

CHAPTER 1

It's Thursday. Gregory Skapstow, chief executive officer and president of Mercurion, snapped out of a reverie when he heard the voice of Becky, his administrative assistant, on the intercom.

"Mr. Skapstow? Mr. Allen is holding for you," she reported.

"Well, put him through!" Skapstow fumed. "How many times do I have to tell you: Don't keep a board member waiting on hold."

There was a click as the call came through.

"Mitch!" Gregory said. "What can I do for you today?"

"We've got trouble, Skapstow," Mitch Allen declared in a decidedly posh English accent. Gregory despised Mitch Allen's Oxford airs. Couldn't he have lost that pompous edge after a decade in the States? "Lawrence Gudgeon went to the SEC Oversight Committee. I heard that he has printouts, conflicting entries in the general ledger. It looks bad."

"If that bastard has printouts and a copy of our ledgers, it only means he's a thief."

"That doesn't matter," Allen said. "They'll start an investigation," he continued. "Bring in an independent auditing firm. You know the climate at the SEC; with all the other scandals, they have to look at everything hard."

"We're ready for 'em."

"Fine, if you say so," Allen conceded, at least ostensibly. "But this is a warning."

"I appreciate it, Mitch," Skapstow said, with equal insincerity, hoping that his informal use of Allen's first name would offend him, just as Allen's insinuation that things weren't really all fine had offended Skapstow. "Don't worry. Gudgeon's just a disgruntled pain in the ass. I'm glad

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I fired him! We might be bending a rule here or there. Who doesn't? But even if they do an audit, they're not going to find anything *actionable*."

"That's why I'm calling: so you can see to it that they don't."

"Understood. Thanks for the heads-up."

"Yea-ah, right."

Click.

Gregory cradled the receiver and sat staring at it for a moment. He didn't need problems with the Securities and Exchange Commission—not then, not ever. Gudgeon, that little piece-of-shit assistant VP, had been a problem just waiting to happen. Gregory had known it when Gudgeon was still working in the financial services department, and Gregory most certainly knew it now. He got on the phone and called down to Legal. He ranted and rattled. Shit rolled downhill, or so goes the saying, and Gregory was damned if he was going to be the only one whose day was spoiled. Besides, if Gudgeon had stolen internal papers on his way out the door, then Mercurion had every reason to file a lawsuit against him.

"I want that son of a bitch in jail," Gregory railed. "Find a way. That's your job. File a complaint or something, understand?" Gregory didn't stop to think that he might be making matters worse. He had no legitimate way to know that Gudgeon had gone to the SEC. Someone over there had leaked that information to Mitch Allen. Because of Gregory's heavy-handed reaction, chances were high that Mitch's source was going to dry up like a tuna in the Sahara.

Gregory Skapstow wasn't a man of careful reflection. He wasn't a so-called "idea guy." He was a man of action. That was how he had managed to push himself through Harvard Business School, and it was how he had managed to land the position as chief executive officer at

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Mercurion. And just because things were getting a little tense, he wasn't going to change his style, not one whit.

The company hadn't always had a catchy name that really meant nothing. Once upon a time, it had been Humphrey, Brown, and Stewart, Inc., HBS for short, a name that said little about the business, granted, although the name had commanded prestige and a certain degree of credibility. But, following the trend in the late 1990s, the partners had changed their name to something that no longer had any prestige or credibility whatsoever and still didn't say anything at all about what they did. However, it offered panache, a sense of *recherché*, and with other companies Frankensteining words like *agile*, *accentuate*, *incentive*, and a host of others, the board jumped on the bandwagon. HBS died, sadly, then reincarnated as the abominable, but trendy, Mercurion.

When Gregory accepted the CEO position, Mercurion was a four-billion-dollar-a-year provider of information-technology (IT) services, everything from custom application development and maintenance to infrastructure support services, platform integrity, and security assurance. His contract was for three years, but Gregory knew—as did everyone on the board—that his contract was actually year-to-year. His first goal was to increase the stock value by twenty percent. If Gregory did that in his first year, both he and the board members would negotiate a new contract, and both he and the board members would make a fortune. If he didn't achieve his goal, well, he would be free to try his hand elsewhere, with a generous buy-out package, of course.

