

Architect's Rendition

A treatment for a full-length film

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## Architect's Rendition – A Treatment

### *Act I*

It's just after the turn of the millennium in New York City, site of some of the world's most iconic architectural gems: Guggenheim Museum, Seagram Building, Lever House, Whitney Museum, TWA terminal, Standard Hotel, New Museum, Hearst Building, IAC Building, Plaza Hotel, Chrysler Building, the United Nations Building. And of course, the wedge-shaped Flatiron Building. A couple blocks from the Flatiron sit the offices of Pfalzgraf Associates, a high-end boutique architecture firm founded by the handsome, well-dressed Gerald Pfalzgraf. Today Gerald sits at his desk – a striking view of the Flatiron Building visible behind him through the floor-to-ceiling windows – reviewing reports generated by a computer program that has captured the internet browsing habits of one of his employees, Oscar Dupree. The content that the program reveals disgusts Gerald – screen captures from Oscar's workstation of graphic, illegal pornography.

As Gerald scrolls through the ugly content, he hears a knock at the door. In pops the head of Oscar. "Sorry to interrupt, Gerald. I'm about to head out. I think the call with Arbogast went well. Anything you need from me?" Gerald, barely masking disgust, shakes his head. After Oscar departs, Gerald stands up, stares pensively out the window at the illuminated Flatiron for a moment, then returns to his desk and shuts down his computer. A copy of "The Prince" by Machiavelli is one among several books on Gerald's desk.

In a contemplative mood, Gerald strolls along a leafy street near Madison Square Park, carrying a stylish briefcase when he passes by a brownstone just in time to hear a man shout obscenities in a foreign language from inside a first-floor apartment. Through the open blinds in the window, Gerald observes an argument between the man, Sinisa and a young woman, Wren. Suddenly, Sinisa clocks Wren hard across the jaw, then storms out of the apartment leaving Wren in a heap. Gerald steps into the shadows and watches Sinisa stride down the block and turn the corner. A moment later, Wren exits the apartment, gingerly rubbing her jaw. A real beauty, she's in her mid-twenties with smooth alabaster skin, willowy arms and shoulder-length golden hair. Wren and Gerald lock eyes for a moment, and just when it seems Gerald might say something, Wren whisks past him. Keeping some distance, Gerald follows Wren along the sidewalk until she ducks into a bar. He turns around and walks away.

Lying in bed the next morning in his plush Fifth Avenue apartment overlooking Central Park, Gerald awakens to the irritating whirring sound of his sweaty wife Morcilla pumping on her step machine. About the same age as Gerald, Morcilla is short and a bit overweight. Without looking at him Morcilla addresses Gerald as he plods past her without acknowledgement. “The decorators are coming at 10. The caterers at 2.” The blunt announcement reminds him: socialite Morcilla is to host yet another of her awful parties this evening, attended by dilettantes, snobs, nouveau riche, and all sorts of slithering hangers-on. It’s decidedly not his scene.

After the caterers arrive to begin setting up the food spread for the evening’s festivities, Gerald concludes the best place for him to be is anywhere out of his house. He heads downtown for a haircut expecting to have his locks trimmed by his usual stylist, but instead he’s met by a newcomer filling in. The stylist suggests a cut that would transpose Gerald’s part from the left side of his head to the right, on the strength that it suits his face well. Reluctantly, Gerald agrees.

His hairdo newly transformed, Gerald walks the same sidewalk the night he brushed into Wren. He makes it to the entrance of the bar where he last saw her, hesitates a moment, then walks in. Gerald scans the dark, empty bar and spots Wren languidly wiping a glass. He takes a seat at the bar. Wren approaches; a bruise is visible on her jaw. “May I make a cocktail for you?” Gerald orders a Gibson. Wren remarks, “I haven’t mixed one of those in quite a while. I hope the onions haven’t turned black,” to which Gerald replies, “Or black and blue.”

After taking a sip of the pungent cocktail, Gerald explains to Wren how the Gibson has come to remind him fondly of the dashing Cary Grant in the Hitchcock film “North by Northwest.” This leads to a discussion of the architecture featured in the movie and finally a segue into his own vocation. “I own an architecture firm near the Flatiron Building,” She replies, “That might just be my favorite building,” adding, “my knowledge of architecture is pretty limited. I’d like to learn more about it, though.” Sensing an opening, Gerald remarks, “I’d love to tell you about it.” As he says this, Gerald notices Wren rubbing her bruised jaw. “How’d you get that?” Wren replies softly, “You know how.” Then, “I like your new haircut. Suits your face well.”

Later that evening at Gerald’s apartment, Morcilla’s society party is in full swing. The place is a beehive of guests all snappily dressed, served by several uniformed caterers delivering hors d’oeuvres. A jazz quartet plays cultured background music on the balcony. A hired photographer mills about documenting the festivities. The Pfalzgraf’s butler greets additional guests periodically.

Although this sort of event is the last thing Gerald wants to attend, he holds his nose and plays the role of the dutiful husband to the party's hostess. To a handful of guests, he outlines his firm's pursuit of a contract to design and build a personal art museum for a wealthy client, David Arbogast. Gerald also makes small talk with some artists and gallery owners, as well as a few art collectors. One particularly flamboyant collector, Chappy Hardwick gushes over the talent of a struggling artist he discovered living and working in a storage unit making sculptures from dried goose droppings. In the middle of the conversation one of the staff call Gerald aside. Excusing himself from the group, Gerald absent-mindedly refers to Chappy as "Chapstick" – a private nickname he invented behind the man's back. Moments later, Morcilla accosts Gerald and excoriates him for insulting her dear friend Chappy. Not in the mood for a confrontation, Gerald pushes back anyway, reminding her of another party where he caught Chappy in their bedroom having sex, and later discovered a bag of cocaine he left behind. A bag of coke that will come in handy later.

Morcilla's party moves along nicely until a guest on the balcony shrieks. Gerald, Morcilla and their guests – including the photographer – rush to the scene to find a very drunken Chappy standing on the edge thirty floors above Fifth Avenue. Chappy utters some barely-coherent accusatory remarks regarding sexual advances toward another guest made by his goose-dropping artist protégé. Gerald talks Chappy off the ledge. Once safely back on the balcony Chappy vomits on Morcilla's Steinway as society swells look on aghast from the sidelines. It's the kind of performance that every hired photographer dreams of capturing at a snooty society soiree.

