kid using an old, rusty nail. Or, he wondered, looking at it again, did the scratchings now look more like "Harold Smits."

Thinking he'd be happier ferreting out Harold Smits than Harold Smith, Skip looked up. He was facing the 458 West Eighty-sixth Street front door, which had a wrought iron grill protecting the glass.

Pressed against the glass he saw a face. A man had pressed his face to the glass so that his features were flattened. He'd raised his right fist to his cheek. In that absurd position he looked like nothing so much as the face on the stone Skip held, or was it the face of the fallen gargoyle?

Skip told himself it isn't anything, it's coincidence, it's a drunkard making his way home. He'd return the look, without flattening his features with his hand but with the same derision. He did, but when he did, he became uncertain as to whether the man was even looking at him but was just pressing his face to the glass for an unspecified reason.

The man backed off, walked away.

Manhattan at night could be like that, Skip tried to convince himself, while also musing that these were the elements that made the nighttime city appealingly unpredictable.

He decided to take stock of where he was and what had brought him there. He rubbed the coat. Having met Sheryl Sherman – having gotten

her out of that jam – altered his attitude towards the blasted thing. Yes, he remained irritated that he'd taken possession of it, but returning it was having an effect on him he didn't fully understand. On the other hand – the one holding the stone – he felt instinctively that he might, that he would, come to some understanding, if he continued the, uh, scavenger hunt.

Okay, he wouldn't walk outside immediately. The drunkard could be skulking. He'd wait a few minutes and while he waited, he'd look into the Harold Smits business. He put the stone in the right-hand pocket – the one without the hole and with the black gloves, Halls cough drops, the Indian-head penny, Sheryl Sherman's business card.

He pulled his cellphone out to consult it for any Harold Smits(es) he might find in the New York City telephone directory.

What he found immediately was a text. He opened it. It said, "Sorry about last message, Angry. Over it. F."

Faye.

She says she's over it, Skip thought.

Am I?

He thought of the woman upstairs. Doing nothing to stop himself – maybe because it was so late and he was impatient – he texted back, "Maybe you shouldn't be over it. Maybe you should be over me. Think about it." He signed the text "Skip," backed up and shifted that to "Edward."

Had he been rash? Maybe there are times, he decided – taking into account how typically his routines were tempered – when it paid to be rash. Maybe after being unrash all these years, he was getting an out-of-the-past lesson in the benefits of rashness, of risk.

Risk – how often did that thought pepper his average day?

Just about never.

Anyway, he had Harold Smits to think about. Inside of a minute, he was in luck. Among the listings he scanned, there was only one for a Harold Smits – at 124 Avenue A. The other side of town, the other side of way downtown. Hardly convenient, but what so far in this coat chase had been convenient, even when – as with Sheryl Sherman – it had its upside?

Since Skip was cooling his hot heels in the 458 West Eighty-sixth Street lobby anyhow, waiting for the dipso with the flat Mayan face to move completely out of range, he thought he'd call the Smits person first, forget the hour. Harold Smits might be up. People in that part of town kept late hours.

Matter of fact, Skip thought, if Smits had anything to tell him about the store or, more than that, knew something about the coat, was perhaps its rightful owner, he deserved to be called at midnight. Macht nichts whether he was wide awake or in a deep slumber.

Skip dialed the number, which, tellingly, had a 646 area code – tellingly, because that indicated there was a good chance he hadn't been at his Avenue A location for long. It could have meant Harold Smits was one of the younger crowd who'd been moving into the gentrifying neighborhood and paying enormous rents for spaces that only ten or twenty years earlier went for peanuts.

Smits might be someone who'd own a coat like the coat Skip once again had on. Smits could be the rightful owner of this coat.

The phone was ringing. What was it Lily Tomlin said in her classic Ernestine sketches – “one ringie-dingie, two ringie-dingies”? There were three ringie-dingies and then four.

The phone was picked up. A man's groggy voice came on, “Hello. Who's this?”

Skip said, “Is this Harold Smits?”

“Yes, this is Harold Smits,” the voice said. It was a harsh voice Skip thought he'd heard recently though he couldn't place it. “Who is this? Do you know what time it is?”

“Never mind the time,” Skip heard himself have the unmitigated gall to say. “I'm calling, because I want to ask you about a stone I found that has your name on it.” Skip was holding the stone up to look at the scratched “Harold Smits” name. “Do you know anything about it?”

“Who is this?” the voice said. Skip thought he could place the voice. It didn't speak with a foreign accent, but it sounded not at all unlike the voice he'd heard on the phone at the office Miles Rogers Havilland no longer occupied, if he had ever occupied it. “Are you crazy calling me at this time of night to ask me about a stone?”

“You’re saying you don’t know about a stone you might have lost?” Skip said. “What about an overcoat with a wide collar in a herringbone pattern? The stone was in the pocket. Well, not in the pocket. It was in the lining. It must have fallen through a hole in the pocket.”

“Are you cracked,” the voice said, “phoning me at this ungodly hour, asking about a stone and a herringbone overcoat?”

Skip heard the voice, and the exasperation in it, but he thought he’d found a likely suspect and wasn’t going to let up. He wasn’t in the mood to let up on anything, and it wasn’t a mood he was often in, if ever.

Even if maybe he hadn’t found a likely suspect. Even if maybe he’d called some innocent shlub, who happened to have the same name as the one on the stone he was gripping like a crazy person. And that’s if Harold Smits was even the correct name, if the scratching on the stone even formed an actual name.

Maybe he should let up. He was closing in on doing as much when the voice, less grinding now, said, “Hold on a second. You’re looking for Harold Smits, right?”

“Right,” Skip said, “and you said you’re Harold Smits.”

“Yeah,” the voice said, “I’m Harold Smits Jr My father was also Harold Smits.”

“Your father?” Skip said, incredulous but not much more incredulous that he’d been about anything that had been going on for what was now inching into its second day.

“My late father,” the voice said. “He’s dead seventeen years, the old bastard.” Skip thought he heard another voice in the background. He couldn’t be sure if it was a man’s or a woman’s. Then he heard Harold Smits Jr say, not to him, “Some guy calling about my dad. What am I supposed to do, hang up on him?” Then he said to Skip, “What do you know about my dad?”

