

The Great Social Security Heist

Larry Enright

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Dedication

*To the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to
breathe free, the wretched refuse of this teeming shore.*

FIRST EDITION

Chapter 1

The Squad

There's a particular block of limestone set into the wall of a certain castle in Ireland. You may have heard of it. People come from all around the world to plant a big wet one on that rock. Why, you might ask? If you believe the old Irish legends, doing so gives you the gift of gab and bestows upon you the title of *BSer Extraordinaire*. I hear it can also give you a cold, the flu, herpes, and a few other nasty diseases, but that's a story for another time. I kissed it once. That doesn't mean that what I'm about to tell you isn't the truth. It doesn't mean it *is* the truth either. You'll have to judge for yourself. I may exaggerate a few things. I've done that before. I may not remember all the details exactly as they happened. I've done that, too. Maybe I'll change a few names to protect the innocent. Maybe I

won't. Who knows? I'm no Joe Friday and this isn't *Dragnet*. My name is Danny Maxwell and this is my story.

It all began in January 1972. I'd just made it through my first solo Christmas (unless you count the company of *It's a Wonderful Life* on the motel TV). And I was trying to decide if I should answer this ad in the newspaper for a room to rent in a place called Evans Village. The Village, as the locals call it, is a little town in Maryland, about a twenty-minute walk south of Woodlawn. That's where I worked—Woodlawn, Maryland. I was fresh out of college and had just started my first real job as a programmer for the Social Security Administration in their central offices. Officially I was a software engineer, a GS-11 on a career ladder to GS-13. I was set. I had everything I needed to start climbing that ladder, everything except a car and a decent place to stay. The car could wait awhile, but I really needed somewhere to live other than that fleabag motel. I'd been looking for a furnished apartment or room to rent within walking distance of the office. I'd checked out a few but hadn't found one I liked yet. But something about that ad intrigued me. It was short and to the point.

Third floor furnished room to let in the Village. Need replacement for tenant who moved on. No kids. No pets. No a-holes. We'll be the judge. Call before four.

When I called the number, the guy I spoke to wouldn't give me the address of the room. Didn't give me his name either, not that I asked. He told me to

meet him and his three buddies in Village Park at five sharp. He said he'd be the one in the Orioles cap. I told him I didn't get off work until five and it was a twenty-minute walk, so I asked if he could make it five-thirty instead.

He said, "What? You think I can wait all day for you?" and hung up.

Maybe I shouldn't have, but I called right back and told him I'd just started a new job and didn't have the annual leave to burn on a place that was probably an s-hole because he wouldn't give the address out to any a-holes. He laughed and said five-thirty it is.

When I got to the park, I spotted an old man in an army jacket wearing an Orioles cap. He was leaning against the hood of a hearse, working a toothpick through his teeth and holding a shoebox under one arm. He waved when he saw me. There were three other old guys with him. They had army jackets on, too. One of them was pacing back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back and his head down. He didn't seem to notice me. Another was staring off into space with his chin in his hand. He definitely didn't notice me. The last one, the really big one, the one who was at least a foot taller than the rest, was looking right at me. To say I was having second thoughts about this whole room thing would be an understatement. I was kind of hoping my housemates would be a little younger or at least born in the same century. But there I was and there they were, so I went over and introduced myself.

"Hi. I'm Danny Maxwell," I said. "I called about the room."

The Orioles fan offered me his hand. "The name's Pinky," he said, "but you already knew that."

His hand was shaking before we ever connected and kept on shaking even after we let go. I found out later that Pinky's hands shook on their own most of the time. He'd been downwind of a canister of mustard gas in World War I—too far away to get killed, too close not to be messed up for the rest of his life. Besides the constant shaking, the gas had cost him most of his hair, and his face was... Well, let's just say he had what people used to call a face made for radio.

I tried not to stare. I said, "I knew you'd be wearing an Orioles cap but I had no clue what your name was. You didn't give it to me over the phone."

"You didn't ask," he replied.

I said, "Then, why did you say I already knew it?"

"What?" he shrugged. "I'm not allowed to check?"

"For what?" I said.

And he replied, "What do you mean for what?"

I tried again, "May I ask what were you checking for?"

"Sure, sure, ask away," he said.

Funny old guy. I had to laugh. I couldn't help it. Pinky grinned and shook his toothpick at me. I wouldn't call it a toothy grin since he only had a couple of them left in there. Another hats off to the mustard gas for a job well done.

He said, "You have a sense of humor, Mr. Maxwell.

I like that.”

“And he’s a smart one,” said the one who’d been pacing. “That’s fairly obvious.” This guy had a really thick accent and the reddest hair I’ve ever seen. It made me think he must have had a job as a stop-sign painter, a really sloppy stop-sign painter. “We could use a smart one,” he added.

“For what?” I said. “It’s just a room.”

“He’s too young,” the one who was still staring off into the sky, chin in hand, whispered. I found out later that he always whispered, some kind of vocal chord thing apparently. This one reminded me of the old man you’d see on the park bench tossing peanuts at the pigeons all afternoon waiting for someone, anyone, to sit down beside him so they could talk about their ailments and the meds they took for them and how hitting pigeons on the head with nuts wasn’t such a hot idea. Popcorn is way safer. This old guy’s hand never left his chin. One of my professors at school was like that, too. The guys I hung around with had two theories on that. Either he did it to give us the impression that he was thinking deep thoughts all the time or he was born like that and his parents didn’t want to spring for chin-hand separation surgery because their insurance didn’t cover it. I went with theory number one on both my professor and this old dude.

“He’s a hippie,” said the one who’d been staring at me the whole time with these lizard eyes that never blinked. And by lizard I mean T-Rex. This guy was big,

way bigger than any of them and a lot bigger than me, and I'm six-two. My impression? Ex-football player? King Kong in human costume? He was that big.

I thought, OK, maybe my hair *is* a little long and maybe I *am* working on a beard now that I've got my good government job and they can't do anything about it. And maybe my jeans *are* a little worn but what the heck? I have a nice shirt and tie on. I have a job, a good job. I don't smoke pot. Don't do drugs. Don't drink much either. I'm definitely no hippie, but I sure wasn't going to take issue with him or that bulge in his jacket. You don't argue with a lizard-eyed giant-gorilla G.I. Joe when he's packing heat.

"Do you know why they call me Pinky?" Pinky said once I'd lost the stare-down contest with the gorilla.

At that point I was considering a stage-left exit away from those wackos. I figured I could probably outrun them. The problem was I was no Superman. I wasn't faster than a speeding bullet and I wouldn't get three steps before gorilla man pulled out his howitzer and blasted me. My choices were limited, so I decided to hang in there and see how things played out.

"I don't know," I said. "Why do they call you Pinky?"

"It's short for Pinkerton," he said. "My name is Pinkerton Abraham Jenowitz. My father named me after the detective agency's founder who foiled a plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. What do you think of that?"

I said I thought it was cool. Actually it was pretty cool, except didn't Lincoln get assassinated? Maybe there were a lot of attempts and Pinkerton wasn't around for all of them. I didn't know and I didn't ask.

Pinky seemed offended. "Cool?" he said. "I fought in the Great War. I was gassed, but I was one of the lucky ones, if you count this as lucky." He pointed to his face. It was hard to look at and hard to look away all at the same time. "I survived the Second Battle of the Marne," he said. "And when I came home I couldn't afford to put myself through school yet here I am with a Ph.D. I don't call that cool. I call it doing something with my life. What have you done with yours, Mr. Maxwell?"

I never expected him to tee off on me like that, but I've never been a golfer so what do I know? I just stared at him from the other side of that chasm they call the generation gap thinking, I just want to know about the stupid room and then I'm out of here.

I said, "I'm still working on that whole doing something with my life thing, sir."

He asked, "Do you have any degrees, Mr. Maxwell?"

"It's Danny," I said, "and my mom always told me I used to give her the third degree. Does that count?"

The red-haired one laughed, "Methinks Danny boy's been playing the wacky-weed pipes, Sarge."

"What? You think that wasn't a serious question?" Pinky said. "We want to know what kind of person we're bringing into our home, Mr. Maxwell. Is that too

much to ask?"

I apologized and said, "I have a college degree, OK?"

He wanted to know in what and from whom.

"In software engineering from State," I said. "It was a five-year combo program, so I got a bachelors and masters at the same time. "

He asked why I didn't go on to get my doctorate.

I didn't want to tell him that my grades weren't good enough, that I was broke and couldn't afford it, and that I really wasn't interested in more school. I said, "I was offered a job that was too good to turn down." That much was true, but I left out that it was the one and only job offer I had gotten. He didn't need to know that.

I was hoping the grilling was over but Pinky kept pressing, "And what job would that be?"

"I work at Social Security up in Woodlawn."

He scowled.

I thought, what's that about? I have a good government job. I'm a GS-11 on my way to GS-13. That's hardly scowl-worthy.

Apparently he came to some sort of decision about me. He nodded and said, "All right then. Are you ready to take a ride with us?"

"In that?" I pointed at the hearse.

"You got a problem with that?" the gorilla said. Unlike Pinky, he had teeth, lots of teeth, lots of big teeth.

"No," I said. "No problem at all."

It was then I noticed that the hearse had a driver. He was wearing a chauffeur's uniform. Things were getting stranger by the minute.

"Good," said the gorilla, coming way too close for comfort. "You get middle back, Junior, unless you want to ride in the box."

Nothing like a death threat to lighten the mood.

Pinky said, "Show a little respect, Corporal."

Apparently trunk darts aren't the only way to stop a rampaging gorilla. The big guy lowered his head and said, "Whatever you say, Sarge."

I looked through the tinted back window of the hearse. "Is there a casket in there?" I asked. I didn't see one. That was something of a relief.

"No," Pinky said. "Time to move out."

We piled into the car. The guy with the hand stuck to his chin took middle front. Pinky got shotgun. I got what was left of the middle back seat after the redhead and the mutant lizard-gorilla took more than their fair shares of the window seats. We drove off.

"I should introduce you to the squad," said Pinky. He pointed to the sad sack beside him who was resting his head in both hands now, staring at the road, thinking about God knows what. "This is Dan Roe. We call him Rodin for obvious reasons."

"Same first name," I said, extending my hand over the bench seat. "That's cool. Nice to meet you, Mr. Roe."

He ignored me and continued to stare at the road ahead. "Tell me, boy," he said. "Have you ever stood

in a trench full of mud for so long that every inch of you feels dirty, smells dirty, even tastes dirty?"

"No, I don't think so," I replied, giving up on the handshake.

"I thought not." Rodin closed his eyes. Not sure, but I think he was crying.

"I must apologize," Pinky said. "This has been a very difficult day for us."

"It's all right," I replied. "I get it." I didn't really, but it seemed like the right thing to say at the time.

Pinky continued, "I should tell you that Rodin has spent most of his adult life in prison. He was in the corps, did something stupid, and got caught. He was about your age. Spent the next ten years in the brig. That gave him a lot of time to think about things. He's been in and out of civilian prisons ever since. He can be abrupt, suspicious, and a royal pain in the neck, but don't let that fool you. He's got a heart of gold and he knows how to get things done, an important skill these days."

"Fair enough," I said. So Rodin was a lifelong criminal. Why was I not surprised?

I guess my hesitation led Pinky to say, "What? You're not having a change of heart, are you?"

Actually, I was, but I replied, "No, not really."

Pinky was a perceptive old guy. "Then, what's bothering you, Mr. Maxwell?" he asked. "Something is."

I said, "I was just thinking of a few stupid things I've done. That's all."

And he said, "As young as you are, I would guess they were either not quite as serious as Rodin's transgressions, or you've had the better fortune of not being caught."

I agreed that it was something like that, but it was pretty much nothing like that. I'd never done anything jail-worthy in my life. I just wanted to get this over with—see the room, say it wasn't quite what I was looking for, and get the hell out of Dodge.

"So, Danny boy's clever too," said Mr. Stop-sign Head. "That's something, right?"

"And that, Mr. Maxwell, is Sean Calder Murphy," Pinky said. "We call him Scaldar because he's such a hothead, which you might have guessed from his hair. Unlike the Corporal on your other side, he seems to have taken a liking to you."

I looked into Scaldar's volcanic smile, one that threatened to erupt at the slightest provocation, and said, "Happy to meet you." No attempt at a handshake this time.

"The pleasure's all mine, to be sure," Scaldar nodded.

"That accent," I asked. "Are you Scottish or something?"

And just like that, Vesuvius erupted.

"I cut out the feckin heart of the last man who called me a Scot," he spat. What rained down on poor unsuspecting Danny of Pompeii after that was a collection of Gaelic curses that I later found out had something to do with my father, my mother, my

grandparents, and everyone else in my family line all the way back to Adam and Eve.

"He's Irish," Pinky said. "Born and raised, but he became a U.S. citizen a long time ago."

"Not that long ago, boyo," Scaldar corrected him. "I still have fond memories of the old sod."

"My grandparents were from Ireland," I said. "County Cork, I think."

"The Maxwells I knew from down Cork way were good folk," Scaldar said. "With that lineage you could claim Irish citizenship, don't you know?"

"Really?" I said. "You never know. I might just do that someday."

"Just don't be calling your fellow countrymen Scots if you know what's good for you." Wise words from an Irish stop-sign painter.

"I don't mean to be rude," I said, "but have you been in trouble with the law too, Mr. Murphy?"

Pinky laughed. "The better question is when has Scaldar *not* been in trouble. He likes to fight, especially over women. Imagine that at his age. Who knew? He also likes to gamble."

"Indeed I do," Scaldar said. And just like that, the volcano went dormant until next time.

"Cool," I said with my best polite smile.

"Is that what you have to say about everything, Junior?" said the giant gorilla lizard man.

"And that, Mr. Maxwell, is Oswald M. Strong," said Pinky. "We call him Oz, as in Oz the Great and Powerful."

The name fit. Oswald M. Strong was taller than me by several inches and heavier by a lot. Like the others, he was an old man, but I still wouldn't want to meet him in a dark alley.

"Cool," I said.

Saying cool was a habit I'd picked up at school and really needed to break. Oz was kind enough to remind me of that. "Yeah?" he asked like he was going to bite my head off. "Why's that?"

Pinky came to my rescue. "Corporal, let's try to be civil for once, shall we? Remember why we are here tonight."

Oz looked out the window and replied, "Yes, sir."

"So you're vets?" I said, changing the subject.

"Everyone who's survived as long as we have is a veteran of something," said Pinky.

"Well, since this is show and tell time," I said, "I guess you want to know a little about me?" I was more or less ready to deliver the short speech I'd prepared to impress the homeowners, but after meeting these bozos, I wondered why I'd bothered.

It seemed Pinky did, too. "Not really," he said.

Talk about a gut punch. Now I *did* want to tell them. "Don't you at least want to know what I do?" I said.

Pinky had this patented shrug that could mean just about whatever he wanted it to. In this case, I think it meant I was wasting his time. He said, "What? You work for Social Security in Woodlawn. You already told us that."

"I don't just work there," I said. "I'm a GS-11 software engineer on a career ladder to GS-13."

"So you're a big shot, are you?" he said.

"Maybe someday I will be," I replied. "Right now, I do mainframe programming, mostly in COBOL. I'm part of a team working on a piece of mass-mailing software to make sending letters to our beneficiaries more efficient."

"Consider us duly impressed, Danny boy," Scaldar said.

"Yeah, that's cool, Junior," said Oz, "really stinking cool."

They all laughed.

"It's not like I think everything is cool, you know," I said in my own defense. Apparently I liked to tempt fate once in a while by taunting uncaged gorillas. I wouldn't recommend it.

Oz popped a Sen-Sen into his mouth and turned my way. He reminded me of the kids in high school who used to smoke in the parking lot at lunchtime to prove how tough they were and then come back to class with a mouthful of Sen-Sen to cover it up. You'd think after several detentions they would have figured out that nothing really hides the stink of tobacco, and licorice only makes it worse.

"Then name me one thing that isn't cool," Mr. Licorice Ashtray Breath said.

I was pissed, rightfully so, but what's that thing about discretion being the better part of something or other? I don't remember the exact saying but I think

the bottom line is to keep your mouth shut when the alternative is getting strangled. I guess I never was much for old sayings or learning lessons.

"You," I replied. "You're not cool at all, Oz."

And that was my little bit of indiscretion for the evening. The lesson followed. Oz grabbed me by the throat and squeezed.

"Look, you little punk," he growled like a bear, a big angry bear. I didn't know gorillas could do that.

Scalder laughed. "I like him, Pinky. He's got my vote."

"Not mine," said Oz.

"Let him go, Oz," said Pinky.

"Sure, after I throttle him a little more."

"I said now, Corporal."

"I don't like him, Sarge," Oz snarled. And believe me when I say a Sen-Sen, stale tobacco snarl is the worst.

"What?" Pinky said. "Do you think he's any good to us dead? Let him go."

That was encouraging. Oz released me and sat back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest, his really big chest.

"I *am* sorry about that, Mr. Maxwell," said Pinky, "but as I said, this has been a difficult day for us and we're all a little on edge."

"Yeah, sure," I said, sounding more like someone who had just inhaled helium from a balloon than a cool tough-guy COBOL programmer. "No harm done." At least he didn't crush my windpipe. I wasn't sure my

government health insurance had kicked in yet.

I hadn't been paying attention to where we were going until I realized we weren't in Evans Village anymore. In fact, I wasn't sure where we were except that we were passing through the gates of a place called Loudon Park Cemetery, a perfect spot for a robbery followed by murder and quick burial afterward. One-stop shopping.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"*My vas pokhoronim,*" Rodin said, tapping the shoebox in Pinky's lap.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't catch that."

"He said we will bury you," Pinky explained. "It's Russian, bad Russian. He picked up a little in prison. It's something Nikita Khrushchev said once. Do you know who that is?"

I took a wild guess. "The Russian shoe-banger from the fifties?"

Pinky said, "I don't believe he ever actually banged his shoe at the U.N, Mr. Maxwell, though he may have encouraged the myth."

"You know," I said, "maybe I should just get out here. I don't think this is going to work out after all. Driver?" I said, tapping the chauffeur on the shoulder. "Can you pull over, please?"

"Name's Theo," the driver replied. "And no, I can't."

"Why not?"

Pinky said. "Trust me. Getting out now is a bad idea, Mr. Maxwell."

It seemed like a pretty good one to me, health-wise, that is. "Why's that?" I said.

"Do you have any idea how many miles it is back to your motel? Do you even know what direction your motel is?"

He had a good point. I was clueless about where we were. I hadn't been in the area long enough to know it well and hadn't been paying attention to where we were going.

"Why are we here?" I asked.

"Rodin just told you why," said Pinky.

Scalder gestured to the shoebox, "Here lies Gerald Connors, dead of a bum liver at the young age of seventy."

I looked at the box. Thom McAns. Nice brand. "Those are the ashes of the guy your ad said moved out?"

"Indeed they are," Pinky replied.

I felt obliged to point out, "You said he moved out."

Pinky corrected me, "The ad said he moved on not out, and so he did."

Pinky was right. As I came to find out, he usually was.

I said, "And you brought me here for his funeral?"

"You called us, Mr. Maxwell," Pinky said. "It just so happens you called the day of poor Gerry's final internment."

"We thought you'd like to join us for it, Danny boy," said Scalder.

"And, of course, for the wake afterward," said Pinky. "A perfect opportunity to get to know each other."

"I still don't think this is a good idea," Rodin said. "It's disrespectful to Gerry."

"I'm with him," I said. "This is definitely disrespectful."

"It's fine," said Pinky. "Gerry would have wanted it this way. After all, you're taking his place."

"That's not exactly settled yet," I said.

But Pinky was having none of that. He said, "You let us worry about that, Mr. Maxwell."

Theo drove us through a maze of roads leading to the back of the cemetery where the grave markers were smaller and the grounds not so well kept. He pulled over on the side of the road and parked. We all got out of the car and followed Pinky single file into the field of graves. He led us to a spot where the markers were basically just worn tablets set into the ground. There was no open grave there, no minister waiting, no friends and family bowing solemnly in prayer, no lights either, and boy was it dark. Pinky shined a flashlight down on a marker that obviously had been set there recently. It wasn't overgrown with weeds like the others. It also wasn't lined up too well with the rest of the markers in the row. And it wasn't a gravestone. It was a piece of sheet metal. Scrawled on it in black magic marker were the words *Mabel Connors. Born August 14, 1900, died April 8, 1971.*

Pinky knelt down and began to speak as if to the

box of ashes he was holding. "I'm sorry we couldn't afford a proper burial for you, Gerry, but I guess you won't mind too much at this point. At least we got you back to where we laid your loving Mabel to rest. You two will be together again soon." He set the box down and turned to Oz with his hand out. "Corporal?"