After the last of the guests have departed, Gerald lies back on a lounge chair in his dimly lit study, a wet rag draped across his eyes. Morcilla walks in, sits on the floor next to Gerald and expresses her appreciation for his help with Chappy's meltdown. She touches his hand. Gerald removes the rag from his eyes – it's a momentary thaw between the two. Then Morcilla tacks. "Still, I can't understand why you didn't intervene before things got out of hand." Indignant at the accusation of dereliction of duty, and angry at himself for falling for Morcilla's faux entreaty, Gerald retorts, "I didn't invite Chapstick and the rest of those mooches who graze on the expensive food you insist on serving them." The mention of "expensive" lights up Morcilla who rubs it into Gerald that it is her wealth that helped him start the architecture firm and continues to provide financial support. More than anything else, it is Morcilla's insinuation that it is her money that keeps Pfalzgraf Associates that infuriates Gerald most – not because it's false, but because it's true.

A few days later, along with his firm's chief financial officer, Martina, Gerald meets with his banker about securing a loan to expand his office space into the unoccupied floor below his current setup in the building across from the Flatiron Building. As they discuss the details, Gerald notices through the glass walls of the conference room a vaguely familiar face of man speaking with a loan officer in the part of the bank reserved for those with fewer assets and lower credit scores. He wracks his brain to recall how he knows the man.

After the meeting, milling around with Martina on the sidewalk outside the bank, Gerald spots the man again. As the man strides by in a huff, Gerald calls out to him: "Tom Stull?" Tom, who's dressed like a shabby contractor straight from a work site, turns around and looks quizzically back at Gerald. Finally, it clicks. "Gerry Pfalzgraf?" Manhattan Gerald internally cringes at being called "Gerry," the nickname he had as a lower-middle-class kid living in Western Pennsylvania decades ago. Tom and Gerald had been classmates in elementary school. The two men exchange small talk: Gerald has his architecture firm; Tom runs a construction business he founded after his honorable discharge from the Army as a squad designated marksman. Tom explains that his company has been contracted to make repairs on Interstate 80 in New Jersey, but his cash flow is gummed up, hence the trip to the bank. Tom asks whether Gerald knows of any construction opportunities; Gerald demurs but takes Tom's business card. The men depart: Gerald into his chauffeur-driven limo, Tom toward the subway.

Gerald is on his way to a lunch appointment with Morcilla in the Meatpacking District where she owns rundown investment property, but first he makes a detour hoping to catch Wren at the bar. Gerald paces the sidewalk outside the bar, deciding whether to enter. After a couple seconds, he does, taking the same barstool he occupied the first time he was there. Wren immediately presents him a Gibson cocktail. "Hello, handsome." "How did you know?" he asks. She replies, "I saw you wandering around outside. I willed you to come in." Gerald and Wren finally formally introduce themselves by name. They make some small talk. Wren tells Gerald that she had gone to the Film Forum the previous evening to watch an obscure foreign movie. She lets him know, "Whenever I'm down, I go there to escape." – a statement that impels Gerald to follow up. "What's got you down?" Wren quickly clarifies, "I go there when I'm not down too, you know," but it's obvious something bothers her. Gerald takes a long sip of his drink, saying nothing, tempting Wren to elaborate. Eventually she succumbs to the desire to reveal her predicament: Sinisa, the ex-boyfriend who clocked her on the jaw the day Gerald strolled by the apartment, has come back to New York with

the intention of rekindling their former relationship. Wren wants nothing to do with him, and suggests to Gerald that Sinisa is a dangerous man. Having shared what she believes to be a sufficient amount of information, Wren pries Gerald for his backstory. He readily admits he's locked in a hell of a marriage, but finding that topic off-putting, he brings up the situation with Oscar and his repulsive downloading proclivities. When Wren asks why Gerald hasn't simply fired the errant employee, he coolly explains, "I might be able to persuade him to do something for me." Wren replies perceptively, "Very Machiavellian."

Gerald finally arrives for his lunch appointment in the Meatpacking District with Morcilla who has been waiting impatiently. As he approaches her table, Morcilla wraps up a difficult phone conversation with the sales manager of an exotic car dealership. She's upset because she feels the sales manager has played a bit of the old "bait'n'switch" with her – a tactic she abhors and refuses to tolerate. After she angrily hangs up, Morcilla digs into Gerald, complaining about his tardiness and pressing him for an update on his meeting with the bankers – all before he even sits down. Inured to such treatment, Gerald ignores his wife and orders a wine flirtatiously from a young waitress. He then reports that the bank has green-lighted the funding for his office expansion, and that he's planning to travel to Pennsylvania to visit David Arbogast about his museum project. Morcilla stuns Gerald with the news that she has decided to renovate her Meatpacking property – a decrepit building Gerald thought would sell. She closes by noting coolly, "I'm going to reconfigure the ground floor into retail space. Going to cost fifty mil, so I won't be funneling any more cash your way."

Wren mixes drinks for a large crowd at the bar when Sinisa shows up looking for her. She's dismayed to see him and reminds him that management has banned him from the premises for past infractions. Sinisa informs Wren that the situation is urgent; she agrees to talk with him briefly. Sinisa explains that he needs money to take care of a \$100,000 gambling debt. Wren knows that Sinisa owes the money to organized criminals. Sinisa adds that he'll soon collect \$10,000 from a deadbeat in Atlantic City, but his situation remains dire. He proposes a harebrained scheme to rob the bar with her help. Uninterested in abetting a crime, and financially unable to help her abusive ex-boyfriend, Wren summarily blows him off – which enrages Sinisa. In response to Wren's rejection Sinisa gets belligerent: harassing bar patrons, snorting coke in the men's room, knocking over a table. A burly bouncer escorts Sinisa calmly to the door. Everything is fine until Sinisa recoils and assaults the bouncer. Witnessing the pandemonium, Wren confides to a fellow bartender, "I'll

probably get fired for this.” Enraged, the bouncer heaves Sinisa through the plate glass front door where he lands at the feet of a NYC police officer summoned earlier. “You again? Man, you just don’t fucking learn, do you,” remarks the officer before cuffing Sinisa and hustling him to a waiting black & white.