“I don’t know anything,” Skip said. “That’s what I’m calling you about.”

“You’re saying something about a stone and an overcoat that belonged to my father?” the now more alert voice said. “If they did, and I’m not saying they did, but if they did, what are you doing with them?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Skip said.

“I can’t tell you anything about them, can I?” Harold Smits Jr said, “until I see them.”

Skip saw an opening and seized it, feeling almost cocky about his new itches to be proactive.

“Proactive”? Where did that thought come from? He’d never used the word – certainly not about himself, certainly not about his behavior. He’d never liked the word, but now he had a new respect for it.

“Do you want to see the coat? The stone?” Skip asked Harold Smits Jr.

“If they had to do with my father,” Harold Smits Jr said, “about whom I knew very little, I’d be glad to look them over.” He then again said something to someone else apparently nearby. “Some objects that belonged to my dad – or may have belonged to my dad.” There was mumbling and then, “Of course, I want to know more.” And then into the phone, “When do you want to let me see them?”

“What’s wrong with now?” Skip asked.

“Now?” Harold Smits Jr said. “Nothing, I guess.” More mumbling in the background, which elicited, “Yes, I know what time it is, but how often do you get a call like this?” Then into the phone, “Let me give you my address.”

“I have your address,” Skip said. “It’s in the phone book. I’m taking a cab there right now.”

“What’s your name?” Harold Smits Jr asked.

Skip gave it and, saying he was catching a cab right away, rang off. Pocketing his cellphone (not in the pocket with the hole; he had a flash of Sheryl extracting it from the lining), he picked up his briefcase, opened the building door, stuck his head out and looked both ways.

All he saw was a man of about forty-eight or fifty in a cardigan walking a Scottish terrier. A little late for walking the dog, Skip thought, but not worth worrying about. Maybe the guy worked a late shift and had just gotten home. Maybe the dog was on a farkakteh schedule.

He stepped out of the building towards the curb where he saw no cabs and debated whether to turn left towards Riverside Drive or right towards West End Avenue and Broadway, where cabs might be more plentiful.

He decided to go towards Broadway. As he did, the man with the

terrier now choosing the curb as an ideal spot to urinate looked up from the pet at Skip and said, clearly as a honking vehicle, “You’re a lucky man.”

Skip kept walking and picked up his pace.

The man spoke again and said, “You’re a lucky man.” Skip was walking faster but hadn’t yet broken into a run. Neither did he turn around to see if the man and the dog were scurrying after him.

“Do you want to know why you’re a lucky man?” Skip heard shouted behind him, as he broke into a run. “Because you can afford a nice overcoat.” Though the man’s voice was getting dimmer, the man repeated what he’d said. “Because you can afford a nice double-breasted overcoat in a masculine herringbone tweed.”

The terrier, putting an exclamation point on the man’s observation, barked twice. Then silence, except for the swish of the one or two cars he dodged as he crossed West End Avenue.

At Broadway and Eighty-sixth, Skip got a cab quickly. Again the cabbie wasn’t Mac McAllister. This one was a Sikh. That’s what the headgear announced, and the licence said Singh, Fateh. He spoke with a distinctly plummy accent, and once he got the destination from Skip, he did the rest of his speaking on a rasping intercom. It wasn’t a new thing, Skip thought, as the man called Singh took the lights as if going to a fire, while keeping up his end of, of all things, a baseball conversation complete with statistics. Near as Skip could figure, he was with a rabid Yankees fan.

Just to keep Singh cognizant that he had a passenger, Skip – massaging the stone until he thought he might rub out the “Harold Smits” – uttered the occasional “That’s right” or “I agree” or “You don’t say” or “I’d totally forgotten he pitched that game.”

As there was little traffic, Skip was deposited no more than twenty minutes later at 124 Avenue A, saying, “If it’s not the Yankees and the Red Sox, I’m probably not going to get to the World Series, after all.” He paid the sixteen-fifty, got out – briefcase, overcoat, stone and all – missing what the baseball enthusiast spouted in parting salutation.

Looking at the building, he saw a man huddled inside the first of a pair of double doors with glass in their upper halves. He was a young man in a thick terry-cloth robe that had seen better days. He hadn’t bothered to

comb his carrot-top hair and had certainly not shaved for the encounter.

When the young man – Skip would have guessed his age at twenty-five, twenty-seven, somewhere around there – satisfied himself he was looking at the man who'd called, he opened the door and whizzed out to intercept Skip on the sidewalk.

“You're the man who just called me?” he said. “You're Chip somebody?”

Skip saw that the man (whom he assumed had to be Harold Smits) had shoved his feet into rubber boots with loose and flapping Velcro-strap closings. “Edward, uh, Skip Gerber,” Skip said, putting out his hand, as he walked towards the building. “You're Harold Smits?”

“Junior,” Harold Smits Jr said, taking Skip's hand. “I'd invite you up, but it's not a good time.” Skip recalled hearing the other voice through the phone. “Too messy. My apartment. I don't like anyone seeing it like that.”

Skip stopped where he was, wondering how many men actually cared if their apartment was messy. He never did. (Anyway, he had housemaid Chaka to clean it up.) Instead, he had the impression he was being lied to, which further irritated him, because he didn't like standing in the street.

Too exposed.

He looked around for anything that could offer shelter and spotted another doorway only a few feet away recessed enough that he'd feel better in the shadows it provided. He nodded towards it and then moved that way.

Following him, Harold Smits Jr said, “I'm sure we can do whatever business you have in mind right here. You said something over the phone about a stone and an overcoat?” He screwed up his flushed face. “Is the overcoat you got on the one you think belonged to my father? It doesn't look like any overcoat I ever saw him wear. Of course, I never saw much of my father, the late, great Harold Smits Sr.”

As Harold Smits Jr said that, he sneered, adding one more to the sneer parade that had been marching past Skip at a steady pace.

