Monday

Fitch flew down the few steps that descended from his front door, as he had done thousands and thousands of times. Landing on the pavement and pivoting lightly a hundred and eighty degrees left, he walked east, with many things on his mind.

Toward the end of January and early in the morning, the cold was dry, the air was still, and the light was not yet as white and full of glare as it would be later on, when the wind would rise to freeze the cross streets and whistle down the long avenues. For several months now he had left earlier than necessary, so early, in fact, that he would arrive at jobs before his crews and have to walk many times around the block or duck in to buy coffee that he did not want to drink.

By leaving early, he made it much less likely that he would encounter the mortuary convoys, which, just as he did, used Twenty-third Street to cross town. He told himself that this was a matter of convenience, because of the time he lost when they passed, when he would stop, turn to the street, put his hand on his heart, and bow his head. But those convoys raced by quickly, sirens blaring, always escorted by flag-bedecked fire trucks and many police cars, and for Fitch it was not a matter of convenience at all. Even by January, when the convoys were running with just body parts, he could not get used

to them, and would never fail to bow his head in respect, though by January he was just about the only one who still did.

He had fifteen men flexibly apportioned among four crews doing five jobs. His rule was always to have at least one man on any job on any day, unless floors were drying or other contractors needed to work unimpeded. Despite trying to keep roughly the same men on the same job, the shuffling was prodigious. Although clients didn't appreciate it, it was necessary for meeting his payroll. His men often had large families. They were immigrants for the most part, but also actors, writers, and painters who painted walls by day and then returned to unheated lofts to paint their canvases by night. One of these, a hair-thin Scotsman named Starr, whose paintings had greatly increased in size after he had begun to paint walls, lived on a diet mainly of hard-boiled eggs and beer. Because he was feather-light and driven, he could feed himself on twenty dollars a week, and did, so he could pay for his share of a loft in Dumbo and spend the rest of his earnings on colors, which he needed in prodigious amounts.

Fitch had two cell phones, and by the time he reached Eighth Avenue had already taken two calls, one in English and one in Spanish. His three best men, his foremen, were Colombians who in their country had managed large enterprises—a furniture manufacturing company, a group of restaurants, and a trucking line. They each would direct a job and sometimes two, running them with what might have been characterized as Swiss precision were it not as easygoing as they were.

Fitch was faultlessly honest, his lieutenants were skilled and efficient, and he and they were well spoken and civilized. Because of this, the Fitch Company was backed up for two years and could have been backed up for ten. They gave reasonable estimates, did the highest-quality work, finished on time, and had the bearing of hidalgos: that is except for Fitch, who had the bearing of Fitch.

Everything ran at a wheeled pace, and what had to be done was done with energy and rapidity. They were tired neither at the beginning nor at the end of a job, because for them it was all an even tapestry. After punch list and payment, Fitch would go right to the next site, where his crew would already have been at work. They rolled through each day at the same fast, sus-

tainable pace, renovating and finishing interiors in every borough of the city. As Fitch sped along, his phone rang again and a dozen people looked at their purses or felt their pockets. "Ya," he said unceremoniously, thinking that it was Gustavo, who had told him that he would call right back with a materials list for the space they were doing in the Thread Building. Clients never called before seven, and people who wanted an estimate would always call after dinner. Static on the phone as Fitch walked and changed position briefly cut out the other party, so he said, "Gustavo? Gustavo?" and then the connection was reestablished.

"Mr. Fitch?" asked a woman's voice.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"I apologize for calling so early. Is this a bad time? If you like, I can call later."

He stopped, to make sure the connection was pure and stayed that way. "No, this is a good time. Are you happy with the kitchen?"

"You recognized my voice."

"I did."

"After two years? That's amazing."

"I do that," he said.

"The kitchen's worked out very well. We had a problem with the microwave oven, but that had nothing to do with the renovation."

Fitch nodded. "What can I do for you?" he asked, as the subway rushed by, pushing warm air up through the grates, and then pulling frigid air in after it as it disappeared, its noise growing fainter.

"We redid the kitchen so we could sell the apartment, and last summer we finally did. The closing was yesterday."

"I hope you did well," Fitch said.

"Yes, and this morning I'm going to close on a duplex in Brooklyn Heights." She told him the address.

Because there was silence on the line, he moved around to pick up a better signal, saying, "Hello? Hello?"

"It needs some work," she said. "It's unoccupied, which I suppose would make it easier than the last job."

Fitch was totally backed up with work, but rather than simply t

her down—if he did not turn her down he would lose half a dozen other jobs—he was indirect. "The question is," he said, "how long can you stay where you're staying? Because we're so backed up. I've got jobs scheduled one after another for. . . ."

"I'm staying with my parents," she interrupted, "in Westchester. It's not a problem. When would you be free?"

"Two years," he said. Usually, he enjoyed saying that, because of what it meant about his work, his business, and himself. But, this time, he didn't enjoy it.

"Two years?"

"Look," said Fitch, for no reason that he could discern save something in her voice, "if it's small, if it's a small job. . . ."

"It isn't," she told him, expecting that the conversation would soon end. "A kitchen, two bathrooms, moving some walls, painting, floors, windows, everything."

"Let me look at it," Fitch said. This made no sense, because he could not afford to take on anything new. It was one of those decisions that contractors make, in memory and fear of lean times, that subsequently they cannot honor. "I'm going to be in Brooklyn in the afternoon. If you like, I can meet you there. What time would be convenient?"

"Can we make it later, in case of problems at the closing? How about five o'clock? I should be able to get there by then."

"See you then," Fitch said. "If you're not there, don't worry. I'll wait for you, Lilly."

She was pleased that he had remembered her name. "How long?" she asked, which seemed strange, even to her.

"Until you arrive," he replied.

"There's no lobby."

"That's all right, they don't let me wait in lobbies anyway."

"Thank you."

A bus went by, and in its ugly brown roar the connection vanished.

As he was walking in the cold wind and blinding sun, he recalled this woman and her husband. They were almost young enough to be his chil-

dren. The husband, who worked on Wall Street, wore dark horn-rims and had the face of a rabbinical student. A genius of sorts in the abstract, he had delicate hands and seemed actually to fear the resistant power of the apartment's walls and woodwork that had to be pulled apart and put together again. Fitch knew that this was because of the precision of his nature, that what he feared was the breaking of more than had to be broken, the pulling out of more than had to be pulled out, and the damage to parts that were to remain, creating in irreparable shattering not only more work than was necessary, but chaos as well.