Oz reached for the bulge in his jacket. I figured this was the part where they blew my brains out in some kind of geriatric cult ritual sacrifice to the dearly departed Gerry. But instead of a gun, Oz pulled out a collapsible pea-green spade, unfolded it, and handed it to Pinky. Pinky pried off the sheet metal marker exposing what was left of another shoebox. He hollowed out a spot next to it.

"What are you doing?" I said.

Pinky looked up at me and said, "This was Gerry's shovel, Mr. Maxwell. He dug many a trench with it in the Great War, including the one that kept us both alive during a mustard gas attack on the Marne. A lot of good men died that day on both sides, but not us. Gerry saw to that. He called it his lucky shovel, mounted it over the mantle. We buried Mabel with it last spring. He made me promise on his deathbed to bury him with it, too."

"You can't do that," I said. "Cemeteries have rules, you know."

"Shut up," said Oz. "You've got nothing to say here."

"I'd listen to the man if I were you, Danny boy," said Scaldar, "and show a little respect for our dear

departed Gerry."

"OK," I said, "but just for the record, I had nothing to do with this."

Pinky set the shoebox into the grave. "Dust to dust," he said.

"Dust to dust," the others repeated.

"I wish we could have done better for you, Gerry," Pinky went on. "A proper funeral, a decent burial, the works; but Social Security barely covers the bills. You of all people knew that. Farewell, old friend. Rest in peace." Pinky took a magic marker from his pocket and added Gerry's name and dates under Mabel's. He folded the sod over, scraped dirt around it as best he could, tamped it down, set the piece of sheet metal back in place, and got up. "Move out," he said. And like a squad of soldiers on night patrol, we followed that crazy old geezer back to the car and drove off.

Chapter 2

The Billet

I fully intended to pay more attention to where we were going on the way back to the Village, but I couldn't see around Rodin's head and the side windows had fogged over pretty quickly despite Theo cranking up the heater. I asked Scaldor to crack a window for a little fresh air, hoping to catch at least a sideways glimpse of our route. He ignored me. I tried Pinky and Theo next, but it was like they couldn't hear me. In desperation, I finally asked Oz. He lit up a cigarette and blew smoke and Sen-Sen in my face. It wasn't hard to see that everyone was in a funk over their friend's death.

"What? Are you trying to get Theo in trouble?" Pinky said to Oz. "Put that thing out."

Oz rolled down the window and flicked his cigarette into what looked like a stream alongside the road. I didn't remember any streams on the way to the cemetery. Didn't remember much of anything. Pinky was right. I never would have found my way back to that motel. I would have frozen to death in the middle of God knows where, which has only one plus that I can think of and that's not having to put up with Oz. He rolled the window up again, gave me one last blast of disgusting smoky licorice breath, and that was that for my figuring out where the heck we were and how the hell we got there.

Out of the blue, Pinky said to no one in particular, "Gerry and I were friends for a long time, a very long time. We met in basic, went to the war together. A lot of guys with high hopes went over there in ships and came home in boxes, but not Gerry and me. We made it out alive..." He brushed something off his cheek and went on, "...at least till now. When Mabel died suddenly back in April, Gerry didn't have the money to keep their apartment anymore. So we drafted him into the squad and he moved in with us."

Rodin whispered, "That's what happens when all you've got to live on are two measly Social Security checks and the government takes one away."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"What? You work for them and you don't know?" Pinky said.

"Why should he?" said Scaldier. "He works in the feckin mailroom."

"Language, please, Scaldar," Pinky said.

"Apologies, Sarge. He works in the bloody mailroom. Better?"

They laughed.

"I don't work in the mailroom," I said. "I'm a programmer working on a mailing program."

"Same difference, Danny boy," Scaldar said. "You're clueless as to what's really going on there."

"SSA's a big place," I said. "It's a complicated law. You can't expect me to know every little thing about it."

Rodin said, "Then, let me enlighten you, kid. The husband gets his pension and the wife gets half. If the wife passes, the half goes away. Get it now?"

"That doesn't seem right," I said. "Are you sure about that?"

Oz joined in on the pile-on-the-new-kid conversation. "As sure as I am that you're not cool, Junior. Not even close."

Pinky came to my defense, I think. "Give him a break, boys," he said. "He's still young. With any luck, he'll wise up before it's too late."

"You mean before he gets fecked like we got fecked?" Scaldar said.

They laughed again. I'm not sure what they thought was so funny, but whatever.

"Watch the language in front of the kid," said Rodin.

"I'm twenty-three," I said.

Rodin turned around. That's when I noticed that

one of his eyes wasn't right. I found out later it was a cataract that he couldn't afford to have fixed. "Everyone in this car is at least three times as old as you," he said. "That makes you a kid."

"No, it doesn't," I said. "It makes you old."

"Stop the car," said Oz. "Let's dump the little punk here."

"Come on, men," said Pinky. "That's no way to act. This is a solemn occasion. How about we start over with a round of apologies? Mr. Maxwell?"

"Fine," I said. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings with that 'old' crack, but this whole thing has been a little weird. You know?"

"A good start," said Pinky. "Corporal?"

Oz turned his lizard eyes on me. Where does a gorilla get lizard eyes anyway? Did the vet pick up the wrong set of eyeballs from the tray when he did Oz's eye replacement surgery?

"Apology accepted, Junior," he said, emphasis on Junior. "I'm sorry you're not cool. I hope you grow out of it someday, but don't expect any help from me."

"OK, I guess," I said.

"And I'm sorry you have no idea what it's like to be old," Rodin said. "Someday you will, and I hope on that day you remember this conversation."

Last but not least, Scaldier said, "I'm sorry you'll get fecked like the rest of us someday, Danny boy. If it's any consolation, welcome to the club."

Pinky just shook his head and turned back to the road. He was used to this kind of thing, I guess.

"Did Gerry have any other relatives?" I asked.

"He has a son who lives up in Philadelphia," Pinky said. His face got dark. "I called him when Mabel passed. He sent flowers."

"That sucks," I said.

Pinky's face got a lot darker. "I called him when Gerry was being evicted, too. He recommended we put him in a nursing home."

I said, "Is that so bad? He was sick, wasn't he?"

Scalder elbowed me to get my attention or maybe because he was mad, too. "Have you ever been inside one of those hellholes, Danny?"

"Well, no," I said, "but..."

He poked me in the chest. "The lazy arses stick you in a feckin wheelchair and herd you into the hall by the nurse's station so they can watch over you like a bunch of feckin cattle. How's that sound to you, boyo?"

I said the first thing that came to mind, "Pretty shitty."

"Friends don't let friends go that way," said Pinky.

He was right. Friends don't. I said, "That was cool of you guys to let him move in with you."

"There he goes with the cool again," Oz muttered.

"It was nice," I said. "OK?"

"It was the least we could do," said Pinky.

"And that was a pretty decent thing you guys did for them back there. Cemetery plots aren't cheap."

Pinky agreed, "No, they are not."

"Don't go giving us too much credit, Danny boy," said Scalder. "We didn't exactly buy the plot. We

appropriated it. We didn't think anyone would mind. And it's a waste of money paying someone else to dig a hole that you can still dig yourself."

I can tell you that realizing you're trapped in a car with a gang of over-the-hill reverse grave robbers is pretty strange. Your run-of-the-mill grave robber usually makes withdrawals from the cemetery not deposits. I wasn't sure what to say at that point, so I changed the subject. "Are we almost there? To the house, I mean."

"We haven't voted yet," said Oz.

"On what?" I asked.

"You're absolutely right," said Pinky. "I vote yes."

"As do I," said Scaldar. "Danny's a keeper."

"I say, no way," Oz said.

"Everything happens for a reason, big guy," said Scaldar. "If the good Lord brought Danny boy to us, it was meant to be."

"The only reason he's here is because he answered the ad," Oz replied.

I hadn't figured Scaldar for the religious type, but I guess you never know.

"But why him?" he said. "And why our ad? And why this very day? This is no coincidence."

"This isn't God's will," Oz replied. "Not my God anyway."

"Come on, boyo," Scaldar said. "Don't be that way."

"I'll be any way I like," said Oz.

"Leave it alone," said Pinky. "The Corporal's

entitled to his vote. What about you, Rodin?"

Rodin just stared at the road. That man did a lot of thinking and staring and chin holding. "I say, no," he finally said.

I saw something in Pinky's eyes I hadn't seen before. It looked a lot like desperation. "We need him, Dan," he said.

That didn't seem to impress Rodin at all. "No, we don't," he replied.

"We're down a fifth," said Pinky. "How are we going to make that up?"

I did something then that's usually reserved for high dives off cliffs and other occasions of sheer lunacy: I jumped into the conversation headfirst. "You're voting on letting me rent the room and I haven't even seen it yet. What if I don't like it?"

"What's not to like?" said Pinky. "It's a room."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm just spit-balling here, but maybe it's too small. Maybe it's too big. Maybe it stinks of old people." I apologized for that last crack, but my point was, "I haven't seen it. And by the way, don't I get a vote, too?"

"I suppose you do, Mr. Maxwell," Pinky said.

But Oz wasn't having any of that. "No, he doesn't."

"We're deadlocked, Oz," said Pinky. "We need a tie-breaker."

Oz applied gorilla logic to the problem. Always a good strategy. "Then, let Theo vote."

"Theo's not in the squad," said Pinky. "He doesn't get a vote."

"Point of order," said Scaldier. "Danny boy's not in the squad either, at least not yet. So what do we do?"

"We have no choice," Pinky said. "We have to deliberate."

Evans Village was a dry town. The limousine pulled up in front of Ted's Tavern, a little hole in the wall on Main Street that had gotten around the strict alcohol ban in the Village by being just over the town's legal boundary line. Not that anyone in the Village minded Ted's being there. They were happy to have a bar in town without actually having a bar in town. We all got out of the car. A handwritten *Closed* sign hung in the door. The shades were drawn down over the windows. There were no lights on inside. Theo unlocked the door and went inside to turn on the lights.

"You guys live over a bar?" I said. "That's cool. Nice, I mean. Real nice."

Pinky motioned for me to follow the others inside. "Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Who lives over a bar?"

When we were all inside, Theo relocked the door and called out for someone named Ted. A skinny old black guy pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen and said, "Stew's on, boys. Make yourselves comfortable. Anyone for a beer?"

"Set us up, please, Ted," Pinky replied.

"I don't understand," I said. "I thought we were going to see the room and then talk about it. You know, deliberate?"

"We are, boyo," said Scaldier, "but first there must

be a proper wake. That's how we do things around here, the proper way."

We sat down at a table set for seven. Ted set out pitchers of beer and joined us. Pinky filled everyone's mugs, raised his, and waited for us to follow suit. "To Gerry," he said. "Rest in peace, old friend."

"To Gerry," we said as one.

They drained their glasses and I took a sip of mine to be polite and set the mug down. I wasn't much of a drinker. Sure, I had a beer or two in college once in a while, but this beer was nothing like that beer. It was terrible.

"What's the matter, Danny?" said Scaldar. "Have you never had beer before?"

"This is beer?" I said.

"Of course, it is. Down the hatch, boy, out of respect for the dead."

One drink. How bad could it be, right? I managed to get it all down with some encouragement from the others. With no alcohol tolerance to speak of my brain went numb pretty much just like that.

"OK," I said, wondering where my tongue had gone. "That wasn't just beer, was it?"

"It's called an Irish Car Bomb," said Ted. "Stout, Irish Cream, and Jameson's."

"Are you Irish, too?" I asked.

"Black Irish," he replied.

They all laughed.

"This is the boy I was telling you about, Ted," said Pinky. "He wants to come live with us."

"Then, he needs another drink before he changes his mind." Ted poured another round. "Down the hatch, boys. For Gerry—one of the last of the good ones."

"I don't think this is such a good idea," I said. "I'm already looped."

Rodin, who had taken the seat beside me, pushed the refilled mug my way. "Don't be disrespectful, kid. Drink your beer."

"Do you think you could stop calling me that, please?" I said. I looked at the finger I didn't realize I was wagging at him and slid my hand under the table. There's that discretion thing again. Maybe I was getting the hang of it, maybe not.

"Junior's not man enough to have another," said Oz.

Nothing like a dare from a chest-thumping gorilla. "Oh yeah?" I said like the kid who took the dare to prove he wasn't chicken while at the same time proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was a total idiot. "Watch me." I clinked glasses with the Great and Powerful, exhaled deeply, and downed my beer in one long swallow. "How's that, big man?" I said.

Oz just smiled, or maybe it was a sneer. I don't know. It was hard to tell the difference at that point. I was having a little trouble focusing. God, his teeth were a mess. I hadn't been in the area long enough to scout out a dentist, but I sure as hell wasn't about to ask him for a recommendation.

When we'd emptied the pitchers, Ted and Theo went back to the kitchen, returning with bowls of steaming hot stew and plates of bread and butter. Rodin said grace, something I hadn't done in a long time. The stew was good. Turns out, booze is Ted's secret ingredient in everything he serves at his place. I made sure to tell him how much I enjoyed it after I came back from throwing up in the men's room. They were already on seconds by then. I passed. They were also into the next batch of pitchers, just beer this time, or so they said. I passed on that, too, until Oz egged me on again.

I can't say how many drinks I had or how many hours I spent listening to those old coots telling stories about Gerry, but the next thing I remember was Pinky shaking me awake and telling me it was time to go.

"Where *is* everyone?" I said.

"They went home," said Pinky. "It's time we did, too."

It was just starting to flurry when we abandoned the smelly warmth of Ted's for the frigid morning air. Let me tell you, a cold shower's got nothing on that kind of wakeup call.

"What time is it?" I said.

"It's morning, Mr. Maxwell."

"I know that. What time?"

Pinky checked his Timex. "Eight-thirty. No, nine-thirty."

"Well, which is it?"

"Nine-thirty."

"Damn it," I said. "I'm late for work."

He asked what time I started.

I said nine.

"Then, I believe you are correct," he said. "You're late for work."

I didn't have any vacation time. I hadn't been at SSA long enough. I had one measly sick day to my name and I was already working on my excuse to use it. That was the beginning of my brief career as a leave abuser. "I need a payphone," I said. "I have to call in."

"You can call from the billet," Pinky said. "We'll be there in five."

We headed into the Village. Pinky made sure to point out the faded white line some drunk had painted on the sidewalk years ago to mark the boundary between the fortress of teetotalers and the chaotic world of free-range drinkers. The guy who'd put it there had been nabbed by the sheriff after wandering two steps into Village jurisdiction with a six-pack under his arm. He'd made the mistake of parking in the wrong place. That lack of discretion (there's that discretion thing again) cost him a night in a cell, fifty bucks, and seventy-two ounces of beer. Pinky wasn't sure, but he thought the paint and brushes probably cost the guy more than the beer and the fine. After all, it takes a special kind of paint to survive the wear and tear of being walked all over and stepped on for years; just like it takes a special kind of tough to survive in this world. His squad was tough. Gerry was tough, but even special paint and tough old birds don't last

forever. Nothing lasts forever.

His lecture on how life was basically a suck-and-die proposition ended as we turned into the sidewalk leading up to the place he called the billet. 808 Rossmore Ave. was a three-story clapboard painted swimming pool blue with shutters that had been at one time white but were not so much anymore. The balcony over the front porch was a death trap waiting to spring on the next unsuspecting Encyclopedia Britannica salesman who made the mistake of leaning on one of the supports to look cool while he gave his pitch. The place had a postage stamp yard with what some people might have called a lawn. There was a short driveway taken up mostly by an old four-door Packard set up on blocks. It was green like the green you'd think of if someone said army surplus staff car. Yeah, that kind of green. Pinky said it was a 1954 with the new Gear-Start Ultramatic Drive. Just put it in "D" and off she goes.

"This baby can really fly," he said.

I replied, "I guess it would have to. It doesn't have any tires."

He said he kept up the registration, ran the engine once a month, and changed the fluids when he thought of it, but I was right. It needed new tires and he hadn't gotten around to that. That was five maybe six years ago. Time flies—apparently a lot faster than a car on blocks.

He pointed to a window just under the crown of the roof. It was missing a pane that someone had

replaced with a piece of cardboard. "That's your room," he said. "I hope you like steps better than Gerry did."

I followed him inside into the hallway. He pointed to the telephone on a stand at the foot of the stairs. There was bowl beside the phone with a few dimes in it. He told me to help myself.

I made the call. I was telling my manager in the most sick-sounding voice I could muster (which wasn't hard with the hangover I had) that I wasn't going to make it in, but that for sure I'd be in the next day. I was all set to ask for my one and only sick day when I looked over at Pinky. I could tell he didn't like the way the conversation was going. I guess lying to the boss wasn't something he'd ever done—maybe lying in general—maybe because it was one of those commandment things. I don't know, and I don't know why I cared about what he thought of me at that point, but I did. So I told my boss the truth that I'd had too much to drink the night before. I told him I wasn't sick because I had a cold or the flu. It wasn't anything like that. I'd passed out in the bar and overslept. That's all there was to it. I told him I was hung over and wouldn't be worth a crap even if I did come in. I asked him if I could take a day without pay. I couldn't swear it wouldn't happen again, but I promised I'd try to do better. He said he'd have to document my file and warned me not to make a habit of it or I could kiss my GS-13 goodbye. I thanked him and hung up.

I fully expected a lecture from Pinky but all he said

was, "Put your dime in the dish. The tour starts now."

The house was basically a four-room square with two windows on every outside wall except for the third-floor attic, which only had one under the crown of the roof on either end. The first floor had a hallway with creaky wooden stairs going up to a landing where there was a stained glass window. There was a cellar door underneath the staircase that led to the basement. Pinky said there was nothing down there I'd be interested in unless I was a heater repairman or had laundry to do. Off the hall on the front of the house was the living room, more or less. It wasn't exactly what I'd call livable. The shade was pulled down, the curtains drawn, and the one and only floor lamp wouldn't turn on. Pinky said Oz had run it over with the vacuum and had chewed up the cord, so they unplugged it until they could get it fixed. That was three maybe four years ago. There was a couch under the window with matching stuffed chairs. At least I think they matched. It was hard to tell in the dark. The room smelled like stale cigarette smoke, that and a closet full of musty old clothes that somebody had forgotten about a long time ago. Down the hall toward the back of the house was the kitchen. It wasn't much, but it had a working stove, sink, and running water. That was a plus. The cleaning and cooking schedule for the month was posted on one of the upper cabinets. It was called KP Duty. Gerry's name was crossed off. Next to the kitchen was the dining room. It connected to the living room through a set of pocket doors that

Pinky said didn't open anymore. Behind the kitchen was a little porch with a couple lawn chairs and a charcoal grill filled with dead leaves.

On the second floor, there was a bathroom at the top of the stairs and four corner bedrooms. Pinky showed me his. It was OK, I guess, as far as matchbooks go. The bed was tiny. The dresser was tiny, and the only closet was a foot deep and barely wide enough to hang things in sideways. Apparently, the people who built houses back then didn't take much stock in either closets or personal space. I'm thinking they were monks. You know, the guys who own one robe, one pair of sandals, the bowl they use to cut their hair, a pair of scissors to cut it, a bible, and pretty much nothing else. The other rooms, Pinky said, were about the same. Rodin, Scaldier, and Oz were asleep, so he couldn't show them to me just then. The bathroom was just a bathroom— toilet, sink, and tub. A schedule like the one in the kitchen was taped to the wall beside the mirror. This one was called Latrine Duty. Gerry had first shower at four-thirty in the morning and it was his week to clean. His name was crossed off of that list, too.

There were two more doors on the second floor. One was a linen closet. I guess monks had sheets and towels, too. The other led to the attic. The attic was the fifth bedroom, Gerry's room, my room. It was almost as big as the house except for a giant walk-in cedar closet that blocked one of the two windows. Pinky said they kept all their woolens in there because moths like

wool and don't like cedar. He showed me the inside. I could see why moths didn't like it. It smelled like the living room. As I said, the attic was huge. There was plenty of floor space for Gerry's bed, dresser, and footlocker with room to spare except for one little problem. Because of the slope of the roof the only place I could stand up straight was in the center of the room. I revised my idea on who this house's designer was from monk to midget monk.