“I didn't say the coat belonged to your father,” Skip said. “I don't know who it belongs to.”

Harold Smits Jr sneered again – he's a very sneer-y guy, Skip thought

– and said through his sneer, “You’re wearing it. Wouldn’t you say it belongs to you?”

Skip wasn’t going to explain why he was wearing it and how he’d come by it – not to anyone, not even to Sheryl Sherman, who may have deserved an explanation.

Then he thought better of it and relented somewhat. He had gotten this guy out of bed fairly late. (It had to be pretty near 1 am by now.) Maybe Harold Smits Jr had a right to sneer when asked to examine a coat that turned out to be no coat he’d ever seen before.

Skip changed his tactic. He pulled the stone from the right-hand pocket and aimed it towards Harold Smits Jr but held on to it. “Would you mind looking at this?” he asked.

“How do you expect me to see it?” Harold Smits Jr asked. “There’s no light here.”

Skip couldn’t argue with that. He moved out of the shadowy doorway to where the streetlights offered enough illumination for Harold Smits Jr to study, at first, the carved surface.

“What is this?” Harold Smits Jr asked. “Some stone you picked up off the street? You got me out of bed and down here to look at a *stone* that for all I know you picked out of the gutter? Is this some kinda *joke*? Did one of my piss-ant friends put you up to this? Did Einar Westfelt cook up this little scheme, because Ramsay is sleeping with me now and not him?”

“I have no idea who either Einar Westfelt or Ramsay are,” Skip said and shook the stone in Harold Smits Jr.’s face. He said, “Look at the stone more closely. You don’t see a face there?”

Harold Smits Jr made a show of looking at the stone. “What face? It looks like a stone to me.”

“You don’t see a mouth? Nose? A right eye?” Skip insisted. “You don’t see that little clenched fist on the right side?”

The questions appeared to intrigue Harold Smits Jr. He looked closer and after a few seconds taking more than his previous cursory look, he said, “Yeah, maybe I see some of that, but what if I do?”

“Doesn’t it hit you like it might be valuable?” Skip asked.

“What? Like it’s some Peruvian relic or something? What’s it to me?”

“Now look at this,” Skip said. They were still in the light. He turned the stone over. “Can you see writing there? Can you read it?”

While Skip held it, Harold Smits took Skip’s hand and pulled it to him. He twisted Skip’s hand an inch or two this way and that to get a better look. Skip was looking at the top of Harold Smits Jr.’s unkempt carrot-top mane. “Looks like a name, I think.”

“Go on,” Skip said. “What does it say?”

“I don’t know,” Harold Smits Jr said, looking up at Skip as if he were a child dissembling before a disciplinarian parent. All Skip saw in those eyes with the bushy reddish-brown eyebrows caterpillaring over them was vacant space. “It looks like Harold – I don’t know – Harold Smith?”

“You don’t see Harold Smits?” Skip said, beginning to lose patience.

“It could be Smits,” Harold Smits Jr said. Little gleams of light came into those eyes. “Uh-oh. Now I get it. This is a scam. You pick a name out – from the phone book or somewhere – scratch it on a stupid rock and then try to get the bozo with that name to buy it off you.”

“Did I say anything about selling you the stone?” Skip asked.

“I bet you were just about to,” Harold Smits Jr said, “but I’m not falling for it. What would I want with a stone anyway? I couldn’t care less if it’s – whadya call it? – a museum piece. I don’t collect stones. Go find Harold Smith and work your sicko con on him.”

For a dizzying moment, Skip viewed himself from outside himself: trying sometime around one in the morning to convince a Lower East Side man he’d never met that a stone retrieved from the lining of a coat he’d never bought had some special meaning.

“You’re not getting my point here,” he said. “You may not collect stones, but you said you’re Harold Smits Jr. What about Harold Smits Sr.? Maybe he had a collection.” He’d freed his hand from Harold Smits’ and was holding the object up. “Maybe this stone was your dad’s.”

The remark had an effect on Harold Smits Jr. He stood upright, tightened the robe around him, planted his rubber-booted feet on the ground and said, “Come to think of it, my father did have not one but many collections. Collections were his big hobby. He was always with the collections. Not with us. Not with my mom and not with my brother Sidney or me. He’d come home, go into his study – where the rest of us

weren't welcome – and futz around with his collections.”

The way Harold Smits Jr was gathering steam, Skip could tell he'd struck a nerve. He also could tell now wasn't the time to interrupt the fellow.

“That thing you're holding in your hand could come from one of my father's collections or it couldn't,” Harold Smits said, “but if it did, I wouldn't want anything to do with it. He didn't have time for us, and now that he's dead and gone, I don't have time for him or anything to do with him. And, buddy, that's all I have to say to you. As far as I'm concerned, you can take your stone and shove it where the sun don't shine. And if you think that's my dad's coat, I wouldn't wear it in a million years. The only thing I'd do with it is feed it to the moths.”

The Oedipal peroration ended (and making Skip think much better of Gabriel Martin Gerber than he had for a while), Harold Smits Jr turned on his boot heel, took a key ring dangling maybe a dozen keys out of the robe pocket and went back to the building door and – taking no time at all to locate the key – through it.

Skip couldn't think of anything to do but stand on the street and watch Harold Smits Jr go. He knew he had to think of something, though, and decided to think of it not under the bright – relatively bright – street lights but in the shadowy door he'd repaired to before.

Noticing by his trusty fake Rolex that it was 1:11 a. m., he decided his interview with Harold Smits Jr was inconclusive, and that was putting the best face on it. On the other hand, he didn't think he'd soon forget Harold Smits Jr.'s face – the eyebrows, the unkempt hair, the sneer-prone mouth.

Perhaps Harold Smits Sr did own the stone, did have it logged in some artifact collection or other? He'd never know for sure.

Or would he? A bulb clicked on in his head. If Harold Smits Sr was a collector – or if even Harold Smith or one of the many Harold Smiths in the Manhattan phone book or any phone book was a collector – he would have had to purchase the stone for his collection, wouldn't he? If that were true, then it followed logically that he bought it from another collector or from a dealer in rare Mayan (Aztec, Incan, name-the-lost-civilization) objects.

