

ONE

The senior partner studied the résumé for the hundredth time and again found nothing he disliked about Mitchell Y. McDeere, at least not on paper. He had the brains, the ambition, the good looks. And he was hungry; with his background, he had to be. He was married, and that was mandatory. The firm had never hired an unmarried lawyer, and it frowned heavily on divorce, as well as womanizing and drinking. Drug testing was in the contract. He had a degree in accounting, passed the CPA exam the first time he took it and wanted to be a tax lawyer, which of course was a requirement with a tax firm. He was white, and the firm had never hired a black. They managed this by being secretive and clubbish and never soliciting job applications. Other firms solicited, and hired blacks. This firm recruited, and remained lily white. Plus, the firm was in Memphis, of all places, and the top blacks wanted New York or Washington or Chicago. McDeere was a male, and there were no women in the firm. That mistake had been made in the mid-seventies when they recruited the number one grad from Harvard, who happened to be a she and a wizard at taxation. She lasted four turbulent years and was killed in a car wreck.

He looked good, on paper. He was their top choice.

In fact, for this year there were no other prospects. The list was very short. It was McDeere or no one.

The managing partner, Royce McKnight, studied a dossier labeled 'Mitchell Y. McDeere – Harvard.' An inch thick with small print and a few photographs, it had been prepared by some ex-CIA agents in a private intelligence outfit in Bethesda. They were clients of the firm and each year did the investigating for no fee. It was easy work, they said, checking out unsuspecting law students. They learned, for instance, that he preferred to leave the Northeast, that he was holding three job offers, two in New York and one in Chicago, and that the highest offer was \$76,000 and the lowest was \$68,000. He was in demand. He had been given the opportunity to cheat on a securities exam during his second year. He declined, and made the highest grade in the class. Two months ago he had been offered cocaine at a law school party. He said no and left when everyone began snorting. He drank an occasional beer, but drinking was expensive and he had no money. He owed close to \$23,000 in student loans. He was hungry.

Royce McKnight flipped through the dossier and smiled. McDeere was their man.

Lamar Quin was thirty-two and not yet a partner. He had been brought along to look young and act young and project a youthful image for Bendini, Lambert & Locke, which in fact was a young firm, since most of the partners retired in their late forties or early fifties with money to burn. He would make partner in this firm. With a six-figure income guaranteed for the rest of his life, Lamar could enjoy the twelve-hundred-dollar tailored suits that hung so comfortably from his tall, athletic frame. He strolled nonchalantly across the thousand-dollar-a-day suite and poured another cup of decaf. He checked his

watch. He glanced at the two partners sitting at the small conference table near the windows.

Precisely at two-thirty someone knocked on the door. Lamar looked at the partners, who slid the résumé and dossier into an open briefcase. All three reached for their jackets. Lamar buttoned his top button and opened the door.

‘Mitchell McDeere?’ he asked with a huge smile and a hand thrust forward.

‘Yes.’ They shook hands violently.

‘Nice to meet you, Mitchell. I’m Lamar Quin.’

‘My pleasure. Please call me Mitch.’ He stepped inside and quickly surveyed the spacious room.

‘Sure, Mitch.’ Lamar grabbed his shoulder and led him across the suite, where the partners introduced themselves. They were exceedingly warm and cordial. They offered him coffee, then water. They sat around a shiny mahogany conference table and exchanged pleasantries. McDeere unbuttoned his coat and crossed his legs. He was now a seasoned veteran in the search for employment, and he knew they wanted him. He relaxed. With three job offers from three of the most prestigious firms in the country, he did not need this interview, this firm. He could afford to be a little overconfident now. He was there out of curiosity. And he longed for warmer weather.

Oliver Lambert, the senior partner, leaned forward on his elbows and took control of the preliminary chitchat. He was glib and engaging with a mellow, almost professional baritone. At sixty-one, he was the grandfather of the firm and spent most of his time administering and balancing the enormous egos of some of the richest lawyers in the country. He was the counselor, the one the younger associates went to with their troubles. Mr. Lambert also handled the recruiting, and it was his mission to sign Mitchell Y. McDeere.

‘Are you tired of interviewing?’ asked Oliver Lambert.

‘Not really. It’s part of it.’

Yes, yes, they all agreed. Seemed like yesterday they were interviewing and submitting résumés and scared to death they wouldn’t find a job and three years of sweat and torture would be down the drain. They knew what he was going through, all right.

‘May I ask a question?’ Mitch asked.

‘Certainly.’

‘Sure.’

‘Anything.’

‘Why are we interviewing in this hotel room? The other firms interview on campus through the placement office.’

‘Good question.’ They all nodded and looked at each other and agreed it was a good question.

‘Perhaps I can answer that, Mitch,’ said Royce McKnight, the managing partner. ‘You must understand our firm. We are different, and we take pride in that. We have forty-one lawyers, so we are small compared with other firms. We don’t hire too many people; about one every other year. We offer the highest salary and fringes in the country, and I’m not exaggerating. So we are very selective. We selected you. The letter you received last month was sent after we screened over two thousand third year law students at the best schools. Only one letter was sent. We don’t advertise openings and we don’t solicit applications. We keep a low profile, and we do things differently. That’s our explanation.’

‘Fair enough. What kind of firm is it?’

‘Tax. Some securities, real estate and banking, but eighty percent is tax work. That’s why we wanted to meet you, Mitch. You have an incredibly strong tax background.’

‘Why’d you go to Western Kentucky?’ asked Oliver Lambert.

‘Simple. They offered me a full scholarship to play football. Had it not been for that, college would’ve been impossible.’

‘Tell us about your family.’

‘Why is that important?’

‘It’s very important to us, Mitch,’ Royce McKnight said warmly.

They all say that, thought McDeere. ‘Okay, my father was killed in the coal mines when I was seven years old. My mother remarried and lives in Florida. I had two brothers. Rusty was killed in Vietnam. I have a brother named Ray McDeere.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I’m afraid that’s none of your business.’ He stared at Royce McKnight and exposed a mammoth chip on his shoulder. The dossier, oddly, was silent on Ray.

‘I’m sorry,’ the managing partner said softly.

‘Mitch, our firm is in Memphis,’ Lamar said. ‘Does that bother you?’

‘Not at all. I’m not fond of cold weather.’

‘Have you ever been to Memphis?’

‘No.’

‘We’ll have you down soon. You’ll love it.’

Mitch smiled and nodded and played along. Were these guys serious? How could he consider such a small firm in such a small town when Wall Street was waiting?

‘How are you ranked in your class?’ Mr. Lambert asked.

‘Top five.’ Not top five percent, but top five. That was enough of an answer for all of them. Top five out of three hundred. He could have said number three, a fraction away from number two, and within striking distance of number one. But he didn’t. They came

from inferior schools – Chicago, Columbia and Vanderbilt, as he recalled from a cursory examination of Martindale-Hubbell’s Legal Directory. He knew they would not dwell on academics.

‘Why did you select Harvard?’

‘Actually, Harvard selected me. I applied at several schools and was accepted everywhere. Harvard offered more financial assistance. I thought it was the best school. Still do.’

‘You’ve done quite well here, Mitch,’ Mr. Lambert said, admiring the résumé. The dossier was in the briefcase, under the table.

‘Thank you. I’ve worked hard.’