I opened the top dresser drawer. Gerry was an orderly guy. His undershirts, underpants, and socks were all neatly folded and stacked.

"The furniture comes with the room," Pinky said, "but not Gerry's things. I can help you take them down to the Salvation Army. They'll find a good home for them."

"Yeah," I said, closing the drawer. "I guess they will. I'm really sorry about your friend, Pinky."

"I am, too," he said. "Well, what do you think? Are you in?"

I asked him how much the rent was.

"Two hundred a month," he said. "That includes utilities. Food's extra."

That was dirt-cheap even for midget accommodations. I was paying more than that for my motel room, but then again, I could stand up in that. "What about Rodin and Oz?" I asked. "I don't think they like me."

"Do you like them?"

"I guess they're OK," I said, by which I meant no,

not really.

He asked what the problem was.

I reminded him that they'd voted no.

Pinky shrugged. "They were just upset."

"What about now?"

He shrugged again. "Now they're asleep."

"I meant what about the deliberations? You said you'd deliberate, remember?"

"And we did, after you passed out," Pinky said. "Do you want the room or don't you, Mr. Maxwell?"

I handed him two hundred dollars and said I'd take it.

After my senior year in high school I had considered enlisting in the army to fight in the Vietnam War. The problem was that particular war just didn't seem to me like a fight we should be in. So I went to college instead to get an education and serve my country in other ways. Then the draft lottery came along and canceled all student deferments, putting my future at school up for grabs. Luckily I drew a high enough number so I never got volunteered to fight for someone else's cause. Little did I know that two hundreds bucks was about to change all that.

Chapter 3

The Minimum

Later that day, I hit the diner next to the motel for my last meal as a civilian. I like diner food. They're always serving breakfast no matter what time it is and I do like breakfast—crispy bacon, scrambled eggs, burnt hash browns, toast dripping with way too much butter, and black coffee (plenty of black coffee). I'm pretty sure that covers all the essential food groups. After one last refill, I packed everything I owned into two suitcases, checked out, and moved into the billet. I travel light. Always have.

According to the list on the basement door (which like all the other lists in the house had my name penciled over poor old crossed-off Gerry's), my turn at the washer and dryer didn't come till the next day. So I

spent the night wrapped in a blanket on the floor of Gerry's old room, my room. Man was it cold. The bed would have been way warmer but the sheets looked like they hadn't been washed since coming back from the Marne and the pillow smelled like that trench the soldiers peed in. I can't say I got much sleep that night.

The next day was Friday. I got up late (if you can call 5:00 a.m. late) because I'd forgotten to wind my travel clock. I blame that little bit of forgetfulness on brain freeze (or more accurately, whole body freeze from spending the night in a walk-in freezer). The net result was that I missed my four-thirty turn at the shower. Oz was already in there when I came downstairs. And the strangest thing—it sounded like he was singing (make that bellowing), "I'm mad as hell on army beer, party fool," over and over again. Catchy tune. Kind of repetitive. I suppose you could dance to it if you were roaring drunk. I'd give it a five.

I left my towel and change of clothes in the linen closet and headed down to the kitchen. I was hungry but not in the mood for the ice-cold stale Pop-Tarts someone had left on the table with a note that said *Breakfast-One Each*. I also didn't feel like scrounging around for something else that might require actual effort on my part, so I ended up skipping breakfast. Not what you'd call a TGIF kind of start to my day.

It was barely five-thirty. Even with the twenty-minute walk to work I'd still get there three hours early, but there seemed to be no point in hanging around the house with nothing to do. So I left, figuring

I'd use the extra time to make up for skipping work the day before. It would be quiet with no one else around, perfect for concentrating on that mailing program. Good plan. Unfortunately, things didn't quite work out that way. When I got to the building around six, the guards made me wait outside, saying I didn't have the clearance to enter before seven. Then my boss showed up while I was still outside playing Popsicle. He had the right clearance to go in but decided instead to take the opportunity to badmouth my generation for the next twenty minutes. We were lazy and irresponsible. More specifically, I was lazy and irresponsible. I didn't appreciate what his generation and the generations before him had done for me. It had taken them nearly two hundred years to make America the country it was and my generation was ruining it for everyone. I won't bore you with all the various blah-blah-blahs of his speech. Let's just say he was doing his best to chainsaw through a couple of the top rungs on my career ladder. It was going to be a lot harder to reach that GS-13. TGIF. I hung on until five o'clock.

When I got home, the squad was sitting around the kitchen table arguing over a pile of cash. It looked like the two hundred in twenties I had given Pinky for my first month's rent and a bunch of ones and change they had scraped together. That's when I noticed that everyone was wearing their hats and coats. I also noticed it wasn't much warmer in the house than it was outside. I admit I'm a little slow on the uptake but even I was starting to connect the dots. I'd spent the night on

the floor freezing my butt off wondering why they'd set the heat so low. Old people hate the cold, don't they? I mean, we're all basically Florida-ready by the time we reach sixty-five, aren't we? That's when we crank up the heater, put on our long johns and two sweaters, and spend the next three months sitting on the radiator sipping hot cocoa. You would think I'd have put two and two together, but not me. It took a table full of shivering old geezers to clue me in.

"What's wrong with the heater?" I said.

"The heater's fine," said Pinky.

"Then, how about we turn it on? It's a little nippy in here, don't you think?"

He shrugged, "It's fine."

"Come on, Pinky. I can see my breath."

Rodin said, "We're out of oil, kid."

"Aren't they supposed to deliver that on a schedule or something?" I said. "You know, like before you run out? The oil company has guys with amazing math skills who figure that stuff out for you. Don't they?"

Pinky shrugged again, "I suppose they do."

I looked a little closer at the pile on the kitchen table. It wasn't just cash. It was sitting on a mountain of overdue oil bills. I rooted through them and picked up one marked "final notice."

The first thing that grabbed me about the bill from the Jack Cooney & Sons Oil Company was the balance. "Jeez," I said. "How much oil do you guys use?" The second thing I noticed were the deliveries noted on it that still hadn't been paid for. "What's with this?" I

said, handing it to Pinky.

He took the bill from me and put it back on the pile. "We're a little behind, Mr. Maxwell."

"A little?" I said. "It looks to me like you owe for this year and all of last year."

"We know that, Danny boy," said Scaldar.

"So, what's the problem?" I said. "Pay Mr. Cooney what you owe him and get more oil. It's freezing in here."

Pinky said, "It's not that simple."

This wasn't one of those *if a train leaves point A going eighty miles an hour and another leaves point B going sixty when do they crash into each other killing everyone* kind of problems. I didn't need more than a handful of fingers to figure this one out. "There are five of us," I said. "We each pay two hundred a month. That's a thousand dollars a month. Call the guy. Tell him we'll pay some now and the rest every month till it's paid off if he'll make a delivery, even a partial just to get us through."

"As I said," said Pinky. "It's not that simple."

Did you ever get that sinking feeling that what you'd assumed was going on wasn't even close? Like when you got that participation trophy at the seventh grade science fair for your project on who could eat more hot dogs in five minutes—girls or boys. You thought it was a great idea at the time. You thought that your trophy was for the good job everyone said you did. Turns out, they were just happy your test subjects didn't throw up in the gym. Well, except

Molly Stanton, but she stuck her finger down her throat to make herself upchuck so she could get third place instead of you. I never liked her.

"Then, maybe you'd better explain it to me," I said, "because while I admit this place has a lot more going for it than that crappy motel, at least they had heat."

"Don't you know anything about the history of Social Security?" Pinky said.

I replied, "Not a whole heck of a lot, but what does that have to do with this?"

"Just answer the question," he said.

"It was Roosevelt, the New Deal or something like that, wasn't it?" I said. "And back to my point, what does this have to do with why we have no heat?"

Rodin's head must have weighed a ton. It didn't look that big, but he was always holding it up by the chin like it was made of solid rock. It must have been incredibly dense, kind of like me, I guess. It was a struggle, but he lifted his eyes my way and said, "How do you know where you're going, kid, if you have no idea where you came from?"

Profundities, I think that's what they call them. Heavy thoughts from heavy thinkers. You know, thoughts from the guys with the really dense, heavy heads? There's one in every crowd.

"The Social Security Act of 1935 was originally called the Economic Security Act," he said, "but Congress changed the name during the debate over it. How were they to know that people of this generation would come to think of it as socialism? It's not

socialism. People who work pay the tax. The money they put in is supposed to be saved for their retirement. It's just that simple. The first taxes were collected in 1937 and the first monthly benefits were paid out in 1940. It was designed as a self-sustaining retirement plan. That's not socialism."

"It's not communism either," said Oz. "Stinking Commies."

That was something they all agreed on.

"OK," I said. "Thanks for the history lesson, but again, what does this have to do with the oil bill?"

Pinky said, "We worked hard all our lives, but most of that was before they started collecting the tax. By the time Social Security came along we were already over the hill. Ten years—it takes ten years of working to qualify for a benefit, Mr. Maxwell. I for one barely got my ten in before I was put out to pasture. Same for Oz and Rodin. The three of us get the minimum. Scaldar wasn't so lucky. He didn't get his ten so he gets nothing."

"OK," I said, still not getting the point of all this.

Pinky asked if I knew what the minimum was. Of course, I didn't.

He said, "In 1940 it was ten dollars a month. And Congress only raises it when they feel like it, so as you can imagine, it hasn't kept up with the cost of living. Right now the minimum is \$70.40 a month. Who can afford to live in a house with a two-car garage and a chicken in every pot on \$70.40 a month?"

I kind of got the garage part, but chickens? "I

thought you said you had a Ph.D.?" I said. "Shouldn't you be getting more than the minimum?"

Scalder laughed. "Pinky's Ph.D. was in public highway digging, Danny boy."

"I dug ditches all over France and ditches all around this country," Pinky said. "It's good honest work, but a man doesn't get GS-11 wages digging ditches."

That's when my C+ math skills kicked in. I said, "Not to be nosy, but how can you guys afford the two hundred a month if you're only getting \$70.40? Do you have military pensions or savings or something?"

Oz stood up in all his great and powerfulness. "Do we look like we have pensions?" he said. He headed over to the sink to get a drink of water, probably before the pipes froze. Good move.

"I wasn't in the army long enough to earn a pension," said Pinky, "and Scalder was 4F. "

"Bum ticker," Scalder said, tapping his chest. "And as you heard, I didn't make enough to get even the minimum."

"That's what happens when all your income is under the table and you don't pay the tax," said Rodin.

"Not all under the table, boyo," Scalder said. "Everyone in my profession pays some tax to avoid the IRS."

I had to ask, "What did you do, Scalder?"

"I was a professional gambler," he replied. "Still am, when I get the chance."

"What little he makes comes and goes," Pinky said.

"Lately it's been mostly going."

"Ah yes," said Scaldar. "'Tis a dicey business that. I haven't yet found a new club to my liking since I stopped frequenting that last one."

"They threw you out on your ear two years ago, you cheating mick," said Oz.

Scaldar was quick with the reply, "Shut your feckin mouth, you dumb Neanderthal or I'll shut it for you."

"Any time you want to try," said Oz.

"Boys," Pinky said, raising his hand. "That's enough." He went on, "And the majority of Rodin's work was... Well, let's just say it wasn't the kind of employment covered under the Social Security Act."

"But there'll always a place for me at the county lock-up," Rodin said.

"Ah yes, the Dan Roe Memorial Cell," said Scaldar.

Oz slapped Scaldar on the back. "Good thing you're funny, Irishman."

Scaldar responded with an elbow to the stomach. "Good thing you're dumb, you big ape."

They had a good laugh.

"What about you, Oz?" I said. "Why are you just getting the minimum?"

And just like that, Oz's smile disappeared. "Why do you think, Junior?"

Actually, I thought it was because gorillas are only paid minimum wage, but before I got a chance to say that, Pinky said, "Oz was working in a factory during the Great War."

"Making bullets," said Oz. "Big ones."

He grinned and held his hands apart like he was describing the one that got away. That Oz was one seriously scary fellow.

"After the war and the factories closed down," said Pinky, "the corporal couldn't hold down any job for very long."

I asked, "Why do you call him Corporal if he was never in the army?"

"Because he's in the squad," Pinky said, "just like you."

I thought I heard the doorbell ring, but it was just Oz smacking me on the back of my head. "And I outrank you, Private," he said. "So when I say jump, you say how high, got it?"

I said, "Does this mean I get an army jacket, too?"

"You've got to earn your jacket," he said.

"And the Army-Navy store in town closed last year," said Rodin. "So that jacket might be a while in coming."

"In the meantime, how about you fetch my smokes, Private?" Oz said. "Come on, hop to it."

"How high?" I said.

They all laughed except Oz. "That's it, smart ass," he said. "You're mine."

Oz tried to grab me but I sidestepped. Pinky shooed him away before he got another crack at me. I don't know what animal-control powers Pinky had but they were formidable.

"So how exactly is it you guys can afford this place?" I asked.

"We've been renting this house from Mrs. Myron for fifteen years," said Pinky. "She's been very kind to us old soldiers. Her husband died in France. I met him there. I saw him give his life for this country. He was a good man, a real hero. Such a shame."

"Just a suggestion," I said, "but maybe this Mrs. Myron could help with the oil bill. After all, it's her house and I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to let your house freeze—something about the pipes bursting?"

"She passed five years ago, Danny boy," said Scaldar. "God rest her soul."

Pinky said, "She charged us fifty a month each, Mr. Maxwell. That's all we could afford. She covered the rest: the utilities, taxes, maintenance. That included the oil. We were her charity, her ticket to heaven she always said. She was very religious. After the cancer took her, nobody came to claim the house so we just stayed on. Where could we go anyway?"

"The poor house, that's where," Scaldar said.

"No such thing," said Rodin. "Now debtor's prison — that's another matter."

They began to argue, but one look from Pinky stopped all that. He said, "Now our fifty goes for taxes, utilities, and repairs. We share the food expenses and chip in to help each other pay for our meds as best we can."

"And whatever's left over finds its way to Ted's Tavern," said Scaldar.

Why was I not surprised? "Wait a sec," I said.

"Back up. What do you mean you just stayed on? How's that work?"

"What's to work?" said Pinky. "The bills come to the house and we pay them in cash."

I felt it was my civic duty to point out to those crazy old coots, "Somebody's going to find out you're squatters. You guys are going to end up in jail. On the plus side, at least they'll have heat."

"One problem at a time," Pinky said. "That's how we get things done in the squad."

"Right," I said. "One last question though. If you're each paying fifty, why am I paying two hundred?"

"Because it's a fair price and you agreed to it, Junior," said Oz. "You got a problem with that?"

He was right. Two hundred was more than fair, but that was assuming it covered the basics like heat. I was pissed. Those old farts had scammed me good. "No," I said. "It's not a problem as long as I'm getting four times what you are. It's obviously not heat, so what is it? Extra space in that smelly old closet in my room? Maybe it's the basement? Yeah, that must be it, the basement. Next to the washer and dryer there's a swimming pool that comes with my room, right? Or does my two hundred just get me a bigger jail cell when the cops show up?"

"Your sarcasm is duly noted," said Pinky, "but the point remains, you accepted the room for the rate of two hundred a month. I think that's far better and cheaper than a motel, but what do I know?"

"Yeah, it's better," I said, "except for the no-heat

part and the fact that they'll lock us up and throw away the key for being here illegally."

"No one's going to lock us up, Mr. Maxwell," Pinky said. "We have squatter's rights."

"What does that even mean?" I said.

Rodin chimed in. He must have studied law during one of his past jail terms. "It's called right of adverse possession, kid. You spend ten years in an abandoned house and it belongs to you, fair and square."

I pointed out one little problem with that. "It's only been five years."

"Time flies when you're having fun," said Scaldar.

"You call charging me four times what you're paying fun?"

"Don't you read the Bible, Danny boy?" he said.

"You mean like do unto others before they do unto you? That Bible?"

He shook his head. "I'm talking about the parable of the vineyard workers. You know, the one where the owner hired men throughout the day and paid them all the same wage when the day was done even though some had worked their arses off in the blazing sun and others had only worked an hour?"

"That doesn't sound exactly fair," I said, and added, "like this."

"The point wasn't that it was unfair to the ones who'd worked all day," Scaldar said. "The point was they'd gotten what they'd agreed to—a day's wage for a day's work. It wasn't their place or right to say what the owner paid the others."

"So I'm supposed to be OK with you screwing me?"

"You've made your bed. Go lie in it," he said.

"I can't. It stinks."

"If you're that unhappy with our agreement," said Pinky, "we'll refund your two hundred dollars and you can go back to the motel. No hard feelings."

"How about we keep the two hundred *and* our hard feelings and he can go to hell?" said Oz.

"That's not who we are Corporal," Pinky said.

"And that's another thing," I said. "Who *are* you people anyway? This isn't the army. You're not a squad and this isn't your billet. You're just a bunch of losers squatting in a house with no heat." I regretted saying that the second the words came out my mouth; not because Oz looked like he was about to tear me in half, not because the others seemed eager to hold me down while he did it, but because it was a shitty thing to say.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that. It's just . . . I'm sorry. I can't do this."

And that was that. Pinky took the two hundred off the pile, stuffed it in my pocket, told me to get my things and clear out. Well, he didn't exactly say it like that. He asked me nicely to leave. No hard feelings, he said again. So I grabbed my two suitcases and booked. Bastards. Just because life had dealt them a crappy hand didn't mean I had to fold, too, not when I'd been dealt a straight flush. I was a GS-11 on my way to GS-13, for God's sake. Maybe a few a rungs *were* gone

from that ladder, but screw them. Someday I'd be lighting my cigars with the two hundred bucks I dropped in the bowl on the phone stand in the hall before stomping out the door. I'd have to take up smoking first, but screw 'em. Yeah, I know that makes no sense, but just listen, would you?

I started back toward the motel. That took me through the center of town. That's where I had one of those experiences Scaldler liked to call a divine intervention. Everything happens for a reason, he always said. Maybe he was right. I don't know. All I know is, I was so busy being mad at Pinky and his squad that when I was crossing the street, I stepped in what looked like a little puddle that turned out to be a six-inch deep pothole filled with ice water. After using up all my best swear words, I looked up and there it was—the start of my own personal divine intervention. It wasn't a burning bush or angels singing on high. It wasn't St. Peter standing before the pearly gates waving me in or the big guy shaking his head at me, wondering what the heck I was doing. It was just some old dude with a pitchfork. Yeah, that's what I thought at first, too. A pitchfork? Seeing as how I'd just walked out on one cold day in hell only to step in another that wasn't quite frozen over, I thought, could it be *that* guy? The guy from downstairs? No way. This guy didn't have a long pointy tail or horns. He did look kind of red in the face but nothing like a demon. He was just a scrawny old man pitching hay to a horse that was tied up next to a *Jack Cooney & Sons Oil*

Company truck. The truck was parked alongside the *Jack Cooney & Sons Oil Company* building. The old guy took one look at me, dropped the pitchfork, clutched at his chest, and doubled over.

I ditched my bags in the street and caught him before he hit the ground. "You OK?" I said.

He nodded, but he was definitely not OK. Neither were my bags. One had managed to find the puddle. The other got run over by a passing car. I took the old man inside and called out for help. A guy in overalls came out of the back covered in grease and oil. He was about my age. I told him what had happened. He said the old man was his dad and he was Jack Jr. We helped old Jack into a chair and Junior called for an ambulance. The other son—turns out there were two *& Sons*—came in the front door with my bags while we were introducing ourselves. He asked if they were mine, said they were a little wet. That was an understatement. He was Bill, named after his granddad. Bill asked what I was doing in the Village. He hadn't seen me around. So I told him about the house, the room, the unpaid oil bills, and my being evicted. I said I was on my way back to the motel. I left out the part about Mrs. Myron being dead. Jack Junior said it was a good thing I was getting out of there. Their dad and Pinky were friends. They'd fought in the same war, which was the only reason they hadn't taken Mrs. Myron to court yet. But enough was enough. If she didn't pay by next month, they were going to sue. They'd take the house from her, kick

Pinky and his buddies out, and sell the place to cover their losses. It was a shame those men had to suffer because of her, but fair was fair, he said. Can't argue with that.