Following a boring conference call with his bankers, Gerald travels to the bar in the hope of encountering Wren. To his chagrin he learns from a bartender that she’s been fired for her association with a miscreant asshole who the night before had been thrown through the front door. The boarded-up door serves as proof of an altercation as described by the bartender. Recalling that Wren once said she likes to watch movies at the Film Forum when she’s feeling down, Gerald takes off for the theater on Houston Street where “Rififi” is playing. The movie is almost over when Gerald steps into the mostly empty, darkened theater. He scans the place, and sure enough, she’s there. He takes the seat directly behind her. The credits roll, Wren turns to leave and is surprised to see Gerald. He asks nonchalantly, “Can I buy you a cocktail?”

Sitting together at an urbane lounge near the theater, Wren expresses her feelings of helplessness and doom now that Sinisa has reentered the picture. Gerald inquires as to Wren’s plans now that she is newly unemployed, learning that she wants to pursue fine art studies that were interrupted after she moved to Manhattan from Vermont a few years earlier. Gerald suggests architecture which, as he anticipated when he floated the notion, leads Wren to probe about Gerald’s profession and his business. She notes that she loves beautiful buildings, but admits she knows little about architecture, adding coyly, “Do you know anyone I could talk to about it?” Gerald plays along, stating that he can introduce her to a guy who owns a top-notch firm, proposing dinner at the highly-rated Eleven Madison Park restaurant not far from the office of Pfalzgraf Associates. He hands Wren his business card. Music to his ears, Wren agrees to the dinner engagement.

Back at the office the following day, Gerald meets with his design team to review the presentation of the museum proposal for the upcoming meeting with David Arbogast. He reminds the team that although his wife Morcilla is a friend of Arbogast’s, the relationship will not increase the chances of success. “Arbogast will base his decision on quality of plans. Clarity of vision. Friendships won’t mean shit when it comes to this project.” Gerald goes on to say that their top competitor – Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company – also plans to bid for the contract.

Gerald and Wren finish dinner at Eleven Madison Park and now walk across the street through Madison Square Park. Wren's hand sweeps by Gerald's. He lightly takes it without resistance from her. The lighted Flatiron Building is in the near distance, reminiscent of the famous Edward Steichen photograph. Wren reiterates that the Flatiron is her favorite building in New York. Gerald provides some history the building, noting that the wedge-shaped building is like a mighty plow in one of those Depression-Era WPA murals, furrowing Manhattan into Broadway and Fifth Avenue. Wren says she had never thought of it that way. Gerald replies, "It's more apparent from my office." Adding hopefully, "Would you like to take a look?"

Inside the office building, Gerald and Wren exit the elevator onto the unfinished floor that Gerald has acquired. Giving her a brief tour, he notes that the company needs the space to accommodate many new architects he plans to hire to deal with the influx of new business. Gerald then leads her to the staircase leading to the office space one floor up. He produces a security badge but notices that the badge reader securing the door to the stairwell has not yet been installed. Once inside Gerald's office, the couple stand side-by-side at the window taking in the beautifully-lit Flatiron Building. After a moment, Gerald lightly strokes Wren's hair. She says, "I don't like that you're married." "Neither do I," he replies. Wren presses on. "I won't be your mistress. Not for long, anyway." "You won't have to," promises Gerald. He embraces Wren and they exchange a passionate kiss, silhouetted against the floor-to-ceiling windows, skyline shining brilliantly in the background.

The big day has arrived when Gerald and his team – architect Oscar Dupree and engineer Paul Clay – will present their proposal for Arbogast's private art museum. Once inside Arbogast's compound in western Pennsylvania, the meeting attendees on both sides share introductions and pleasantries before Gerald and Arbogast make opening statements. Gerald notes that all the buildings on Arbogast's large compound have been designed by Pfalzgraf Associates, adding that for continuity it would be best to assign the museum project to Gerald's company. He then turns the meeting over to Oscar who delivers the presentation. After he finishes, lunch is brought in and one of Arbogast's men commences with a presentation on the contents of Arbogast's art collection. Suddenly, in the middle of the presentation, Paul let's out a laugh which he quickly stifles. Arbogast is flummoxed and Gerald is mortified. The man continues the presentation, but tension remains high.

Later, during the limo ride back to Manhattan, Gerald erupts in anger. Paul apologizes profusely, blaming the outburst on a joke Oscar whispered to him. Gerald seethes at the possibility that the childish behavior threatens the bid. His ire for Oscar has instantly doubled since he the day he discovered pornography on Oscar's workstation. Livid, Gerald quietly stares out the window in deep thought. The limo drives by a construction site on the Interstate. Gerald spots a truck emblazoned with the name "TS Erection." He thinks for a moment, then removes Tom Stull's business card from his wallet. Perhaps Tom can be of assistance after all.

While Gerald was in western Pennsylvania, Morcilla visited the exotic car dealership to make a stink about the treatment she has received from the sales manager. Accompanying her is Vicki, Morcilla's best friend from high-school. The sales manager greets Morcilla, but she's in no mood for pleasantries. She quickly tears his head off, and makes a demand that throws him off balance. He retreats to his office, promising to work out the details. Alone with Vicki, Morcilla confides that she plans to travel to Barcelona – her family's ancestral city – where she will meet up with David Arbogast. She leaves the not-so-subtle impression that it will be more than a friendly encounter. When the sales manager returns, he announces that he can, after all, deliver the vehicle Morcilla demanded – a brand new, ostentatious convertible exotic car painted bright yellow.

The day after his debacle of a meeting with Arbogast, Gerald awakens once again to the irritating whirring sound of Morcilla pumping her step machine. He takes a shower. When he steps out, the whirring stops and Morcilla intercepts him. "Gerald, what happened at your meeting with David Arbogast?" Confused by the inquiry, Gerald just stares blankly at Morcilla. She continues, "He called me last night to tell me things didn't go so well in your meeting." At first Gerald acknowledges that he has to repair damage, but then recoils at the notion that Arbogast would tell Morcilla about the meeting. He challenges her to explain. She demurs. In no mood to start a fight, Gerald calmly explains that he has the situation under control. Once Morcilla leaves, Gerald angrily yanks a black suit out of his closet, breaking the wooden hanger.

On the sidewalk outside his apartment, Gerald notices a parked flatbed truck bearing Morcilla's new sports car. He approaches the driver. "Hey, I don't suppose that snazzy car is for Mrs. Pfalzgraf." The truck driver confirms it, adding that the woman who bought the car must have some pull because the dealership already had a taken a down payment on it from a famous entertainer. Just more confirmation for Gerald of Morcilla's talent for manipulation.