Furthermore, if Harold Smits Sr – or any of the Harold Smiths – had amassed a valuable collection, it's possible other collectors knew about it, museums knew about it.

It was possible a curator, or curators, at the Museum of Natural History or, maybe even better, a dealer in South American – or any kind of antiquities – knew about the collection and, more than that, knew about this stone.

Skip was clicking on all cylinders, but it was 1:15 a. m, fifth-rate Rolex time. I'm not about to visit any dealer and certainly not anyone at the Museum of Natural History – not at, checking, 1:16 a. m.

What was he to do? he was thinking as he stepped out of the doorway. Propelled into pondering his next move – patting down the overcoat again for hints; he'd overlooked the hole earlier and the stone to which it led; what else might he have overlooked? – he wasn't heeding his surroundings.

He'd neglected to cast another of the beacon-like glances he'd gotten used to beaming round him. And he was only peripherally aware of several loud, low-pitched masculine voices coming his way on the generally deserted street.

The owners of the voices were aware of Skip.

"There's one, ladies," a low-pitched masculine voice rang out. "So well dressed, too, in that big *faaaabulous* coat," another low-pitched masculine voice agreed. "Let's *join* him," a third, low-pitched masculine voice said. "Or have *him* join us," a fourth low-pitched masculine voice joined in.

Still paying little attention to the low-pitched masculine chorus because steeped in thoughts of his next move, Skip was only jarred from them when he realized he'd been gripped by both arms and, in the old phrase, had been swept off his feet.

Barely able to utter alarm, Skip looked at his new traveling companions. His momentary surprise lessened when he remembered he was on Avenue A, where anything of this nature can't be dismissed as unlikely.

The two people holding him up and the two others, one who grabbed Skip's briefcase, were dressed in the kind of garish finery that only men

in drag wear out of some need to dress – if they're going to dress as women – in the extreme, to dress as *ne plus ultra* women, to dress so *ne plus ultra* that they can't shop in stores like Bloomingdale's or Lord & Taylor or in any sort of Madison Avenue or Fourteenth Street boutique, stores catering to actual women.

They must shop in drag-queen specialty stores or, the way things were changing these days, online. This quartet surely had done one or the other or both. They were fireworks of glitz and glitter wrapped in feather boas. They teetered on huge high-heeled shoes.

They were all well over six-feet tall and each of them weighed at least two-hundred-fifty pounds, Skip observed to himself as he was dragged (in more than one sense of the word) along.

Even though the night had gotten progressively chillier and Skip had long since ceased feeling overheated in the coat, his new companions were adorned skimpily. Under the boas were short-hemmed dresses exposing thick thighs. Hairy chests, hairy arms and hairy legs abounded.

Holy hell, Skip thought, these guys are a football coach's worst nightmare, and his best efforts to free himself from them – even in his new, energized condition – were useless. All he was able to summon repeatedly was, "What do you think you're doing?"

"*Calm* yourself, child," one of the two gripping him, who had a black star pasted to his rouged cheek, said. "You can't fight us."

"And if you can't fight us," the other one gripping him, who featured a rhinestone tiara on his shaved head and a full beard, said, "you might as well join us."

"You should be *proud* to be with us," a third with red bee-stung lips and holding Skip's briefcase, said. "You'll be able to tell your friends you were specially selected by the Bad Mama Bears."

"To be our Goldilocks for the evening," a fourth one, holding a canvas tote bag that promoted "Whole Foods," appended." Having said that, he pulled a Goldilocks wig out of the Whole Foods tote bag and, the two holding Skip stopping, arranged it on Skip's head.

Though he was trying to free himself, Skip recognized futility when he looked it square in the mascara-laden face. He was able to say, "I'm not about to be anybody's Goldilocks. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me go and

give me my briefcase. I don't have time for this."

He didn't. He had a mission to go on that was looking that much more enticing just then.

The Bad Mama Bear with the black star said, lowering his voice to an even lower pitch, "Listen to this, Ladies, he doesn't have time for us. He doesn't have time for Lulu, Zelda, Gigi and me, Gertrude." He pointed at each of the others with an index finger weighed down by a ring the size of a small hubcap.

"He's a busy, busy Goldilocks," Zelda, the one in the tiara, said. "How busy can he be not to have time for some fun with a few lovely ladies of the night?"

Lulu, the tote bag carrier also holding the briefcase, said, "Why not let's see what keeps him so busy?" He bent down to set the briefcase on the sidewalk, balancing on his high heels with his actual chapped heels protruding an inch over the platforms. He released the latches on the briefcase.

"Please don't do that," Skip, who was still being held, said. "Those papers are important. They can't be mixed up."

Lulu paid him no mind but said, "A lot of mumbo-jumbo here. Hold it. Here's a business card." He looked it over. "Ladies, say hello to Edward Raymond Gerber, attorney-at-law."

As if conducted by a choirmaster, the ladies said a choral, "Hello, Edward Raymond Gerber, attorney-at-law."

"And here," Lulu continued, "must be legal." "Oooh, legal briefs," the others cried, and Lulu added, "We love briefs."

Gertrude said, "We love boxers, too."

Ignoring the intrusion, Lulu said, "Gigi, you're the lawyer. What do you make of them?"

The red bee-stung-lips Bad Mama Bear squeezing Skip's left arm let go but not before motioning Bad Mama Bear Zelda with the tiara to take over. He went to look at the briefs. "I'm a trial lawyer, Lulu. You know that, and these look like they have something to do with real estate. They're *contracts*, for fuck's sake. Bo-ring."

He elongated the "boring" so that it resonated around them, turned to Skip and, picking up the short hem of his skirt to hold it out, curtsied

and said, “You’re in real estate law? You should be kissing us for taking you out of those dreary doldrums.” He let his skirt drop and returned the contracts to the briefcase.

“We’re such a god-send,” tote-bag-carrying Lulu said. “Should he be kissing us? Zelda? Gigi?” “On our cheeks?” tiara-wearing, full-bearded Zelda said. “On our lips,” red bee-stung Gigi said.