‘You made extremely high grades in your tax and securities courses.’

‘That’s where my interest lies.’

‘We’ve reviewed your writing sample, and it’s quite impressive.’

‘Thank you. I enjoy research.’

They nodded and acknowledged this obvious lie. It was part of the ritual. No law student or lawyer in his right mind enjoyed research, yet, without fail, every prospective associate professed a deep love for the library.

‘Tell us about your wife,’ Royce McKnight said, almost meekly. They braced for another reprimand. But it was a standard, nonsacred area explored by every firm.

‘Her name is Abby. She has a degree in elementary education from Western Kentucky. We graduated one week and got married the next. For the past three years she’s taught at a private kindergarten near Boston College.’

‘And is the marriage –’

‘We’re very happy. We’ve known each other since high school.’

‘What position did you play?’ asked Lamar, in the direction of less sensitive matters.

‘Quarterback. I was heavily recruited until I messed up a knee in my last high school game. Everyone disappeared except Western Kentucky. I played off and on for four years, even started some as a junior, but the knee would never hold up.’

‘How’d you make straight A’s and play football?’

‘I put the books first.’

‘I don’t imagine Western Kentucky is much of an academic school,’ Lamar blurted with a stupid grin, and immediately wished he could take it back. Lambert and McKnight frowned and acknowledged the mistake.

‘Sort of like Kansas State,’ Mitch replied. They froze, all of them froze, and for a few seconds stared incredulously at each other. This guy McDeere knew Lamar Quin went to Kansas State. He had never met Lamar Quin and had no idea who would appear on behalf of the firm and conduct the interview. Yet, he knew. He had gone to Martindale-Hubbell’s and checked them out. He had read the biographical sketches of all of the forty-one lawyers in the firm, and in a split second he had recalled that Lamar Quin, just one of the forty-one, had gone to Kansas State. Damn, they were impressed.

‘I guess that came out wrong,’ Lamar apologized.

‘No problem.’ Mitch smiled warmly. It was forgotten.

Oliver Lambert cleared his throat and decided to get personal again. ‘Mitch, our firm frowns on drinking and chasing women. We’re not a bunch of Holy Rollers, but we put business ahead of everything. We keep low profiles and we work very hard. And we make plenty of money.’

‘I can live with all that.’

‘We reserve the right to test any member of the firm for drug use.’

‘I don’t use drugs.’

‘Good. What’s your religious affiliation?’

‘Methodist.’

‘Good. You’ll find a wide variety in our firm. Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians. It’s really none of our business, but we like to know. We want stable families. Happy lawyers are productive lawyers. That’s why we ask these questions.’

Mitch smiled and nodded. He’d heard this before.

The three looked at each other, then at Mitch. This meant they had reached the point in the interview where the interviewee was supposed to ask one or two intelligent questions. Mitch recrossed his legs. Money, that was the big question, particularly how it compared to his other offers. If it isn’t enough, thought Mitch, then it was nice to meet you fellas. If the pay is attractive, *then* we can discuss families and marriages and football and churches. But, he knew, like all the other firms they had to shadowbox around the issue until things got awkward and it was apparent they had discussed everything in the world but money. So, hit them with a soft question first.

‘What type of work will I do initially?’

They nodded and approved of the question. Lambert and McKnight looked at Lamar. This answer was his.

‘We have something similar to a two-year apprenticeship, although we don’t call it that. We’ll send you all over the country to tax seminars. Your education is far from over. You’ll spend two weeks next winter in Washington at the American Tax Institute. We take great pride in our technical expertise, and the training is continual, for all of us. If you want to pursue a master’s in taxation, we’ll pay for it. As far as practicing law, it won’t be very exciting for the first

two years. You'll do a lot of research and generally boring stuff. But you'll be paid handsomely.'

'How much?'

Lamar looked at Royce McKnight, who eyed Mitch and said, 'We'll discuss the compensation and other benefits when you come to Memphis.'

'I want a ballpark figure or I may not come to Memphis.' He smiled, arrogant but cordial. He spoke like a man with three job offers.

The partners smiled at each other, and Mr. Lambert spoke first. 'Okay. A base salary of eighty thousand the first year, plus bonuses. Eighty-five the second year, plus bonuses. A low-interest mortgage so you can buy a home. Two country club memberships. And a new BMW. You pick the color, of course.'

They focused on his lips, and waited for the wrinkles to form on his cheeks and the teeth to break through. He tried to conceal a smile, but it was impossible. He chuckled.

'That's incredible,' he mumbled. Eighty thousand in Memphis equaled a hundred and twenty thousand in New York. Did the man say BMW! His Mazda hatchback had a million miles on it and for the moment had to be jump-started while he saved for a rebuilt starter.

'Plus a few more fringes we'll be glad to discuss in Memphis.'

Suddenly he had a strong desire to visit Memphis. Wasn't it by the river?

The smile vanished and he regained his composure. He looked sternly, importantly at Oliver Lambert and said, as if he'd forgotten about the money and the home and the BMW, 'Tell me about your firm.'

'Forty-one lawyers. Last year we earned more per lawyer than any firm our size or larger. That includes every big firm in the country. We take only rich clients – corporations, banks and wealthy people who pay our

healthy fees and never complain. We've developed a specialty in international taxation, and it's both exciting and very profitable. We deal only with people who can pay.'

'How long does it take to make partner?'

'On the average, ten years, and it's a hard ten years. It's not unusual for our partners to earn half a million a year, and most retire before they're fifty. You've got to pay your dues, put in eighty-hour weeks, but it's worth it when you make partner.'

Lamar leaned forward. 'You don't have to be a partner to earn six figures. I've been with the firm seven years, and went over a hundred thousand four years ago.'

Mitch thought about this for a second and figured by the time he was thirty he could be well over a hundred thousand, maybe close to two hundred thousand. At the age of thirty!

They watched him carefully and knew exactly what he was calculating.

'What's an international tax firm doing in Memphis?' he asked.

That brought smiles. Mr. Lambert removed his reading glasses and twirled them. 'Now that's a good question. Mr. Bendini founded the firm in 1944. He had been a tax lawyer in Philadelphia and had picked up some wealthy clients in the South. He got a wild hair and landed in Memphis. For twenty-five years he hired nothing but tax lawyers, and the firm prospered nicely down there. None of us are from Memphis, but we have grown to love it. It's a very pleasant old Southern town. By the way, Mr. Bendini died in 1970.'

'How many partners in the firm?'

'Twenty, active. We try to keep a ratio of one partner for each associate. That's high for the industry, but we like it. Again, we do things differently.'

‘All of our partners are multi-millionaires by the age of forty-five,’ Royce McKnight said.

‘All of them?’

‘Yes, sir. We don’t guarantee it, but if you join our firm, put in ten hard years, make partner and put in ten more years, and you’re not a millionaire at the age of forty-five, you’ll be the first in twenty years.’

‘That’s an impressive statistic.’

‘It’s an impressive firm, Mitch,’ Oliver Lambert said, ‘and we’re very proud of it. We’re a close knit fraternity. We’re small and we take care of each other. We don’t have the cutthroat competition the big firms are famous for. We’re very careful whom we hire, and our goal is for each new associate to become a partner as soon as possible. Toward that end we invest an enormous amount of time and money in ourselves, especially our new people. It is a rare, extremely rare occasion when a lawyer leaves our firm. It is simply unheard of. We go the extra mile to keep careers on track. We want our people happy. We think it is the most profitable way to operate.’