A contractor, however, learns early on to deal with chaos, and the technique is simple: if you can build, you need not fear the terrors of demolition. For example, if you know how to build a window-opening into a wall, how to set a window in it, how even to build a window itself, and how to do the trim and painting around it, you need not fear any of the process of taking the window out, for you can go down clear to the bone and come back cleanly, rebuilding, better than in a partial repair.

Like her husband, she was delicate and dark. Graceful and beautiful, she had treated Fitch and his men neither patronizingly nor with false sympathy, as was often the case when clients dealt with the Fitch Company. An academic, she taught classics and was working for tenure at Columbia. "That's my country," Gustavo had said dryly.

As Fitch walked, he thought about her closing and then his own, when he had sold his apartment on the Upper West Side before moving to Chelsea. He had owned the apartment in the clear, and was sitting calmly at a table with half a dozen lawyers, waiting out the hours of paper shuffling, when a man burst into the room and, with evident pleasure, held up his right index finger and declared, "I'm from the Hapsburg Fund, and nothing closes here until we say so!"

He had the wrong room. Nevertheless, everyone froze, even Fitch, though only momentarily, for, having no mortgage, he had nothing to fear. "Please sit down," he asked the officious interrupter. The man from the Hapsburg Fund sat down. Fitch cleared his throat. "We're going to close without you," he said.

"You can't close without me."

Fitch nodded to the lawyers, who laughed.

"You think it's funny? I'm going to shut this whole thing down. It's within my discretion entirely."

"It's not," said Fitch.

"You can't close."

"Yes we can."

The man from the Hapsburg Fund said, "Guess what? It won't go through unless I sign off."

"Ah," said Fitch, "that's where you're wrong. You see, we're from another planet, and your law doesn't apply to us. Isn't that right, lawyers?" he asked the lawyers, who nodded with certainty.

"You're insane," said the interloper.

"Sign where there are arrows," said one of the lawyers, pushing a tide of papers toward Fitch, who signed on page after page.

AS HE WENT FROM ONE SITE to another, hauled materials, made deliveries, and took measurements, Fitch thought about how she had referred to *her* closing, not *his,* her husband's, or *ours.* Perhaps this was in the self-centered way many women refer to shared bedrooms as "my bedroom," something every contractor has observed. But she was not that kind of woman. Nonetheless, while he waited for her on Columbia Heights he was saddened to think that her husband had left her, or that she had left him. Half his renovations, it seemed, were associated with recent or impending divorces, but when he had dealt with this couple he had thought that they were destined for a long life together. It was none of his business, but when they did a job he and his men would discover in many conversations far more than they needed to know about their clients' lives.

The building was a brick double-wide with limestone sills and lintels on the street side. Hers were the top two floors and, he assumed, a roof terrace. It had a separate entrance, which was excellent from his point of view—no paying off superintendents, and work at any hour as long as it was quiet. And though it was set back from the Promenade enough to keep it from the roar of the BQE, the building had a magnificent view of the harbor and lower Manhattan. He and his men loved to work with a view. Still, whatever

its attractions, he dared not take this job, because he simply couldn't work it in without the risk of badly disrupting his business. She would be disappointed, but he would give her invaluable advice that would protect her in dealing with whoever would bid for and do the job. He would keep them there until eight, until she and her husband—who, if they were not divorced, would probably show up, since he worked just across the river—were giddy from hunger. And if they remembered every detail, or took notes, it would save them two months' time, a hundred thousand dollars, and much heartache. Though he couldn't do the job, Fitch would in this way make up for it, because they had been kind to him. And he hoped that when he saw someone walking with the tense and expectant gait of a person who is rushing to a meeting, whoever was moving toward him on Columbia Heights as the sun was setting would not be moving toward him alone.

IN THE DUSK the street was briefly empty—with not a single person or car moving along it. Though the wind was blowing and it was twelve degrees, still the lull was otherworldly, because at a quarter of five people should have been returning from work. And though the wind was terribly cold it was clean, having come from the south over the ocean, from the empty parts of the world.

Three people suddenly appeared near Pierrepont Street and the playground. Given the way they walked, he knew they were coming to meet him, especially when, still two minutes away, a hand went up tentatively from the one in the middle—Lilly—like a semaphore. From the unmoving attitude of their heads he could tell even several blocks distant that their eyes were on him. It was impossible to discern except indirectly, by noting that the upper parts of their bodies seemed immobile in comparison to the far greater fluidity of the rest. When people walk, everything moves, except when they are anxiously fixed upon a destination.

They had probably brought the architect. Fitch hated architects the way anyone might hate someone who demeans him for not being able to realize perfectly a bunch of vague instructions in service of foolish and unnecessary theories. Not a week before and in the presence of the client, Fitch had an-

swered an architect's hectoring and accusative question with the words, "Because, if I hadn't put it there, the upper floors would have collapsed, that's why. You forgot to support them properly. It was correct on the early drawings, but you left it out of the finals. Perhaps your hand slipped when you were clutching your automatic pencil."

"I don't use an automatic pencil," the architect had said, his face the color of a cherry.

"You should," Fitch said as the architect stormed out, "it would do a better job." And, then, to the distressed client, "Don't worry. He's not building this, he just thinks he is."

Neither an architect nor Lilly's husband was flanking her, but two older people who walked as stiffly as cranes. Divorce, thought Fitch, and a bad one. He left *her.* Screwed her. Her parents are paying for the apartment and holding her up between them. As badly as the woman might take it, for the parents to see their child wounded was far worse. These people were in their seventies and probably their most fervent prayer was that she would be happy again before they died. Fearing that she would not be, they would be so protective that they would treat Fitch like a plunderer.

They were suspicious, as Fitch knew quite well anyone has the right to be upon meeting a contractor, and they seemed so reserved and so intent upon protection that it was as if they had said, "If you do anything to harm our daughter or exploit her in any way, we will eviscerate and burn you."

The father was tall and thin, with an old-fashioned brush mustache, very neat. He too had dark horn-rims and an intelligent face. He wore a gray greatcoat, a plaid scarf, and no hat. He looked like Robert Trout. To Fitch's relief, the mother was not in a fur. Every winter day in New York Fitch passed a hundred thousand old ladies doddering along in furs. Though they could afford them, they could not carry them. Someone of fragile build in a fur coat always seemed to Fitch to have been devoured by a wolf or a bear. If underneath a heavy fur there was not a gorgeous fertile body, it was just the preface to a funeral.