The ambulance came to take old Jack away. One of the medics said it was lucky I showed up. Old Jack could have hit his head on the pavement and died out there in the cold before anyone came along. He said the Good Lord must have been watching out for Jack that day. Junior and Bill said pretty much the same thing. The Lord works in mysterious ways. They had to get over to the hospital, but they said if I ever needed anything, *anything*, just ask.

So I did. I asked them to give Mrs. Myron a little more time. I told them I would cover her oil bill but I needed a couple months to scrape together the cash. I'd just started a new job at SSA, but I was a GS-11 on my way to GS-13 and I made good money. I gave them my boss's phone number so they could check out my story. I told them I'd sign whatever papers they wanted, just don't throw the squad out on the street. I even said please.

I don't why I said what I said, but you know how I mentioned that running into old Jack on the street like that was the start of a divine intervention? I guess what happened next was the big finish. Junior agreed on the spot, said he'd check my story out later, but he knew in his heart I was good for it. Bill tossed in the kicker. He said when they got back from the hospital they'd deliver enough oil to get us through the winter, that his

dad's life was worth way more than a five hundred gallon fill.

They thanked me one last time and left for the hospital in the *Jack Cooney & Sons Oil Company* truck. I headed back to the billet with my wet, crushed suitcases. I found the squad still sitting around the kitchen table. They'd brought my two hundred bucks back in from the hall and it was sitting on top of the pile of oil bills again. I went through the pile, pulled out all the bills, jammed the final one into my pocket, tossed the rest in the trash, and told them if they were keeping my rent money, I was keeping the room. "And by the way," I said on my way upstairs. "I stopped by the Cooneys. They'll be delivering oil tonight."

Chapter 4

The Plan

I heard the heater kick in sometime late that night. The Cooneys had made good on their end of the deal. I figured I was technically still within my allotted washer/dryer time, so I stripped the bed, started a load of laundry, and hopped in the shower. The hot water felt great until it wasn't hot anymore. It got lukewarm pretty fast, then turned ice cold just like that. I jumped out of the tub wondering if the heater had given up the ghost. It couldn't have been from overwork, that's for sure. Then I wondered if the Cooneys had given us just enough oil to say screw you, this is what you get for stiffing us. That seemed a little more likely.

I waited a while, then gave up on the water ever

turning hot again and got dressed. Pinky was waiting for me in the hall when I came out of the bathroom.

"What?" he said. "You think you can do laundry and take a shower at the same time when the heater's running? It's a summer-winter hookup." Which meant nothing to me, so he explained the principle. In a summer-winter hookup a single boiler heats both the house and the hot water. It's cheaper than separate systems and works fine if it's only doing one job, not so good if you make it do more than one thing at a time. God forbid you make it do three like I had. "It's like rubbing your stomach and patting your head at the same time," he said. "It can't be done. So unless you like your showers cold in wintertime, I'd suggest cutting the heat back before you jump in the shower. The thermostat's downstairs in the hall. Just make sure you turn it back up when you're done."

"Got it," I said. "Sorry if I went out of turn. It's just that I smelled like the sheets and we both needed a bath."

Pinky hung his head. "We let a lot of things go at the end," he said. "I'm afraid that was one of them."

"I know I've said this before," I replied, "but I really am sorry about Mr. Connors."

Pinky thanked me. It wasn't hard to see that Gerry's loss had shaken him. That's how it goes when a loved one's death reminds you that the finish line is just over the next hill and you're coming up on it fast. Someday it'll be me. Someday it'll be you. You can't really prepare for it and there's no stopping it. That's

just the way it is. If you don't get what I'm trying to say, just nod and pretend you do because someday you will.

"I'm promoting you to corporal," Pinky said. He waved off my "what?" and said, "No arguing. What you did for the squad deserves a promotion. We all agreed."

"Even Oz?" I said.

He nodded, "Even Oz."

I asked if that meant I could quit working on my high jump.

He laughed and thanked me again.

I said it was nothing, that I'd only bought us more time with the Cooneys. I wasn't about to tell him I'd be footing the entire bill because they couldn't. Nobody likes to be told that they're not pulling their own weight.

"Don't be so modest," he said. "You get things done and we need that around here. We'll be mustering at O-Eight-Hundred. Don't be late."

Mustering? Who musters anymore? I wasn't even sure what it meant, but I figured it out when Pinky said I was on toast duty.

I got some decent sleep that night. It was warm in my room and the sheets didn't smell like Gerry anymore. Next morning at mustering time, it surprised the heck out of me that Oz had skills other than yelling, growling, and strangling. He scrambled a pretty good egg. He'd been a short-order cook in a previous life until he got fired for throwing a complaining customer

through the window. To go with the eggs, Rodin pan-fried this stuff he called scrapple. It was definitely not bacon. He said it was meat, but it looked more like a cake of hardened vomit. He'd picked up a taste for it when he was in prison in the Lancaster area. He said it was mostly cornmeal and pork. I had my doubts, but it tasted OK when it was swimming in a pool of maple syrup. You can't go wrong with maple syrup. Scalded coffee you could stand a spoon up in and I burnt the toast just the way I like it. I was hoping Pinky would fry up some hash browns but no such luck. His job was setting the table and doing the dishes.

It was Saturday morning and I didn't have to go to work. The others decided at breakfast to let me finish my laundry even though it wasn't my day. The *how's things* checklist was looking pretty good. We had heat again. Check. My room was clean (Pinky helped with that). Check. My sheets didn't smell anymore. Big check on that one. And I was no longer an outsider. Double check. I was officially part of the family, a full-fledged member of the squad. I'd say that was a pretty good day. Too bad it didn't end right there. The rest of it turned out . . . well, you'll see.

I came downstairs around lunchtime looking for a snack. I'd spent most of the morning in a comfortable chair getting up close and personal with a COBOL manual, trying to figure out why that mailing program I'd been working on Friday still wasn't doing what it was written to do. It was supposed to segment different letters to different beneficiaries using some

key data from their records, but on the test server it was sending the same letter to everyone—a real shit sandwich that I was told I had a week to fix or I'd be eating it on my next review. Sorry about the language. I was just repeating what my boss said. Anyway, I found the squad camped out in the living room. They'd pulled the curtains back for more light—not that much got through the Lucky Strike cloud that hung over them. Is that what they call the fog of war or is that something else? Scaldier was holding a khaki-colored army surplus flashlight over the coffee table so they could see better. They were studying a map like a bunch of battlefield generals plotting their next maneuver.

When Pinky spotted me, he said I was just the man they wanted to see. They made room for me on the sofa and asked me to sit down. They all said hi, even Oz. He asked how it was going. Didn't call me Junior. Something was clearly up, so I asked, "What gives?"

Scaldier said, "Have you ever wondered where all the money goes, Danny boy?"

"What money?" I said.

"Our money," he replied.

I told him I figured they kept their savings stashed in a safe place, like under a floorboard or in their mattresses or something like that, though I wondered just then if that lump in Gerry's—I mean my—mattress was actually a pile of forgotten cash.

"He's not talking about that," said Pinky.

"Think bigger, kid," said Rodin. "Much bigger."

I tried again, "In a joint bank account at First National?"

Oz looked at me with those lizard eyes. People *do* have to blink, right? I mean, that's how your eyes work, isn't it?

"The money your bosses keep from us, Junior," he said.

The snappiest comeback I could come up with was, "Huh?"

"The trust fund, Mr. Maxwell," said Pinky, "the Social Security Trust Fund—the one they put the taxes in that are deducted from your pay, the one they say they keep safe for you while they get all the interest, the one they promise to give back to you some day when you're old enough."

I told him federal employees had their own pension system. We didn't pay into Social Security.

"It's the same idea," said Pinky. "A pension is a pension."

You can't argue with a tautology. Yeah, I know that word. I took one Philosophy class in college and I must have been awake the day the professor said that *A equals A*, like all tautologies, was a necessarily true statement.

Scalder's face turned as red as his name (but not quite as red as his hair), and I hadn't even said anything smart-ass worthy yet. "Feckin pensions. They take your money and say you can't have it back when you need it. You get it back in little dribs and drabs when they're damn well ready to dole it out to you.

What gives them the right to do that?"

And this from the guy who worked under the table, hardly paid any taxes, and wasn't getting any of it back.

"The law?" I suggested.

Rodin said, "Do you have any idea how many years of monthly checks it would take to get back the money they took from us?"

And this from the guy who'd spent most of his adult life in jail.

I said they had some kind of actuarial formula to figure things like that out so you'd eventually get it all back.

"Formula shmormula," Pinky said. "Who do we look like, Moses?"

And this from the guy who definitely did not look like Charlton Heston.

"And what about the interest?" said Oz. "Tell him about the interest, Rodin."

Rodin recited some compound interest calculation that I didn't exactly follow. I doubt Oz did either. I'm pretty sure gorilla school doesn't include higher-level math classes. Rodin's point, however, was that people could do better putting their money in the bank where *they'd* get the interest, not the government.

I agreed that might be true, but the fact is retirement plans like Social Security manage people's money because most of them won't do it for themselves. Maybe that sounds a little harsh, but it's true. If people aren't forced to save, they won't. It's just

a fact of life. It's human nature. We're like the grasshopper in that ant and the grasshopper fable. We like fiddling around more than storing up food for the winter. And yeah, keeping what's really our money plus interest does seem a bit unfair, but they don't want us ending up with a big fat zero when we retire. So setting something aside in a trust fund for us made perfect sense to me.

"Forty billion dollars as of the end of 1971," said Rodin. "That's what they've set aside, kid."

I had to admit that was a whistle-worthy pile of money. I asked him how he knew that. He said he reads the paper. Me? I never get past the comics.

"Rodin did a little reconnaissance for us at the Library of Congress," said Pinky. "It's all in the public records."

"Reconnaissance for what?" I asked, looking at the map. "And what's with this line from the Village to..." I looked a little closer. "West Virginia? And what about this big X over Parkersburg? What's in Parkersburg?"

"The money, Mr. Maxwell," said Pinky.

And Rodin reminded us all, "Forty billion dollars."

"Our money," said Oz.

How can anyone make two simple words like that sound like a threat?

"And we'd like it back now," said Scaldier.

Did he want his in pennies, nickels, and dimes? I hoped he had a big enough bag.

"And we're going to get it," Pinky said.

"Before we get into the whole bank robbing thing,

can we back up a sec?" I said. "I have a few questions. Let's start with how do you even know the money's there?"

Pinky began, "The big WWII finished the Krauts, Mr. Maxwell, but it wasn't the end of the war. Stalin never gave back the land he grabbed helping us defeat the Nazis. Instead he put up that Iron Curtain of his and now we're in a Cold War with them."

"And a feckin arms race that's only going to end when we blow everyone and everything up," Scaldar nodded. He really liked that word feckin.

"Lousy Commies," said Oz.

"OK," I said. "I'm guessing any kid who's ever done a duck-and-cover drill in grade school or gone to a County Fair and played in the bomb shelters knows that, but what does that have to do with anything?"

Pinky went on, "It was President Eisenhower (good man, God rest his soul), who decided in the fifties that government functions should be decentralized and backed up in case of an A-bomb attack on Washington. The Treasury Department picked Parkersburg to house the Bureau of Public Debt's secondary offices."

"In case you hadn't noticed," Scaldar pointed out, "it's in the middle of nowhere."

I actually had noticed that. I told them I still wasn't following them. The Social Security Trust Fund had nothing to do with the public debt or the Treasury Department. It was money set aside in a separate fund wasn't it?

"The money's gone, kid," said Rodin.

"So, the money's *not* in Parkersburg?" I said. "First you say it is. Then you say it isn't. Now I'm really confused."

"Every president since FDR (good man, God rest his soul)," said Pinky, "has been borrowing from the Social Security Trust Fund to pay for other things."

Apparently, God rests a lot of souls. He must be a busy guy.

"Why would they do that?" I said.

Rodin set me straight again. That seemed to be his job, that and holding his head up at the same time. They call that multitasking. Too bad they can't figure out how to do that with summer-winter hookups. "The banks charge too much interest, kid, other countries, too. Private investors are the worst, so the government borrows our money for next to nothing and we have no say in the matter."

"But they pay it back, don't they?" I said.

Pinky looked at me like I'd just come off the boat. "You think they're stupid, Mr. Maxwell? Year after year they borrow every penny of the taxes that are put into that trust fund. Then they use what they borrowed to pay back the pittance of interest and once in a while some of the principal to make it look like they're not robbing us blind."

"So we're back to where there's no money there for you to steal?" I said.

"It's not stealing when it's your money, Danny boy," said Scaldar.

"It's not *all* your money," I said. "Besides there isn't

any money. They spent it, remember?"

"Oh, there's money there all right," said Rodin. "Every time they borrow from us, they leave us an IOU. Every time one's paid off, they cancel it, but the pile keeps getting bigger. There's a file cabinet full of unpaid IOUs in an office building in Parkersburg, West Virginia. I've seen it with my own eyes."

"How?" I said.

He replied, "I took the Greyhound."

"What I meant is how did you get to see the IOUs, Rodin?"

He said, "I didn't. I saw the file cabinet."

"OK. Let me try this again," I said. "Why did they let Mr. Dan Roe into their building and why did they allow him to see this file cabinet?"

"Did we mention Rodin's been in and out of jail all his life, Danny?" said Scaldar.

Rodin showed me the fake ID he'd used. Apparently, Cosmo Feldman was an FBI Special Agent, a really old special agent, who'd stopped by the Parkersburg office to run a quick security check because, of course, why wouldn't he?

"I'm pretty sure impersonating an officer is a crime," I pointed out.

"I didn't do anything wrong," he said, completely missing the point.

"Are you really planning on stealing a bunch of IOUs?" I asked.

"It's not stealing," said Pinky. "We're taking back what rightfully belongs to us, no more, no less. Rodin

has figured out what each of us is owed plus interest down to the penny.”

The penny must have been Scalders’ share.

“This is all your idea, isn’t it?” I said to Rodin.

“We voted on it,” Pinky said.

“You know you’re all going to jail. Did you vote on that, too?”

“They can’t put you in jail for taking something that belongs to you. That’s unconstitutional.” Naturally, that remark came from the squad lawyer, Rodin.

This whole thing was unbelievable, totally nuts. “Have you tried asking them nicely?” I said.

Oz reached inside his jacket for a gun, I assumed, or a whacking stick, or whatever it would take to bump me off since I now knew the big plan and wasn’t playing along. No witnesses, right? But instead he pulled out some folded papers and handed them to me. The top one was a carbon copy of their latest letter to the Commissioner of Social Security. It listed their names, Social Security numbers, amounts they’d paid in taxes over the years, compound interest on the money at two percent (which seemed a little low to me but they thought it was fair), a subtraction of benefits already collected, and the net amount they said they were owed. They’d asked nicely for their money back. The reply wasn’t so nice. The next paper was a form letter thanking them for their interest. That’s it—their interest. It wasn’t even signed. The signature was machine-stamped. Pinky called it ironic. Scalders used a

few choice words of his own to say they shouldn't have thanked them for just the interest but for the whole feckin pile of money they'd stolen.

I checked the dates on the letters. They were over a year old. "How long have you been planning this?" I asked.

Pinky said, "When the doctors said Gerry needed a new liver and Medicare wouldn't pay for it, we decided to get our money back and pay for it ourselves."

I looked at the numbers again. It wasn't a lot of money. "This couldn't possibly cover a liver transplant, could it?"

"Think of it as a down payment, Danny," said Scaldar.

"But you're waiving your right to any future benefits. It says that right here in your letter."

"I didn't merit a benefit, boyo, remember?" Scaldar said, "and yet they took my money right enough."

"OK," I said. "Fair enough, but how did you plan on paying off the rest of the transplant bill? And what about *your* needs, you know, like food and water and heat (as long as you don't want to take a shower)?"

"One problem at a time," said Pinky.

"No offense," I said. "Your reason for doing this was very cool. I mean honorable," I corrected myself before Oz could pound me. "But Gerry's gone. You don't have to do this anymore."

Pinky shook his head. "We've decided we still want our money now. None of us has much time left

and we want to enjoy our golden years.”

“You’ll be enjoying them in prison,” I said. “Think about it. Let’s just assume you actually pull this off. I know, call me crazy, but bear with me. You gave them your names, your Social Security numbers, *and* your address in that letter. When they find out that some of their IOUs are missing, who do you think they’ll come looking for? The janitor? The pizza delivery guy? How about the old coots who sent that crazy letter asking for their money back? Who do you think will be knocking on your door the very next day? I’ll give you one guess and it’s not Jack Cooney or his two boys. In fact, I’ll even give you their initials – F.B.I.”

“Do you really think with all the waste in government they’ll miss a few thousand dollars out of forty billion?” Rodin said.

“Yeah, I do,” I said. “Believe it or not, they pay guys to keep track of stuff like that. They call them bean counters, and it doesn’t matter how many beans are missing. All it takes is one for the red flags to go up.”

“Do you think we were born yesterday, Mr. Maxwell?” said Pinky. “Every detail, every contingency has been accounted for in our battle plan, including our escape.”

“Oh, really?” I figured this ought to be good.

“We’re taking the Packard to Mexico,” said Oz. “Driving straight through after we pull off the heist.”

“Costa Rica, Oz,” said Pinky. “It’s Costa Rica. It’s much nicer there and the cost of living is dirt cheap.”

Rodin said, "And we're not driving there, big guy. We're going as far as New Orleans where we'll hop a freighter."

"Hop a freighter?" I said. "Who hops freighters anymore?"

"I've got an old pal in the business, Danny boy," said Scaldar. "He'll get us through Customs no questions asked."

Rodin said, "And I've got the passports all made up."

"I'll bet you do," I said, "but aren't you forgetting something? Like tires for the car? Money for gas? Food? I don't know – freighter bill? Things like that?"

"Little Jimmy from the Gulf station will be bringing new tires over tomorrow," Scaldar said. "He gave us a fair shake on them. Free mounting, too. That leaves us plenty from the two hundred you chipped in for gas and food till we can cash in the IOUs."

Oz finally caught on to where his lunatic friends were taking him. "At the bank in Costa Rica, Junior," he said. He sounded vaguely happy that he'd have a jungle to play in with his fellow gorillas.

"You know you're doing this with *my* money?" I said.

"Your rent, our money," said Pinky.

"What about the oil?" I said. "You're just going to stiff Mr. Cooney after his boys were nice enough to deliver oil?"

Pinky had a pretty good answer for that actually. "What? You think Jack Cooney hasn't been

overcharging Mrs. Myron for years, Mr. Maxwell? We know. We checked around."

"If anyone deserves a good stiffing, it's old Jack the Scoundrel Cooney," said Scaldar. "He's a disgrace to the Green."

What's that they say? No good deed goes unpunished? I figured after they took off for Parkersburg, one way or another the Feds would show up, find out that Mrs. Myron was long gone, kick me the hell out for trespassing or jail me as an accessory or something, and I'd still be stuck with the Cooney oil bill. I said, "Why are you telling me this? You've just made me an accessory to your little conspiracy. I could go to jail if I don't report this."

"You're right. Twenty years, kid," said Rodin. He would know.

Then it dawned on me, "You're pulling my leg, right? This is all just some kind of sick joke. Isn't it? Like I'm the freshman with the beanie and you're hazing me before you let me into your Beta-Theta-Fart fraternity or something. Good one. Not cool, but good one. You almost had me there."

"This is no joke, Mr. Maxwell," said Pinky. "The squad moves out Monday morning at O-Nine-Hundred and we need you to come with us."

I said, "What? Like you're drafting me?"

"We took a vote."

"Well in that case," I said. "I vote no."

"That makes it four to one, Danny boy," said Scaldar.

"I can't go with you," I said. "I have work at O-Nine-Hundred."

"One problem at a time," Pinky said. "Right now, we need to know if you'll drive the Packard for us. You do have a license, don't you?"

"Of course I have a license," I said, "but see previous statement. I have work. Plus, I'm a programmer, not a bank robber."

Pinky said, "It isn't a bank. It's an office like your office in Woodlawn. All you have to do is drive us there, wait in the car while we pick up our money, and take us to New Orleans. Once you drop us off at the dock, the Packard is yours. I've already signed over the title. It's in the glove compartment."

"I have only one more thing to say about this," I said, "and that's no."