‘I have another impressive statistic,’ Mr. McKnight added. ‘Last year, for firms our size or larger, the average turnover rate among associates was twenty-eight percent. At Bendini, Lambert & Locke, it was zero. Year before, zero. It’s been a long time since a lawyer left our firm.’

They watched him carefully to make sure all of this sank in. Each term and each condition of the employment was important, but the permanence, the finality of his acceptance overshadowed all other items on the checklist. They explained as best they could, for now. Further explanation would come later.

Of course, they knew much more than they could talk about. For instance, his mother lived in a cheap trailer park in Panama City Beach, remarried to a retired truck driver with a violent drinking problem.

They knew she had received \$41,000 from the mine explosion, squandered most of it, then went crazy after her oldest son was killed in Vietnam. They knew he had been neglected, raised in poverty by his brother Ray (whom they could not find) and some sympathetic relatives. The poverty hurt, and they assumed, correctly, it had bred the intense desire to succeed. He had worked thirty hours a week at an all night convenience store while playing football and making perfect grades. They knew he seldom slept. They knew he was hungry. He was their man.

‘Would you like to come visit us?’ asked Oliver Lambert.

‘When?’ asked Mitch, dreaming of a black 318i with a sunroof.

The ancient Mazda hatchback with three hubcaps and a badly cracked windshield hung in the gutter with its front wheels sideways, aiming at the curb, preventing a roll down the hill. Abby grabbed the door handle on the inside, yanked twice and opened the door. She inserted the key, pressed the clutch and turned the wheel. The Mazda began a slow roll. As it gained speed, she held her breath, released the clutch and bit her lip until the unmuffled rotary engine began whining.

With three job offers on the table, a new car was four months away. She could last. For three years they had endured poverty in a two room student apartment on a campus covered with Porsches and little Mercedes convertibles. For the most part they had ignored the snubs from the classmates and coworkers in this bastion of East Coast snobbery. They were hillbillies from Kentucky, with few friends. But they had endured and succeeded quite nicely all to themselves.

She preferred Chicago to New York, even for a lower salary, largely because it was further from

Boston and closer to Kentucky. But Mitch remained noncommittal, characteristically weighing it all carefully and keeping most of it to himself. She had not been invited to visit New York and Chicago with her husband. And she was tired of guessing. She wanted an answer.

She parked illegally on the hill nearest the apartment and walked two blocks. Their unit was one of thirty in a two-story red-brick rectangle. Abby stood outside her door and fumbled through the purse looking for keys. Suddenly, the door jerked open. He grabbed her, yanked her inside the tiny apartment, threw her on the sofa and attacked her neck with his lips. She yelled and giggled as arms and legs thrashed about. They kissed, one of those long, wet, ten minute embraces with groping and fondling and moaning, the kind they had enjoyed as teenagers when kissing was fun and mysterious and the ultimate.

‘My goodness,’ she said when they finished. ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘Do you smell anything?’ Mitch asked.

She looked away and sniffed. ‘Well, yes. What is it?’

‘Chicken chow mein and egg foo yung. From Wong Boys.’

‘Okay, what’s the occasion?’

‘Plus an expensive bottle of Chablis. It’s even got a cork.’

‘What have you done, Mitch?’

‘Follow me.’ On the small, painted kitchen table, among the legal pads and casebooks, sat a large bottle of wine and a sack of Chinese food. They shoved the law school paraphernalia aside and spread the food. Mitch opened the wine and filled two plastic wine-glasses.

‘I had a great interview today,’ he said.

‘Who?’

‘Remember that firm in Memphis I received a letter from last month?’

‘Yes. You weren’t too impressed.’

‘That’s the one. I’m very impressed. It’s all tax work and the money looks good.’

‘How good?’

He ceremoniously dipped chow mein from the container onto both plates, then ripped open the tiny packages of soy sauce. She waited for an answer. He opened another container and began dividing the egg foo yung. He sipped his wine and smacked his lips.

‘How much?’ she repeated.

‘More than Chicago. More than Wall Street.’

She took a long, deliberate drink of wine and eyed him suspiciously. Her brown eyes narrowed and glowed. The eyebrows lowered and the forehead wrinkled. She waited.

‘How much?’

‘Eighty thousand, first year, plus bonuses. Eighty-five, second year, plus bonuses.’ He said this nonchalantly while studying the celery bits in the chow mein.

‘Eighty thousand,’ she repeated.

‘Eighty thousand, babe. Eighty thousand bucks in Memphis, Tennessee, is about the same as a hundred and twenty thousand bucks in New York.’

‘Who wants New York?’ she asked.

‘Plus a low-interest mortgage loan.’

That word – mortgage – had not been uttered in the apartment in a long time. In fact, she could not, at the moment, recall the last discussion about a home or anything related to one. For months now it had been accepted that they would *rent* some place until some distant, unimaginable point in the future when they achieved affluence and would then qualify for a large mortgage.

She sat her glass of wine on the table and said matter-of-factly, ‘I didn’t hear that.’

‘A low-interest mortgage loan. The firm loans enough money to buy a house. It’s very important to these guys that their associates look prosperous, so they give us the money at a much lower rate.’

‘You mean as in a *home*, with grass around it and shrubs?’

‘Yep. Not some overpriced apartment in Manhattan, but a three bedroom house in the suburbs with a driveway and a two car garage where we can park the BMW.’

The reaction was delayed by a second or two, but she finally said, ‘BMW? Whose BMW?’

‘Ours, babe. Our BMW. The firm leases a new one and gives us the keys. It’s sort of like a signing bonus for a first-round draft pick. It’s worth another five thousand a year. We pick the color, of course. I think black would be nice. What do you think?’

‘No more clunkers. No more leftovers. No more hand-me-downs,’ she said as she slowly shook her head.

He crunched on a mouthful of noodles and smiled at her. She was dreaming, he could tell, probably of furniture, and wallpaper, and perhaps a pool before too long. And babies, little dark eyed children with light brown hair.

‘And there are some other benefits to be discussed later.’

‘I don’t understand, Mitch. Why are they so generous?’

‘I asked that question. They’re very selective, and they take a lot of pride in paying top dollar. They go for the best and don’t mind shelling out the bucks. Their turnover rate is zero. Plus, I think it costs more to entice the top people to Memphis.’

‘It would be closer to home,’ she said without looking at him.

‘I don’t have a home. It would be closer to your parents, and that worries me.’

She deflected this, as she did most of his comments about her family. ‘You’d be closer to Ray.’

He nodded, bit into an egg roll and imagined her parents’ first visit, that sweet moment when they pulled into the driveway in their well-used Cadillac and stared in shock at the new French colonial with two new cars in the garage. They would burn with envy and wonder how the poor kid with no family and no status could afford all this at twenty-five and fresh out of law school. They would force painful smiles and comment on how nice everything was, and before long Mr. Sutherland would break down and ask how much the house cost and Mitch would tell him to mind his own business and it would drive the old man crazy. They’d leave after a short visit and return to Kentucky, where all their friends would hear how great the daughter and the son-in-law were doing down in Memphis. Abby would be sorry they couldn’t get along but wouldn’t say much. From the start they had treated him like a leper. He was so unworthy they had boycotted the small wedding.