Gerald is on his way to the office when he receives a call from David Arbogast who informs Gerald that he has invited Curtain, Wall, Buckley and Company to accelerate the presentation of their proposal. Gerald pretends to support the decision to check the competition, expressing confidence that Pfalzgraf Associates will, in the end, offer the better proposal. Inside he's unsettled and furious. As soon as he hangs up, Gerald receives another phone call, this time from a weeping Wren. Holding Gerald's business card, she speaks from inside a restaurant kitchen near her apartment. "I'm sorry. I just didn't know what else to do." Wren explains that Sinisa appeared at her apartment unexpectedly and threatened her. Gerald redirects his limo driver to the restaurant.

The limo arrives and the driver honks the horn. Wren rushes out of the restaurant, jumping into the limo and into Gerald's arms. She makes a move to kiss her savior, but Gerald stops her – not a good idea to reveal his philandering to his driver. Gerald eases Wren away, suddenly noticing her black eye. The limo driver drops the couple off at Madison Square Park where Gerald commits to protecting Wren from the evil Sinisa. He proposes she stay awhile incognito at a room at a boutique hotel that Pfalzgraf Associates holds for visiting clients. Wren responds tentatively: "I don't know what to say. We barely know each other." "Can't you tell I care about you." "Yes, I do. Me too." Gerald fishes for more information about Sinisa, and learns enough to fashion the foundation for a ploy to bring him down. Wren reveals that his full name is Sinisa Ražnatovi, and that he's a coke head, compulsive gambler, and a bone-breaker for organized crime. This last detail disturbs Gerald greatly. Pursuing all angles, Gerald probes into whether Sinisa has any redeeming qualities – or at least a weakness he can exploit. Wren retells the time a drunken Sinisa poured his heart out about how a Catholic priest molested him many times when he served as an altar boy. Gerald feigns sympathy for Sinisa, but he knows these past episodes may be leveraged.

The next day, Gerald takes a cab to a gritty industrial neighborhood outside of Manhattan. He walks to one of the last working pay-phones in New York City that still exists, plucks a card from his wallet and dials the number for TS Erection. Tom answers and Gerald invites him to lunch at a busy chain restaurant in Times Square. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss a business deal. Tom excitedly agrees.

Back home, Gerald calls out for Morcilla. Hearing no response, he enters her bedroom and thumbs through Morcilla's planner. On the current day he notes that his wife is scheduled to attend a fund raiser. He jumps a few weeks ahead and notices an entry about her traveling to Barcelona for

several days to oversee a museum exhibition opening. The initials D.A. are penciled in. Gerald grimaces, as he figures D.A. is David Arbogast. He backs up to a couple weeks in the future where he spots an entry about Morcilla going to Vicki's house in New Jersey to plan a high school class reunion. This entry intrigues him.

## *Act II*

Arriving at the office, Gerald walks imperiously past a nervous Oscar without looking at him. The time on a wall clock: 8:45. Fast forward. It's now 6:59 and the place is mostly empty. Oscar stares at the wall clock and when it clicks to 7:00 he shuffles anxiously toward Gerald's office and knocks on the door. Gerald stands next to his computer, hand on the mouse. "Come in," he says. Oscar enters the office with trepidation in his gait. He immediately acknowledges his unacceptable behavior at the Arbogast meeting – presuming this is the reason for the meeting – and apologizes profusely for the transgression. However, this is not why Gerald summoned Oscar. Instead he confronts his employee with the evidence of his download of illicit pornography. Oscar initially denies the accusation, claiming that perhaps someone hacked his computer, but Gerald isn't having it. He continues to shame Oscar with more shocking images until Oscar finally succumbs and admits his guilt. He apologizes once again, but that gesture is far too little for Gerald. Oscar pleads with Gerald, offering to take a pay cut and give up vacation. "Whatever it takes," says Oscar, "I want to stay with the firm. Please, don't fire me. I'll do anything you want." Gerald smiles when Oscar says the words he wants to hear. He accepts Oscar's proposed concessions, but notes that he must perform an additional service to retain his job and avoid being turned over to the authorities. Gerald tells Oscar that the task is somewhat unorthodox, and admonishes him to tell no one about it. Oscar agrees and Gerald lays out the details. After a moment, Oscar reacts strongly. "You're joking, right? I can't do that!" Gerald presses him with threats of prison time if he doesn't comply. Oscar is conflicted. Gerald tries a different angle. "Oscar, this guy is blackmailing the firm. He has damaging information that could keep us from bidding on contracts. We'll lose the museum for sure, and maybe even get hit with some serious litigation. This bastard is a threat to all of us, and we – you – have to make him disappear." Gerald's browbeating has the desired effect, as Oscar reluctantly agrees.

The next day, Gerald has lunch with Tom Stull, the proprietor of TS Erection. They recall humorous and memorable events from elementary school back in Pennsylvania. Among those is

Gerald's recollection of the time Tom brought in photos of a bear he shot when he was eight years old. The discussion of the hunt leads to Tom's skill with a rifle, and the fact that he had been a squad designated marksman – a sharpshooter – in the Army. Familiar with Tom's shooting prowess, Gerald mentions he has some work for Tom – but it has nothing to do with TS Erection's construction expertise, as Tom assumes. Rather, Gerald lays out a plot to shoot and kill a person driving a fancy car on Interstate 80 – a location where TS Erection is grading and paving a section of the highway. The idea is to make it appear that a crazed person – like the notorious shooters who randomly killed many innocent people in the Washington, D.C. area – is responsible for the deed. Gerald points out that Tom can quickly take the shot and get back to his job site before law enforcement can arrive. Because of the randomness of the shooting, all the police can do is prepare for another shooting – which won't happen. Of course, Tom is flabbergasted by the request, and becomes agitated in the restaurant. Gerald calms him down and appeals to Tom's cash-strapped situation. The money Gerald is prepared to spend will go a long way toward keeping TS Erection solvent. He adds that he can help influence the bank to ease the terms of Tom's loans. The offers are too rich for Tom to dismiss outright. In the end he agrees to accept a large down payment, with the promise of even more when the task is completed.