Gregory had six months left to go. His first guidance report to The Street estimated a significant growth in revenue. If it held true, the stock would rise nicely. If he gave optimistic guidance after that, the stock would soar like an eagle.

After that, it didn't matter what happened.

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So far, revenue was not quite where it needed to be, but Gregory had a plan, and aside from that thorn-in-the-paw Gudgeon and his whining trip to the SEC, things were going according to plan.

Gregory worked in his office until after eight, then took a quick shower in his private washroom, donned a fresh, custom-tailored Italian suit, and put in a call for his car to meet him out front.

At least once a week, Gregory met his current wife, Amanda, at some fashionable restaurant downtown. That night it was at *Chez Soignée*. Once there, he ran into several of his contemporaries, other men in their forties or fifties. Some, like Gregory, were dangling second-edition trophy wives on their arms, like diamond-studded cufflinks. It was a game of see and be seen, a game that Gregory knew he must play to maintain his successful image.

“Why, hello, Gregory! I didn’t expect to see you here tonight.” It was Jessica Fadey, CEO of Middleton and Brock Consulting, a small but prestigious accounting firm whose stock was not doing very well at that particular instant in NYSE time. With her was her husband, Randall, or was he Randolph? Gregory didn’t remember the fellow’s name.

There was something in her voice, a hint of disdain, perhaps.

“Hello, Jessie,” Gregory didn’t get up, but he offered his hand for a limp shake. “Just being seated?” He thought that she wasn’t a player, not really. If she were a powerbroker, he would have asked her and her nothing husband to join them. She would have refused the offer anyway—so went the social protocol—but by not offering, Gregory, in a way, was slighting the younger executive.

“Yeah,” Jessica slurred. “Nice to see you. Enjoy your dinner.”

“You too!” Gregory smiled and nodded, then turned back to his wife.

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“Who was that?” Amanda asked after the couple was out of earshot. “She’s beautiful.”

“Jessica Fadey,” Gregory replied. “She’s nobody, at least not yet.”

“Oh,” Amanda dismissed the encounter and went back to picking at her snails.

There were other such meetings and greetings, with everyone appraising one another, kowtowing to those with an edge, slighting those without, and engaging in lively jousts between equals. After dinner, Gregory and Amanda rode to their home outside the city. Amanda went to her bedroom, while Gregory retired to his den. With the financial news in one ear, he worked on a business plan for an offshore subsidiary. With the business plan, he hoped to garner a nice chunk of venture capital from a group of Swiss investors. With the money, he would buy services from the parent, Mercurion, which would show up as new revenue. When the time was right, he would sell off or close down the subsidiary and write the credits off as bad debt. The Swiss, well they’d do the same thing, if they were smart.

As usual, he worked until eleven-thirty, then went to his own bedroom. Some nights, he visited Amanda, but this wasn’t one of those nights. His alarm woke him at five-thirty. He had a cup of coffee and made a quick scan of the headlines, then dressed in gym clothes and went to his health club. He spent an hour and a half with his personal trainer, and then he showered and selected a freshly pressed suit from his locker. After a quick breakfast, he left for his office.

It was a normal day; he met with subordinates, reviewed financial statements, and interacted with analysts. At eleven-thirty, unexpectedly, his first wife called.

“Greggy,” she said, half-trashed already. “How’s tricks?”

“What do you want, Eileen?” Gregory asked.

He’d met Eileen while he was still working on his first undergraduate degree. They’d each been struggling, and they found that they had one major thing in common: they both needed to

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blow off steam, and they both liked to do it the same way. They'd go out carousing with the other college kids, but they never stayed out long. They always wound up back at Eileen's off-campus apartment. There, they'd have marathon sex until the sunlight streamed in through the blankets that she had tacked over the windows. They had thought that they were madly in love. They got married in due time and had two children: first Charles, then Ursula. Even then, Gregory was focusing most of his energies on building his career, and the marathon sex sessions had dwindled to nothing but brief, unsatisfying encounters. With nothing left in common, they drifted apart. Eileen turned to the bottle. Gregory ignored her and devoted his attention to his work. Divorce was inevitable, and when Gregory felt that he could afford to do so, he dropped Eileen like a piece of pocket lint.