‘Have you ever been to Memphis?’ he asked.

‘Once when I was a little girl. Some kind of convention for the church. All I remember is the river.’

‘They want us to visit.’

‘Us! You mean I’m invited?’

‘Yes. They insist on you coming.’

‘When?’

‘Couple of weeks. They’ll fly us down Thursday afternoon for the weekend.’

‘I like this firm already.’

TWO

The five-story building had been built a hundred years earlier by a cotton merchant and his sons after the Reconstruction, during the revival of cotton trading in Memphis. It sat in the middle of Cotton Row on Front Street near the river. Through its halls and doors and across its desks, millions of bales of cotton had been purchased from the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas and sold around the world. Deserted, neglected, then renovated time and again since the first war, it had been purchased for good in 1951 by an aggressive tax lawyer named Anthony Bendini. He renovated it yet again and began filling it with lawyers. He renamed it the Bendini Building.

He pampered the building, indulged it, coddled it, each year adding another layer of luxury to his landmark. He fortified it, sealing doors and windows and hiring armed guards to protect it and its occupants. He added elevators, electronic surveillance, security codes, closed-circuit television, a weight room, a steam room, locker rooms and a partners' dining room on the fifth floor with a captivating view of the river.

In twenty years he built the richest law firm in Memphis, and, indisputably, the quietest. Secrecy was his passion. Every associate hired by the firm was

indoctrinated in the evils of the loose tongue. Everything was confidential. Salaries, perks, advancement and, most especially, clients. Divulging firm business, the young associates were warned, could delay the awarding of the holy grail – a partnership. Nothing left the fortress on Front Street. Wives were told not to ask, or were lied to. The associates were expected to work hard, keep quiet and spend their healthy pay-checks. They did, without exception.

With forty-one lawyers, the firm was the fourth largest in Memphis. Its members did not advertise or seek publicity. They were clannish and did not fraternize with other lawyers. Their wives played tennis and bridge and shopped among themselves. Bendini, Lambert & Locke was a big family, of sorts. A rather rich family.

At 10 A.M. on a Friday, the firm limo stopped on Front Street and Mr. Mitchell Y. McDeere emerged. He politely thanked the driver, and admired the vehicle as it drove away. His first limo ride. He stood on the sidewalk next to a streetlight and admired the quaint, picturesque, yet somehow imposing home of the quiet Bendini firm. It was a far cry from the gargantuan steel-and-glass erections inhabited by New York's finest or the enormous cylinder he had visited in Chicago. But he instantly knew he would like it. It was less pretentious. It was more like himself.

Lamar Quin walked through the front door and down the steps. He yelled at Mitch and waved him over. He had met them at the airport the night before and checked them into the Peabody – 'the South's Grand Hotel.'

'Good morning, Mitch! How was your night?' They shook hands like lost friends.

'Very nice. It's a great hotel.'

‘We knew you’d like it. Everybody likes the Pea-body.’

They stepped into the front foyer, where a small billboard greeted Mr. Mitchell Y. McDeere, the guest of the day. A well-dressed, but unattractive receptionist smiled warmly and said her name was Sylvia and if he needed anything while he was in Memphis just let her know. He thanked her. Lamar led him to a long hallway where he began the guided tour. He explained the layout of the building and introduced Mitch to various secretaries and paralegals as they walked. In the main library on the second floor a crowd of lawyers circled the mammoth conference table and consumed pastries and coffee. They became silent when the guest entered.

Oliver Lambert greeted Mitch and introduced him to the gang. There were about twenty in all, most of the associates in the firm, and most barely older than the guest. The partners were too busy, Lamar had explained, and would meet him later at a private lunch. He stood at the end of the table as Mr. Lambert called for quiet.

‘Gentlemen, this is Mitchell McDeere. You’ve all heard about him, and here he is. He is our number one choice this year, our number one draft pick, so to speak. He is being romanced by the big boys in New York and Chicago and who knows where else, so we have to sell him on our little firm here in Memphis.’ They smiled and nodded their approval. The guest was embarrassed.

‘He will finish at Harvard in two months and will graduate with honors. He’s an associate editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.’ This made an impression, Mitch could tell. ‘He did his undergraduate work at Western Kentucky, where he graduated summa cum laude.’ This was not quite as impressive. ‘He also played football for four years, starting as quarterback

his junior year.’ Now they were really impressed. A few appeared to be in awe, as if staring at Joe Namath.

The senior partner continued his monologue while Mitch stood awkwardly beside him. He droned on about how selective they had always been and how well Mitch would fit in. Mitch stuffed his hands in his pockets and quit listening. He studied the group. They were young, successful and affluent. The dress code appeared to be strict, but no different than New York or Chicago. Dark gray or navy wool suits, white or blue cotton button downs, medium starch, and silk ties. Nothing bold or nonconforming. Maybe a couple of bow ties, but nothing more daring. Neatness was mandatory. No beards, mustaches or hair over the ears. There were a couple of wimps, but good looks dominated.

Mr. Lambert was winding down. ‘Lamar will give Mitch a tour of our offices, so you’ll have a chance to chat with him later. Let’s make him welcome. Tonight he and his lovely, and I do mean lovely, wife, Abby, will eat ribs at the Rendezvous, and of course tomorrow night is the firm dinner at my place. I’ll ask you to be on your best behavior.’ He smiled and looked at the guest. ‘Mitch, if you get tired of Lamar, let me know and we’ll get someone more qualified.’

He shook hands with each one of them again as they left, and tried to remember as many names as possible.

‘Let’s start the tour,’ Lamar said when the room cleared. ‘This, of course, is a library, and we have identical ones on each of the first four floors. We also use them for large meetings. The books vary from floor to floor, so you never know where your research will lead you. We have two full-time librarians, and we use microfilm and microfiche extensively. As a rule, we don’t do any research outside the building. There are over a hundred thousand volumes, including every conceivable tax reporting service. That’s more than

some law schools. If you need a book we don't have, just tell a librarian.'

They walked past the lengthy conference table and between dozens of rows of books. 'A hundred thousand volumes,' Mitch mumbled.

'Yeah, we spend almost half a million a year on upkeep, supplements and new books. The partners are always griping about it, but they wouldn't think of cutting back. It's one of the largest private law libraries in the country, and we're proud of it.'

'It's pretty impressive.'

'We try to make research as painless as possible. You know what a bore it is and how much time can be wasted looking for the right materials. You'll spend a lot of time here the first two years, so we try to make it pleasant.'

Behind a cluttered workbench in a rear corner, one of the librarians introduced himself and gave a brief tour of the computer room, where a dozen terminals stood ready to assist with the latest computerized research. He offered to demonstrate the latest, truly incredible software, but Lamar said they might stop by later.

'He's a nice guy,' Lamar said as they left the library. 'We pay him forty thousand a year just to keep up with the books. It's amazing.'

Truly amazing, thought Mitch.

The second floor was virtually identical to the first, third and fourth. The center of each floor was filled with secretaries, their desks, file cabinets, copiers and the other necessary machines. On one side of the open area was the library, and on the other was a configuration of smaller conference rooms and offices.