Chapter 5

The Volunteer

If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that old people play by their own rules. A lot of them think it's because they have that lifetime-of-experience thing going and that gives them a free pass. Or they'll say they're smarter and wiser than you because they've been around the block more than a few times and learned from their mistakes. Or maybe they'll say that most of rules we're told to follow are pretty ridiculous. I can't argue with that, but personally, I think it's because they're just old and crotchety and don't have the patience anymore for dorks like me who think we know everything. Regardless, oldies pretty much do what they want and you can like it or lump it (which, if you're into classifying things, is a subset of *tough beans*, which falls under the category *too bad*).

I spent the rest of that Saturday in my room except for running over to the local burger joint to grab something for dinner. And I do mean running—down the stairs, out the door, sorry no time to talk. I didn't want to have anything to do with the squad. I wanted to come down for breakfast Sunday morning and find their tactical map, their letters to SSA, and their robbery plans in the kitchen wastebasket along with the oil bills. Then I'd know for sure they were just having a little fun at my expense.

I came down early Sunday morning after my 4:30 shower to find the wastebasket empty and the map laid out on the kitchen table. Either they thought their big joke needed more play or these old guys were actually serious. Either way, I wasn't having any of it. I left a note beside the map saying I wasn't hungry and that I'd wash the dishes later. It was my turn.

I grabbed a couple pieces of Wonder bread and headed back to my room. I hid out there all morning studying computer printouts and didn't even come out when Little Jimmy from the Gulf station stopped by to put the new tires on the Packard. I did watch from the window though. They were whitewalls. Who buys whitewalls anymore? I didn't even know they still made them. They had to be expensive, more than my two hundred bucks. That meant they were hot. I figured Jimmy must have pilfered them from some poor sucker on the other side of the Village who was wondering why his car suddenly had cinderblocks for wheels.

Once the car was ready to roll, Pinky pumped the gas and cranked the engine. The Packard started right up. It purred like a kitten, a really big kitten. The others piled into the car (not Jimmy – Jimmy was long gone by then), and Pinky backed out onto the street. He honked the horn and waved for me to come down. I shook my head. He waited a bit for me to change my mind and then pulled back into the driveway. I went back to my printouts. They sat there with the engine running for maybe fifteen minutes, then shut off the car and came back into the house.

Around dinnertime Pinky came up to my room and told me they were heading over to Ted's to get something to eat. He said Ted's stew was their regular Sunday ritual, like Mass only without the standing up, sitting down, and marching around. Plus, he said, it was a lot easier to swallow. He handed me the keys to the Packard and showed me the list with my name on it indicating it was my turn to drive to Sunday dinner. This was a car that been up on blocks for five plus years. How could it be my turn? How does that even work? I asked him if they were going to talk about their dumb-ass plan at dinner. He promised they wouldn't and he was true to his word. We had a pretty good time, actually.

And the Packard was a blast to drive. Put it in "D" and off she goes, just like Pinky said. When we got to Ted's we had the place to ourselves, which made me wonder how Ted managed to stay in business. My guess was he'd made a career of stiffing the Cooneys

too, or maybe he was the whitewall baron. I didn't bother to ask. What was the point? Theo showed up in his chauffeur's uniform as we were getting ready to eat. Apparently, he'd come straight from the cemetery. I said something about how the funeral business must be booming, how they were dropping like flies or something stupid like that. I don't know. I was just trying to be funny. Pinky pointed out that everybody ends up the same, rich or poor, and the closer you get to that end the less you like the prospects. My advice? If you're thinking of telling any funeral jokes around old people, don't.

I stayed out of the conversation after that. After a few pitchers of beer and a bowl or two of Ted's booze-filled stew, it was like I wasn't even there. It was funny the way they all talked like soldiers before the big battle, the one they knew not everyone was coming back from. You know what I mean, right? You've seen the war movies where the hero tells his lieutenant, "Sir, if I don't get back from this, give my girl this letter and tell her I love her. You'll do that for me, won't you?" And the lieutenant (who I picture as John Wayne for some reason) says, "Tell her yourself when you get home, pilgrim. If anyone's jumping on a potato masher today, it'll be me." He probably didn't say pilgrim. It was probably private or something like that. By the way, a potato masher's a grenade in case you didn't know. I know I didn't.

Pinky showed us the scar on his shoulder where he'd taken a bullet. We were all done eating, so it

wasn't a gross-out kind of thing. And I'm pretty sure it wasn't the first time he'd done that for them either. It was definitely a first for me. I'd never seen a gunshot scar for real, just the fake ones on TV. I think he was trying to prove to me that he was a hero during the war because he'd taken a bullet for his country. Scaldar took a little air out of that balloon when he retold Gerry Connor's version of the tale of how Sarge had gotten shot by some feckin kid in the platoon playing with his rifle while the big hero was taking a feckin piss in the feckin trench. They all laughed. They'd heard the story a hundred times and still they laughed. I, however, wasn't laughing. I couldn't help thinking that Pinky's trophy bullet hole was nothing compared to what the mustard gas had done to him. That was the real hero stuff, but he never mentioned it, never complained about the shakes or the big-time ugly that it had laid on him, never talked about it except that one time when he first met, and that was just so I'd stop staring at him. But I'm telling you, what he did for this country was no joke, and what we did to him and the other soldiers when they came home from that war was a disgrace.

Anyway, I laid off the Irish Car Bombs—I wasn't about to let Oz egg me on again—and we had a pretty decent time. I wasn't even hung over the next morning and actually enjoyed the chilly walk to Woodlawn. I got there early again and picked up something at the coffee truck parked outside the office. No matter what time I got in or what time I left, that truck was always

there. I'm pretty sure the guy who runs it lives in it. Seems a little cramped to me, but what do I know?

I made it to my desk without spilling my coffee—a major achievement for me—a good omen, I thought since it so rarely happened. I had a really good feeling that I was going to do something special that day. I was going to find that program bug. I was about to be one more rung up that ladder toward my GS-13. And who knows? My boss just might reattach those top rungs he'd cut off. I went right to work.

I'd just started running a new test of the mailing program and was collating the mountain of printouts when the boss and his admin, Mildred, showed up. He was carrying a coffee in each hand and Mildred, being the obedient GS-4 pack mule that she was, was toting half a dozen boxes of doughnuts. She must have been a juggler in some past life. The boss set one of the coffees down for her, snagged a doughnut, and headed into his office while she began setting up a regular smorgasbord in the back of the unit like she did whenever it was someone's birthday. That was the beginning of the end of my nice, quiet morning. You know, the one where I was going to figure out what was messed up in that stupid mail program? Just to be clear, I didn't write the original code. Some clown who quit for a better life did. My job was to fix it.

After everyone was in, Mildred called us all to the back. The boss came out to join us and grabbed another doughnut before anyone else could get to them. Instead of the usual *Happy Birthday* sign, which was

what these doughnut-fests were usually about, Mildred had hung a homemade string of construction paper letters that spelled *Welcome* across the front of the table. As soon as the boss opened his mouth and started his speech, I knew he was talking about me. It was all pretty weird. I mean, I'd been there for what? A month? And they were just now getting around to welcoming me? What's with that? Yeah, I guess you're right. It was still nice of them.

The best thing about these get-togethers was that they let us hang out and talk for a while before starting work, like warming up in the on-deck circle only without the bat and steroids, just loads of sugar and caffeine. That's pretty much what we were doing when Mildred's phone rang. She answered it, called the boss over, and passed the call off to him. He said hello, listened a minute, asked the person on the other end to hang on, and said something to Mildred about taking the call in his office. He headed in there and closed the door. She transferred the call to his phone, stayed on the line to eavesdrop a bit before hanging up, and left the unit crying into a Kleenex she'd just used to blow her nose. I thought, what the heck? Who wipes their eyes with some booger-filled Kleenex? This must be serious. By now, everyone was watching the boss—still munching on their doughnuts and slugging down their coffees (don't get me wrong)—but everyone's eyes were glued to him. Something bad was up, something really bad.

After the boss hung up the phone, he pointed to me

and one-fingered me in like he did whenever he was going to chew out one of his lackeys. I thought, oh crap. He found out I was staying in the Village with a bunch of old farts who had commandeered a dead lady's house. I was about to be fired, soon to be a GS-0 on a career ladder to nowhere. But Rodin said it was legal, didn't he? Right of adverse possession... Perfectly fine... And he would know, wouldn't he? He'd spent most of his life in jail.

I polished off what I figured would be my last free doughnut ever and went into the office to face the music. I closed the door behind me. My boss said I might want to sit down for what he was about to tell me, but I figured if he was firing me, I'd stand and take it like a man, a soon-to-be unemployed man, a soon-to-be broke and unemployed man. I was already considering my options on how to get out of my promise to the Cooney's. A simple disappearing act might do it, but to what end? I had nowhere to go, nowhere to disappear to. I guess I could go back home, but Mom wouldn't be happy about that. And they'd catch up to me eventually. They always do. I was basically screwed. Anyway, the boss said he'd just gotten off the phone with my dad. There was no easy way to say it, but my mom had passed away in her sleep last night.

Talk about soul crushing. Anyone with half a heart would have broken down and cried that very instant. I mean, look at Mildred. She was wiping her tears in her snot rag over it. That's real emotion. Not me though

and not because I'm a heartless bastard. It wasn't that at all. You see, I haven't seen my dad since I was ten. Haven't heard from him either. Haven't gotten any news about him. Not a word. Nada. Zip. He just took off one day and that was that. It wasn't one of those *just heading down to the store for cigarettes and I'll be right back* kind of things either. No. It wasn't like that at all. He just got in the Rambler and left with nothing but the shirt on his back. Didn't wave. Didn't look in the rear view. Nothing. Mom wouldn't say why and I stopped asking somewhere around high school. So you can see why my reaction was more *what-the-heck* than *oh, my God*.

I have to say I wasn't exactly giving my full attention to boss man anymore. It was more like I was listening with one part of my brain and trying to figure out what was going on with the other. My boss was saying something about how I could take up to three days family bereavement leave with pay, and that he would allow me to take two additional days of leave without pay so I could have the whole week off plus the next weekend to mourn. Work could wait. This was more important. Family was more important than anything. He was going on about how Dad had contacted his older brother, my uncle Pinky who shared a house with some army buddies in the Village. It was just luck or maybe it was divine providence that I was staying with them, the boss said. My uncle was nice enough to volunteer to take me home to Parkersburg for the funeral. The boss said he had no

idea I was from Parkersburg. What a coincidence, he said. His wife was from there, too. Nice town. Social Security had a district office there in the Post Office building. In fact, he said, back in the fifties when Eisenhower decided to decentralize and set up all these redundant sites so the government could survive an A-bomb attack, SSA set up a secure terminal there that could access the Woodlawn mainframes just in case. (I guess that's because people still have to get their checks every month even after a nuclear war, right?) He said he'd clear it with them to give me access so if I had some spare time and felt the need to get some work done (you know, to take my mind off things) that I could. No pressure, he said, just putting it out there, you know? I still had a deadline to meet, but work was totally secondary. It was OK with him if I just hung out with my family and mourned the loss of my mom, but just in case...

You can see where this is going, right? Those crafty old coots and their battle plans and strategies—they'd boxed me in. Pretty clever, I'd say. I couldn't tell my boss the truth that they were going to rob Social Security. That would make him look stupid for taking a stranger's word over the phone and granting me special leave without double-checking. Plus if I told him it would probably get me fired for associating with criminals, knowing what they were up to, and not turning them in. Accessory before the fact, I think they call it. And I couldn't tell him my mom was still alive and well and living in New Jersey with my step-dad.

And could I really say I was a squatter in a dead lady's house and they were a bunch of pathological liars who belonged in an insane asylum? That would raise all kinds of red flags, start a security check, and probably get me fired. Besides, this guy was handing me a week off on a silver platter. It was like scoring a get-out-of-jail-free card from the *Chance* pile. And nothing was going to happen in Parkersburg. I mean, really? Worst-case scenario: they would get run out of town for being bat-shit crazy. Nobody arrests seventy year-old men for having a few screws loose. At that age, they're all a little cuckoo. Best case scenario: the entire squad would have to go to the bathroom a half hour into the drive when there wasn't a bathroom around for a hundred miles, and they'd just say the hell with this pissing in the woods thing, and we'd turn around and go home. I'd still get my week off no matter what.

The phone rang. My boss picked it up, listened for a sec, said thank you, and hung up. It was security. My ride was downstairs waiting. Here's your hat, what's your hurry?

I waded through the crowd of doughnut-munching, coffee-swigging coworkers who had all heard the sad news from Mildred. I tried to be as polite and full of *thank-yous* and *I appreciate that's* as possible. What was I supposed to do?

I spotted the Packard parked right in front of the building in the spot reserved for the commissioner. You know, the one with the sign that says all others will be towed? The engine was running. It sounded a

little rough. The exhaust was pretty thick, too, like a steel mill turned on its side. I don't know a lot about cars, but I'm guessing running a car for only a half hour every month isn't enough to keep things in tiptop shape. Pinky was sitting in the front passenger seat. Scaldar and Oz had the back windows and Rodin the middle back. And they were all singing. It was the same tune (more or less) that I'd heard Oz cranking out in the shower. But it wasn't "I'm mad as hell on army beer, party fool." It was *Mademoiselle from Armentières, parlez-vous*, and they were letting it rip like a bunch of slaphappy doughboys who had just finished a hard day of grenade chucking. Did you know that the mademoiselle hadn't been kissed in forty years? So that made her, I don't know, maybe sixty? And the soldiers were what back then, maybe eighteen? That's just weird.

The only seat left was the driver's. The singing stopped when I got in.

"Hello, Uncle," I said to Pinky. "Uncle's army buddies," I nodded to the three in the back.

Pinky had the map open in his lap. He said, "Turn right out of the parking lot. Then it's two lights down and a left at the stop sign."

"What's the big idea?" I said.

"Parkersburg, Mr. Maxwell," he replied, like it was nothing.

I asked, "How did you get here so fast?"

Rodin lifted his chin from his hand long enough to say, "We called from the payphone on the corner."

"Oh, OK," I said. "That explains that, but what the hell? I never said I'd drive you to Parkersburg. In fact, I think I might have actually said no. Yeah, I think those were my exact words. No."

"Don't get so upset," said Pinky. "It's not good for your blood pressure. I packed your ditty bag and a change of clothes. They're in the trunk with our things."

I turned the car off. "One," I said, "I don't have a ditty bag. I don't even know what a ditty bag is. And two, I'm not driving you to Parkersburg."

Pinky pointed to the window on the fourth floor where everyone was watching. "They think you are."

"Shit," I said. "You can't do this." I started the car up again and backed out of the space. It was definitely running rough. I said I was taking them home. That's when Oz leaned forward and I felt something poke me in the back through the seat. I stopped the car at the parking lot exit. "What is that?" I said.

"Take a wild guess, Junior," said Oz.

I felt something like cold metal touch the back of my neck.

"Drive," he said.

Naturally, I had to ask, "Is that a gun?"

"What do you think?" he said, sitting back.

"What do I think? I think this is kidnapping," I said.

"That's right, kid," said Rodin. "Just don't do any napping while you're behind the wheel."

They all laughed.

Funny. Real funny. Did they all have exactly the same sense of humor or is it just me?

"You can't do this," I said. "It's not right."

"You want to try and stop us?" said Oz.

How do you stop a gorilla with a gun?

Pinky raised his hand. "That's enough, boys. Mr. Maxwell, the fact is you volunteered for this mission."

I said, "No, I didn't."

Pinky dropped his patented shrug on me. "What?" he said. "You think you get dealt the hand you want in life? You get whatever card comes next in the deck."

"You mean the kidnapping card?" I said.

Objection overruled, apparently, because he shrugged again. "In the army we called this being volunteered."

"Why can't you drive yourself?" I said.

"Have you ever seen Sarge drive, Danny boy," said Scaldar.

I thanked Mr. Lucky Charms for his input and said, "Then, how about one of you drive? It's not that hard."

"None of us has a license," he said.

"Let me get this straight. You're worried about having a driver's license when you're about to rob a bank?"

"It's not a bank," said Pinky, "and it's not robbery. We're just taking back what's ours."

"And we cleared the whole thing with the boss man," said Scaldar. "You're good to go."

"And if we get caught," said Rodin, "we'll tell them you had nothing to do with it."

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Great plan. That’ll work. Especially when they find out I was going to a nonexistent funeral in Parkersburg for a mom who lives in New Jersey. Yeah, that’ll fly... like the Hindenburg.”

A guy pulled up behind us and leaned on his horn. We were blocking the exit. At that point, at gunpoint that is, I had no idea what to do. So when Oz poked me in the neck again with the cold hard steel of fate and said turn right, I did that thing you see in the movies where the recruits are lined up and the drill sergeant asks for volunteers to step forward and everybody takes one step back but you. I volunteered.

Chapter 6

Road Trip

We left Woodlawn behind after six more verses of *Mademoiselle from Armentières*. Let me tell you, that song is a lot stranger than just being about a woman who hasn't been kissed in forty years. It has so many verses they'd have to insert commercial breaks in it if they ever played it on the radio and that's even after the network censors removed the ones about body parts that Scaldar took lead on. Did he make those verses up? Beats me, but they all knew the words, even Oz.

Rodin said we had a six-hour drive ahead of us, and it was as bad as I figured it would be. Worse. Five minutes out of Woodlawn we had to make a pit stop for Oz. Yeah, that's right. The Great and Powerful couldn't hold his morning coffee more than twenty

minutes. Overactive bladder, Pinky said. Just wait till I get old and have to pee all the time, he said. There's something to look forward to, right? That tacked another fifteen minutes onto the trip.

Rodin was busy recalculating our timetable when Oz got back in the car. I don't know if you've ever been in a gas station restroom but on the whole I'd say they're pretty disgusting. They rank right up there with abandoned outhouses and overused porta-potties. I'm not sure what Oz brushed up against in there but he stunk (to high heaven, as Scaldar said). Pinky cranked up the heat, we opened all the windows, and left civilization behind for the middle of nowhere. By the time the stench finally cleared (or maybe it was when we couldn't smell it anymore) we hit a construction site outside some creepy little one-stoplight town. I can't remember the name of the place. It doesn't matter. I'm never going back there. The thing is we were the only car on that two-lane road and yet the flagman made us wait a half hour before letting us through while some guy running a backhoe filled in this big hole he'd dug in the pavement for who-knows-what. We lost another half hour there.

Later when we crossed the Potomac River and came to the town of Harper's Ferry, Rodin announced that we were officially in West Virginia. Unofficially (or maybe it's more officially) the heist they were about to pull off became an interstate matter, making it a federal offense even if they never made it out of the building, which was pretty much how I figured it

would go for them. But not me. Oh, no. I already had my escape plan set. We'd get to Parkersburg. They'd tell me to keep the car running while they went inside and when the feds nabbed them I'd just take off, head back to Evans Village, and lay low for the rest of the week in Mrs. Myron's house. Then I'd show up at the office Monday morning all sad and everything. I'd have to get something black to wear to work before I went back, maybe an armband or a black shirt or two. I was pretty sure I could find something suitably mournful in the Village's one and only department store. I'd also have to figure out long-term what to do about a place to stay, but as Pinky always said, one problem at a time.

By the clock in Scalders's stomach it was lunchtime, so we stopped at a roadside diner just past Harper's Ferry. Nice place. Nice view of the river. The food was pretty good, too. While we ate, Pinky gave us all a history lesson on the Harper's Ferry raid and the guy who led it—John Brown. You know, the one whose body lies a-moldering in the grave? Apparently he has a song, too. Pinky sang a little of it for us at the table—not as many verses as the mademoiselle's and definitely not dirty enough for Scalders's tastes, but the people at the counter clapped when Pinky stopped, or maybe because he stopped. It was hard to tell.

Anyway, John Brown was the one who'd led a bunch of volunteers in a failed attempt to take over the government arsenal in Harper's Ferry right before the Civil War. His basic idea was to arm the slaves and

start a revolt, but that didn't work out so well for him unless you consider a-moldering a win. Pinky said Brown's problem was that he wasn't much at tactics and strategy.

"How so?" I asked.

"What? You think you can just walk in and take over a government facility?" he said. "It takes more than men. It takes planning."

"Strategy," Rodin said.

"And don't forget improvisation when the fog of war gets thick as Irish stew," said Scaldar.

Oz leaned across the table. "And muscle, Junior... Plenty of muscle... That's where I come in."