"I need a raise," Eileen said. "Four thousand a month ain't cuttin' it."

Four thousand a month was already a thousand more than the judge had ordered, but the money wasn't really alimony; it was hush money to keep Eileen out of the public eye. She knew it, but she didn't care. In fact, she wasn't above leveraging her position as a potential embarrassment.

"Eileen," Gregory rebutted, although he knew he'd acquiesce. The truth was that he had no choice. The best that he could hope was to keep the amount of the newest increase to a minimum. Eileen wasn't greedy—he knew—she was just a drunk with expensive and unrestrained taste. "You're already over your allowance. How much more do you think I've got?"

"It's for Charles," Eileen lied. "You remember—your son? You're not doing anything for him, so it falls to me."

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Charles was a disappointment, a disappointment despite the fact that Gregory had invested little time with Charles in his formative years. Still, Gregory had hoped for much, much more. He had expected Charles to inherit his knack for business. Short of that, he had hoped that Charles would find *something* worthwhile to do with his life. Charles had somehow managed to conclude that he had talent, artistic talent. So far, no one else had discovered it, but Charles managed to cling to the dream. Gregory had ponied up for college. Charles shifted his major behind Gregory's back. Still, Gregory paid, even going so far as to make sure that Charles got a master's in fine art—and from NYU, no less. Gregory even paid for studio space in Manhattan for Charles, but he used it only as a mailing address. For reasons that Gregory knew all too well, Charles preferred to live in squalor and debauchery in San Francisco.

“What are you talking about, Eileen? I pay the bills for his studio here in town. How much more does he need? Can't he sell enough 'art' to pay for food, for Christ's sake?”

Eileen ignored Gregory's argument. “I need an extra thousand a month,” she said, flat, period.

Gregory's sigh was audible even over the phone line. “Okay. But no more, understand? I mean it, Eileen. You'll have to make it work; otherwise, I'll take it back to the minimum, and we'll let the lawyers have at it, scandal or no.”

“Yer a dear, Greggy,” Eileen slurred and hung up.

Gregory slammed the receiver down, only to hear the voice of his assistant announce another call.

“Mr. Skapstow? It's Mr. Allen.”

“Goddamn it! Put him through!”

“Yes, sir.”

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“The SEC has filed papers,” Allen reported. “They’ve contracted with an independent auditing firm. You’ll get a thirty-day notification. After that—”

“Don’t blow a gasket, Mitch. I told you: we’re all right.”

“We had better be,” Allen said, his voice as cold as a London fog. “You’ve got a month to make sure we are. Understand?”

“Yeah. I understand. Thanks for calling, Mitch.”

Click.

“Fuck!” Gregory cradled the receiver with vigor and a bang. “I don’t need this shit!”

He glanced at the clock mounted in a solid block of pure-black onyx that rested on the edge of his desk. It was after lunchtime. His stomach gave an affirmative rumble, yet a memory was tugging at Gregory’s attention. Uncontrollably, his mind returned to the year his grandfather had died, the summer he had found The House.

It had been between fourth and fifth grade. Gregory remembered because before school had let out for summer, he’d stayed home on a fine, spring day to go to his grandfather’s funeral. Maybe it had been the following June, perhaps July. Alone, as usual, Gregory had been walking in the patch of woods across from his parents’ house, the house in which his father still lived.

Gregory Skapstow had grown up in Fairfield, New Hampshire, just a half-hour drive north of Manchester, a bedroom community to the greater Boston metropolitan area. Fairfield had been a mostly rural place and still was, as far as Gregory knew; he hadn’t been back in over ten years.