Fitch himself, at fifty-three, might have been taken for a bear. His massive face appeared to be bigger than the faces of the three people he was about to meet even had their faces been fused into one. His immense hands were

strong from wielding hammers. His body was like a barrel. And yet he had the same quality of expression, the same kind of glasses, the same careful and thoughtful look, as they did. Were the parents academics, like their daughter, they would have their higher degrees, as she did, and as he did, too, although he had never done anything with his except, in the sixties, earn them.

It was his nature to read rather than to write, to listen rather than to speak. Erudite and learned, he had been overcome at an early age, upon the death of his father, with a reticence that would never leave him. As if guarding what he knew and saving it for heaven, he confined his output to the production of beautiful rooms with plaster moldings as white as wedding cakes, with deep and glistening floors, magnificent cabinetry, walls like smooth prairies, and tranquil effects of light and shadow. That was his output, and all the rest, all his knowledge and contemplation, which was so immense that it seemed to require his very large body to hold it, stayed and developed within as he read, pondered, and learned, and as the work of his intellect perfected neither article nor book but only his soul. That is not to say that he was comfortable with this, but that he had no choice in the matter.

"You're Fitch?" asked Lilly's father.

"I'm Fitch," said Fitch, with no choice in the matter. The way he said it was a signal to Lilly's father that he, Fitch, was never going to take advantage of her.

AFTER THE HEAVY DOOR had been pulled shut by its spring, they stood for a moment, listening to a faulty radiator valve. Someone once had tried to close it and broken it further, and as it rattled and hissed it made the pipes knock with the lonely sound that haunts the winters in New York and echoes from floor to floor of apartment buildings and tenements like the complaints of a dying man. The air was hot and dry, as it will be in most empty apartments in winter, but Fitch refrained from opening a window, for he was a guest, even if, just having taken possession, Lilly, too, moved as carefully as a stranger.

Had the place had a soul it might have been offended that its owners had abandoned it and left it dirty. Dust lines on walls and floors betrayed where

furniture had been and currents of air had run along its edges. The wall behind the stove was almost blackened, the exhaust fan covered by dust and grease with the texture of velvet. Porcelain had yellowed and chipped, light fixtures in bathrooms and in the kitchen were the mass graves of hundreds of desiccated flies, and the windows were anything but clear.

They took creaky stairs to the upper floor. In each bedroom and in one of the bathrooms the previous occupants had left telephone books, hangers, and dead lightbulbs. In one bedroom window, one of the panes had been replaced with cardboard from a frozen-dinner box. The only illumination on the second floor was the mysterious glow, as if from an astronomical photograph of distant galaxies, of the office buildings across the river in Manhattan. It was wind-whistling and bleak, but beautiful nonetheless—white, tranquil, and deep.

Aided by her hands moving like those of a policeman directing traffic, Lilly explained to what extent she wanted to enlarge one bedroom at the expense of the other, and that she wanted to change the hall so that one entered the bathroom from the enlarged bedroom.

"Do you want to keep the skylights?" Fitch asked with professional detachment, almost brusquely, looking up.

"Yes," Lilly answered, bewildered. "The roof garden is mine alone." The skylights were of opaque glass, and privacy would have been assured even had she not been in sole possession of the roof garden.

Fitch had asked about them not in view of privacy but because the roof garden was accessible from the roofs of adjacent buildings, and skylights were a common means of forcible entry. Had she seemed less vulnerable, he might have gone on to reinforcement and alarms, but he was silent, unhappy that she might be thinking less of him because it seemed that he was unable to appreciate the even and filtered light that opened up the rooms beneath the roof to something more than simply day.

On the roof itself the wind forced its way through their coats and chilled them as much as they had been overheated moments before. The office towers of lower Manhattan, cold and brilliant, loomed up like an immense cliff. Red lights at their tops blinked arrhythmically. One could see even the flow of the river marked by the movement of its speeding and broken ice, and the

traffic on the bridges looked like sequins on an evening dress. Snow was left on the roof, and the wind would pick it up capriciously and move it from place to place, sometimes blowing a sparkling veil of it over the parapet and into the night. The roof was three quarters covered by a deck, and Fitch had noticed that the ceilings of the floor below were stained. The deck would have to be replaced and the roof redone.

"Let's go down," said Lilly's mother, the coldest, and they gladly descended to the first of Lilly's floors, the building's fourth, where they gathered to talk, in a room lit by the dim light that came from across the river, as the radiator hissed and the pipes knocked.

"Do you have an architect?" Fitch asked.

"Do I need one?" Lilly asked back.

"An architect would think so, but it depends on what you want to do and how much you trust me. An architect will tell you that without him I'll pad the job, use inferior materials, and run with the money. And many contractors would do exactly that."

"You won't," she said. "When we redid the kitchen it was the architect who cheated us, not you, and you easily could have, couldn't you."

"Yes," said Fitch. "I wouldn't have done a good job of cheating, but I've been cheated enough to know the rudiments."

"I heard you say something then," Lilly told him, "that you didn't know I heard."

Fitch waited.

"You didn't know I had come in, because one of your men was on his way out and the door opened and closed just once as we passed each other. I was taking off my coat, and you were talking to . . . the foreman. Gustavo?"

"Gustavo."

"And you said, 'I *hate* liars.' You were angry. You were very angry. You see, I trust you. And I'm not going to give you a huge amount of money to start."

"What I can do depends on what you want to do. What do you want to do?"

She told him: the kitchen, baths, changing the bedroom dimensions, painting, repairing the little things that were broken, bookshelves every-

where. "My husband and I have many more books now than even what you saw in the apartment two years ago. We moved them from our parents' houses, and they just keep coming in."

Fitch was pleased to discover that it seemed there had been no divorce. "I'll work up an estimate," he said, taking out a little notebook. "Give me a fax number."

She did. It had a 914 area code.

"In a few days, you'll get a rough picture of what I can do and for what price." He had completely forgotten the impact upon his schedule that this job would have. "Then you can add, subtract, replace, modify, and we'll go back and forth until I can show you some plans, and cut sheets for materials, fixtures, and appliances. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that's fine," she said. The parents said nothing.