“I think he should,” Lulu said. He tottered to Skip, leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth. Skip clenched his lips against Lulu’s thick and probing tongue, trying to feel nothing. He smelled a strong perfume he hadn’t detected before.

As Lulu kept his lips pressed to Skip’s, Zelda and Gigi kissed him on his cheeks. Gertrude leaned in and kissed him on his chin.

They all reeked of perfume, enough to make Skip think he might collapse from the invisible weight of it. He was so woozy he wasn’t sure he could think straight, although “straight” may not have been the adjective most relevant to his position.

The men calling themselves Lulu, Gertrude, Zelda and Gigi completed their sloppy osculation, but then Zelda reached into the fringed purse he carried over one hairy forearm and got out a flask.

“You must try some of this,” he said. “Sure as shit, he must,” Lulu said, followed by Gertrude and Gigi saying, “He must, he must” in bass-baritone sing-song.

The next thing Skip knew – “experienced” was more like it – he was swallowing something strongly alcoholic. But that was about all he knew for sure. Otherwise, he couldn’t even determine where he was or how long he was being hauled about like a straw figure to the jangling of cheap jewelry and the click-clack of size-thirteen heels pocking the pavement.

Was he still on Avenue A, or was he being led along one of the streets that ran east-west?

Because it was so late – maybe 2 a. m., or later by then, though he couldn’t see his not-Rolux – there was little traffic wherever they were. So during the soused promenade, he and his escorts encountered very few pedestrians.

One or two passed by and laughed not just at the sight of the outlandish quintet but at Lulu or Gertrude or Zelda or Gigi when one or

more of them said something along the lines of “It’s his birthday. We’re celebrating the way he asked us to celebrate.”

All that Skip could muster the energy to say a version of from time to time was, “Please give me my briefcase. Please let me go. I’m not Goldilocks. I don’t even have blond hair. I’m Skip Gerber. I’m Edward Raymond Gerber, and I need my briefcase.”

He said it one too many times. Lulu, the Bad Mama Bear carrying the Whole Foods tote and the brief, finally said, “Don’t you think Goldilocks is too attached to his briefcase?”

Zelda said, “Abso-fucking-lutely, Lulu, dear.” “No one wearing such a handsome overcoat should be so dependent on a sad little briefcase,” Lulu said, and Gigi said, “We really need to do something about it,”

Lulu said, “We know what to do with it, don’t we, Ladies? We need to –.” He paused so the others, seeing where he was going with this, could join in with a low-pitched chorus of, “– *get rid of it.*” This was followed by a chorus of “I’ll do it, let me do it”s.

“I’m holding it,” Lulu said. “I’ll do the honors.”

“Please, please, don’t,” Skip repeatedly said. To no avail. Within seconds he heard the sound of what he knew had to be leather hitting metal. It was plain to him, even in his liquor-and-perfume-inebriated state that his briefcase was now resting in a trash can somewhere on the Lower East Side.

How and when would he be able to retrieve it in what he knew, or had heard, were still the wilds of Manhattan’s Loisaida? Would he ever retrieve it and all the contracts, et cetera, that may have been the bane of his existence but were nevertheless the *sine qua nons* of his working life?

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Don’t be silly,” Lulu said. “Wait and see. You’ll thank us.”

“I won’t,” Skip said. “You just threw away my livelihood.”

But how bad was that, really? Skip wondered, as the toes of his shoes scraped along. Maybe that’s what I want, he thought.

“If you think your whole livelihood is in that briefcase, Goldilocks,” Gertrude said, “you better start looking around for another livelihood. Am I right, Ladies, or am I right?”

“You’re right,” the others echoed, and Lulu said, “Ladies, I’m beginning to think Goldilocks isn’t registering very high on the Bad Mama Bears fun-o-meter. What do you think?” Zelda said, stroking his beard, “Dolled up in that overcoat, he sure looked like he’d be a great Goldilocks.” “Maybe we need to find another Goldilocks,” Gigi of the red bee-stung lips said. “No maybe about it,” Gertrude of the black-starred cheek said.

“Shall we take a Bad Mama Bears vote?” Lulu said. “May I see a show of ringed hands and braceleted arms, Ladies?”

Skip was too out of it to see how the vote went but learned soon enough. “It’s unanimous. Edward Raymond Gerber is no longer Goldilocks.”

Through blurring eyes, Skip saw and felt the Goldilocks wig wrenched from his head. “Now,” Lulu said, “he’s just Edward Raymond Gerber, the real estate lawyer in an overcoat too good for him.” “Maybe we should relieve him of it,” Gigi said. Zelda said, “Not a good idea. By now it might be highly contaminated by negative vibes.” Gertrude said, “Let’s leave it on him, wherever we leave him.”

Skip, still gripped by two of them, heard some mumbling and sensed a decision was being reached. He felt himself being lifted up by the four of them and carried several yards away.

He heard Lulu say, “Gently, Ladies, gently. When dumping a Johnny – literally dumping him – we must be as gentlewomanly as we can be.”

Then he felt himself hitting something round and hard. He was suffering the same fate his briefcase had. He had, he easily but not happily ascertained, been deposited, rear-end first, in a trash receptacle – and too far in to force his way out.

As the Bad Mama Bears clattered away, their voices growing dimmer, Skip heard Zelda say, “What time is it, anyway, Ladies?” “It’s nearly three in the fucking a. m.,” Gigi said, “time to get home for porridge. I’m in court tomorrow.” “I’m flying to Atlanta,” Gertrude said. “I’m sleeping in,” Lulu said. “The dealership ought to be able to get along without me for a day.” Zelda, heard faintly, said, “I’m not sleeping at all. I’m due in surgery at six. Oops!”

Skip heard no more, and wriggling in the metal can like a cockroach

on its back – like something out of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* – he was left. He thought that maybe if they’d relieved him of the overcoat – the thickness of which was part of his inability to dislodge himself or do anything better than cram himself in more tightly – he’d have been released from this waking nightmare.

