

### CHAPTER 3

The following day, Gregory had a videoconference with his largest European customer. On one of his travel weeks, Gregory had met Henrik Gier and had taken over the negotiations. The deal was far too big for his VP to handle.

Henrik was in Detroit visiting his own U.S. division. Gregory had carefully laid out a proposal, and it was the subject of the videoconference.

“So,” Gregory said, the preliminaries out of the way. “Is there anything preventing you from signing the contract today?”

“I have several issues,” Henrik replied. Each was alone in a conference room.

Gregory’s proposal was for support services for three years. Part of the compensation package involved a complex stock swap. Henrik’s company would purchase stock at a price slightly higher than market. Mercurion would, in turn, invest part of the monetary compensation in Henrik’s stock, slightly below market. The deal was complex and not exactly legal. Henrik himself would stand to make a fortune on the deal, and of course, Gregory hadn’t left himself out of the mix. Mercurion would get a big boost in revenue—the majority of the payments would come in the first year of the contract—but the overall profit was nonexistent. In fact, the latter two years of the contract would end up at a loss; the third year, a big loss.

By then, Gregory would be long gone, so who cared? Besides, the only thing that concerned anyone on the board was revenue and thus a short-term increase in stock value. About the future, no one cared, no one except the “monkeys” and the schmuck, buy-and-hold investors.

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They went back and forth, speaking in the international language of business jargon. In the end, Gregory secured Henrik's signature. Gregory never thought that such a deal would earn the focused attention of Middleton and Brock's lead auditor, Elizabeth Prentice.

The thirty days went by quickly. Gregory "wheeled and dealed," revenue rose steadily, and long-term profits tumbled. When the time was right, Gregory would go through the organization like a hot knife through butter, slashing overhead with reckless abandon. At year's end, revenue would be high, and operating costs would be down. The board and The Street would love him, and Mercurion would be well on its way to bankruptcy.

Everything was going according to plan.

Mercurion's chief financial officer, Karen Nathan, worked diligently to prepare the books for the audit. She met with Gregory several times. She was thankful that Gregory was clever and not forthcoming with his shenanigans. (She didn't want to know the details: ignorance meant plausible deniability.)

It was on a Wednesday night, almost ten o'clock, when the call came through. Gregory's assistant, Becky, had left for the day, and atypically, Gregory picked up the incoming call.

"Skapstow," he declared into the phone receiver, holding up his index finger toward Karen. They were in his office, going over the general ledger and balance sheet entries. The audit was to begin the very next day.

"Mr. Skapstow," the voice responded. "This is Doctor Remillard. I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Karen waited. She couldn't tell what the phone call was about. Gregory's side of the conversation consisted of grunted affirmations and single-syllable responses. Neither his expression nor his eyes gave anything away.

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“Yes. Thank you,” he concluded, cradling the receiver gently. “I’m afraid we’ll have to pick this up another time, Karen,” he said.

“But the audit begins tomorrow. They’ll probably be here first thing. How do we handle these entries here? There’re no corresponding credits. The money looks like it’s coming from nowhere. This is going to stand out like a sore thumb.”

“You’ll figure something out,” Gregory replied. His voice sounded empty, as if he were no longer there.

“But—”

“I have to go now,” he said, standing. Silently, he retrieved his suit jacket from the closet and stood waiting for her to accompany him out the door.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll try to come up with something, but this is trouble, Gregory. We only have to balance these entries, and then I’m pretty sure things’ll hold up, at least to a cursory audit.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Gregory said, absently repeating himself.

Gregory walked out into the night, his car and his driver forgotten. The company kept a condo downtown for him, and it was to that condo that he headed. He walked through the familiar streets on autopilot, through the ever-present, ever-moving crowds, the flashing signs, the pathetic or aggressive panhandling homeless people, groups of laughing and partying people, wide-eyed tourists staring about, awed, confused. He didn’t see any of it. Once again, he was far away and long ago.

It had taken young Gregory weeks to build up enough courage to return to The House. During that time, he’d told himself, “Ain’t nothin’ there, no ghosts, no psychos with chainsaws, just an old, old house full of *treasure*.” Originally, the mystery of the place had compelled him,

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the magic of it and the excitement of exploring the forgotten. Room after undiscovered room awaited him! But during the following weeks, his mind had turned again and again to the items he'd seen and the ones he hadn't seen, but somehow knew were there.