Fitch was hungry. He wanted to get home and eat. He needed to talk to Gustavo and Georgy. He needed a hot bath. But he wanted to leave with less abruptness than the sudden silence suggested, so he took a step toward the windows of the living room, his face lit by the skyscraper light, and said, "On September eleventh, we were working on Joralemon Street. When we heard that the first plane had hit, we went up on the roof. Everyone kept on saying, 'Jesus, Jesus,' and we stayed up there, and watched the towers come down. The dust on the windows is from the Trade Center. It will have to be washed down very carefully, or the mineral grit will scratch and fog the glass. And it will have to be done respectfully, because the clouds of dust that floated against these windows were more than merely inanimate."

When he turned back to them, only the father was there. He could hear Lilly on the stairs, and her mother following. Fitch thought this was somewhat ungracious. Then her father moved a step toward him and took him lightly by the elbow, the way men of that generation do. His tweed coat reminded Fitch of old New York; that is, of the twenties and thirties, when the buildings were faced in stone the color of tweed, when the light was warmer and dimmer, and when in much of the city, for much of the time, there was silence.

"Her husband was in the south tower," the father said quietly. "He didn't get out." Then he turned and went after his daughter, walking stiffly down the stairs, like a crane.

. . .

BY SEVEN O'CLOCK, Fitch had returned home, with fresh fish and vegetables, to a Chelsea apartment that overlooked a large garden and was as quiet as the New York of his childhood. He made a fire in the woodstove, quickly did the mail, and prepared his dinner. When he was forty-eight and the first Mrs. Fitch had left him for a new life and a new job with an investment bank in London, he had decided that he would refuse to become, like so many divorced men, a habitué of restaurants, and instead had learned to cook.

He had one immense room with a tiny bedroom off it, and a luxurious bathroom that he had copied from a luxurious hotel. As his dinner cooked slowly over the fire in a Japanese wrought-iron pot, he sat close by on a rush chair, staring into the flame. The only light other than firelight was a warm fluorescent beneath the cabinets suspended over the kitchen counters, blocked except where it glowed within a pass-through.

Normally as he made dinner he would read, or listen to the news, but now he just sat still and watched the broth lightly boiling in the pot. For almost an hour he stared into the fire. Then he replenished it, ate, cleaned up, and returned to position. For a man with no living family and very few friends this could have been quite lonely, but wasn't. He was counting with his fingers, shuffling numbers in his head, calculating square footage, weeks and days, hours, costs, taxes, fees, and rates of interest. He was calculating them neither desperately nor greedily, but, rather, casually, as if he were watching a tennis match. And yet, underlying his ease and relaxation was an inflexible resolution. At nine-thirty he picked up the phone and pressed 1. "Gustavo, are you busy?"

"No."

There was a pause while Fitch thought. Gustavo knew that when Fitch called and ten seconds were held in suspension, changes were due. "We've got five jobs at the moment."

"Yes."

"They'll finish in the order Smilksteen, Yorkville, Liechtenstein, the chicken restaurant, and Requa, is that correct?"

"I don't think so," said Gustavo. "Put the chicken restaurant at the end.

We still don't know the dimensions of the rotisseries, and we won't until they come in. I asked them a million times, but they say it's hard to call up a factory someplace in Korea and get a number you can rely on."

"Okay, the chicken place at the end."

"Why?"

"How far are we in Yorkville?"

"You saw. Twenty-five percent, maybe thirty."

"They haven't paid us," Fitch told Gustavo. "They're six weeks late. They think they can get away with it, but we're almost even, because their first payment covered most of our overhead until now and we can cancel the materials that haven't been delivered yet."

"We've already put ten thousand dollars in lumber, electrical, and the start of the plumbing rough-in."

"We'll eat that," Fitch said. "Shut down the job."

"When do you think they'll pay?" Gustavo asked.

"No, close it down. I'm not going to play games. They think we won't walk away from ten thousand dollars. I'll bet they've done the calculation to the penny. Shut it down and take the tools."

"Okay, tomorrow morning."

"Now we've got four jobs. How fast," Fitch asked, "can we finish Liechtenstein?"

"With the Yorkville crew, now," Gustavo answered, "ten days."

"And Requa?"

"That's two months, anyway."

Fitch thought. "What I want you to do," he said, "is to pull people off the other jobs to finish up with Liechtenstein and Requa, those two."

"So we slow down chicken and Smilksteen?"

"Yeah, no more than two men on either, until they're done."

"They won't like that. You're talking about a month late for both, at least. That'll kill us with penalty, not to mention reputation."

"That's all right."

"Just because you want to go to U.N. Plaza?" Gustavo spoke as elegantly as an ambassador, and could have been one. In the beginning, Fitch had had to convince him not to bow and kiss women's hands, explaining that Americans would think either that he was mocking them or that he was insane.

"I didn't say anything about U.N. Plaza."

Now Gustavo paused. "Wait a minute, Fitch," he said. "At the cost of twenty or thirty thousand dollars and three angry clients, in two weeks we're going to have most of our people free. How could we go anyplace but U.N. Plaza?"

"We're going to be two or three weeks late there, maybe."

"If they let us in late," Gustavo added.

"I'll talk to them."

"If we're late there, the whole job line will be pushed back. It'll be a disaster. What did you get, Fitch, Gracie Mansion? The White House? The New York residence of Mr. Bill Gates? It must be very important, and very lucrative."

"It's not lucrative, but it'll be the best job we've ever done, and we're going to do it faster than hell."

"What job?" asked Gustavo. "What?"

"You know," asked Fitch, "how knights would die for the Virgin, would yearn to die? And how everything in the world seemed unimportant next to their peculiar, settled, certain devotion?"

"Yes, I know," Gustavo said, "because that is still very much in the heart of my country."

"Well, then you know. Sometimes you find something that's truly important, and even though it throws everything into disorder you know you have to do it . . . and it gives you new life."

"Let me guess," said Gustavo. "This new job is for a woman."

"Yes."

"And you're in love with her."

"No, I'm not. I don't know her, and she's almost young enough to be my daughter. I suddenly came to love her, but I'm not in love with her."

"That's even more dangerous."

"Right," said Fitch. "It is. I'll see you tomorrow."