On the “waking nightmare” phrase, however, he heard what sounded like a young man behind him say, “Look at the man, man.” He tried twisting around to see who was talking but was impeded by the way he was wedged in the can.

“We ought to help him out of his misery,” a second adolescent voice said.

“You’re right,” the first said. “He needs us to do that.”

“Maybe that stick over there will do the trick,” the second voice said.

Their exchange was over fast, but led Skip to believe he was about to be rescued by one of the newcomers using whatever stick they’d found as a lever to remove him from his ungainly pose and by the other grasping his arms to pull him from it. He also thought he might have heard those voices before – hot-footing it away on Vesey Street, scuffing along on West Eighty-sixth Street.

Wondering if all the city’s troublemakers sound alike, he caught a thunderclap of rowdy laughter and felt a dull knock on the top of his head and then – even as he thought he was losing consciousness – felt himself grabbed by each arm.

What a relief! Whoever they were (there seemed only to be two of them), they were going to pull him from his buffoon’s perch.

No, they weren’t.

One of them said in a growl, “Nothing on this wrist.” The other said in a higher growl, “Something on this one. A Rolex.” The first said, “Fuckin’ *awesome*.” The second one said, “Forget it. It’s a knock-off.” The first one said, “Yeah, but maybe we can unload it to someone as stupid as this guy.” The second one said, “Not worth our time.” The first one said, “Cheap bastard. The coat’s probably a knock-off, too. But if he likes knock-offs, this oughta make him happy.”

Skip felt another cranial thud. Then nothing, then a blaze of falling stars. He regained consciousness slowly, thinking sequentially “Where

am I? Wherever I am, why am I here? Who am I?” He also thought, “Why is the light so bright?” and “What is that face looking at me? Why is that face looking at me? Whose is that face looking at me?”

“You’re finally coming to,” a male voice that struck a distant chord said.

Skip tried to make out the man’s features but couldn’t.

“It’s me, bud,” the voice said, “Dermot McAllister. Mac.”

Whoever Mac is, Skip thought, his features are coming into focus. It was a clean-shaven, craggy face with not much more than a dot for a nose. It was a boxer’s nose, Skip thought and, “It’s the cab driver. What’s he doing here – wherever here is?”

“Don’t be alarmed,” Mac said.

Yes, it came to Skip that Mac was someone he knew he knew. The person known to him was wearing a grey sweat shirt and sweat pants, had a towel around his shoulders like a trainer and was holding a brush of some sort.

Mac went on to say, “You’re out of danger, and if you’re wondering, you’re at my place.” He held up the brush. “I’ve just been in the other room getting the dirt off that big coat ’a yours. Not much damage to speak of.”

Skip tried to raise himself on his elbows to look around, but Mac said, “Not yet, bud. Just lie there for a few more minutes.”

“Where is your place?” Skip asked, though the words didn’t come easily to him.

“Astoria,” Mac said, “Queens. You ever been out here before? Not counting JFK?”

As Skip took in what he could see – mostly ceiling with a water stain marking one corner like a rusty tide coming in – Skip tried to remember if he’d ever been to Queens. He knew he had but couldn’t recall the occasion.

He couldn’t recall much of anything. He knew he was Skip Gerber – Edward Raymond Gerber. Beyond that he had to wrack his brain, which, now that he realized it, wasn’t feeling too conducive to being wracked. Might that have something to do with the slight bump he discovered when he felt on the top of his head?

He tried nodding that not unfamiliar head to let Mac know he'd been to Queens, even if he hadn't, but his neck didn't seem to respond to his bruised and aching brain's commands. He let his head fall back – but tenderly as he could – against whatever he was lying on. He would have said it felt like a bed with a pillow, but he wasn't prepared to draw any hard-and-fast conclusions.

“Why don't you take it easy for a few more minutes,” Mac said, “and let me talk while you're getting your strength back.”

In his present condition, that sounded like a good idea to Skip, who didn't even think about nodding again. His head was hurting like a son-of-a-bitch. He resumed surveying the ceiling.

Mac, sounding as if he were sitting in a chair somewhere nearby, began to talk, saying, “You're probably wondering how you happened to end up at my humble abode. It's like this. When I dropped you off to meet that guy at Hudson and Twelfth, I had a feeling something wasn't right. Truth to tell, I'd picked up something about you all the way to Hudson and Twelfth from the Upper East Side. That's why when you paid me and sent me off, I had a hunch I ought to drive around the block a couple times.”

That's why he picked me up the second time, Skip remembered.

“That's why I picked you up again. It wasn't no coincidence. When I dropped you off at 185 Vesey Street, that wasn't the end of it, neither. I don't mind telling you I followed you ever since – up to West Eighty-sixth Street and down to Avenue A. I just didn't want to pick you up again, 'cause I didn't want you to think I was stalking you. It's just I kept having the feeling something was wrong with you. You can take the cop out of the precinct, but you can't take the precinct out of the cop. Hunches are my business.”

While Mac was talking, Skip was beginning to get his strength back – not a lot of it but enough to move his head right and left on the pillow. Yes, it was a pillow with, he was pretty certain, a red-white-and-blue pillowcase on it. He was in a bedroom on a bed with metal poles for a headboard. It was a small room with pea-soup green walls and a window that looked out on another building. Through the window he saw a brick wall and a window with a white lace curtain in it.

In the rest of the room, he saw a closet with no door and inside, clothes jammed together. Other clothes were piled on a wooden chair. There was another non-matching wooden chair painted a lima-bean green. Mac was sitting on it. On the wall opposite the window and to his right was a crucifix.

If only Bernice Sawyer Gerber could see me now, Skip thought, under the care of Jesus. Of course, if she could see me now, he further thought, she'd want to know if I've uncovered the information Gussie Slotnik claimed she needed.

Mac was still briefing him with, "And you can count on the fingers of one hand and still have a few fingers left over the number of times my hunches have let me down. A good thing, too, because if I hadn't been following you the way I was, I never would have found you in that trash can when I did. I would have gotten there sooner, but I have to own to making a few misjudgments. Not wanting you to make me, I lagged behind a certain distance wherever you were, and I wasn't counting on a bunch of drag queens taking you on that hike. What a bunch of what-are-they they were. But that's New York City for you.