There was a small patch of forest. Through that was an old meadow. Even then, it had given way to saplings, shrubs, and scrub. Still, patches of it were clear where the neighborhood kids would play scratch baseball, kickball, or any one of a number of other kids’ games. In other

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places, the grass had already grown tall by the day that young Gregory made his way through, bound for he knew not where.

The memory came back misty, with a magical, surrealistic feel. He hadn't thought of that day for many, many years.

He had walked through the meadow, whistling snatches of popular tunes, such as "Mrs. Robinson" and "Build me up, Buttercup," and on into the bigger stretch of forest that lay beyond. There, yellow birches, maples, and oaks predominated, and in Gregory's memory, the sun came through the canopy of leaves in dappled patches. It had been cool, dry, and quiet.

He walked that day, and then he walked some more, like a typical nine-year-old, not marking time and with no particular destination in mind. He walked and walked, whistled, and kicked rocks. With a big old stick he'd picked up somewhere, he batted at the butternut trees to see whether he could knock some of last year's nuts down.

Then he'd stopped. Up ahead and to one side, the land rose gradually. Amidst the dappled shadows and small, wavering patches of filtered sunlight, there was a familiar shape. Either the trees grew inordinately dense there, or there was an old building, perhaps a shack of some kind. With renewed attention, he made his way towards it, no longer whistling, the stick dropped and forgotten in the middle of the thin, wandering path.

As Gregory approached, his pace quickened. It was surely a building, an old house, sitting there alone—silent and mysterious—in the middle of the woods.

He climbed the slight incline. The trees thinned. The breeze picked up. There was no yard to speak of, and with no small amount of awe and caution, he noticed that there was no driveway, no clear path leading up to the place.

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It was no shack, not some old, fallen-down outbuilding or barn; it was a house, although the paint had mostly flaked away, exposing bare wood. Gregory knew it, could see it in his mind, that the house had once been a bright, new white.

In the windows that he could see, the glass remained intact. Coming closer, he thought that he saw wispy window sheers on the other side.

He walked all around the house. It was out of place. It didn't belong there. He approached it slowly. Part of him didn't want to approach it at all. "Where's the driveway?" he wondered. "Where're the power lines?" But his curiosity drove him on, and he took in more and more of the place as he approached.

Trees stood all about the place, shading it, keeping it cool and dry. A steady, fresh breeze dried the sweat on his forehead and bolstered his courage. There was a front door with a few stonework steps that led up to it. Around to the side, near the back, was another door. This one also had stonework steps, and there was a small, wooden porch as well that wrapped around to the back. Like the house, the porch was roofed over with what looked to Gregory to be wooden shingles. No one his age could possibly know such a thing, but he thought the roof shingles were stout cedar that had once been treated with linseed oil.

He climbed the steps and tested the porch floor carefully, then followed it around back.

At the farthest end hulked what had once been a fan-backed wicker chair. It too had been a clean, sparkling white, Gregory could tell, although little remained of the paint, and the chair didn't look as though it could support even his childish weight. In the seat had been a cushion, but no vestige of it remained. He turned and made his way back to the steps and the door leading in.

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It was made of wood planks that fit together perfectly, and at one time, it had been painted to match the house.

Gregory stood on the porch, looking at the door. He lost track of time, but a cool breeze brought him back to himself. He was alone, and the afternoon was growing old. Without a conscious reason or a backward glance at the door, he ran down the steps and back the way he had come through the woods.

That night, lying in the safety of his little bed, he thought about The House. *I wonder how old it is. Who owns it?* Such questions floated through his mind. *Who lived there?* he mused, almost asleep, and he answered himself, *Nobody. It's abandoned.* Then his thoughts changed track: *I wonder what's inside.*

A buzz and the sound of his assistant's voice, "Sir," she said. "Ms. Richford is here for your one-thirty meeting."

"Huh? What?" Gregory returned to the moment. Sure enough, the clock on the edge of his desk read one-thirty. He'd been lost in a daydream for well over an hour. He'd missed his lunch.