He hadn't consciously planned to go to The House on that particular day. He was just walking along in the woods, whistling and singing snatches of songs the way kids do—by himself as usual—and suddenly found himself standing in front of it. This time, he looked carefully at the second floor.

He hadn't paid much attention on his previous visits, or so it seemed. He hadn't really noticed the second floor. To one side was a belvedere, a round room with many windows. 'S *funny*, he'd thought. *I didn't see that before.*

With a degree of familiarity, he went around back and soon was standing in front of the door. He reached out to open it, and a chill went up his spine. Had he closed and latched that door when he left the last time? He didn't remember doing so, but it was most certainly closed and latched now.

With a shake of his head, he pulled the latch and pushed the door open. He was standing in the kitchen once more. Everything looked the same, except that upon the floor were footprints in the dust. For a moment, he felt terror and panic, but then he realized that the footprints were small, kid-sized. In fact, he recognized that telltale Keds tread mark.

He stood for a moment, regrouping, smelling the long-stale mustiness of the place, that dry-dusty hint, almost gone, of mildew.

He walked in, unconsciously stepping in his previous footprints. At the stove, he peered farther around the corner. There was a doorway leading to another room. Cautiously, he ventured in.

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The windows admitted a good deal of light, but they were dusty and dirty. It wasn't like standing outside. The place seemed to be in a perpetual gloom of half-light. Once, the sound of children playing outside must have come in with bright sunshine, but no more. Gregory found himself in what was once called a parlor.

The outside wall had a single, large window. The glass was thick and warped like the other windowpanes, like no windows he'd ever seen before. Here, the glass was thick; there, it was thinner, as if maybe it was liquid, fluid space, semi-frozen in time. Beneath it was a couch of wood, with cushioning fastened onto the back with big, brass tacks, once golden and clean, now almost black. In the interior wall was a fireplace, the iron grating still in place, with a ponderous pile of dust underneath. Gregory figured that it was all that remained of the wood that perhaps was laid there in anticipation of some coming fire or maybe just for show. Above the mantel was a painted picture. Although the image was barely visible, he could see that it was a portrait of a child, a boy. He wore a half-jacket and a shirt of lavender. His hair was blond, like Gregory's, but longer, forming curls down over his ears. Upon his face was a look of hopeful wonder. Something about his expression hinted at a long and marvelous life yet to come.

Upon the walls was dark, rich wallpaper, heavily printed with stripes of maroon, scarlet, and gold. He ran his hand along it, felt its texture, almost like velvet, but not quite that thick. To the walls clung little dust, but where his hand had brushed, the colors appeared vivid once more.

On either side of the fireplace were small, incidental tables with a huge lamp in the center of each. On either side of the couch, facing the fireplace, were similarly upholstered chairs. Emboldened and filled with awe, Gregory continued through the room, heading toward the front of The House.

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The next room was the front sitting room; that much was obvious. A massive square table stood in the middle, and against the walls were chairs that matched the ones in the parlor. From the windows hung the sheers he'd seen from outside. They were thin and hung in tatters and blew upon the whisper that he'd stirred by entering. Gregory imagined that whoever had lived there had moved the table aside and danced in that room.

The table was covered with a blanket of dust. In the center stood another vase, this one big, surely of hand-blown glass. Oil lamps hung on the walls, between the windows. Once, the table had sat upon a beautifully woven rug, but this was now little more than a crumbling pile of dust. When Gregory stepped on it, a little cloud arose, and he avoided stepping on it afterwards.

He kept moving, reaching out and touching the walls or running his fingers along the tops of the chairs. The place had him spellbound. Who owned The House? Why had they left it still full of furniture and bric-a-brac? It looked as though everyone had just disappeared one day, as if they had all taken a trip to town to buy ice cream and had simply never returned.

On through the sitting room and into the front entryway he went. To Gregory's right stood the front door, to one side of which was a heavy wooden coat rack. Upon one of the upper hooks was a silken stovepipe hat. Leaned amongst the ornate feet of the rack was what could only be the sad remains of an umbrella.

To Gregory's left was the staircase that led upward to the second floor.

Just for an instant, as he turned his head, he thought he caught sight of a furtive movement there. He stood stock-still, trying not to breathe too loudly. He felt eyes upon him, as though someone were watching. At the bottom of the stairs, a doorway led to yet another room. The door stood open, just a crack.

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Gregory felt sudden fear, almost panic. Could anyone still be living there? Perhaps some old spinster lady with no family, no one to take care of her. Perhaps she was looking through the doorway that instant, terrified herself to see an intruder wandering around in her house.