"So in Alphabet City I lost you for a while. I had to drive around for longer than I expected and finally saw you in the trash can with two hoods in hoodies frisking you. I jumped out of the car and scared them off, but not before they'd located the wallet on your person. When I came after them with the truncheon I keep on the front seat of the cab in case anybody gets frisky, they made it out of there on their Nikes and dropped your wallet on the way. I picked it up and shoved it in my pocket before I got you out of the can, which was no easy job. Those two shitheels dumped you in there but good."

Skip was listening, but something about the last part didn't sound right to him. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was. The last thing he remembered was meeting a carrot-top guy somewhere on Avenue A. Whatever happened between then and his lying on this bed with a pillow under his throbbing noggin and the old wooden cross to his left was a blank to him.

Mac wasn't finished. "I got you out eventually, slung you over my shoulder, stuffed you into the cab and brought you here. I looked in

your wallet. That's how I know you're Edward Raymond Gerber and where you live, but I didn't think I should take you there. If there was a doorman or no doorman but only a nosy neighbor, I didn't think you'd want them to see you like this. I got you out of most of your clothes – suit, shoes, shirt, tie, that heavy overcoat you didn't seem to want to get out of, even though it got a little roughed up.”

He stopped and started. “Everything's in the living room. Your wallet, with, near as I can tell, everything in it, in case you're worried. Yeah, and your briefcase, too. It's not often you find a guy and his briefcase in two different trash cans. I found it where you or somebody left it. I don't suppose you're the one who threw it in a trash can.”

What did he mean by that? Skip wondered, and then he knew. His memory was coming back. At least partially. He remembered something happening with his briefcase he didn't want to happen. Someone else had it and was threatening to discard it.

Did discard it.

It was more than one someone. Now he got it. He had an image of four big men in dresses abducting him, putting a wig on his head, calling him “Goldilocks.”

No, he had to be making that up, but he couldn't be. Why would he make up something that preposterous? And then all sorts of things came back to him. That's what Mac meant by “a bunch of drag queens.” There were four of them. They called themselves Bad Mama Bears.

And before them there was a majorly attractive actual woman who called herself Sheryl. There was a Mayan (or maybe Aztec or maybe Incan) stone he had somewhere. How about the Central Park Mall? Yes, there was that and a statue of a financier. Even before that there were a few chases his head ached too much to spend time reliving.

Most of all, there was an overcoat. Yes, an overcoat. That's what Mac must have meant when he referred to a coat Skip didn't want to get out of. Why didn't he want to get out of it? It came to him, as if he'd been slapped in the face, that he hadn't wanted it in the first place – had to get rid of it, would get rid of it, would now refocus himself on getting rid of it. Get it to the rightful owner before who-knows-what does him in.

He'd get on with the great exploit that had been dropped in his lap.

Just when he needed it, he said to himself. But no, it hadn't been dropped in his lap. It had been put in his hand, draped on his shoulders.

He reckoned he'd been deterred from it for some hours now. And by whom, by what? By four steroided drag queens and two hoodlums. By his lying in a strange bed watched over by a Savior.

Now he was incensed, riled, pissed off. He tried sitting up again. This time he was able to. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, which, since he was swaddled in a blanket like a newborn, was more difficult than he signed up for.

"Whoa, there, Mr Gerber, bud," Mac said. "One thing at a time. I know it's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, but I don't think you're ready for any giant leaps yet."

Mac was right. If Skip even tried to walk, he'd pitch over, and since he felt bum from top to toe, he'd best sit where he was for a few minutes.

Assured that Skip was stationary for the time being, Mac said, "Anyway, I better tell you that although I have your briefcase, I don't know about all the stuff in it. When I saw it lying on the ground next to a trash can, I'd been driving around looking for you, and there it was. I figured it might be yours. Who else would be carrying an expensive-looking briefcase around the Lower East Side in the middle of the night? When I knew your name was Edward Raymond Gerber, I knew the initials on the briefcase matched yours."

"Anyway, I'd pulled over, stopped the cab, got out and went to pick it up. Sorry to say, it had been opened and the papers in it were scattered around. Probably some homeless person or a couple of kids were hoping for something they could sell or pawn, and when they saw there was nothing in it but papers, got mad and threw them around.

"I rounded up what I could, but I can't say some of the papers didn't blow away or were maybe trashed by whoever went through them. Could of been those kids in the hoodies. Could of been anyone who happened to come along."

Skip tried to remember what he had in the briefcase. There were the three contracts. He needed them, but they weren't what you'd call classified information. If he was being tailed, it was unlikely those were what he was being tailed for. Didn't matter. Brianna could duplicate them

at the office. The office! He couldn't go to the office looking and feeling as he did. Was Brianna even in the office?

What time was it? When that question went through his tossed-salad brain matter, he progressed from sitting position to standing as fast as that. He began unwrapping himself from the blanket into which Mac had secured him. He had no idea how long he'd been here, how long he'd slept – or if he'd slept. He could have been unconscious the whole time.

“What time is it?” he asked as he was getting himself unraveled.

“Take it easy, bud,” Mac said. “It's about eight-thirty, quarter to nine. Anyway, you're not going anywhere until I say so. I'm not going to be responsible for you passing out on the staircase or anything.”

Free of all tethers now, Skip looked down at himself and saw he was still in his underwear, and his legs looked purple in spots. He only wore Calvin Kleins because women laughed at Fruit of the Loom, and, yes, he wore the real thing, not rip-off CKs – though he would if he could ever find any.

Being plunked into trash cans definitely bruises a guy, Skip observed. He wondered what the back of his thighs and calves looked like. Not so good, if they looked the way they hurt.

“What time did I get here?” he asked Mac, who'd also gotten up, as if to restrain Skip, should it come to that.

“I must have discovered you about three, maybe a little after,” Mac said, “and by the time I got you back here, it had to be three-thirty, thereabouts. So you been here close to five hours, five hours plus change, something like that. Not enough time to be up on your pins. Why don't you sit back down like a good boy while I make you some breakfast?”