In Wren's hotel room at night, Gerald lies in bed next to his young lover, post-coital pleasure on their faces. For the first time, Gerald seriously brings up the notion of leaving Morcilla, while declaring his desire to retain the wealth he requires to maintain and expand his life-style. Gerald expresses his love for Wren, noting that her youth makes him feel young, too. She acknowledges that their age difference is immaterial, and that she feels safe with him. Her mention of safety gives Gerald the opening to pry for more details about Sinisa. He already knows Sinisa had been molested as a child, is a cocaine abuser, and has a propensity for violence. Wren fills in some missing pieces – each serving as a vulnerability that Gerald hopes to exploit. She reveals that he owes \$100,000 to organized criminals, and that he plans to go to Atlantic City soon to take back \$10,000 owed to him by a gambler. When Gerald asks where in Atlantic City he might go, Wren says she doesn't know for sure, but notes that Sinisa often lit cigarettes using branded matchbooks from the Borgata Hotel – a possible destination. Gerald soaks up all the information, sizing up Sinisa's vulnerabilities.

At home, Gerald watches a documentary on television about the assassination of a Bulgarian dissident by a KGB agent armed with an umbrella tipped with poisonous ricin. Gerald learns ricin is

a derivative of beans from the castor plant. Death is assured and pinpointing ricin as the cause is difficult. The story intrigues Gerald. Morcilla steps into the TV room and tells Gerald she's planning to visit Vicki the following morning for a few days to organize their class reunion. She adds, "I'm going to take the new car." Thinking fast, Gerald says that he too has to go out of town. "I need to run down to the job site in Philly for a couple days."

Later, Gerald works at a computer in the public library, taking notes about the effects of ricin poisoning. He clicks, bringing up a foreign patent for manufacturing ricin out of castor beans, taking copious notes on the process. From the library, Gerald travels to an Army surplus store to purchase with cash a used chemical suit, complete with a gas mask. After leaving the surplus store, Gerald drives a rented van along a country road eventually pulling into a tree nursery. He wanders about the potted plants arrayed on the ground, until a worker approaches, asking "How can I help you?" Gerald pulls a paper from his pocket and starts reading from it: "Celosia, gomphrena, portulaca, castor, mercardonia. You got any of those?" The worker takes off looking for the plants Gerald seeks. Soon after, the worker loads a bunch of plants into Gerald's rented van. Gerald pays with cash and drives off down the country lane. Miles later he pulls off the lane and dumps all the plants except the castors into the woods. Wearing rubber gloves, he delicately picks beans from the remaining plants and places them in a Ziploc bag.

Gerald parks outside a trailer at his company's job site Philadelphia. Inside the trailer, Gerald dons the chemical suit and begins to grind up the castor beans. A food dehydrator sits nearby. Later that evening, having completed the transformation of castor beans into highly toxic ricin, Gerald takes off for Atlantic City. On the way, he places a call to the Borgata Hotel to inquire whether a Mr. Sinisa Ražnatovi is a registered guest. The desk clerk on the other end of the line hesitates. "How do you spell... did you say Mr. Ražnatov Sinisic?" Gerald replies, "No," then realizing the flipped nature of the name must be an alias, he quickly pivots. "I mean 'yes'; that's him." Gerald abruptly hangs up and calls Morcilla's cell phone to tell her he must stay in Philadelphia a couple more days. Morcilla, who is lying in bed with Vicki, both naked, blithely acknowledges Gerald.

Gerald passes a sign on the highway that reads "Atlantic City 40 miles." He drives into an isolated, empty rest stop and types a letter on an old manual typewriter. When finished, Gerald walks to a dumpster and tosses the typewriter and a garbage bag containing his chemical suit. He then enters the lavatory to change into a snazzy suit of a unique purplish color and pattern.

Finally arriving at the Borgata, Gerald parks the van, enters the hotel and heads straight to the cage where he purchases \$15,000 in chips with which he gambles for a couple hours on blackjack and baccarat. More or less even, Gerald converts his stash into a few high-denomination chips some of which he inserts into a manilla envelope addressed to Ražnatov Sinisic along with the letter he composed at the rest stop. The value of the chips is \$10,000 – the precise amount of the debt Sinisa had come to Atlantic City to recover. The letter contains instructions for Sinisa to meet Gerald in the hotel bar. Gerald takes the envelope to the front desk and asks the clerk to deliver it to the addressee.

Fiddling with a cocktail in a booth near the back of the crowded bar, Gerald, checks his watch and looks around, anxiously hoping Sinisa will show. Finally, he does. Sinisa immediately demands angrily to know why he has been offered \$10,000 without any explanation. He asks, “How do you know that scumbag Selakovic?” Flummoxed by the question and the strange name, Gerald hesitates. Then quickly presuming “Selakovic” is the debtor Sinisa seeks, Gerald declares he has no connection to the man, but that he is aware of Sinisa’s interest in him. Gerald introduces himself as “Paul Geraci,” a fixer for a rich businessman who requires the bone-breaking skills that Sinisa possesses. He goes on to explain that the \$10,000 payment is meant to clear Selakovic’s debt so that Sinisa can concentrate on a new job: a hit on a blackmailer who has been exacting stiff payments from the businessman. “Geraci” offers a payday of \$100,000 for the kill. As an aside, “Geraci” notes that the blackmailer is also a pervert who enjoys child pornography. Seeing an opportunity to retire his personal debt to organized criminals, and exact punishment on the kind of person he reviles most – a child molester – Sinisa accepts.

With all the players cast, Gerald places a call to Tom Stull informing him when and where on Interstate 80 his victim will be, adding that “he” will be driving an exotic yellow convertible with the top down. Gerald tells Tom to take a couple pot shots at passing trucks first to establish the ruse that a crazed sniper is responsible for the shooting. Tom expresses concern about doing it as soon as the next day, but Gerald makes it known that the opportunity is too good to pass up. Tom asks how he will be paid for the rest of the money. Before answering, Gerald inquires as to what Tom has done with the large down payment, concerned that he might have squandered it in a conspicuous fashion. Tom assures him that he has stashed the loot in a tool compartment on his pavement grader. Satisfied, Gerald tells Tom to go to a specific subway station at a specific time in

the evening after the shooting where an associate dressed as a bag-man will hand over the rest of the money.