IN THE FIRST TWO WEEKS of February, Fitch met Lilly five times at the site and sent her thirty faxes—some quite short and composed of just a single question, but others of many pages, with sketches and lists of costs and ma-

terials. He had to have this job, so he priced it honestly but as low as he could, certain that he would get it, and he did. For the high quality that he would provide, he would charge three hundred thousand dollars, a sum that was slightly under her expectations and her father's.

Because he was closing down projects in Manhattan, and because she came into and left the city at Grand Central, they agreed to meet for lunch on Friday, the fifteenth of February, at the Oyster Bar. He never met clients for lunch, but he had a great deal to say to her about the contract he would be bringing for her to sign. He knew that she would be surprised that he would have it ready for signing, and surprised as well by its terms.

"It's so noisy in here," she commented as they entered. "How will we be able to hear?"

"It's the vaulted ceilings," Fitch said, leading her forward, "but if you sit at the far end of the oyster bar itself, the effect almost vanishes."

"Oh," she said, stopping short. "I can't eat shellfish; I have to sit at a table."

"No no, I know, I thought that might be the case," Fitch told her as they moved toward the quieter place. "You can order anything here that you can have at a table, and I won't have any shellfish."

"Please do," she said. "Have whatever you want. It's not a problem. I have, in my time, eaten every kind of shellfish. I love it. But my husband came from an Orthodox family, and we just never. . . . I stopped eating shellfish."

It was remarkably quiet at the end of the bar. They sat and opened their menus. Fitch, who knew what he was going to have, put his menu down almost immediately. "Take your time," he told her. "I already know. I've come here—in fact, to this seat—a lot."

She studied the menu with the triple difficulty of someone avoiding shellfish at the Oyster Bar, trying to hurry, and not being clear about who would pay. Because of these multiple confusions, it took her some time, and as time passed she felt embarrassed, and she, Lilly, turned the color of a rose.

He was obliged to look at her at intervals to see if she had finished and was ready, and he spent as much time looking at her as he spent looking away. He had known that her eyes were blue, but he had not known how blue. Behind her polished lenses they were exquisitely beautiful, he thought, not merely because of their extraordinary Prussian-blue color but because of

the intelligence and spirit they betrayed in their quick and alert motion. Even when immobile, they seemed ready to move, to judge, compare, and take in fact and sensation from the center and from the periphery.

He could not possibly love her the way her beauties invited him to love her, because he was too old, and because she had just lost her husband, whom she loved, and she would not, she could not, be ready until Fitch was not merely too old, but far too old. Still, when he looked at the several tiny crescents at the corners of her mouth as she smiled, at her lips pursed or moving in speech, and at her hands floating gently, sometimes, in pantomime, he felt a rush of love and contentment that he then had to suppress.

He was good at suppression, having learned in Manhattan's expensive neighborhoods that young, elegant, and beautiful women turned from the gaze of a man who, no matter how intelligent, worthy (perhaps), and admiring, had paint on his clothes, his watch, and his glasses, and who was dressed to work with his hands. And he could suppress his desires because he was an honorable man. And he did, though, aware that he was studying her and forcing himself not to look too hard or too long, she had, to her own surprise, no objection.

A pound of oyster crackers was already in a basket in front of them. "That's a great deal of food right there," she said. "I'll have a small fish chowder and a glass of white wine."

"I'll have the same," Fitch told the waiter, "but with a beer, not wine." He opened his briefcase to take out copies of the contract. "It's ready for signing. We can get that done today."

"I can't," she told him. "I didn't transfer funds or bring a check."

"You don't need a check."

"What about the deposit? Don't you require a twenty-five-percent deposit?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"I don't need a deposit."

"You don't? What about materials?"

"We're coming off other jobs," Fitch said. "We're hardly short of funds. Don't worry."

She had not done enough of this kind of thing to know how unusual this was. Her father would have been—and would be later—very suspicious, but she was not.

"And, about materials, that's another thing I wanted to talk to you about. We have a warehouse where we store our materials, tools, and trucks. We do a lot of expensive projects, and most of the time the clients have no way to use excess material, so they ask us to take it. Because we bring particular types of marble, tile, fixtures, moldings, whatever, from job to job, most of the time this is to our advantage. But if we go to another kind of job where we don't use that exact set, we have no room in our warehouse for the things we might need."

"So you want to offload it on me?"

"No. We can sell it back, but with the restocking fee and prices for broken lots, it works out to the same thing as buying new material at a lesser quality, and it's an accounting nightmare. After your place, we're going to U.N. Plaza to do two entire floors, and the materials are specific to that job. We've got to empty our warehouse, so there may be opportunities for advantageous substitutions."

This was totally untrue: his warehouse was too well managed to be overfull. He simply intended to give her, at his own expense, a far better job than she could afford, and he did not want her to know that he had done so.

"I've made an extensive list, with cut sheets and full specifications, of these potential substitutes. It has only upgrades, as you'll see. And if you don't like anything, we'll pull it out and go with the original."

"You can do that?"

"There's no structural work. We can do that."

"But you might have to repaint a room, or redo a floor or something. Wouldn't that injure your profit?"

"No," said Fitch, quite honestly, for on this job he would have no profit as commonly understood. He would have, as commonly understood, a loss. "You'll see in the contract that if any substitution, or all, will not meet your approval, you can require us at absolutely no additional expense to install the original, to meet the contract specifications exactly."

Taking out a little leather portfolio, she opened its red Florentine cover and,

shuffling the pages, said, "I'm going to be away until Monday, March eighteenth. You might put a lot in, in a month, that I might make you pull out."

"Not to worry," Fitch told her. "In a month, we'll be mainly setting up, doing demolition, the systems rough-ins, framing, and administration—permits, ordering, receiving, inspections, all that kind of thing. It's a five-month job."

"My father said six months. Can you do it in five?"

"I'm going to put a lot of men on it. You'll see that there's a penalty clause. We'll have to refund to you five hundred dollars for every day past the completion date."

"And what do I pay for every day that you're early?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"That's right."

They were looking at one another directly, eyes locked as if purely because they were in the crux of a business negotiation. Anyone viewing them from nearby, however, might have thought that they had fallen into the lovers' traction that one sees so often in New York, mainly in restaurants, as gardens and bowers are scarce.