I considered bringing up the fact that these old coots were pretty much looking at the same fate as John Brown, but what was the point? There was no way they were going to listen to me. I was just a kid. What did I know? And it didn't matter that they would end up either dead or spending the rest of their days a-moldering in a cell in Leavenworth. They were on a mission, damn it, and come hell or high water (or the urgent need to take a leak every half hour) they were going to see it through. No matter what. That's just how they were.

For some reason it was my turn when the check came, so I was volunteered to pay the bill. It was no big deal. I didn't even ask to see the list with Gerry's name crossed off and mine penciled in. We gassed up on good Gulf (my turn to pay again), and once Pinky figured out where we were on the map, we headed

west into no man's land. Miles and miles of nothing but trees and rocks and streams that the squad took turns peeing in and on. I can't tell you how many twisty mountain roads we took, but I *can* tell you that Rodin's twenty year-old map didn't have a lot of them on it. We took a few wrong turns, ended up on more than a few dirt and gravel roads, but somehow we reached the Ohio River.

That river marks the boundary between the states of West Virginia and Ohio. The city of Parkersburg sits on that river. The problem was Parkersburg wasn't where we were. Oops. Rodin reckoned we were about a hundred miles north of it so we headed south. By the time we'd wound our way down along the river to the outskirts of the city, it was late. It was dark. It was really cold, too. From what Rodin told us, they rolled up the sidewalks at nine in Parkersburg. He was right. The streets were empty. I mean totally empty except for us. We stuck out like a sore thumb. Apparently, that's why a cop in a gumball machine pulled us over across from the Wood County Courthouse. I rolled down the window when he tapped on the glass.

"License?" he said.

I handed it over and asked, "Is anything wrong, officer?"

He looked over my ID and gave me the once-over, too. "Just routine, Mr. Maxwell," he said, shining his flashlight around the car, checking out the rest of the squad. He noticed their khaki jackets. "I hope you boys ain't of a mind to head over to the American Legion

right now, cause they're only open on Thursdays and Fridays. Besides, it's kinda late to be out and about, ain't it?"

"Tell me about it," I said.

The policeman's smile was short a doe or two around those two big white bucks standing front-and-center in his mouth. "Where you boys from?" he asked in a drawling, hillbilly kind of way.

You know what I'm talking about, right? First they act all nice and everything. Then they take you to see their woodshed out back. Then when you get there they chop you into a million pieces with a big axe and spread them on the beet field for fertilizer. At least that's what I saw in a movie once. And that's why I don't eat beets.

But back to his question. "Near Woodlawn in a place called the Village," I said, trying to be as vague as possible.

"Never heard of it," he replied.

"It's in Maryland," I said, "near Baltimore."

"That explains the plates," the cop said. He took his cap off, scratched his bald head, and looked down at my license again. "But it don't explain this."

I asked him what he meant.

"This here license says you live in New Jersey." He handed it back.

I told him I'd just moved to Woodlawn a month or so ago and was waiting till I was sure my new job panned out before I switched the license.

"Don't that beat all?" he said. "You boys just

passing through?"

"We're on our way to a funeral," I said, "in Ohio. Columbus actually. My mom passed unexpectedly. This is my uncle and those are his army buddies. They fought in the Great War together."

"You don't say?" the cop said. "That's right nice, but you boys ought to consider investing in a map. If you're of a mind to head to Columbus, you're going the wrong way."

Pinky finally piped up. "What?" he said. "You think we don't have a map? My nephew, Danny here, works for Social Security in Woodlawn. A real big shot. He heard there was an office here and wanted to see it since we were in the neighborhood."

I thought, why don't you give him our address, too, while you're at it? Oh, and thanks for whittling my options down to living the rest of my life with you clowns on the run in the jungles of Costa Rica or spending my next twenty years in a federal pen. It's a good thing that cop wasn't a mind reader.

"A little late for sightseeing, boys," he said. "They close at five. Most everything 'round these parts closes at five."

"I really just wanted to check out the building from the outside," I said. "I heard it was pretty cool. Your whole city is actually. I wish we could stay a few days and check it out. Maybe on our way back through we can stop over for a bit. Can we, Uncle Pinky? Please?"

"Sure, sure, anything you want," Pinky said.

"You'll be wanting the Blennerhassett then," said

the cop. "Fanciest establishment in town. It's just up the street yonder at Fourth. And your Social office is left on Fourth and a couple blocks down next to the Post Office. If you shoot over to Fifth from there, you can pick up the Fifth Street Bridge. That'll bring you right into Ohio. A couple jigs and jogs and you'll hit Ohio 33. That'll take you right straight into Columbus."

"Thanks for the help, Officer Jenkins," I said, reading his nametag.

The thought occurred to me that if I confessed to the hillbilly cop that the good ole boys in the car with me had kidnapped me at gunpoint and were on their way to pull off a heist at the Federal Building, I could have ended the whole mess right then and there. Yeah, maybe I would have taken some heat back at the office, but I think I could have convinced my boss that I didn't know what the heck was going on until I got in that car and by then it was too late. They had a gun on me, for God's sake, the same gun Oz was pointing at my back, ready to blast me through the seat if I said the wrong thing to that cop. I couldn't let that happen.

"I heard you Mountaineers were downright friendly and, by gum, they were right," I said. I even gave my knee a slap. Lame, but it was the first thing that came out of my mouth. I have that problem sometimes.

The cop's smile took off down that old country road pretty quick. "Not all folks 'round here are from the mountains, son," he said. "It ain't like you see on

the TV. We ain't the Beverly Hillbillies."

"Sorry, Officer. I meant no offense," I said.

Jenkins nodded, but he'd already rolled up that old down-home welcome mat and tucked it away with the sidewalks. He tipped his hat and said, "None taken, but you boys best be on your way. Now you be careful, hear?" On the way back to his car, he stopped to write down our license plate number.

When we pulled away, Scaldar said, "Well done, Danny boy. You fit right in. You lie like a rug."

"This is great," I said, "just great. He's got my name, where I work, and where the car is registered. It is registered, isn't it? He's got everything he needs to finger me if you guys pull this off. Are you happy now? While you're living it up in Costa Rica, I'll be stamping license plates in Leavenworth."

"What? You think this is like the Great War?" said Pinky. "You think the two sides just dig trenches and shoot at each other?"

"What are you talking about?" I said.

He replied, "War today isn't like it was fifty years ago, Mr. Maxwell. Battlefields are fluid now. Strategies have to change as the situation changes."

"What's that even supposed to mean?" I said.

"It means you're coming to Costa Rica with us, kid," said Rodin.

I stopped the car at the corner of Fourth and Market. There was the Blennerhassett Hotel right where the cop said it would be. It was a spiffy-looking red brick thing with a turret five stories high above the

main entrance. Yeah, a turret, like the kind they used to shoot arrows from or dump burning oil on you—that kind. The place looked like an old castle someone had turned into a hotel. All that was missing was the crocodile-filled moat. There were a few lights on in the upstairs guestrooms, one over the entrance, and one inside in the lobby where a night clerk was watching TV at the front desk.

“Look,” I said. “I’ve got a credit card on me. It’s got a two hundred dollar limit. I’ll spring for rooms for us at this Blennerhassett place. We’ll bribe the desk clerk to get us some moonshine or white lightning or whatever they make in their still down in the dungeon. We’ll get totally wasted singing *Mademoiselle from Armentières* and we can all go home in the morning with an awesome story for our grandkids of how we almost robbed Social Security. What do you say?”

“We don’t have any grandchildren, Mr. Maxwell,” said Pinky.

“We only have you, kid,” Rodin added.

I think Rodin meant that other than his built-in chin-rest he only had me.

“So we’ve pretty much got nothing,” said Oz.

I couldn’t argue with that.

“The big man doesn’t speak for us all, Danny boy,” said Scaldar. “You’re a good man, and good men do the right thing. Help us, won’t you, lad?”

“Nice try,” I said, “but I was raised Catholic and I know a guilt trip when I see one.”

“What? You think this is about guilt?” said Pinky.

"It's about justice."

"Don't you get it?" I said. "The police are on to you now. The chances of you pulling this off just went from zero to negative ten."

"They're not on to us, Danny," said Scaldier. "They're on to you."

"And that's another thing," I began before Oz cut me short.

He said, "We should have taken care of that hick when we had the chance."

"That's your answer for everything," I said. "Does it ever work?"

Oz leaned in closer behind me. I could feel his eyes boring a hole in the back of my neck. Who needs a gun when you've got drills for eyes? Between his Sen-Sen cigarette breath and the Aqua Velva he'd picked up in the diner restroom, I wanted to puke.

"How about we find out right now?" he said.

"And that's what I'm talking about," I said. "This isn't good men doing the right thing. It's you doing a bat-shit crazy thing. You can't go around robbing the government and you can't go around shooting people just because they're in your way."

"Nobody's shooting anybody," said Pinky. "And it isn't robbery if you're taking what belongs to you."

I gave up arguing. "I can't do this," I said. "I'm sorry. Shoot me if you have to, but I just can't."

Pinky still didn't seem to understand. "What?" he said. "You came all this way and you're backing out now?"

"I came because Oz had a gun in my back. He said he was going to shoot me. More than once he said that." I turned around. Oz was still staring at me. "You did say that, right?"

Oz smiled, "Did I?"

Pinky said, "The corporal doesn't have a gun."

I looked at him. "What?"

Oz was laughing, definitely laughing. They were all laughing – at me.

Scalder said, "It was piece of pipe, Danny boy, a good enough whacker but to be sure not a gun."

I won't repeat what I said just then but it started with an F and ended with UCK and it wasn't fire truck.

Pinky seemed totally unfazed. He shrugged and said, "The officer said to turn left here, Mr. Maxwell. We should take his advice before we attract any more attention."

"I didn't volunteer for this," I said. "You drafted me. I never wanted to do this. Well, except maybe for the car, but I can't be a part of this. I have a life. I have a future... unlike you."

Have you ever said something really awful and regretted it the second the words came out of your mouth? I do it all the time. Why can't we have a six second delay like they do on live TV so the censors can block the things that shouldn't be said out loud?

"I'm sorry," I said. "That's not what I meant."

"We know what you meant," said Pinky, "and you're right. You're young. You have your whole life ahead of you. Us, we're just a bunch of foolish old men

with one foot in the grave. Why should you care? Why should anybody?" He patted my arm. His hand was shaking more than usual. "I'm sorry," he said. "We had no right to force you to bring us here. You're not our conscript. You're our friend, and you're free to go."

"You want me to get out right here?" I said.

"Sure, sure," he replied. "You're the one with the credit card and the big-time limit. The hotel is right there. Get your room. Drink your white lightning. Have fun. Take the Greyhound home in the morning. Stay in the billet as long as you like. Five more years and it's all yours. And don't worry about us. We'll be fine."

I said, "You're really going through with this, aren't you?"

"What?" he said. "You think we came all this way just to wave the white flag? Thank you for everything, Danny. You're a good boy. Good-bye."

That was the only time Pinky ever called me by my first name. He shook my hand and said it was all right, said I should go. I waved good-bye to the others in the rearview. They waved back. All but Oz, that is. He just stared out the window. I got out of the car. Pinky slid over into the driver's seat and drove off... more or less. There was a lot of jerking and stopping and starting and arguing back and forth and some feckin this and feckin that, but the Packard finally made it through the intersection and headed off down Fourth Street.

Chapter 7

Breaking and Entering

Pinky had just let me off the hook, a really big hook. To be fair, it was one he'd stuck in my mouth without asking, but to his credit he'd pulled it out and thrown me back. I don't think it was because he'd had his fun reeling me in and decided to let me go because I was just too small a fish to bother. I don't think the old guy got any particular satisfaction out of tooling me around. I just think he was desperate and really needed help, specifically my help. So he'd done the only thing he could—he'd tricked me—and now he was sorry for it. I know it sounds crazy. I mean, I was the victim here, wasn't I? So why did I feel so bad? I mean really bad. Does the hook hurt worse after it's pulled out? Is that even a thing with fish? I'd ask one but who speaks fish? All I knew was, in some twist of

crazy fate, I'd become the bad guy. I was the one who'd abandoned him. I was the deserter, not him. He would never do that to the squad. No way. No how.

Maybe you don't see it that way. Maybe you think I was just laying a guilt trip on myself because I was raised Catholic. Maybe you think I was just a confused kid who had no idea what he wanted. Maybe I *was* in it for a car and a few days off. I don't know. I just don't know.

But there I was standing on that sidewalk across from the Blennerhassett feeling pretty shitty. I could have booked that room for the night. I could have gotten roaring drunk on moonshine. I could have taken the bus back to the Village the next day. I probably could have lived in that house rent-free for a long time if I kept the Cooneys happy, maybe even ended up with it being mine after that adverse possession thing kicked in. And a week off would have been nice. My boss would never know. I mean, how would he ever find out that my mom was still alive? It's not like she calls work every day to make sure I packed my lunch.

Then again, it's not my boss I should be worrying about. It's the FBI. They would probably show up at the billet to search for evidence after they nabbed the old geezers. That's the kind of thing they do (at least on TV). They'd find me, ask me questions, check out my story. You know how they do that. But what the heck? I could just play dumb. That wouldn't be too hard. I'm not exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier.

Sir, those old guys begged me to drive them to

Parkersburg. What was I to do? They were desperate. Desperate, I tell you. They said they had a funeral to go to for an old World War I buddy. No, it wasn't a funeral for my mother. Where did you hear that? Oh right, my boss. About that... I think Pinky must have gotten the whole thing confused when he spoke to him on the phone. The old guy does that a lot. No, I have no idea why that hillbilly cop said I told him that it was my mom who'd died. I guess he didn't hear me right. Besides, it's his word against mine, isn't it? Yeah I know it all sounds crazy, sir, but you know how old people are, right? And the thing is they were soldiers (well, most of them). They fought for this country. They're the good guys, sir. At least I thought they were. OK. OK. You're right. I probably should have called my boss back and told him it was all a mistake, but don't you see? They needed my help. What do mean that makes me an accessory? All I did was drive them to Parkersburg. That's it. When we got there, they dropped me at the hotel, told me to get a room for the night, and take the bus home. They said they'd make their own way back. What's that? Why couldn't they drive themselves to Parkersburg if they were willing to drive home to Maryland on their own? How should I know? Have you ever seen the way old people drive? Maybe they needed to get there this century but didn't care so much how long it took to get home. Anyway, I figured when I showed up for work the next day, I'd explain it all to the boss and everything would be fine. I know I didn't do that. I admit I messed up, but how

was I to know they were going to do something stupid like try and break into a government building? Who does that anyway?

The more I thought about it, the less I liked it. The whole walking out on them thing, the lying to cover my butt, the having to live with it all for the rest of my life... How do you do that? How does that even work?

Think of every curse you know. Then make up a few of your own like swill-sucking, gut wallowing son of a pig bastard. That's a good one. It totally lets the person you're cursing at know you mean business. It doesn't matter if it makes no sense. That's never a requirement in the fine art of swearing. Then use every last one of your favorite curses and the ones you made up on the spot in one long, loud cry that nobody in Parkersburg would hear because they were all in bed (except maybe the night clerk at the Blennerhassett, but he didn't even look up from his TV). Got it? Good, because that's what I did right before I jogged off down the street after the Packard.

I hate jogging. Why is it that everyone you see jogging has this pained look on their face? They can't possibly enjoy it. So why are they doing it? Is it because pain is gain or are they just masochists? Or maybe they realized they'd just made a big mistake, too, and were jogging their little hearts out to make up for it.

I stopped on the corner where the Packard had turned right at the five-story Federal Building. The windows of its upper four floors were dark. The

ground floor entrance (where there was a sign that said Bureau of Public Debt) was lit inside and out. There was a spotlight over a camera mounted on the corner of the building. The spot was pointed at a cornerstone with a dedication etched into it that I couldn't make out from the street. An ancient two-story post office sat next-door to the Fed. That building was totally dark except for a single streetlight out front. When they built the Fed they knocked out the adjoining wall of the post office and connected the two buildings with a brand new two-story hallway. That made it easier to move mail back and forth, Rodin said, and there was a lot of public debt so they moved a ton of mail. That in-between section was dark, too. I could see a security guard planted at the front desk inside the Fed probably watching the same TV show as the night clerk at the Blennerhasset. I came a little closer to the building (but out of range of the spot) to read the dedication. *John F. Kennedy, president 1961*, it said.

"Good man," said Pinky, coming up behind me. "Shot in his car. Such a shame."

"Yeah, I know," I said.

He handed me the car keys. "I thought you might be back for your wallet with your big shot credit card. You left it on the seat."

I slapped my back pocket. He was right. I'd never put my wallet away after showing my license to the cop.

Pinky went on, "I parked the car around back by the loading dock. Leave it unlocked and the keys in the

visor when you're done." He turned and started walking back around the building.

I called out that I wasn't there for my wallet.

He stopped and turned around, "Then, what?"

I said I wanted back in.

He just looked at me.

"I've seen you drive," I said. "You'll never make it to New Orleans. You'll be lucky to make it out of Parkersburg in one piece."

He shrugged. "What about your life? Your future?"

I tried to explain as best I could that I didn't think I could live with myself knowing I'd let him down. Maybe I didn't use those exact words. I might have said something like I hadn't heard all the verses to *Mademoiselle from Armentières* yet. I don't know. But the truth, the stupid honest truth, was that helping those guys who thought they were getting screwed over by the government, the politicians, and everybody else who thinks old people don't deserve a decent living was the only thing that mattered to me that night. Had Pinky asked me how I felt about it the next day I might have said something different, like how my life was basically over anyway so what difference did it make. I think I actually did say that the next day when the subject came up again, but this wasn't the next day. It was then. It was Pinky. It was me.

I didn't have a dad growing up (at least not one I remember other than that he decided one day to take off in the Rambler and never come back), but looking back on it I'm sure that what happened next is exactly

what a father would do. Pinky hugged me and patted me on the back. He told me I was a good boy. He said he was proud of me, said he knew I'd come through, that he was sure I'd do the right thing.

The right thing? Who really knows what's right and wrong? Who's to say what's good or bad? Not me. Not Pinky. Not you either. That's for sure. I guess God knows but when was the last time he gave us any direct advice? The Ten Commandments? That was thousands of years ago. Things have gotten a lot more complicated since then. We need way more than ten dos and don'ts for all the things that can go wrong in this world, like what you're supposed to do when a bunch of old World War I vets get screwed over by their government. Which commandment covers that? If you ask me, as long as dialing God's number just gets me a busy signal the best I can do is try and do the right thing, then hope I didn't screw up too badly. That's all I can do. That's all anyone can do.

We headed around back. After retrieving my wallet, we joined the rest of the squad at the backdoor next to the loading dock. Rodin's first rule of breaking and entering was never go on a heist without a can of Barbasol. He'd already lathered up the one and only security camera with it. Great idea. Blind the watchman and hope he doesn't wonder why someone was giving his camera a shave in the middle of the night. Made perfect sense to me. Rodin's second rule of B and E was always carry a flashlight and a crowbar in your bag of tricks. Scaldier was holding the flashlight

for Oz, and the Great and Powerful was failing miserably at prying open the metal door that was apparently both crowbar and gorilla proof. Add that to the list of great ideas.

“This is your plan?” I said. “This is the great Social Security heist plan? You know you’ll never jimmy that door open, right?”

“Yeah, watch me, Junior,” Oz said.

So I watched the big ape put his back into it. He grunted. He groaned. He cursed. He knew a few good ones. When I got tired of watching him, I checked out the keypad next to the door. Ten numbers, zero through nine – probably a four-digit code. That meant ten thousand possible combinations: more than enough to keep out any hillbilly burglars who happened to wander by and try their luck, way more than we had time to try.

But you know what they say: if you can’t be good, at least be lucky. I asked Scaldner to shine his light on the keypad. He wanted to know why, so I told him. When I was at school I had a roommate sophomore year who used to steal from the chemistry lab to finance his drug habit: chemicals, equipment, gear, whatever he could sell cut-rate to the other students who couldn’t afford to pay full freight for their class supplies. He never took anything too big or too expensive. That would raise all kinds of red flags. He always kept it small so they wouldn’t suspect that it was any more than students pilfering stuff during class. That, they dealt with all the time. He’d been in

the business since his first year at school. Problem was, he flunked out of chemistry freshman year and the lab was kept locked with a keypad like the one on the metal door Oz was busy rapping with a crowbar. But my roommate was a smart kid (a thief and a druggie, but a smart kid). I think he's in med school somewhere now. Anyway, he figured out the combination to the chem lab by studying the keys. He probably should have studied chemistry instead, but whatever. He figured out that the keys where the numbers were more worn out had to be the ones in the combination. Nobody ever changes combinations at a place like that, right? It's too annoying for the professors to keep track of if you keep changing it all the time, and you definitely don't want to piss off the professors. So my roommate picked the four keys that looked most worn out to him and kept punching in numbers until he hit them in the right order. It took him a while (but less than a thousand tries out of ten thousand because he'd been lucky). I figured we might get lucky, too.