'You won't see any pretty secretaries,' Lamar said softly as they watched them work. 'It seems to be an unwritten firm rule. Oliver Lambert goes out of his way to hire the oldest and homeliest ones he can find.'

Of course, some have been here for twenty years and have forgotten more law than we learned in law school.’

‘They seem kind of plump,’ Mitch observed, almost to himself.

‘Yeah, it’s part of the overall strategy to encourage us to keep our hands in our pockets. Philandering is strictly forbidden, and to my knowledge has never happened.’

‘And if it does?’

‘Who knows. The secretary would be fired, of course. And I suppose the lawyer would be severely punished. It might cost a partnership. No one wants to find out, especially with this bunch of cows.’

‘They dress nice.’

‘Don’t get me wrong. We hire only the best legal secretaries and we pay more than any other firm in town. You’re looking at the best, not necessarily the prettiest. We require experience and maturity. Lambert won’t hire anyone under thirty.’

‘One per lawyer?’

‘Yes, until you’re a partner. Then you’ll get another, and by then you’ll need one. Nathan Locke has three, all with twenty years’ experience, and he keeps them jumping.’

‘Where’s his office?’

‘Fourth floor. It’s off limits.’

Mitch started to ask, but didn’t.

The corner offices were twenty-five by twenty-five, Lamar explained, and occupied by the most senior partners. Power offices, he called them, with great admiration. They were decorated to each individual’s taste with no expense spared and vacated only at retirement or death, then fought over by the younger partners.

Lamar flipped a switch in one and they stepped inside, closing the door behind them. ‘Nice view, huh,’ he said as Mitch walked to the windows and looked at

the river moving ever so slowly beyond Riverside Drive.

‘How do you get this office?’ Mitch asked as he admired a barge inching under the bridge leading to Arkansas.

‘Takes time, and when you get here you’ll be very wealthy, and very busy, and you won’t have time to enjoy the view.’

‘Whose is it?’

‘Victor Milligan. He’s head of tax, and a very nice man. Originally from New England, he’s been here for twenty-five years and calls Memphis home.’ Lamar stuck his hands in his pockets and walked around the room. ‘The hardwood floors and ceilings came with the building, over a hundred years ago. Most of the building is carpeted, but in a few spots the wood was not damaged. You’ll have the option of rugs and carpet when you get here.’

‘I like the wood. What about the rug?’

‘Some kind of antique Persian. I don’t know its history. The desk was used by his great-grandfather, who was a judge of some sort in Rhode Island, or so he says. He’s full of crap, and you never know when he’s blowing smoke.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Vacation, I think. Did they tell you about vacations?’

‘No.’

‘You get two weeks a year for the first five years. Paid, of course. Then three weeks until you become a partner, then you take whatever you want. The firm has a chalet in Vail, a cabin on a lake in Manitoba and two condos on Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman Island. They’re free, but you need to book early. Partners get priority. After that it’s first come. The Caymans are extremely popular in the firm. It’s an international tax haven and a lot of our trips are

written off. I think Milligan's there now, probably scuba diving and calling it business.'

Through one of his tax courses, Mitch had heard of the Cayman Islands and knew they were somewhere in the Caribbean. He started to ask exactly where, but decided to check it himself.

'Only two weeks?' he asked.

'Uh, yeah. Is that a problem?'

'No, not really. The firms in New York are offering at least three.' He spoke like a discriminating critic of expensive vacations. He wasn't. Except for the three day weekend they referred to as a honeymoon, and an occasional drive through New England, he had never participated in a vacation and had never left the country.

'You can get an additional week, unpaid.'

Mitch nodded as though this was acceptable. They left Milligan's office and continued the tour. The hallway ran in a long rectangle with the attorneys' offices to the outside, all with windows, sunlight, views. Those with views of the river were more prestigious, Lamar explained, and usually occupied by partners. There were waiting lists.

The conference rooms, libraries and secretarial desks were on the inside of the hallway, away from the windows and distractions.

The associates' offices were smaller – fifteen by fifteen – but richly decorated and much more imposing than any associates' offices he had seen in New York or Chicago. The firm spent a small fortune on design consultants, Lamar said. Money, it seemed, grew on trees. The younger lawyers were friendly and talkative and seemed to welcome the interruption. Most gave brief testimonials to the greatness of the firm and of Memphis. The old town kind of grows on you, they kept telling him, but it takes time. They, too,

had been recruited by the big boys in Washington and on Wall Street, and they had no regrets.

The partners were busier, but just as nice. He had been carefully selected, he was told again and again, and he would fit in. It was his kind of firm. They promised to talk more during lunch.

An hour earlier, Kay Quin had left the kids with the baby nurse and the maid and met Abby for brunch at the Peabody. She was a smalltown girl, much like Abby. She had married Lamar after college and lived in Nashville for three years while he studied law at Vanderbilt. Lamar made so much money she quit work and had two babies in fourteen months. Now that she had retired and finished her childbearing, she spent most of her time with the garden club and the heart fund and the country club and the PTA and the church. Despite the money and the affluence, she was modest and unpretentious, and apparently determined to stay that way regardless of her husband's success. Abby found a friend.

After croissants and eggs Benedict, they sat in the lobby of the hotel, drinking coffee and watching the ducks swim in circles around the fountain. Kay had suggested a quick tour of Memphis with a late lunch near her home. Maybe some shopping.

'Have they mentioned the low-interest loan?' she asked.

'Yes, at the first interview.'

'They'll want you to buy a house when you move here. Most people can't afford a house when they leave law school, so the firm loans you the money at a lower rate and holds the mortgage.'

'How low?'

'I don't know. It's been seven years since we moved here, and we've bought another house since then. It'll

be a bargain, believe me. The firm will see to it that you own a home. It's sort of an unwritten rule.'

'Why is it so important?'

'Several reasons. First of all, they want you down here. This firm is very selective, and they usually get who they want. But Memphis is not exactly in the spotlight, so they have to offer more. Also, the firm is very demanding, especially on the associates. There's pressure, overwork, eighty-hour weeks and time away from home. It won't be easy on either of you, and the firm knows it. The theory is that a strong marriage means a happy lawyer, and a happy lawyer is a productive lawyer, so the bottom line is profits. Always profits.'

'And there's another reason. These guys – all guys, no women – take a lot of pride in their wealth, and everyone is expected to look and act affluent. It would be an insult to the firm if an associate was forced to live in an apartment. They want you in a house, and after five years in a bigger house. If we have some time this afternoon, I'll show you some of the partners' homes. When you see them, you won't mind the eighty-hour weeks.'

'I'm used to them now.'

'That's good, but law school doesn't compare with this. Sometimes they'll work a hundred hours a week during tax season.'

Abby smiled and shook her head as if this impressed her a great deal. 'Do you work?'

'No. Most of us don't work. The money is there, so we're not forced to, and we get little help with the kids from our husbands. Of course, working is not forbidden.'

'Forbidden by whom?'

'The firm.'

'I would hope not.' Abby repeated the word 'forbidden' to herself, but let it pass.

Kay sipped her coffee and watched the ducks. A small boy wandered away from his mother and stood near the fountain. 'Do you plan to start a family?' Kay asked.

'Maybe in a couple of years.'

'Babies are encouraged.'

'By whom?'

'The firm.'