Gerald calls Oscar into his office. Oscar looks haggard, fretting that today is the day he'll be sent off to perform the task Gerald laid out previously. Gerald produces a duffle bag containing the costume Oscar is to wear the following evening – that of a grungy bag-man. Having won the bid for the museum, he tells Oscar, “I’m going out to Pennsylvania tonight to see Arbogast. I’ll be back tomorrow night. Meet me back here alone precisely at midnight to do a debrief on your mission.”

Gerald arrives in the late evening at the Arbogast compound three hundred miles from New York City for a two-day visit – the perfect spot for supporting an alibi. The following morning, he begins a sequence of meetings that keeps him busy throughout the day. That afternoon, Morcilla departs Vicki’s house in New Jersey in her brand-new yellow sports car, top down – precisely on the schedule Gerald had learned from his wife’s meticulous planner.

Tom and a few workers on his construction crew on Interstate 80 look over papers. Several large pieces of road equipment sit nearby behind cones separating them from rushing traffic on the highway. Tom looks at his watch which reads 3:15. He tells one of his workers, “I’m gonna run ahead to the grading team.” Tom hops in his truck and drives off. Arriving at the shooting site, Tom dons camouflage then lies prone in a grassy area amidst trees in a woodsy area near the highway. He peers through a scope on a rifle mounted on a tripod at traffic tooling along the busy interstate. Tom nervously checks his watch which reads 3:50. Unexpectedly, his cell phone rings. He scrambles to turn it off, fearful the call could conceivably establish his location at this moment. Flustered, Tom peers through the scope, spots a long, double-length semi and squeezes off a round that strikes the rear trailer. The truck driver continues on unaware. Tom cocks the bolt-action rifle and takes a shot at a truck hauling new automobiles, hitting one near the rear. He cocks the bolt again, and checks his watch which reads 3:55. He spots a truck bearing the logo of a construction competitor, and with a sinister grin on his face Tom fires a round. This one misses the target and pierces the tire of a minivan which was behind the truck a second earlier, but lagged back suddenly. The minivan swerves and rolls over. Traffic moving in the opposite direction slows down as the tumbling mini-van sheds parts. Morcilla is among those slowing down. Tom spots the slick yellow car, quickly cocks the bolt and takes the shot that strikes Morcilla in the head, Zapruder style. The car unceremoniously veers

onto the grassy median strip and slams to a stop into a grassy knoll. Tom packs his gear and rushes into the dense stand of trees behind him.

Back at the job site, Tom encounters workers milling around, talking among themselves. Traffic is stopped in both directions. Emergency vehicles zoom past, followed by news trucks. A helicopter passes overhead.

At the same time in western Pennsylvania, Gerald and Martina sit at a conference table along with Arbogast and a couple of his aides. An accountant stands at a podium, making a boring presentation. Martina's phone dings with a text message. Gerald eyes her as she silently reads the text. Suddenly, she blurts out, "Oh my god! There was an accident on I80 an hour ago. They think a sniper might've killed a couple drivers." The mention of "a couple drivers" stuns Gerald who was expecting the news of a killing of an individual – his wife Morcilla.

Back in Manhattan, Wren exits the Film Forum where Sinisa waits on the sidewalk holding a tool bag. She is unpleasantly surprised to see him, and demands to know why he's stalking her. On the contrary, he explains that he simply wants to return the watch she surrendered the evening Gerald witnessed Sinisa striking Wren. Given that Sinisa's original purpose in taking back the watch was to help retire his debts, Wren says, "I thought you needed money." Sinisa invites Wren for a drink – just one – to explain his situation. She resists, eventually caving in to Sinisa's persistence. Inside a bar, Sinisa tells Wren that he landed a new high-paying gig that will help solve his financial problems. He explains, "I met some pompous asshole at the Borgata." Sinisa pulls out the business card Gerald gave him and reads aloud the name. "Geraci. Some slick motherfucker in a purple suit. He's got a bigtime client with a problem." Sinisa hoists his tool bag onto the table, and as he fishes around in it, Wren notices with concern that it contains a rope, pliers and an ice-axe. Finally, Sinisa produces the watch and hands it to Wren, imploring her to put it on. Instead she stuffs the watch in her purse, a gesture that angers Sinisa. True to form, he begins to verbally abuse Wren. She makes a move to leave, but Sinisa grabs her by the arm. The commotion attracts the attention of the bartender, and Sinisa relents. Wren bolts for the door. Drinking smugly, Sinisa calls out, "Go ahead and leave. I'll find you again."

Later in the evening in Manhattan, Oscar, dressed in the bag-man costume, shuffles down the stairs into the subway station carrying a garbage bag. The few straphangers on the sparsely

populated platform pay no attention to him. Oscar proceeds slowly toward the end of the platform. About 30 feet from the end he spots Tom standing by a support beam with his back to the rails. The two make eye contact. Oscar shuffles in place until he hears the sound of a train approaching the station. Finally, he approaches Tom, coming face to face with him. The train races into the station. Oscar extends the garbage bag toward Tom, announcing, "Here's your payoff, fucker." Tom offers a quizzical look, and as he reaches for the bag, Oscar shoves him into the path of the oncoming train. The brakes screech but it's too late; Tom is crushed under the steel wheels. Oscar rushes up the stairs and out of the station. He ducks around a dark corner and sneaks behind a row of hedges. He quickly sheds the bag-man garments revealing normal street clothes underneath. He stuffs the costume into the garbage bag, steps from behind the hedges unobserved and casually but briskly ambles along the sidewalk. He tosses the garbage bag into a trash can, then hails a cab. He hops in as the sound of blaring sirens builds.

At that moment, in the dark empty floor under construction one flight down from the office of Pfalzgraf Associates, Sinisa rifles a filing cabinet, eventually recovering a brief case. He opens it to reveal bundles of neatly wrapped money bound by ribbons bearing the Borgata Hotel logo – cash that Gerald laundered using casino chips as an intermediary currency. He makes a quick count of the cash, satisfied it's all there. On top of the money rests a package of white powder. A note on the package reads, "A token of our appreciation." Sinisa grins at the gesture. Sitting on the floor by the window, Sinisa the cokehead reliably snorts a fingernail of the powder. By his reaction, it's quality cocaine – the same cocaine Chappy Hardwick left behind at one of Morcilla's parties. Sinisa checks his watch, pulls on gloves and a ski-mask, and ascends the stairs to the office above.