"It sounds so disadvantageous to you. It makes me nervous. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do. Look, I don't know what happened to the country, but everybody tries to screw everybody else. More so than in my father's day, more so than when I was a child, more so than when I was a young man, more so than ten years ago . . . more so than last year. Everybody lies, cheats, manipulates, and steals. It's as if the world is a game, and all you're supposed to do is try for maximum advantage. Even if you don't want to do it that way, when you find yourself attacked from all sides in such fashion, you begin to do it anyway. Because, if you don't, you lose. And no one these days can tolerate losing."

"Can you?" Lilly asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Tell me."

He hesitated, listening to the clink of glasses and the oceanlike roar of

conversation magnified and remagnified under the vaulted ceilings of the dining rooms off to the side. "I can tolerate losing," he said, "if that's the price I pay, if it's what's required, for honor."

"Honor," she repeated.

"Honor. I often go into things—I almost always go into things—with no calculation but for honor, which I find far more attractive and alluring, and satisfying in every way, than winning. I find it deeply, incomparably satisfying."

"How do you stay in business," she asked, "in *Manhattan?*"

"We do a lot of work in Brooklyn," he answered. "Look, although I'm not as rich as some other contractors, I always have a steady supply of work, and usually it goes well. Sometimes we have a loss, but we're paid back in reputation and in pride in what we do and how we do it."

"I know," said Lilly, "from last time."

"Take the contract home. You don't have to sign it now. Bring it to a lawyer."

"My father's a lawyer."

"That's perfect."

"But, listen," she said. "I don't have to bring it to him. I can read it right here, and sign it. I trust you."

"No," he insisted. "I want you to give it to him. If he wants, we can modify it. I want you to be absolutely confident, absolutely reassured."

"Why?" she asked.

"I want you to be happy."

Moved by this, for many reasons, some of which seemed even to her to be mysterious, Lilly looked away—at the long sweep of the bar at which they sat, and the blur of waiters and barmen in white, moving like the crowds in Grand Central, even busier, and the noise like that of water and ice flowing in a rock-strewn brook.

"Tell me why you value honor," she said.

"I'm fifty-three," he answered with analytical detachment. "My father died at fifty-nine. What good is money? If I have six years left or thirty, it makes no difference. My life will be buoyant, and my death will be tranquil, only if I can rest upon a store of honor."

"There are other things."

"Name them," he challenged.

She met his challenge. "Love."

"Harder than honor, I'm afraid, to keep and sustain."

This startled her into silence.

"YOU'RE AN IDIOT," Gustavo said, as he and Fitch were measuring in Lilly's dust-filled duplex. The first day after the permit, the demolition had been finished in record time and removal and cleanup were under way, with nine men moving about like the builders of the Panama Canal. Gustavo was insulting only when he was frightened. "Here, because there are so many people with Ph.D.s, they have to drive taxicabs and mix drinks."

Fitch wasn't entirely sure what Gustavo was trying to say. Nonetheless, he answered. "But Gustavo," he said, "that's why we're a great power. It's how we invented the blender."

"You can't throw away the whole business for one crazy thing."

"Who's throwing away? Everyone's getting paid."

"From your pocket."

"So?"

"How are you going to retire? With the materials you're going to use here, and this kind of detail, it will cost us half a million dollars. No profit, and two hundred thousand dollars from your pocket."

"No," Fitch said calmly. "Five hundred thousand. I'm not going to charge her."

Gustavo put his clipboard down where he was kneeling, and straightened his back. "That's everything you have."

"Don't worry, Gustavo. We're going into U.N. Plaza on the eighteenth. We won't be late. We'll be early."

"The eighteenth of what?"

"March. Monday, the eighteenth of March."

"We'll finish here in less than a month?" Gustavo was stunned.

"I'm going to call in as many subcontractors as we need, pay overtime, work day and night myself. It'll be done by that date. When she returns from California she'll come back to the most beautifully done space she's ever seen—in pristine condition, clean, quiet, safe, complete—with a Fitch Company bill that says, 'No Charge.' That's what I want."

"Why?" Gustavo asked. And, when Fitch was not forthcoming, Gustavo commanded, "You've got to tell me why."

"If you could see her . . . ," said Fitch.

"I saw her when we did the kitchen. She's pretty. She's beautiful. But she's not that beautiful."

"Yes, she is," said Fitch. "She bears up, but I've never seen a more wounded, deeply aggrieved woman. It's not because she's physically beautiful. What the hell do I care? It's because she needs something like this, from me, from us, from everyone. Not that it would or could be a substitute, but as a gesture."

"A substitute for what?" Gustavo asked.

"Her husband."

"Her husband left her?"

"Her husband was in the south tower when it came down," Fitch said. "For Christ's sake, they'll never even find the bodies. Vaporized, made into paste. What can she think? What can she feel?"

Gustavo looked away to his left, at the wall where he had drawn some lines and written some letters. "How old is she?"

"I don't know. Early thirties? Middle? Her parents are old. The mother has that look in her eye, as if she knows that her time is close. I'm doing it as much for the parents as for the child."

Still on his knees, Gustavo closed his eyes. After a while, he rose to his feet. "To me," he said, "you cannot pay anything. Don't protest. Nothing for this job. I'll work with you day and night. Let me talk to the men."

"No, don't tell them. They have enough troubles of their own. They're not in a position to do this. I am."

"Fitch, they have honor as much as you. They'll decide for themselves. And that fucking Scotsman, he owes it to everybody and the world.

"Listen up!" Gustavo called, a colloquialism he had embraced with great enthusiasm, and that he spoke with authority and promise.

THE RHYTHM OF THEIR WORK in the month that followed was like a rolling wave. In hour upon hour of tedium, of scraping, sanding, sweeping, mea-

suring and remeasuring, driving nails, turning screws, drilling holes, fitting things, smoothing plaster, and running wire, Fitch saw himself, as if from a trance, atop a wave rolling across the sea, the wind lifting droplets from curling edges and blowing them back like a scarf trailing in the slipstream of a car.

Their normal conversation was curtailed until they said almost nothing. Even the Scotsman, whose chief work requirement was to argue with Fitch, Gustavo, and everyone else, was quiet. He let his paintings stand enormously in his cold loft until the smell of linseed oil and turpentine was taken by the drafts and pinpoint leaks beyond the loft and blown over Long Island and out to sea, and as the paintings rested in darkness, the Scotsman worked in Brooklyn Heights.