“You're looking at a former short-order cook. That was my first job when I was fourteen and my uncle needed help at his greasy spoon, and the family needed someone else bringing in bread. So it'll be good. How do you like your eggs, and do you take your coffee black or with milk? I only keep skim milk.”

“Scrambled, like my brains,” Skip said, “and coffee with milk. Skim milk. I need to look at whatever's left in my briefcase.”

“You stay seated,” Mac said. “I'll bring it to you. You can look over whatever's there, while I'm in the kitchen – anyways, what my landlord

calls a kitchen.”

Mac left the room.

Skip, sitting on the edge of the bed like a good boy, seized the opportunity to give the room a second once-over and, among less compelling items of a standard nature, noticed on an old bureau a pistol in a holster attached to a wide belt. He looked at it with alarm and wondered if Mac had been wearing it during the cab ride(s) or had it with him.

Mac returned with the briefcase and saw Skip gazing. He nodded and said, “I never need it. Okay, *hardly* ever.” He emitted what could only be called a chortle that made his craggy face craggier. “Just kidding. Here’s your briefcase. I’ll go scramble some eggs. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? Not poached or sunny side up.”

Mac disappeared, humming an unidentifiable tune under his breath. Was it “You Are My Sunshine,” and if it was, why did that hit a familiar chord? Skip put the thought aside, laid his briefcase on his lap and snapped it open. He faced partial disarray. Mac had tried to square off the papers into a manageable stack but had only been partially successful. Skip found the contracts with which he was involved at the moment – or parts of them.

His Chapstick was there, along with his Roloids and Binaca. His copy of “The Firm” was there, only slightly the worse for wear. John Grisham must not have been of interest to anyone rifling the briefcase. Not fiction readers, apparently. Maybe just not legal-thriller readers. Maybe just not of interest to legal-thriller readers who knew, as he did, that Grisham’s version of the law is ratcheted up.

Or is it? Nothing like those plots ever happened to lawyers. Hold it. Maybe they did. Maybe something within those stretched parameters was happening now. To him – and, wow, if it was, if it was his own made-to-order legal thriller, then that was kind of, wow, exciting.

Excitement in his life? When did that ever happen?

Like, never.

But back to the papers he was sorting through. He seemed to remember a few others he had in there, but if he couldn’t recall what they were, how important could they be to him? He wondered if even the

supposedly important contracts were important to him. They were, but in the greater scheme of things, were they?

He didn't even try to suppress the returning thought that the Bad Mama Bears were right when whichever one of them said they were doing him a favor by deep-sixing the briefcase.

While he was musing on that, Mac returned with, in one hand, the eggs on a plate with some toast and home fries and, in the other, a mug of coffee from which steam was rising exotically.

"Hold these," he said, "while I get you a table to put them on and a fork. I hope you don't take butter or sugar. I don't keep any in the house. Not good for you." He left and returned right away with a wooden cart and a fork. He set the cart down in front of Skip. "There's the table. Sorry it's not too fancy."

He handed Skip the fork, sat down with his hands on his knees and leaned in to talk. Skip began to eat. The eggs were as good as Mac said they'd be. To let Mac know, he made non-verbal appreciation noises.

"Glad you like them," Mac said. "The secret ingredient makes the difference. It's not so secret. Paprika." He held up a fleshy hand. "But only a dash."

Skip ate more, while Mac, remaining on his bare feet, moved closer to him. "But that's not what I want to talk about. I got to get back in the hack shortly. To make up for what I didn't take in last night following you around."

With a mouthful of toast, Skip wasn't about to go find his wallet.

Mac picked up the look in Skip's eyes. "I don't say this to make you feel guilty. I say it because there's something going on with you, and you oughta tell me what it is. Nobody makes the cross-town trips like you made last night, ending up in a trash can, without something going on. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but it sure as hell might help if you did."

Mac stopped to wait for what Skip had to say. For his part, Skip thought about it, but what could he do? He plain and simple didn't want to go into the business with the overcoat. He'd sound like a grade-A fool, accepting the coat outright in the first place.

Mac, deciding the extending pause meant Skip wasn't going to say

anything, said, “Okay, it’s your funeral. I’d like to provide my services again today, but like I say, I can’t. I’m getting out of here in about fifteen minutes. If you feel up to leaving with me, I’ll drive you back to Manhattan. If not, you can stay here until you’re ready to leave. I’ll give you an extra set of keys. When you lock the three locks, you can push the keys under the door.

“Either way, if you want to shave, there’s shaving cream and an extra razor in the bathroom.” He pointed out the bedroom door and to the right. Before walking out of the room, he said, “I keep one there for whoever ends up spending the night.”

Skip thought over the options. He wasn’t going to stay here. If he did, he’d have to take a subway back to Manhattan, and in the best of times, which these weren’t, he tried to avoid the subway whenever he could.

Look at me, he thought, worrying about subways when I have an overcoat in the next room with a stone burning a hole in its pocket – a stone that had already burned a hole in the other pocket.

He was now *compos mentis* enough to know that dealing with the stone – maybe it was Peruvian, maybe it was from another part of the world entirely – required finding a dealer who knew about these things. He had no doubt there’d be one or more or many more in Manhattan. But how to locate whoever it was or they were?

Besides which he felt fueled by the hot-off-the-skillet breakfast, renewed for what increasingly had the aspect of a stimulating assignment, one he wanted to prove he was up for and up to.

He decided to accept the shaving offer, and, wobbly as a toddler, followed the directions to a bathroom just large enough for a three-foot by three-foot shower, a toilet, a sink with a mirror. It was also just large enough for a man to turn around in.

The mirror was what got him – looking at himself in it, that is, not the fact that it needed some resilvering. His face wasn’t bruised, but in his hazel eyes, his mouth, under the day’s beard, he saw a man he only recognized as a slightly disoriented version of his former self. It wasn’t that he looked older. He looked different, changed, uncertain. In his appearance he saw the earmarks of a quandary.

He didn’t have to think hard to admit he was in one. He wanted to