Having completed the task of killing Tom, Oscar sits at his desk to await Gerald's arrival, as requested. Instead it's Sinisa who arrives, forcing Oscar to don a straitjacket. Completely subdued in the jacket, Oscar cries out, "Why are you doing this?" Sinisa barks, "Shut the fuck up, pervert." Called a pervert, Oscar suddenly realizes Gerald has set him up, but it's too late. Sinisa chokes the life out of a writhing Oscar. Sinisa removes the straitjacket, places a noose around Oscar's neck and hoists his dead body onto the desk. He climbs atop the desk, ties the rope to a beam above, lifts up Oscar's body and drops it, simulating suicide. The neck snaps; urine runs onto the carpet. Sinisa stashes the straightjacket into his tool bag and heads to the exit, leaving Oscar to hang limply.

Sinisa stops off at a bar for several celebratory drinks. After a couple hours, fully inebriated, Sinisa arrives at his apartment building and fumbles with his keys at the entrance. Once inside, Sinisa unsuccessfully tries his key at apartment number 4F. Frustrated at his inability to get in, he kicks the door. A large, muscular neighbor opens the door and demands, “What’s your fucking problem, pal?” Sinisa is about to engage the man until he realizes he’s on the wrong floor at the wrong apartment. The man slams the door in Sinisa’s face. Sinisa climbs the stairs, sticks a key in a door marked 5F, and turns the knob. Successfully inside, Sinisa throws a frozen dinner in the oven, sits on the couch and flicks on the TV. He opens the brief case, grabs a stack of money and ogles it lovingly, then takes out the packet of coke, dumps a pile onto a mirror on his coffee table and divides it into three lines. He snorts two in rapid succession. Sinisa changes TV channels rapidly, settling on an old movie. Suddenly, he becomes distressed, puking all over the coffee table. Struggling to breathe, Sinisa staggers about the room, coughing hard. The ricin Gerald has mixed into the cocaine works as designed.

Sinisa stumbles into the hallway, coughing uncontrollably. He presses a button on the elevator, but when it doesn’t arrive immediately, he heads for the stairwell. He opens the door to the stairwell, takes an unsteady step and tumbles all the way down, bashing his head against an old-style accordion radiator. Blood seeps from a deep crack in Sinisa’s cranium.

### *Act III*

On a hot, sunny morning the following day, Gerald, Martina, Arbogast, and an aide follow the owner of a quarry along a dusty path. Gerald is inappropriately dressed in a dark suit and Italian shoes. He brushes dust off his clothing as the quarry owner leads the gang to a stack of stone slabs to secure approval for their use in the construction of the museum. Just then, Gerald’s cell-phone rings, startling him. He steps away from the others. The call is from his secretary at his Manhattan office where lots of action takes place in the background: rubber-necking employees cordoned off from a body bag, cops and EMT’s working the scene. Hearing his secretary sobbing, Gerald asks what’s going on, as if he didn’t know; the others in the quarry party look over at Gerald. His secretary blurts out, “Oscar’s dead, Gerald! He hung himself right at his desk. The police want to talk to you.” A detective lays out the situation to Gerald and inquires about his plans to return to Manhattan. Gerald replies he’ll come back right away.

After he hangs up, the others bombard Gerald with questions. He reports dolefully that Oscar, one of his employees working on the museum project, hung himself above his desk. No one knows why. Almost no one. As the other people express shock and remorse, Gerald receives another call, this time from the New Jersey State Police. It's the news of Morcilla's death by a crazed sniper on Interstate 80. Gerald listens for a moment, then drops the phone and falls to his knees. Martina rushes toward him. "Gerald! What's the matter?"

The following morning, Gerald sits in the back of David Arbogast's private jet, wearing dark sunglasses. He stares out the window at the landscape below. Martina sits a few seats away, reading some papers and occasionally glancing up to check on Gerald. The pilot opens the cockpit door and announces some breaking news. "They just closed Interstate 80 again. A half hour ago that crazed sniper took some more pot shots." Martina responds, "Unbelievable." Gerald peers out the window again. The quizzical look on his face slowly turns into an ever-so-slight smile. He mumbles to himself, "That is unbelievable."

Back home, Gerald drops a piece of luggage on the floor and checks his answering machine. The first message is one of condolence. Gerald shuts off the machine in midsentence. He walks to the couch and flicks on the TV. A news reporter details the arrest of an alleged sniper caught near Interstate 80. For Gerald, it's a dream come true as the "crazed sniper" theory he imagined will only gain greater credibility – and divert any possible attention away from Tom Stull.

At Sinisa's apartment building, a police officer interviews the neighbor in 4F. He describes Sinisa's rude mistaken intrusion late in the evening, and recalls him stomping around the floor. The officer informs the neighbor that Sinisa fell down a flight of stairs and succumbed to a head injury. The police officer then proceeds to Sinisa's apartment and meets up with the inspector assigned to the case. The officer presumes Sinisa must have been drunk when he fell down the stairs. The inspector agrees. "It certainly looks like an accident. He probably went out for some air and stumbled." The inspector proceeds to examine the briefcase, shocked at the quantity of money inside. The officer speculates the money was a payoff to Sinisa for performing an illegal act; the inspector counters that the money may have been intended as a payment from Sinisa to another criminal who will come looking for it. "We might have ourselves some bait to catch a bad guy," he says hopefully. This theory is in line with Gerald's. He wants the criminals to whom Sinisa owed money to find it, thus removing a reason for them to hunt down Wren.

At Tom Stull's house, a detective interviews Tom's widow, who is unable to provide an explanation as to why her husband would be in the subway at such a late hour. Tom's widow asks whether the police have apprehended the person who pushed Tom onto the tracks. The detective responds that it's just a theory. He explains that no one actually witnessed the event, that no cameras are pointed at that section of the station, and that the motorman simply saw Tom fall into the path of the oncoming train. In the end, the cause of death is determined to be an accident.

Another detective visits Gerald in his office. He offers his condolences for Gerald's loss of his wife, and expresses relief that the sniper who killed her and others was quickly apprehended. The detective then turns his attention to the case of Oscar's suicide. He begins to speculate on a reason when Gerald eagerly volunteers that Oscar had been caught with illegal pornography on his workstation. Gerald goes on to say that perhaps Oscar broke down after receiving a demotion, a pay cut, and removal from a key project. He shows the detective the folder of pornography which prompts the detective to inquire as to why Gerald didn't call in authorities right away. The detective floats the idea that Gerald might have retained the materials as a cudgel. The implication unnerves Gerald, and he mentally scolds himself for being too quick to offer his opinion. He's now worried that the detective could take an outsized interest in what should have been a mundane case.