Oz took a well-deserved break (crowbar sex takes a lot out of you), and Scaldar shined his light on the keypad. On the one, six, and nine keys the paint was totally gone. The only thing left on them was the number etched in the metal. The other keys were in pretty good shape. Ten years—they'd been using the same three-digit combination for ten sweaty-fingered years. Three digits, six possibilities—seemed like a piece of cake to me. I punched in 169 and tried the door—nothing. Ditto for 196, 619, 691, 916, and 961. Oh,

well. Maybe my old roommate wasn't so smart after all. I think he was planning on becoming a brain surgeon. I'll have to look him up someday.

Oz, that crowbar sex machine, was ready to get back to it. "Nice try, Junior," he said. "Now step back and let the real men take care of business."

"Wait," I said. The answer was simple, even for me. I punched in four numbers and the door unlocked. "1961," I said. "The year the building was dedicated." Take that, drug-addict roommate brain surgeon.

I was kind of expecting a really loud alarm to go off when Pinky pulled the door open and motioned us inside. I was kind of expecting our next maneuver to be a strategic retreat back to the Packard (that's army talk for running like hell). I was also kind of expecting to get out of Dodge with nothing but a tall tale of how we'd almost pulled off the great Social Security heist. I expected a lot of things but not a giant St. Bernard dog with big droopy eyes sitting there staring at us. He was drooling like a leaky faucet, and drooling and drooling and drooling. Did I mention drooling? Aren't St. Bernards supposed to have a keg of beer or something tied around their necks for stranded skiers? You know, so the skiers can get boozed up while they freeze to death? This one didn't. He should have had a drool bucket around his neck. Maybe that's how he did his rescuing in the good old days. And it was everywhere: on him, on the piece of rug he was sitting on, the cement floor, everywhere. The strange thing was he didn't bark at us, didn't snarl, didn't do anything but

drool and stare. He wasn't chained, yet he didn't make a move (as long as you don't count drooling). We didn't either.

Rodin pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and held it in the dog's general direction. "Here you go, Ralphy, boy," he said. "There's a good dog. Want a treat? Your favorite, right? Come on, boy. Come here."

Ralphy got up and came over to Rodin without slipping on his own slobber, which was better than I did, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself. He sniffed the cigarette and then sniffed Rodin's hand like he was trying to decide which would be tastier. Hmmmm. Let's see. Do I feel like a nicotine fix or chicken fingers tonight? Rodin didn't need all those fingers, right? Unless it was his head-holding hand, in which case I'm not sure how that would have worked out. The dog apparently made up his mind and traded a big glob of slobber for the cigarette. Then he ate the damn thing. And yes, it turned the slobber brown. It was disgusting. Aren't dogs supposed to wag their tail when they're happy? This one didn't. Maybe it was too much work. Maybe it was because he'd just eaten a cigarette and was dying of nicotine poisoning. Who knows?

Rodin patted him on the head. "Good boy," he said. He turned to me. "All part of the plan, kid."

He proceeded to tell me how he'd met Ralphy during his reconnoitering of the Fed. Ralphy was their guard dog. He stayed in the back and patrolled the loading docks between sleeping, eating, doing his

business, and of course drooling. Rodin hadn't had any treats on him when they first met, but the dog kept sniffing at the pocket where he kept his Luckys, so he gave him one. Ralphy liked that. He liked it a lot. So Rodin gave him another and they became best buds.

"That was your plan?" I said. "To give a dog cancer?"

"It hasn't killed me," Rodin replied.

"Yeah but you don't eat them," I pointed out.

"Don't worry so much," said Pinky. "Bob said it was fine."

Of course, I had to ask who Bob was. I figured he was a vet. They would know about dogs and cigarettes, right? Turns out he was a vet, but not that kind. He was the kind who had spent most of World War II as a POW after his plane got shot down somewhere over France, but not just any old POW. The Nazis thought he was a Jew (which he wasn't, but there was no changing their minds) so they sent him to a concentration camp called Buchenwald. Rodin said Bob saw some pretty awful things there, really messed him up in the head. He came home a changed man. That was a long time ago. Now Bob was fifty something. He wasn't in the service long enough to get much of a pension. He was too young for Social Security, too messed up to get a good job, but not messed up enough to qualify for disability, so he took the night watchman job that nobody else wanted. No wife. No kids. Just Ralphy. He'd been doing it for a good fifteen years, hoping to make it to sixty-five. That

was his life's goal — make it to sixty-five so he could get Social Security. How sad is that? They let him bring his dog to work because... Well, I don't actually know why. Maybe they were worried Ralphy would flood Bob's second-floor apartment and the floor would collapse under the weight, drowning the people below him in slobber. Maybe it was because Ralphy was eight, which is really old for a St. Bernard. That's why a few cigarettes once in a while wouldn't hurt him.

Anyway, Bob was supposed to be watching the cameras and making the rounds once every two hours, but he'd told Rodin that he mostly just watched TV and slept. So we left Ralphy with a few more cancer sticks and climbed the fire tower stairs, stopping every flight for Oz to catch his breath. He was lugging the tool bag, which judging from his complaining had every tool they owned in it. It took us a good fifteen minutes to get to our next objective—the third floor. And I only slipped on Ralphy slobber once.

On the way up I kept looking at Scaldier. His face had turned as red as his hair. Finally, I asked if he was OK. He complained about his shoulder, said he'd twisted it making one of the turns, said it was aching like the morning after a feckin night at the whorehouse. How any of that made sense was beyond me, but it was none of my business so I let it slide.

The fire tower door on three wasn't locked. I don't think they're allowed to lock them, are they? Rodin poked his head in for a look, shined a flashlight around and gave us the thumbs-up. We followed him into the

hallway single-file like little kids sneaking off to have a cigarette in the boy's room between classes. Not that I ever did that. I was a good kid. And actually, now that I think of it, sneaking isn't the right word. There's no sneaking when it's a bunch of old geezers with creaky bones who grunt and groan and wheeze and cough and talk to themselves when they don't even know they're doing it. We might as well have announced on the loudspeaker that we were coming.

The third floor hall was just your basic hall. Not much to say about it. Only every other light was lit. I guess they were trying to save energy and taxpayer dollars. Very commendable. The offices were all dark and their doors were shut. The office we wanted, the one with the filing cabinet filled with IOUs, was locked. It was Oz time again. One small crowbar for the Great and Powerful, one giant leap for us past the shattered door.

When we were all inside, Pinky told me to close the shade on the one and only window. It was one of those windows that couldn't be opened. It's because they don't want the desperate workers jumping out. I hear that's hell on the insurance rates. At least that's what Pinky said. Rodin hit the lights after the shade was down. The office looked like any other government office to me: an armada of battleship gray desks with gray dividers between them. Not that they give you any privacy, but at least you don't have to look at the unhappy person next to you. Your basic portrait photo of the president was hanging on the wall by the door.

Richard M. Nixon—nice smile, nice teeth. The other walls had certificates and awards scotch-taped to them: employee of the month (a bunch of those), employee of the year (not so many of them, but still impressive), and a framed regional office achievement award from last year that was twice the size of the others. Nice. These Bureau of Public Debt people were good at what they did. I'll give them that. They even tried to add some color to the place with a few plants and flowers. That was pretty cool. It made me think I should bring a plant in for my desk, assuming I'd still have one after all this, I mean. And everything was so neat, so clean except for one battleship, which must have under the command of Rear Admiral Oinker. What a pig. His trashcan had half a burger in it. There were a few fries on the floor, a mess of papers and ketchup packets on the desk, and one dead plant. Why would anyone keep a dead plant? What's with that? And don't they have cleaning people that empty the trash every night? We did at SSA.

Scalder helped himself to a drink from the water cooler and gave the dead plant one too while he was at it. The old Irishman didn't look so good, and I said so.

"I'm fine boyo," he said, "just a tad weary."

Pinky told him to take a load off, so he took a seat at the helm of the *Swine Of The Sea*. He put his head down on one of the stacks of papers and said to wake him in ten.

The file cabinet, or the objective as Pinky called it, was next to the water cooler. It was battleship gray to

match the desks. Pinky said the government must have gotten a good deal on gray paint. It had four drawers, a key-lock, and of course it was locked. This is where I was expecting Oz to step to plate like the mighty Casey but with a crowbar. Instead he rooted through the bag, pulled out a few Z-shaped pieces of wire rubber-banded together, and handed them to Rodin. Rodin tried the different wires in the lock until he found the one that fit. Oz took back the others and handed Rodin another piece of wire, this one with one end crimped up into a point.

"What's that?" I asked.

"The pick, kid," Rodin said. "Every locksmith has one. It's used to set the tumblers. The Z is the torque wrench that puts tension on the lock to turn it when the tumblers are in place."

I said, "Where did you learn that?"

"I picked it up in a Bradford jail from my cellmate. He showed me how the pick the cell door lock before he broke out."

"You didn't go with him?"

"I only had a few more weeks left on my sentence so I stayed and practiced the trade." Rodin then went on to explain what he was doing. "These file cabinet locks are easy: three or four tumblers at most. Just slide the wrench in and apply a little pressure with your thumb. You want to try it, kid? You never know when it might come in handy."

"No, thanks," I said. "I'll just watch the master at work."

"Suit yourself," he said. "The idea is to apply pressure but not so much that you'll bend the wrench. Got it?"

I nodded.

He went on, "You put the pick in the lock. It goes all the way in. This is the part where you need some quiet so you can concentrate. You have to feel the tumblers and listen while you pull the pick back. Count them."

I didn't hear any tumblers but when he pulled the pick all the way out, he said, "There's three. Now the trick is to find which of them is the loosest. That's the one that gets pushed up first." He put the pick back in and felt around. "The middle one. Keep pressure on the lock with the wrench, push the tumbler up and listen."

The wrench turned slightly and there was a soft click.

"Now the next one," he said.

Two more times, two more clicks, and the lock turned all the way.

"*Veni, vidi, vici,*" he said. "We came, we saw, we opened."

Chapter 8

The Best Laid Plans

The best laid plans... That's what they say, isn't it? The best laid plans of mice and men go to hell in a handcart? You know, the one where the poor innocent mouse is just along for the ride? Don't remember that one? Can't say as I blame you. Pinky said I got it all wrong. It's not plans. It's schemes. And there is no handcart, never was. Schemes just go awry. Ask Bobby Burns. Good man. Good writer. Died young. Such a shame.

Sorry. I'm getting a little carried away. It doesn't matter what Pinky said. What matter's is this is the part where everything went to hell in that nonexistent handcart and I was along for the very real ride.

"Agent Feldman? What in tarnation?"

Those were the words we heard coming from the hall. Surprised the hell out of us because, as you might have guessed, no one thought to post a guard to keep watch. We were all so excited about finally getting to those IOUs that we'd forgotten the most important rule of breaking and entering—post a damn lookout. Even Rodin, the professional criminal, had forgotten. Well, guess what? Those words of surprise came from none other than Bob, the night watchman. Bob was making his rounds, the ones Rodin said he never made. And guess what else? Bob had a gun and was pointing it at us. You're probably wondering why Bob asked Agent Feldman about all this tarnation going on in his building when there was no Agent Feldman there. If you recall, Cosmo Feldman was the name on the fake ID Rodin had used to get his little tour of the facility with Bob. Don't remember that? Don't feel bad. None of us did either, at least not at first.

"What are you doing?" Bob asked. "Who busted this door in? And who are these guys?"

So many questions. All good ones, too.

It finally dawned on Rodin what was going on. "This isn't what it looks like, Bob," he said.

Bob clearly had his own notion of what it looked like, what with the door busted in and this bunch of strange men and Cosmo the FBI Special Agent in his building in the middle of the night.

"We'll see about that," he said, stepping into the room. "Reach for the sky, fellers. Go on, put 'em up. You too, Agent Feldman."

Nothing like a hokey line from a western to make a weird situation a lot stranger, right? I mean, he could have said, "hands up, scumbags," or "show me your armpits, losers." You know, something a little more trendy and up-to-date and maybe a tad more threatening? Apparently Bob wasn't a fan of crime shows and this was obviously his first bust in fifteen years. And the way his gun was shaking in his hand? Not exactly a confidence builder. We all put 'em up like the obedient caught-in-the-act bank robbers we were.

Rodin tried to reason with him, "Bob, we're here on official business."

Bob shut him up fast. "Zip it, Agent Feldman or whoever you are. You must think I was born yesterday."

Actually, compared to the squad minus me, Bob pretty much was.

Pinky stepped forward. He was shaking more than usual, even more than Bob's gun. That had me a little worried, too. "Listen to me, Mr. Bob," he said. "I can explain everything."

I don't know if it was Pinky's shaking or his disfigured face or what, but Bob let him speak his piece. Pinky gave him the short version of why we were there, which was basically that they'd been screwed over by the system just like he'd been, and they were there to get their money back.

"That's the craziest damn thing I've ever heard," Bob said. "This ain't no bank and there ain't no money

here." He finally noticed Scaldier stretched out on the desk. He also noticed that he hadn't reached for the sky like the rest of us. In fact, Scaldier hadn't lifted his head from that pile of papers since we started working on the file cabinet. "Get 'em up, partner," Bob said. "I ain't fooling around here. Get 'em up."

I gave Scaldier a nudge but he wasn't budging. I turned his head sideways. "Something's wrong," I said. I tried to sit him up, but he just slid down in the chair. It tipped over and he fell on the floor. I knelt down beside him and put my ear to his mouth. "I don't think he's breathing," I said.

"Is this some kind of trick?" said Bob.

"No," I said. "I'm serious."

Rodin made a move towards us.

"Where do you think you're going, Cosmo?" said Bob.

"I know mouth-to-mouth," Rodin said and kept going.

"All right," Bob said, "but no funny business."

The barrel of Bob's gun followed Rodin over to us. We lifted Scaldier onto the desk, rolled him on his back, and Rodin gave him mouth-to-mouth. The Irishman's face didn't seem so red anymore. It was always red. And his cheeks seemed droopy, you know, like the muscles just gave out? I couldn't watch. Rodin did his best, but we all knew Scaldier wasn't coming back. I'd never seen anyone die before. Do you have any idea what it's like to have someone there with you one minute and not the next? I still can't get over it. I don't

know that I ever will. Poor Scaldar. He never got to see those IOUs, never made it to New Orleans, never took that boat to Costa Rica, never got to sit on the beach and watch the ocean. Of course on the plus side, he never got busted by Bob and sent to jail for the rest of his life, so there is that.

Speaking of which, when Bob let Rodin go over to Scaldar, he made a huge mistake, a tactical blunder as Pinky called it, that not even a buck private fresh out of basic would make. He let a diversion draw his attention away from the real threat. In this case, that was Oz. With every ounce of his great and powerfulness Oz blindsided Bob and wrestled the gun away from him. Of course, it went off. Why wouldn't it? That's what guns do. Lucky for us when it did, the only casualty was President Nixon—got him right between the eyes. Good man. Good president. His portrait died so young. Such a shame.

I couldn't help thinking back to when I was sure Oz had a gun but actually didn't. The whole time in the car I was afraid he would use it on me because... well because he was Oz. Gorillas don't need a reason, do they? Now he did have a gun, a real gun, and it was pressed against Bob's temple. I don't how Oz managed to take a bullet out of the gun, write on it, and get it back in there so fast, but I was certain that next bullet had Bob's name on it.

"I say we get rid of him, Sarge," Oz said.

And I thought, oh great, here we go. This is where we graduate from robbery to murder.

"What? You mean kill him?" Pinky said. "We don't mistreat prisoners, Corporal. There's no honor in that."

"That's right," I said, "and it's against the Geneva Convention." Funny. I have no idea what's actually in the Geneva Convention, but I'm guessing it doesn't allow the cold-blooded murdering of prisoners. Or does that come under capital punishment? I don't know. It doesn't matter now. It didn't matter to Oz then either.

"They didn't have a Geneva Convention back in the day, Junior," he said.

And I replied, "Well, they do now. I'm telling you, you can't do this, Oz." Me telling a gun-toting gorilla what to do was like a mom telling her kid in the back seat to quit annoying his sister or she'll stop the car, and boy will he be sorry. It's an empty threat that goes in one ear and out the other.

It's a good thing Pinky was the one giving the real orders. "Tie him up and gag him," he said.

Fortunately for us, planning for the great Social Security heist included stashing rope and duct tape in the bag of tricks. Rodin tied Bob to a chair. When he tried to tape Bob's mouth shut, the poor guy said he couldn't breathe through his nose, that he had asthma or allergies or something. He promised he'd be quiet, so Pinky said no gag. Oz reminded him that he had a bullet with his name on it if he made so much as a peep. See? I told you he had a bullet with Bob's name on it.

"Not good, Sarge," said Rodin. "He can finger us."

Pinky nodded, "You're right." He thought a minute, then said, "Change of plans."

"Good," said Oz. "Let's waste him."

"Please, don't kill me," Bob said. He was scared shitless. Isn't that what they call it when you're so afraid that you're in danger of taking a crap in your pants? But if that's so, why isn't it called scared shitful? In any case, either Bob messed himself or someone farted big time because, man, did it stink all of a sudden. I'm thinking it was a fart because Bob begged for his life, not for us to let him go to the bathroom. He said he wouldn't tell anyone about us. He said he'd figure out something to explain the broken door. He'd blame it on Ralphy. That's it. The dog did it.

Rodin wasn't buying it. Neither was Oz. Neither was I really. First of all, Ralphy? Really? And second, it's always the butler that did it, not the dog. And third, the minute we were out the door, he'd be on the phone calling the hillbilly cops.

Bob started crying. "Who's going to mind Ralphy when I'm gone?" he said.

I thought, wow. He thinks more of that dog than he does of his own life. Here's another guy who served his country, got the shaft in return, and still wants to do the right thing. Bob was an OK guy in my book.

"Nobody's wasting anybody," Pinky said. "We're taking you with us, Mr. Bob."

"But Sarge," said Rodin.

I'm pretty sure I was thinking what Rodin was thinking. The heist was now a kidnapping, too. Not

quite murder, but definitely not good.

"There's no other way," Pinky said.

"The dog, too?" said Oz.

Pinky nodded. "The dog, too. We'll release them when we get where we're going."

"Uh, one slight problem," I said. "What about me?"

"What about you, Junior?" said Oz.

The gun swung my way. I put my hands up. "Take it easy, big guy," I said. "Just asking for a friend who was planning on going back to his old life."

Pinky said, "What? You've never heard of in for a penny in for a pound?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

Pinky looked over at Scaldar like he was an Irish king lying in state, only his state was a gray metal desk and he was just a broken old man like the rest of them. I could see Pinky was pretty shaken up. We should have covered Scaldar up with something. Isn't that what they do in the movies—put a blanket over the body out of respect and so you know the person is dead? Naturally, there wasn't a blanket in Oz's bag. Who plans for that kind of thing when it's just a heist?

"I'm sorry, but there's no going back for you now, Mr. Maxwell," Pinky said.

"You just told Bob my name," I pointed out, realizing after I said it that Officer Jenkins knew a lot more than just my name.

Pinky shrugged like it was nothing, which it was. "What? You think it matters that he knows your name? He's an eye witness."

"I can take care of that," said Oz.

Pinky reminded him that we were not murderers.

"We're not babysitters either," Oz said. "Nobody said anything about bringing Junior with us."

"Then, we vote on it," said Pinky, "and I vote yes."

Oz checked the gun, I guess to make sure it had enough bullets for both Bob and me, and maybe to write my name on one of them. "I vote no," he said.

"What about you, Mr. Maxwell?" Pinky said.

There was no way I could go home again: not with a witness who knew my face and my name, a cop who'd seen my driver's license and had the plate number from the Packard, and the FBI who would find my fingerprints on the building's back door lock and everything else I'd touched. They all had gloves on. Why didn't I get a pair of gloves? Maybe because I wasn't supposed to be there? Like I told you, I was the little mouse who had hitched a ride on the handcart and it was definitely headed straight to hell.