The only respite was when something was setting or drying, or materials were late in coming. They scheduled the bathrooms in such a way that one was always available for use. They scheduled the rooms so that they never lacked a place for a row of cots. One man's job was purely cleanup and housekeeping. He took food orders, served the take-out meals on two doors resting on sawhorses, and carried out construction waste and debris twenty times a day. So that the food would be varied, he went round-robin from one type of restaurant to another. He bought compact discs and ran Fitch's music system, brought from Chelsea, like a disc jockey, taking requests. They might have a Greek dinner and afterward work to Celtic music, or a Japanese lunch followed by an afternoon of rock and roll. Everything was possible, because some of the people on the floors below were away, and the others were almost deaf.

Another man did nothing but deliver materials. Whenever he arrived in the truck, as many men as needed would come downstairs to unload and carry. It went fast, and he would set out again. When Gustavo was not supervising, he did the fine-work. Fitch set up a desk, his two cell phones, a bank of battery chargers, a computer, and a neatly shelved library of plans, telephone directories, catalogs, and ledgers. To get a break on materials, he would, while in the physical presence of the supplier, state the purpose of the job.

For example, he might walk into the marble place, which was in northern Queens and surrounded by chop shops and piles of salt. He was a good

customer, but nothing like the big commercial contractors who did floor after floor of new office towers. "Deansch," he might say.

"Hey, Fitch, how are you?"

"Great, Deansch, great."

They liked him. Among other things, although he knew costs and never had to overpay, he did not have the power to make them slice so thin that they couldn't eat, and he always paid instantly, something almost unheard of in the contracting business. Now, however, though they didn't know it, he did have the power to make them slice it thin, so thin, in fact, that it was inside out.

"What can I do for you?" Deansch asked. "Are you in U.N. Plaza yet?"

"Eighteenth of March."

"We've got the marble when you're ready for it."

"Now we're on a small job in Brooklyn."

"Whataya need?"

"The ivory Carrara."

"The best we have and the best there is."

"Two thousand square feet."

"No problem. We've got it."

"You have to cut me a deal on it."

"I'll consider it part of the U.N. Plaza pricing. That'll drop it from sixteen to thirteen-fifty per square foot. That's a deal."

"I need better than that."

"Better than that?"

"We're doing this job for free, all of us. No one is getting paid. We're working eighteen-hour days, sleeping there."

Deansch tightened. "For who?"

"For a woman who lost her husband when the World Trade Center went down."

"What's her name?" Deansch asked, already struggling within himself.

"Lilly. Does it matter?"

Deansch shook his head, rocked it really, pursing his lips as he thought. "No," he answered. Then he looked up at Fitch, and said, "Take what you need."

In the days of furious work, and the nights, when they labored in the blaze and heat of lights, something arose that made it easy. It was not merely a rhythm or a sense of progress. Nor was it the unusual speed of the work, nor the caffeine, nor the music, both of which powered them on all of their jobs and neither of which was capable of sustaining them as now they were sustained, power and perseverance flowing so voluminously and steadily that they were lifted from their fatigue, lifted above their difficulties, just as Fitch had imagined, as if on a wave in the wind. Such waves can without effort lift even immense ships, because the power of the wave comes from the great mass and depth of the sea.

Without the slightest hesitation, Fitch's men had refused pay, committed to staying twenty-four-hour days, and started immediately. The weeks in which they would work this way would be weeks in which they would not see their families, and it was not as if they and their families had no troubles to speak of that a month without pay would make worse. Fitch had no children and therefore no need to keep what he had or to come out ahead. They did. These people, who had less power over their own lives than anyone Fitch had ever known, were the most generous he had ever encountered.

Wives, mothers, aunts, and cousins would show up to serve meals of rice and beans, fish, chicken, vegetables. The many children in tow, who were quiet, charming, brown-eyed, would take a turn at sawing, sweeping, or painting, their fathers' hands often guiding them. Fitch paid their fathers well, but upon seeing this he resolved to pay them better, especially now that he had rid himself, or would shortly, of his carefully accumulated savings and, following upon that, of the need or desire to save.

A lapsed but believing Catholic, he had not been to mass since mass had lapsed out of Latin, but what happened in the weeks of February and March made up for the thousands of masses he had missed. The mass existed, in his perhaps heretical view, to keep, encourage, and sustain a sense of holiness, and to hold open the channels to grace that, with age and discouragement,

tend to close. Witness to those who had little sacrificing what they had, to their children contributing to the work in their way, and to the fathers' pride in this, Fitch felt the divine presence as he had not since the height of his youth. The less he had and the closer to death he felt, the more intense, finer, and calmer the world seemed. It had been a long time since he had been on the ocean on a day of sun and wind, but now he and all his men were lifted and traveling on the selfsame wave.

THIS WOULD HARDLY BRING BACK for Lilly what had been taken from her, and, knowing it, he would work furiously into March, as if it might. March broke with pale sun, spells of warmth, and respite from the snow and bitter cold. Sunlight now flooded in from the great airy spaces over the harbor and the mouth of the East River, from between the buildings in the financial district, from east, south, and west, and even by echo from the colder and bluer north.

For long periods they forgot Lilly and forgot their purpose, as if the driving force of what they were doing was merely what they were doing and its driving force, self-sustaining, self-feeding, and rounding in perfection. The work itself became the object, and never in their lives had they done better. Never had the walls been straighter or smoother, never had the plaster been whiter, never had the wood been closer joined, never had the joints been tighter, the colors more intense, the proportions more artful.

Georgy had been absent except to measure, and when he arrived with his cabinetry they had no need to comment as one might when someone else has made his best effort but not quite hit the mark, for what Georgy had done was so self-evidently beautiful at first sight that their quiet admiration was the greatest praise. And when they fitted it all in, something that normally would have taken four or five days but which now they did in a day, and when it was combined with the appliances that Fitch and the appliance dealer had bankrupted themselves to supply, the men kept on saying, "Look at that! Look at that!" because nowhere in New York or perhaps anywhere else was there a better job.

This was repeated in rosewood paneling, in limestone baseboards, in

nickel, marble, granite, and unobtrusive plaster molding that physics said could not be whiter, purer, or more like snow in bright sun. It was apparent in the ironwork, brass work, and glazing. The solid walnut doors were two and a half inches thick, with the same brass hardware and hinges as in the White House, and they closed more smoothly and quietly than the doors of a Rolls-Royce. The lighting had been planned by a theatrical lighting designer who had worked for free and delayed a Broadway opening ("So what?" the lighting designer had said), and its effects seemed to double the space. It shone here or there with such clarity and purity, or softly and gently, that moving from room to room was like passing through the seasons.