More likely, no one lived there. Otherwise, the dust wouldn't lie in blankets everywhere. The House wouldn't have that empty smell. No one had been in that place for about a hundred years, Gregory was sure, at least no one living.

The stairs stood in front of him, beckoning. His curiosity overpowered his fear. He wanted to climb those stairs, to see what was there. He wanted to go into that windowed room.

In the back of his mind, there was the unspoken notion that if he went into that round room on the second floor, he would see the outside world as it had been when the house was bright, new, and full of life. In the front yard would be a tree swing and maybe horses hitched to buggies.

With a cautious and unblinking eye on the nearly closed door, he started up the stairs.

He rose into a hallway with doorways that opened on either side. At the end was a single thick-paned window with more tattered curtains. He knew that the doors to his left led to bedrooms and that the single door to his right led to the belvedere.

As he stepped down the hallway, the boards creaked. From below came a similar creak, almost as if it were coming from the first stair. Gregory heard it, and part of his mind rebelled in utter panic. *There's someone there!* he thought, but he went on, lost to that other part that just *had* to see.

Through the doorway into the front room. Light streamed in through the windows. There was a small bed with a canopy, a night table with another of the ubiquitous oil lamps. To one

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side were a child-sized armoire and a matching chest of drawers. Through the room he walked, as if in a dream, toward that round room and all those windows.

The floor creaked as he walked, and that small part of him screamed, *Behind you, behind you!* but he did not turn. He kept walking.

Through the doorless entryway, into the round room. It was empty, save for a single, ladder-backed, miniature rocking chair. It stood facing the front yard. He wanted to sit in it and rock, to look out upon the busy front yard. In its seat was an ancient, cracked leather envelope, *like a diplomatic pouch*, the thought appeared in his mind from nowhere. Upon the leather envelope was a seal of some sort.

Young Gregory reached out and picked up the pouch. It cracked in his hands, and little pieces of dry, flaking leather drifted down from it. With trembling hands, he broke the seal and opened the pouch.

Inside were several crackling sheaves of parchment and ancient brown-tinted photographs, but he paid them no mind. Also inside were many big thick coins, some of silver, some of gold. He stood thus, transfixed, in the middle of the round room. Lost in an expanding moment, he did not look out or about. His eyes followed his fingers as he extracted first one coin, then another. Some were foreign. Some were rusty and worn almost smooth. Others were more familiar, but all were old, very old. One in particular caught his eye. He held it in his hand, gently rubbing its surface. It was solid gold. He knew it. On one side was the head of a woman in profile surrounded by stars. Below her was struck "1855." On the other side was a shield with an eagle's head appearing above. Around the edge was printed "San Francisco" and "Twenty D."

There were others in there just like it, several others. His eyes were half-lidded as his fingers caressed the coins. They were worth a fortune. He knew it.

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A noise startled him from his reverie. It was a creak in the floor, close behind him, from the room through which he'd just come. He found himself standing in that old windowed room, dust lying thick on the floor and the chair, dust at his feet along with little bits of stiff flaky leather.

Another creak, unmistakable, closer, heavier.

His breath came in short heaves. His heart thundered in his ears. He was trapped! There was no way out, except through the windows.

He turned to face whoever or whatever might be coming through the doorless entryway, but there was nothing there, just a cold snatch of breeze, barely perceptible. But there! There came the creak again, loud, closer still. It was in the room with him!

He heard it distinctly, knew what it was, felt it in the floorboards. Without thinking, he bolted, back through the bedroom, down the stairs, and into the front entryway. The door that had stood almost closed was open wider. He saw it in a glance. Over his shoulder, he detected movement, following him, coming down, quickly.

He went back the way that he had come, through the front sitting room, through the parlor, into the kitchen, and out the back door, which stood open, just a crack.

Once he was standing outside in the sunlight, he looked back. No wispy, headless ghost guarded the door; it stood slightly ajar, swinging a little. He could see that any good gust would blow it open. And the way it was hung, it would close all by itself.

He stood there for a long moment, in the sunshine, birds twittering and singing in the trees, a gentle breeze playing through the leaves. With a shake of his head, he mounted the steps and latched the door closed. He walked away slowly, with many a look over his shoulder. Back in the woods again, he took out an apple and began eating it. He munched as he walked, but he whistled no tunes.

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Walking, walking, he returned to himself on the streets of New York.

“Mr. Skapstow?” It was the doorman.

“Good evening,” Gregory replied. He went inside.