Gerald arranges to meet Wren for dinner. On his way in the limo he comes across a short article reporting the accidental death of Sinisa. The briefcase full of cash was money well-spent. Inside the restaurant, Gerald sits at a table, drinking a cocktail while he awaits Wren's arrival. She's never late, so her tardiness unnerves Gerald. His paranoia increases after a police car drives slowly past the restaurant. Finally, Wren walks in. The maître d' leads her to Gerald's table where the couple embrace. Wren extends her sympathies for Morcilla's death which she read about in the obituary section of the paper. Gerald explains that he and Morcilla had been working on the financial details of a divorce – which is news to Wren. He says, "I would never wish Morcilla dead, but now that she is, I have to move on. I want to be with you. I love you." Wren responds in kind, adding that she wishes Sinisa would leave her alone and disappear from her life. Gerald says he has a feeling the wish will come true. Later that evening, Gerald and Wren make love in her hotel room, and the following morning have breakfast together in the rooftop restaurant. Gerald gently breaks the news that Oscar committed suicide, and that the odd coincidence of his death and Morcilla's murder on the same day is bound to raise some eyebrows. He recalls the grilling he received from the detective investigating Oscar's suicide. Gerald remarks, "Every husband becomes a prime

suspect when his rich wife dies unexpectedly - especially if he immediately takes up with a younger woman. It screams motive.” Gerald suggests that to tamp down unwanted scrutiny, Wren take up residence for a while in a cottage he will rent upstate. She’s hesitant, but Gerald insists.

On the day before Wren is set to depart for the cottage, she meets up with Gerald by the Hudson River. He wears the same uniquely purplish suit as when he met Sinisa at the Borgata Hotel. The couple express their mutual melancholy at having to be apart for a few months. A chilly wind kicks up. Gerald embraces Wren who thrusts her hands into his jacket pockets to warm them. A moment later she takes out a \$500 casino chip branded with the Borgata Hotel logo. “Where’d you get this, Gerald?” Gerald takes the chip and examines it like it’s a foreign object. He responds dumbly, “That must be from that time I went to an architect’s conference in Atlantic City.” Wren takes note of Gerald’s outfit, recalling what Sinisa had told her in the bar the night he returned the watch: “I met some pompous asshole at the Borgata. Geraci. Some slick motherfucker in a purple suit.” She tentatively asks whether Gerald knows someone named “Geraci.” He says “No” flatly, adding, “Who is he?” Wren replies, “I’m not sure. I’m kind of afraid to find out.”

The next day, as Wren packs her bags she receives a call from the inspector investigating the origin and purpose of Sinisa’s briefcase full of money. He explains that Sinisa possessed her phone number. The inspector goes on to request her presence at the station to answer some questions. Wren assumes Sinisa has been picked up once again for breaking the law, but is aghast to learn that Sinisa is, in fact, dead. At the police station, the inspector explains the details of Sinisa’s demise, then proceed to ask her some basic questions. She replies that Sinisa was a drug addict, a loan shark, a gambler indebted to organized criminals. The inspector reveals the existence of the briefcase containing cash wrapped with Borgata Hotel ribbons. The mention of the Borgata momentarily stuns Wren. Noting her reaction, the inspector presses her to reveal more, but she declines, explaining she knows nothing about the money.

Gerald has just instructed an employee to bid on a pavement grader (one that may contain Tom Stull’s down payment) at an auction of TS Erection’s assets, when his secretary informs him a woman without an appointment has requested to see him. When Gerald spots Wren standing in the lobby, he rushes over and escorts her out of the office. Once out of earshot of his employees and secretary, Gerald asks why Wren isn’t at the upstate cottage. Wren reveals she has just come from the police station where she was questioned about Sinisa and his accidental death. Gerald feigns

surprise that Sinisa is dead. Before he can ask questions Wren hits him directly: “Do you know someone named Geraci?” Gerald tries to brush it aside having already answered that question in the negative, but Wren persists. She explains how Sinisa was found with a briefcase full of money from the Borgata Hotel, and suggests a connection with the chip she found in the pocket of Gerald’s purplish suit. Gerald professes his love for Wren and again reinforces his desire to be together with her. Then, rather than make up more stories, Gerald asks simply, “Would it really matter to you whether or not I knew this guy Geraci?” Wren contemplates the question, then strokes Gerald’s face. She’s with Gerald, free of the wrath of Sinisa – that’s enough for her. She responds, “Not really.”

### *Epilog*

Inside Penn Station, Gerald accompanies Wren and her luggage to the track where the train to the upstate cottage awaits departure. Gerald mentions that he’s been called to give victim testimony at the trial of the sniper who killed people on the Interstate, noting uncomfortably that the accused has since recanted his involvement in Morcilla’s death the first day.

Six months later, Gerald carries Wren across the threshold of the Fifth Avenue penthouse, followed by his butler who schlepps a bunch of luggage. “Welcome to your new abode, Mrs. Pfalzgraf. How about fixing us some drinks?” After Wren finds her way to the kitchen, Gerald paws through a pile of mail, tossing aside the dreck. He stops to open an important looking letter from the district attorney. The DA informs Gerald that the sniper has hired a new lawyer who has filed an appeal based on new evidence discovered since the guilty verdict was rendered three months earlier. New evidence has surfaced consisting of rifle rounds recovered the second day of the shootings that do not match those from the first day. Wren comes out of the kitchen and places a Gibson cocktail on the coffee table. Gerald watches her walk out onto the balcony and admires her beautiful silhouette. He goes back to reading the letter which states that the lawyer intends to assert his client is not guilty of the shooting that killed Morcilla. Gerald blanches. The DA wraps by saying, “Rest assured that the New Jersey State Police will pursue with vigor the identity of a different shooter, should one exist, who was responsible for your wife’s murder.” Gerald looks at his new young wife soulfully; she blows him a kiss. He sips his Gibson, contemplating impending doom. Might the authorities come looking for him tomorrow, or a decade from tomorrow?

A student of Machiavelli, Gerald mutters to himself, “What a Prince would do now?”