"OK," I said. "I guess since I have no choice, I'm in."

It was all up to Rodin now. I was pretty sure he didn't like me, maybe not as much as Oz, but enough to vote no. That would leave us in a two-two tie unless they had some rule about casting a vote from the great beyond that I wasn't aware of. Then what?

"We have an extra spot now," Rodin said. "We should fill it."

Waste not, want not, I guess. It surprised the heck out of me but it probably shouldn't have. Nothing

should have surprised me at that point. I wasn't even supposed to be there. I should have been at the Blennerhassett watching Johnny Carson and boozing it up on the best moonshine east of the Ohio River. Actually, when you think about it, I shouldn't have been in Parkersburg at all. When my boss got that call from Pinky, I should have said something but I didn't. I don't know why. I guess I'm an idiot, but at least idiots get to sit in the front of the handcart. Best seat in the house.

"Then, it's settled," said Pinky. "Mr. Maxwell is coming with us. Let's get our money and get out of here."

Chapter 9

The Big Score

This time, we posted a guard. Naturally, that was Oz. After all, he was the one with the gun, the actual gun this time. Rodin opened the top drawer of the cabinet. It was packed with file folders, the kind that hang on rails. None of them had “IOUs” printed on the tab, or “money we borrowed,” or “graft and corruption,” or anything like that. Just numbers. Rodin pulled out the first one, a fairly thin one. He set it on top of the file cabinet and in his classic chin-in-hand pose, flipped through it. Not to be critical, but using both hands would have sped things up a lot.

When he’d finally made it to the end, he said, “It’s all interagency correspondence.”

Oz turned his eagle eye away from the hall long

enough to ask what that was.

"It's when people talk to each other without guns or blunt objects," I said. "You should try it sometime. You might find it refreshing."

Pinky was in Oz's line of fire but Oz was like Gorilla Superman. His x-ray-vision stare went right through Sarge and hit me square in the face.

Pinky said to Rodin, "What? You think forty billion dollars in IOUs will fit in a little folder like that? Try the thickest one."

Rodin tossed the folder onto a desk and grabbed the biggest one from the drawer. This one was a couple inches thick and pretty beat up (well traveled, Pinky said). Rodin flipped through it and said it was the same thing.

You know, I had a hundred dollars in ones once in my wallet. I forget why. It might have been to impress a girl. That wad of bills must have been a good half-inch thick. I could only imagine what forty billion in IOUs would look like. "If it's that much money," I said, "it's probably split between a lot of folders. We'll be here all night. Hey, Bob, you're the tour guide. Which drawer are they in?"

He said, "You fellers are crazy. There ain't no money in there."

"They're IOUs," Rodin said. "The clerk said they keep them in this cabinet. Which drawer?"

And I added, "The sooner we find them, the sooner we let you go, Bob. So where are they?"

How's that for convincing?

"How should I know?" Bob said. "I just work here."

"You just work here?" I said. "What kind of answer is that?"

Pinky reminded me, "The same answer you gave us about working at Social Security when we asked if you knew anything about the law."

"Oh, right," I said.

Apparently Oz didn't get the memo about people talking to each other without guns. "If you want to *keep* working here," he said, "you'll spill it or I'll spill you." Nothing like a threat when you have no idea what it means, but even at that I was thinking, yeah, spilling sounds like a pretty awful thing to do to someone.

Too bad Bob was clueless. "What are you all wanting me to spill?" he asked.

"The beans," Oz said. "Spill 'em or I do you right now."

"I'm telling you there ain't no beans and there ain't no money," said Bob.

Pinky told Oz to get back to his post and Rodin to get back to the files. "We're wasting time. Give me a stack. Give Mr. Maxwell one, too. We'll go through them one by one," he said. "We'll find them."

"Can I just ask Bob one thing?" I said.

Pinky reminded me that he wasn't standing between Oz and me anymore.

"I know," I said. "It's just... Bob, where can I get a blanket or something to cover our friend?" Poor Scaldier. Somehow we'd let the IOUs come between us

and common decency.

Bob thought it over. "Betty keeps one of them afghan things on her chair. She's always complaining that the A/C is set too low. Made it herself. She's one to get carried away, too, that Betty is. It's so darned big, you could wrap two people in it."

"That'll work," I said. "Where's her desk?"

Bob gave me the room number and directions—up a floor and down the hall a bit. They never lock their office, he said. No reason to. Nothing in it worth stealing unless you're an afghan collector.

I grabbed Bob's flashlight and said I'd be right back. Pinky thanked me. I think he was crying. Rodin thanked me, too, and smiled—at least it looked like a smile. Rodin didn't smile much, plus that hand was always in the way so it was hard to tell. Oz didn't shoot me in the back as I walked by, so I guess he was OK with my doing this, too. One small step for me, one giant leap for ape kind.

I sprinted down the hall toward the fire tower stairs, stopping at the elevator. I hadn't noticed it on the way in. I figured I'd take it, so I pressed the UP button. The doors opened right away because the elevator was still there from when Bob had come up on it, I guess. I pressed 4. That was when I noticed that you could only get to the fifth floor if you had a key. I'd heard about elevators like that. That's how they keep the riffraff off certain floors. When the doors opened on four, I got off. Betty's office was down the hall to the right, but I was curious, so I headed left to

the stairs and took them up. When I got the fire tower door on five, I found it was locked. I guess they *are* allowed to lock fire tower doors if they really don't want anyone going that way. For added measure, the sign on the door said *no entry*. I walked back down to four, got on the elevator and headed down to the third floor.

"Where's the blanket?" Oz called out after he was sure that the guy walking hands-up toward him and saying don't shoot was me.

"I couldn't get the door open," I said.

Hey, don't look at me like that. It wasn't a lie. I never even tried the door, so how could I get it open? It wasn't exactly the truth either, but I was curious about that fifth floor and wasn't particularly interested in shuffling through a bunch of folders for an hour, especially when it looked like Rodin and Pinky were having such a good time with it. I don't like to rain on anybody's parade, OK?

"That door ain't locked," Bob said. "It ain't ever locked."

Bob's keys were attached to his belt. I unclipped them. "Tell that to Betty," I said. "I'll be right back."

I took off again. The first stop was Betty's office to snag that afghan. Bob was right. The door wasn't locked. He was also right about the afghan. It was huge. Beyond huge. You'd think she was working for Omar the Tentmaker in her spare time.

My next stop was the fifth floor. Bob had a lot of keys. I don't know how you can have that many keys

and keep them all straight. It took me a while to find the right one, but I did. No more riffraff for me. Penthouse here we come. When the elevator got to five it was like walking into a totally different building. There was no hall and no offices. The whole thing was just one big room. There were no windows on the walls where there should have been windows and no lights on. It was dark and creepy. I thought I heard someone talking so I called out, but there was no answer. And those other noises—like mice running around in the walls or padding away on those little wheels they put them in to keep them amused—what was that all about? And that whirring sound—was someone swinging something around in the dark... like an ax... at me? I saw a movie like that once. I thought, what the heck *is* this place, the Bureau of Public Debt Torture Chamber?

I was kind of freaked out and was all set to get back on the elevator when I noticed a tiny orange light on the wall next to the elevator door. It was a light switch. I flicked it and the place lit up. It was a computer room the size of the building. There were, I don't know, maybe twenty or twenty-five rows of mainframes working away. I saw tape drives, disk drives, communications equipment, things I had no idea what they were. Everything was humming and whirring and buzzing. You know, doing all those things computers do on their own? Someday they won't need us anymore. Can't wait for that. And let me tell you, it was chilly in there. Not as cold as outside, but man, it

was nippy. I wrapped Betty's afghan around me twice and did a little exploring.

Toward the back of the room, I found a couple desks with terminals on them working away at something. Naturally, I had to check those out. After all, I had a bachelors *and* a masters. That's when I realized this wasn't just any old Bureau of Public Debt Torture Chamber slash computer room. Scrolling on those screens were line after line of Social Security numbers, names, benefit amounts, and earnings records. This was Woodlawn's backup system all in one room. They'd never let me in the computer section back at Woodlawn, but I'd always imagined it to be like a whole crap-ton of people typing away, entering information into the system under the watchful eyes of their midlevel doughnut-eating managers. But surprise, surprise—here it was all in one room (the whole shmegegge, as Pinky would say) with no people, no managers, no 10:15 and 2:30 breaks, no lunch, no nothing but machines. No wonder the floor was shut off from the rest of the building. Those machines didn't need us there.

Funny thing, though—both of the terminals had keyboards. So maybe they needed us after all, unless there were a couple ten-fingered robots lurking about in the shadows. After ruling that out I sat down at one of the terminals and, just for the hell of it, pressed the space bar. The scrolling stopped, and there was a login prompt, sitting there, blinking at me, daring me to log in. You *do* know those computers keep a record

somewhere of every time anyone logs into them, right? They're sneaky like that. And just when you think you're in scot-free, the next thing you know the FBI is breaking down your door. It might take them a while before they notice, but they'll come for you. Guaranteed. The thing is, when you're already screwed because you let a bunch of old doughboys rope you into their crazy scheme and there's no going back, what the heck's the difference? I logged in.

All my stuff was there: my messages, my schedule, and that stupid mail program—the one I should have been back in Woodlawn working on and supposedly fixing. All my revisions, every version, every little change I'd made was backed up in Parkersburg in case of that A-bomb attack President Eisenhower warned us about. No nuclear war was going to stop me from making sure all those incinerated beneficiaries got the right letters.

I'd left a test program running back at the office before the squad kidnapped me. I checked on it. I don't know why. I guess I was curious to know if by some miracle my latest changes had worked. Maybe they'd go easy on me if they had. Big surprise—they hadn't. My simulation was still sending the same letter to all twenty-eight million Social Security beneficiaries. If the letter was just a "Hi, how's it going folks, blah-de-blah-blah" kind of thing it wouldn't have been so bad, but it wasn't. It was supposed to be giving them very specific and individualized information about their benefits. Oh well, back to the drawing board.

That was when something caught my eye. At the top of the screen, set apart from everything else, were the two words LIVE and BACKUP. The word BACKUP was highlighted. That meant that terminal had access to both the backup system in Parkersburg and the live one back in Woodlawn. So after the bomb dropped, assuming Bob survived and assuming he was really Super Programmer disguised as a mild-mannered security guard, he could send all twenty-eight million dead SSA beneficiaries the same stupid letter.

Dearly incinerated,

*Your next monthly benefit check will be slightly delayed
and possibly radioactive.*

Sincerely,

Bob

I know. I am one sick puppy, but you knew that already. Switching to LIVE looked pretty straightforward, so I did. I made a few changes to the mail program and restarted the test run. Call me crazy, but I really wanted that stupid thing to work. Even if I never saw the outside of a prison cell again, I wanted my last act of programming to count for something, like the runner who wants to win just one more race before he can't run anymore or the ballplayer who wants to get just once more hit before he hangs up his cleats. I know. It's stupid. I get that, but there you have it. When the program was chugging along, I logged out and headed back down to the third floor.

The guys were almost into the last drawer. The

place was a mess. Folders were everywhere. I covered Scaldier with the afghan and asked them how it was going.

"It would go faster if you helped," Rodin said.

I wanted to say it would go faster if he used both hands, but I just replied, "I'm on it."

"So, what took you so long?" said Pinky.

"I had to find the right key," I said. "Bob has a lot of keys."

Bob shook his head. "I'm telling you, that door ain't locked. It ain't ever locked. But does anyone ever listen to Bob? Nope. Nobody listens."

"Thanks, Bob," I said. "That's really helpful."

The bottom drawer had three-ring binders in it instead of folders. I grabbed one, opened it up, and there it was, staring me right in the face. "On this twentieth day of... Agrees to pay... This is it," I said, "the IOUs." Only they weren't called that because there isn't any "I" in government. They're called promissory notes, as in they promise to repay the money they took from you. Rodin said they more or less do pay them back eventually. Kind of like how I promised the Cooney brothers I'd pay for that oil, only as it turned out, it wasn't going to be any time soon and possibly never.

The binder looked more like a stamp collection only the stamps were gigantic. Each was in its own plastic sleeve with holes punched in them so they'd fit in the three-ring binder. It shows a lot of respect for your obligation when you punch holes in it.

"That can't be all of them," said Rodin. "There's forty billion dollars here."

"That must be what's in all of these other binders," Pinky said. He handed me a piece of paper. "This is how much we're owed. Not a penny more. Understand?"

"Uh," I said, flipping through the rest of the notes in the binder. "Houston, we have a problem."

"What's wrong, kid?" said Rodin.

"What's wrong is..." I said, going back through the binder again just to make sure. "Well, I don't know how to tell you this, but..."

"This isn't Apollo 13, Mr. Maxwell," said Pinky. "It's not rocket science. Spit it out."

"It's all here in this binder," I said. "All forty billion and change."

Rodin said that was impossible. He started going through the other binders, but they just had junk in them.

Pinky grabbed the binder out of my hands and flipped through it just like I had. "Each of these notes is worth billions," he said. "This can't be. No. It can't be."

"Well," I said. "I think it is." I should really learn to keep my mouth shut when I've got nothing helpful to add to a conversation.

Rodin came up with a great idea. "We take one, cash it in, and mail them back the difference."

Pinky sat down, staring at the top IOU. In my day I've seen kids beaten up, beaten up pretty badly, but I don't think I've ever seen a man beaten like that before.

"We can't," he said.

"Why not?" said Oz. "It's an IOU and we're the U, right?"

Oz had a point, not a particularly good one, but a point.

"Only if your name is Social Security Trust Fund," I said. "These aren't like cash, Oz. They're more like a check and they're not made out to you."

Poor Pinky went right to the heart of the matter. "But they took our money," he said.

"You're right," I said, "but it's not here. It's not anywhere. It's just gone."

"Like I told you," said Bob. "But does anyone ever listen to old Bob? Nope. Nobody listens."

"Shut up," Oz said. He was waving that gun around again. Not good. Not good at all. Rule number one – you never let the gorilla play with the firearms.

"It's not gone as in wasted," I said. "They spent it on roads and bridges and tanks and guns." I threw in the tanks and guns thing because I figured they could relate to that. "And everything else that keeps this country going including your monthly benefit checks."

"We came for our money and we're going to get it," Oz said.

Rodin agreed.

Things were going from not good to really, really bad awfully fast. "You need to keep cool," I said.

Oz reminded me just how much he hated that word. He fired off a round in the air. Oh well, they didn't need that ceiling tile, did they?

"OK," I said. "Just simmer down, will you? How are you going to get your money now? That's all I'm asking. How are you going to do that? What's the big plan?"

"The freighter captain was Scalders' friend and he only takes cash," Rodin reminded us.

We all looked over at Scalders. Somehow it was easier when he was just a lump in Betty's afghan.

"I thought you said you had the tickets," I said.

"Spots," Rodin corrected me. "Cap's holding four bunks for us. We pay when we get there—a hundred each."

"I don't have that kind of cash," I said, "and my credit card has a two hundred dollar limit." Then it occurred to me, "What about the Packard? Maybe we could sell it when we get to New Orleans. It's got to be worth a few hundred bucks right? It's an antique."

"You fellers are planning on going to the Big Easy, eh?" said Bob. "That's just downriver, ain't it?"

"Yeah," I said, "like a thousand miles downriver."

"Even if it gets us on the boat, it won't be enough," Pinky said. "You think we can live on air when get to Costa Rica?"

"Costa Rica?" Bob said. "A friend of mine was down there once. Good fishing, he said. That's just over the line into Arkansas, ain't it?"

"Right, Bob," I said. "Arkansas."

"I'd forget about that boat if I was you, boys," he said. "It ain't that far a drive."

"Bob," I said, "unless you want to be chewing on

duct tape for the rest of the night, you should probably stay out of this.”

He said he would after reminding us one last time that nobody ever listens to Bob.

“We’re cut off behind enemy lines,” Rodin said. “What do we do, Sarge? Give up?”

“What? Surrender?” said Pinky. “There’ll be no talk of that while Pinkerton Abraham Jenowitz is in command of this squad.”

I felt sorry for Pinky, for Rodin, even Oz. “We have to get out of here,” I said.

Pinky didn’t see it that way. He said, “We stay until we sort this out, Mr. Maxwell.”

“Sort what out?” I said. “There’s nothing here for us. Let’s get the hell out of here while we still can. We’ll figure out a Plan B back at the billet. OK?”

“What’s to figure out?” he said. “How much toothpaste to bring to prison? Twenty years, Mr. Maxwell. That’s how long the sentence is for burglary in this state. Rodin looked it up.”

“Look,” I said. “It’s not burglary if you haven’t stolen anything. As of now, it’s just breaking and entering and a little property damage and that hole in the ceiling. A couple years in jail tops. We’ll be out in no time. And who knows? Once we tell them what we were doing here maybe they’ll just call us crazy and throw us in a mental hospital for a couple years. That’s not so bad, right? I hear they put some pretty awesome drugs in the food.”

I was just kidding but boy did he get mad. “That’s

what they did to the boys coming home after the Great War who were suffering from shock, from their wounds, from the mustard gas. They drugged them and threw them in mental hospitals like so much garbage because they didn't want to deal with them. They almost did that to me."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just meant that this is not as bad as it seems." Of course, I was thinking maybe not for them, but it was definitely the pits for me. Twenty-three and my life was basically over. Nobody hires a felon, especially a crazy one, right?

"Sarge," said Rodin. "The mission started out as a burglary, but when Oz threatened the guard with a gun, it became armed robbery. That's life, not twenty years."

It's amazing how much you can learn about the judicial system from someone who's spent most of his life behind bars.

"Twenty years... Life... Same difference," Pinky said. "We'll die in prison before we see justice done."

"The problem, as I see it, is him," Rodin said, pointing to Bob. "Without him, there's no robbery, no witness to say we were here at all. Without him, we could walk away from this."

"I can take care of that right now," said Oz, and he kissed the gun barrel. That's right, he kissed it.

"This is insane," I said. "We've gone from burglary to robbery and now you want to graduate to murder? At least the kidnapping part is out. And I'm out, too. I can't do this anymore." I started for the door.

Oz blocked my way. "Where do you think you're going, Junior?" he said.

"Over to that hotel," I replied. "I'm going to book myself a room, find a bottle of white lightning, and get totally plastered. This is stupid. It's wrong on so many levels. And it's crazy. You're crazy if you think this is how people are supposed to act. Bob was just doing his job. Does that mean you have the right to kill him just because he got in your way? Think about it. His life is as messed up as yours. Give him a break, won't you?"

Oz looked over at Rodin. "Is there any difference between one murder and two?"

And I thought, this is it. This is the end... well... my end. Why wasn't my whole life flashing before my eyes? What's up with that? I guess when you're only twenty-three the flash takes a lot less time. If you blink, you'll miss it.

"Lower your weapon, Corporal," said Pinky.

"But Sarge," Oz said like the little kid whose mom just told him to go to his room. And boy, was he going to get it when his dad got home.

"That's an order," Pinky said.

Oz put the gun away. I had this weird image of him stomping off to his room and smashing all his toys and throwing them out the window into the driveway so his dad would run over them with the car when he got home from work. That'd teach him.

Pinky said to Bob, "You think we're murderers? We're soldiers. We served faithfully. We just want what we're due."

Bob replied, "I appreciate that, sir, and I'm truly thankful for it, believe you me. I did my part, too, and this was the thanks I got. So I know what end of the stick you're holding right about now. But Mr. Feldman there—or whoever he is—he's got a point. I can't just let this be. I've got a duty here and I ain't one to shirk that lightly."

"I understand," said Pinky. "We'll find another way."

Bob was a good man but he wasn't exactly helping his side of the don't-murder-Bob argument. He should have put the shovel down and shut up at that point, but he kept digging the hole deeper.

"I gotta say you fellers are in a real pickle," he said. "Can't go. Can't stay. If you ain't planning on killing me (which even I got to admit is the easy way out), it seems to me the only sensible thing to do is turn yourselves in and face the music."

I totally expected Oz to whip out the gun and the pull the trigger, Pinky or no Pinky, but he didn't. Like it or not he had his orders though it was pretty clear he didn't like them one bit. "So what now, Sarge?" he said.

Pinky got up from his chair like the boxer who just been beaten to a pulp but didn't know when to quit. "We fight on," he said.