Although these attributes, some massive, some almost undetectable, were of interest in themselves and had taken sacrificial labor and care to create, the remarkable achievement was that they were all subsumed quietly into something greater. In the place Fitch and his men built, the trees and the garden below were pulled in, as were the water and the light, and the openness of the view in all its intricacy. It was a refuge, and yet it was not closed. It was a fortress, and yet it was light and airy. It was luxurious, and yet it was modest and austere. Everything was in perfect balance, contending forces in abeyance, as had been intended, and when on Sunday, the seventeenth, they withdrew, leaving the surfaces polished and perfect, they knew much more than that the next day they would be going to the big job at U.N. Plaza and would once again be earning. They knew that they had made something beautiful, and, because of this, they were content.

ON MONDAY, the eighteenth of March, 2002, Lilly arrived at the apartment late in the morning. Her train into Grand Central had been delayed, and the Number Four to Borough Hall had sat on the track for twenty minutes, its doors opening and closing as inexplicably as if they were responding to radio signals from Mars.

The sky was delft blue, and broken clouds spread across it were touched with yellow as the sunlight passed through them. In the playground at the foot of Columbia Heights, scores of young children worked the swings and bars as if these were the machines in a factory run by monkeys. Half

Jacket design: Darren Haggar. Jacket photograph © Jane Booth Voiland/Photonica. Author photograph © Lisa Kennedy. Printed in U.S.A.

were watched by their mothers and the other half by nannies who took benches according to nationality, with the world appearing largely Jamaican. As Lilly walked by, she saw a little girl on a sprung horse, a child of no more than two, with round red cheeks and marvelously intelligent eyes. Her grief flooded in—for the husband she had lost, for the child they would never have.

She could not appear to Fitch with her eyes red, so she veered onto the Promenade. She would look up at her apartment to see if they had made any progress on the outside, although there was not much you could tell from the outside. When she got there, she looked first across the river at the skyline, to the space that had been occupied by the World Trade Center, and where now there was only light. And then she looked at her building. They had done the roof garden. Instead of the rusting iron railing, now there was a limestone balustrade. She could see the tops of stone planters in which were rooted elegant topiaries. And where a toupee-like edge of crumbling tar had lapped over the roof, now there were heavy copper gutters and downspouts.

Was this her building? She had to check, counting from the big apartment house, remembering details from the garden and the lower floors. It was, but her windows had been replaced. They were beautiful, French. Fitch had not been supposed to replace the windows. She was alarmed, thinking that perhaps she had been cheated. And she drew in a sharp breath when, looking closer, she noticed that the sills and lintels, which had been wood in dubious condition and were supposed to have been painted, were now the same taupe limestone as the balustrades of the roof garden.

Almost in a panic, she made her way around the apartment house and then south along Columbia Heights. Out of politeness, she rang her buzzer to let them know she was coming. She saw that her mailbox was brass, the buzzer solid and new. Even her nameplate was elegantly engraved. No one answered. She rang again, and then, like someone who is worried and ready to be hurt, pushed her key into the lock. As she went up the stairs, she heard no hammering, no saws, no radios, no machines, the things that might have drowned out the buzzer, which, although she did not know it, was now a bell.

At her landing, she was shocked. She had certainly not ordered a marble

floor, nor the beautiful millwork, nor the pinpoint recessed lighting, nor the coco mat flush with the floor and surrounded by a heavy brass rim. She stared at the door in disbelief. Where once a single door had been was a double door, and she could tell by looking at it that it, like the windows, had actually come from France. She didn't know what to do, because she hadn't called for the replacement of the existing door, much less for the opening to be rebuilt, much less for the importation from Paris of a paneled and chamfered walnut door that was so substantial and perfectly crafted that she guessed that it and putting it in could not have cost Fitch any less than fifteen or twenty thousand dollars.

She knocked. Then she saw the doorbell, yet another thing for which she had not asked, and rang it. As she lifted her key to the lock, she imagined that Fitch had spent all her money—then she realized that she hadn't yet paid him anything—on the roof garden, entry, and windows, and would now extort much more to finish the interior. She was sure that he could not have touched the interior, not in that short time, not with all that had been done on the outside. Holding her breath, she turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

As she walked from room to room, she trembled. This could not be. It was a dream. How could he have worked so fast and so well? She was practiced in the close reading of complicated texts, and here was a work of art, in every detail of which the essential condition of art—as she believed it to be—shone through, and that was a beauty that arose from love. She did not know where she stood, what she had to pay, or when, or how. She did not know why Fitch had done it, or at least she thought she didn't know. No matter what, it was too much for her now. Fitch was too much for her now. It was too soon.

But then she thought of the child she had seen in the playground, of her innocence, of her eyes, and she thought that for the sake of such a child nothing was too much, nothing was too difficult, nothing was too soon. This made her tremble even more, not helplessly but with something akin to resolve. And then she saw on the mantle—and what a beautiful mantle it was—the Fitch Company bill, standing like a pup tent.

She knew before she unfolded it what it would say, and as she unfolded

it she was calmed. The lettering was unpretentious. It said, "Fitch Co.," and, in a universal typeface for this word, "Invoice." Paying no heed to the lines printed on the paper, Fitch had written, "No charge through completion, paid in full," signed his name, and dated it "Monday, 18 March 2002." Lilly's hands fell to her sides, the bill fluttering down with them.

FITCH WAS WALKING SOUTH on First Avenue in pale sunshine that had everything about it of spring about to break the siege of winter. He had many things on his mind. His men were happy and reassured. Now they were working for pay, and they had the quiet power of those who had done right. They knew, as he did, that their work would go beautifully now that they had turned a corner. He himself couldn't wait to get at the job. Down the long prospect of First Avenue, glittering like mica in the sun, the building was in sight.

He was standing on the northwest corner of Fiftieth and First, waiting for the light, when his cell phone rang. He thought it might be Gustavo, but was not surprised that it wasn't.

"Fitch," she said, "Oh Fitch, this is Lilly."

And then he stood in silence with nothing coming from the other end of the line, but he did not call her name or think that they had been cut off, and when he saw the light change he stayed in place, for he knew that she needed time to regain her composure.