'Why should the firm care if we have children?'

'Again, stable families. A new baby is a big deal around the office. They send flowers and gifts to the hospital. You're treated like a queen. Your husband gets a week off, but he'll be too busy to take it. They put a thousand dollars in a trust fund for college. It's a lot of fun.'

'Sounds like a big fraternity.'

'It's more like a big family. Our social life revolves around the firm, and that's important because none of us are from Memphis. We're all transplants.'

'That's nice, but I don't want anyone telling me when to work and when to quit and when to have children.'

'Don't worry. They're very protective of each other, but the firm does not meddle.'

'I'm beginning to wonder.'

'Relax, Abby. The firm is like a family. They're great people, and Memphis is a wonderful old town to live in and raise kids. The cost of living is much lower and life moves at a slower pace. You're probably considering the bigger towns. So did we, but I'll take Memphis any day over the big cities.'

'Do I get the grand tour?'

'That's why I'm here. I thought we'd start downtown, then head out east and look at the nicer neighborhoods, maybe look at some houses and eat lunch at my favorite restaurant.'

'Sounds like fun.'

Kay paid for the coffee, as she had the brunch, and they left the Peabody in the Quin family's new Mercedes.

The dining room, as it was simply called, covered the west end of the fifth floor above Riverside Drive and high above the river in the distance. A row of eight-foot windows lined the wall and provided a fascinating view of the tugboats, paddle-wheelers, barges, docks and bridges.

The room was protected turf, a sanctuary for those lawyers talented and ambitious enough to be called partners in the quiet Bendini firm. They gathered each day for lunches prepared by Jessie Frances, a huge, temperamental old black woman, and served by her husband, Roosevelt, who wore white gloves and an odd-fitting, faded, wrinkled hand-me-down tux given to him by Mr. Bendini himself shortly before his death. They also gathered for coffee and doughnuts some mornings to discuss firm business and, occasionally, for a glass of wine in the late afternoon to celebrate a good month or an exceptionally large fee. It was for partners only, and maybe an occasional guest such as a blue chip client or prospective recruit. The associates could dine there twice a year, only twice – and records were kept – and then only at the invitation of a partner.

Adjacent to the dining room was a small kitchen where Jessie Frances performed, and where she had cooked the first meal for Mr. Bendini and a few others twenty-six years earlier. For twenty-six years she had cooked Southern food and ignored requests to experiment and try dishes she had trouble pronouncing. 'Don't eat it if you don't like it,' was her standard reply. Judging from the scraps Roosevelt collected from the tables, the food was eaten and enjoyed immensely. She posted the week's menu on Monday,

asked that reservations be made by ten each day and held grudges for years if someone canceled or didn't show. She and Roosevelt worked four hours each day and were paid a thousand each month.

Mitch sat at a table with Lamar Quin, Oliver Lambert and Royce McKnight. The entrée was prime ribs, served with fried okra and boiled squash.

'She laid off the grease today,' Mr. Lambert observed.

'It's delicious,' Mitch said.

'Is your system accustomed to grease?'

'Yes. They cook this way in Kentucky.'

'I joined this firm in 1955,' Mr. McKnight said, 'and I come from New Jersey, right? Out of suspicion, I avoided most Southern dishes as much as possible. Everything is battered and fried in animal fat, right? Then Mr. Bendini decides to open up this little café. He hires Jessie Frances, and I've had heartburn for the past twenty years. Fried ripe tomatoes, fried green tomatoes, fried eggplant, fried okra, fried squash, fried anything and everything. One day Victor Milligan said too much. He's from Connecticut, right? And Jessie Frances had whipped up a batch of fried dill pickles. Can you imagine? Fried dill pickles! Milligan said something ugly to Roosevelt and he reported it to Jessie Frances. She walked out the back door and quit. Stayed gone for a week. Roosevelt wanted to work, but she kept him at home. Finally, Mr. Bendini smoothed things over and she agreed to return if there were no complaints. But she also cut back on the grease. I think we'll all live ten years longer.'

'It's delicious,' said Lamar as he buttered another roll.

'It's always delicious,' added Mr. Lambert as Roosevelt walked by. 'Her food is rich and fattening, but we seldom miss lunch.'

Mitch ate cautiously, engaged in nervous chitchat

and tried to appear completely at ease. It was difficult. Surrounded by eminently successful lawyers, all millionaires, in their exclusive, lavishly ornamented dining suite, he felt as if he was on hallowed ground. Lamar's presence was comforting, as was Roosevelt's.

When it was apparent Mitch had finished eating, Oliver Lambert wiped his mouth, rose slowly and tapped his tea glass with his spoon. 'Gentlemen, could I have your attention.'

The room became silent as the twenty or so partners turned to the head table. They laid their napkins down and stared at the guest. Somewhere on each of their desks was a copy of the dossier. Two months earlier they had voted unanimously to make him their number one pick. They knew he ran four miles a day, did not smoke, was allergic to sulfites, had no tonsils, had a blue Mazda, had a crazy mother and once threw three interceptions in one quarter. They knew he took nothing stronger than aspirin even when he was sick, and that he was hungry enough to work a hundred hours a week if they asked. They liked him. He was good-looking, athletic-looking, a man's man with a brilliant mind and a lean body.

'As you know, we have a very special guest today, Mitch McDeere. He will soon graduate with honors from Harvard -'

'Hear! Hear!' said a couple of Harvard alumni.

'Yes, thank you. He and his wife, Abby, are staying at the Peabody this weekend as our guests. Mitch will finish in the top five out of three hundred and has been heavily recruited. We want him here, and I know you will speak to him before he leaves. Tonight he will have dinner with Lamar and Kay Quin, and then tomorrow night is the dinner at my place. You are all expected to attend.' Mitch smiled awkwardly at the partners as Mr. Lambert rambled on about the

greatness of the firm. When he finished, they continued eating as Roosevelt served bread pudding and coffee.

Kay's favorite restaurant was a chic East Memphis hangout for the young affluent. A thousand ferns hung from everywhere and the jukebox played nothing but early sixties. The daiquiris were served in tall souvenir glasses.

'One is enough,' Kay warned.

'I'm not much of a drinker.'

They ordered the quiche of the day and sipped daiquiris.

'Does Mitch drink?'

'Very little. He's an athlete and very particular about his body. An occasional beer or glass of wine, nothing stronger. How about Lamar?'

'About the same. He really discovered beer in law school, but he has trouble with his weight. The firm frowns on drinking.'

'That's admirable, but why is it their business?'

'Because alcohol and lawyers go together like blood and vampires. Most lawyers drink like fish, and the profession is plagued with alcoholism. I think it starts in law school. At Vanderbilt, someone was always tapping a keg of beer. Probably the same at Harvard. The job has a lot of pressure, and that usually means a lot of booze. These guys aren't a bunch of teetotalers, mind you, but they keep it under control. A healthy lawyer is a productive lawyer.'

'I guess that makes sense. Mitch says there's no turnover.'

'It's rather permanent. I can't recall anyone leaving in the seven years we've been here. The money's great and they're careful about whom they hire. They don't want anyone with family money.'

'I'm not sure I follow.'

‘They won’t hire a lawyer with other sources of income. They want them young and hungry. It’s a question of loyalty. If all your money comes from one source, then you tend to be very loyal to that source. The firm demands extreme loyalty. Lamar says there’s never talk of leaving. They’re all happy, and either rich or getting that way. And if one wanted to leave, he couldn’t find as much money with another firm. They’ll offer Mitch whatever it takes to get you down here. They take great pride in paying more.’

‘Why no female lawyers?’

‘They tried it once. She was a real bitch and kept the place in an uproar. Most women lawyers walk around with chips on their shoulders looking for fights. They’re hard to deal with. Lamar says they’re afraid to hire one because they couldn’t fire her if she didn’t work out, with affirmative action and all.’

The quiche arrived and they declined another round of daiquiris. Hundreds of young professionals crowded under the clouds of ferns, and the restaurant grew festive. Smokey Robinson sang softly from the juke-box.

‘I’ve got a great idea,’ Kay said. ‘I know a realtor. Let’s call her and go look at some houses.’

‘What kind of houses?’

‘For you and Mitch. For the newest associate at Bendini, Lambert & Locke. She can show you several in your price range.’

‘I don’t know our price range.’

‘I’d say a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand. The last associate bought in Oakgrove, and I’m sure he paid something like that.’

Abby leaned forward and almost whispered, ‘How much would the notes be?’

‘I don’t know. But you’ll be able to afford it. Around a thousand a month, maybe a little more.’

Abby stared at her and swallowed hard. The small

apartments in Manhattan were renting for twice that. 'Let's give her a call.'

As expected, Royce McKnight's office was a power one with a great view. It was in one of the prized corners on the fourth floor, down the hall from Nathan Locke. Lamar excused himself, and the managing partner asked Mitch to have a seat at a small conference table next to the sofa. A secretary was sent for coffee.

McKnight asked him about his visit so far, and Mitch said he was quite impressed.

'Mitch, I want to nail down the specifics of our offer.'

'Certainly.'

'The base salary is eighty thousand for the first year. When you pass the bar exam you receive a five thousand dollar raise. Not a bonus, but a raise. The exam is given sometime in August and you'll spend most of your summer reviewing for it. We have our own bar study courses and you'll receive extensive tutoring from some of the partners. This is done primarily on firm time. As you know, most firms put you to work and expect you to study on your own time. Not us. No associate of this firm has ever flunked the bar exam, and we're not worried about you breaking with tradition. Eighty thousand initially, up to eighty-five in six months. Once you've been here a year, you'll be raised to ninety thousand, plus you'll get a bonus each December based on the profits and performance during the prior twelve months. Last year the average bonus for associates was nine thousand. As you know, profit sharing with associates is extremely rare for law firms. Any questions about the salary?'

'What happens after the second year?'

'Your base salary is raised about ten percent a year

until you become a partner. Neither the raises nor the bonuses are guaranteed. They are based on performance.'

'Fair enough.'

'As you know, it is very important to us that you buy a home. It adds stability and prestige and we're very concerned about these things, especially with our associates. The firm provides a low-interest mortgage loan, thirty years, fixed rate, nonassumable should you decide to sell in a few years. It's a one shot deal, available only for your first home. After that you're on your own.'

'What kind of rate?'

'As low as possible without running afoul with the IRS. Current market rate is around ten, ten and a half. We should be able to get you a rate of seven to eight percent. We represent some banks, and they assist us. With this salary, you'll have no trouble qualifying. In fact, the firm will sign on as a guarantor if necessary.'

'That's very generous, Mr. McKnight.'

'It's important to us. And we don't lose any money on the deal. Once you find a house, our real estate section handles everything. All you have to do is move in.'

'What about the BMW?'

Mr. McKnight chuckled. 'We started that about ten years ago and it's proved to be quite an inducement. It's very simple. You pick out a BMW, one of the smaller ones, we lease it for three years and give you the keys. We pay for tags, insurance, maintenance. At the end of three years you can buy it from the leasing company for the fair market value. It's also a one shot deal.'

'That's very tempting.'

'We know.'

Mr. McKnight looked at his legal pad. 'We provide complete medical and dental coverage for the entire

family. Pregnancies, checkups, braces, everything. Paid entirely by the firm.'

Mitch nodded, but was not impressed. This was standard.

'We have a retirement plan second to none. For every dollar you invest, the firm matches it with two, provided, however, you invest at least ten percent of your base pay. Let's say you start at eighty, and the first year you set aside eight thousand. The firm kicks in sixteen, so you've got twenty-four after the first year. A money pro in New York handles it and last year our retirement earned nineteen percent. Not bad. Invest for twenty years and you're a millionaire at forty-five, just off retirement. One stipulation: If you bail out before twenty years, you lose everything but the money you put in, with no income earned on that money.'

'Sounds rather harsh.'

'No, actually it's rather generous. Find me another firm or company matching two to one. There are none, to my knowledge. It's our way of taking care of ourselves. Many of our partners retire at fifty, some at forty-five. We have no mandatory retirement, and some work into their sixties and seventies. To each his own. Our goal is simply to ensure a generous pension and make early retirement an option.'

'How many retired partners do you have?'

'Twenty or so. You'll see them around here from time to time. They like to come in and have lunch and a few keep office space. Did Lamar cover vacations?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Book early, especially for Vail and the Caymans. You buy the air fare, but the condos are free. We do a lot of business in the Caymans and from time to time we'll send you down for two or three days and write the whole thing off. Those trips are not counted as vacation, and you'll get one every year or

so. We work hard, Mitch, and we recognize the value of leisure.'

Mitch nodded his approval and dreamed of lying on a sundrenched beach in the Caribbean, sipping on a pina colada and watching string bikinis.

'Did Lamar mention the signing bonus?'

'No, but it sounds interesting.'

'If you join our firm we hand you a check for five thousand. We prefer that you spend the bulk of it on a new wardrobe. After seven years of jeans and flannel shirts, your inventory of suits is probably low, and we realize it. Appearance is very important to us. We expect our attorneys to dress sharp and conservative. There's no dress code, but you'll get the picture.'

Did he say five thousand dollars? For clothes? Mitch currently owned two suits, and he was wearing one of them. He kept a straight face and did not smile.

'Any questions?'

'Yes. The large firms are infamous for being sweatshops where the associates are flooded with tedious research and locked away in some library for the first three years. I want no part of that. I don't mind doing my share of research and I realize I will be the low man on the pole. But I don't want to research and write briefs for the entire firm. I'd like to work with real clients and their real problems.'

Mr. McKnight listened intently and waited with his rehearsed answer. 'I understand, Mitch. You're right, it is a real problem in the big firms. But not here. For the first six weeks you'll do little but study for the bar exam. When that's over, you begin practicing law. You'll be assigned to a partner, and his clients will become your clients. You'll do most of his research and, of course, your own, and occasionally you'll be asked to assist someone else with the preparation of a brief or some research. We want you happy. We take pride in our zero turnover rate, and we go the extra

mile to keep careers on track. If you can't get along with your partner, we'll find another one. If you discover you don't like tax, we'll let you try securities or banking. It's your decision. The firm will soon invest a lot of money in Mitch McDeere, and we want him to be productive.'

Mitch sipped his coffee and searched for another question. Mr. McKnight glanced at his checklist.

'We pay all moving expenses to Memphis.'

'That won't be much. Just a small rental truck.'

'Anything else, Mitch?'

'No, sir. I can't think of anything.'

The checklist was folded and placed in the file. The partner rested both elbows on the table and leaned forward. 'Mitch, we're not pushing, but we need an answer as soon as possible. If you go elsewhere, we must then continue to interview. It's a lengthy process, and we'd like our new man to start by July 1.'

'Ten days soon enough?'

'That's fine. Say by March 30?'

'Sure, but I'll contact you before then.' Mitch excused himself, and found Lamar waiting in the hall outside McKnight's office. They agreed on seven for dinner.

THREE

There were no law offices on the fifth floor of the Bendini Building. The partners' dining room and kitchen occupied the west end, some unused and unpainted storage rooms sat locked and empty in the center, then a thick concrete wall sealed off the remaining third of the floor. A small metal door with a button beside it and a camera over it hung in the center of the wall and opened into a small room where an armed guard watched the door and monitored a wall of closed circuit screens. A hallway zigzagged through a maze of cramped offices and workrooms where an assortment of characters went secretly about their business of watching and gathering information. The windows to the outside were sealed with paint and covered with blinds. The sunlight stood no chance of penetrating the fortress.

DeVasher, head of security, occupied the largest of the small, plain offices. The lone certificate on his bare walls recognized him for thirty years of dedicated service as a detective with the New Orleans Police Department. He was of medium build with a slight belly, thick shoulders and chest and a huge, perfectly round head that smiled with great reluctance. His wrinkled shirt was mercifully unbuttoned at the collar, allowing his bulging neck to sag unrestricted. A thick

polyester tie hung on the coatrack with a badly worn blazer.

Monday morning after the McDeere visit, Oliver Lambert stood before the small metal door and stared at the camera over it. He pushed the button twice, waited and was finally cleared through security. He walked quickly through the cramped hallway and entered the cluttered office. DeVasher blew smoke from a Dutch Masters into a smokeless ashtray and shoved papers in all directions until wood was visible on his desk.

‘Mornin’, Ollie. I guess you want to talk about McDeere.’

DeVasher was the only person in the Bendini Building who called him Ollie to his face.

‘Yes, among other things.’

‘Well, he had a good time, was impressed with the firm, liked Memphis okay and will probably sign on.’

‘Where were your people?’

‘We had the rooms on both sides at the hotel. His room was wired, of course, as was the limo and the phone and everything else. The usual, Ollie.’

‘Let’s get specific.’

‘Okay. Thursday night they checked in late and went to bed. Little discussion. Friday night he told her all about the firm, the offices, the people, said you were a real nice man. I thought you’d like that.’

‘Get on with it.’

‘Told her about the fancy dining room and his little lunch with the partners. Gave her the specifics on the offer and they were ecstatic. Much better than his other offers. She wants a home with a driveway and a sidewalk and trees and a backyard. He said she could have one.’

‘Any problems with the firm?’

‘Not really. He commented on the absence of blacks and women, but it didn’t seem to bother him.’

‘What about his wife?’

‘She had a ball. She likes the town, and she and Quin’s wife hit it off. They looked at houses Friday afternoon, and she saw a couple she liked.’

‘You get any addresses?’

‘Of course, Ollie. Saturday morning they called the limo and rode all over town. Very impressed with the limo. Our driver stayed away from the bad sections, and they looked at more houses. I think they decided on one, 1231 East Meadowbrook. It’s empty. Realtor by the name of Betsy Bell walked them through it. Asking one-forty, but will take less. Need to move it.’

‘That’s a nice part of town. How old is the house?’

‘Ten, fifteen years. Three thousand square feet. Sort of a colonial-looking job. It’s nice enough for one of your boys, Ollie.’

‘Are you sure that’s the one they want?’

‘For now anyway. They discussed maybe coming back in a month or so to look at some more. You might want to fly them back as soon as they accept. That’s normal procedure, ain’t it?’

‘Yes. We’ll handle that. What about the salary?’

‘Most impressed. Highest one so far. They talked and talked about the money. Salary, retirement, mortgage, BMW, bonus, everything. They couldn’t believe it. Kids must really be broke.’

‘They are. You think we got him, huh?’

‘I’d bet on it. He said once that the firm may not be as prestigious as the ones on Wall Street, but the lawyers were just as qualified and a lot nicer. I think he’ll sign on, yeah.’

‘Any suspicions?’

‘Not really. Quin evidently told him to stay away from Locke’s office. He told his wife that no one ever went in there but some secretaries and a handful of partners. But he said Quin said Locke was eccentric and not that friendly. I don’t think he’s suspicious,

though. She said the firm seemed concerned about some things that were none of its business.'

'Such as?'

'Personal matters. Children, working wives, etc. She seemed a bit irritated, but I think it was more of an observation. She told Mitch Saturday morning that she would be damned if any bunch of lawyers would tell her when to work and when to have babies. But I don't think it's a problem.'

'Does he realize how permanent this place is?'

'I think so. There was no mention of putting in a few years and moving on. I think he got the message. He wants to be a partner, like all of them. He's broke and wants the money.'

'What about the dinner at my place?'

'They were nervous, but had a good time. Very impressed with your place. Really liked your wife.'

'Sex?'

'Every night. Sounded like a honeymoon in there.'

'What'd they do?'

'We couldn't see, remember. Sounded normal. Nothing kinky. I thought of you and how much you like pictures, and I kept telling myself we should've rigged up some cameras for old Ollie.'

'Shut up, DeVasher.'

'Maybe next time.'

They were silent as DeVasher looked at a notepad. He stubbed his cigar in the ashtray and smiled to himself.

'All in all,' he said, 'it's a strong marriage. They seemed to be very intimate. Your driver said they held hands all weekend. Not a cross word for three days. That's pretty good, ain't it? But who am I? I've been married three times myself.'

'That's understandable. What about children?'

'Couple of years. She wants to work some, then get pregnant.'

‘What’s your opinion of this guy?’

‘Very good, very decent young man. Also very ambitious. I think he’s driven and he won’t quit until he’s at the top. He’ll take some chances, bend some rules if necessary.’

Ollie smiled. ‘That’s what I wanted to hear.’

‘Two phone calls. Both to her mother in Kentucky. Nothing remarkable.’

‘What about his family?’

‘Never mentioned.’

‘No word on Ray?’

‘We’re still looking, Ollie. Give us some time.’

DeVasher closed the McDeere file and opened another, much thicker one. Lambert rubbed his temples and stared at the floor. ‘What’s the latest?’ he asked softly.

‘It’s not good, Ollie. I’m convinced Hodge and Kozinski are working together now. Last week the FBI got a warrant and checked Kozinski’s house. Found our wiretaps. They told him his house was bugged, but of course they don’t know who did it. Kozinski tells Hodge last Friday while they’re hiding in the third-floor library. We got a bug nearby, and we pick up bits and pieces. Not much, but we know they talked about the wiretaps. They’re convinced everything is bugged, and they suspect us. They’re very careful where they talk.’

‘Why would the FBI bother with a search warrant?’

‘Good question. Probably for our benefit. To make things look real legal and proper. They respect us.’

‘Which agent?’

‘Tarrance. He’s in charge, evidently.’

‘Is he good?’

‘He’s okay. Young, green, overzealous, but competent. He’s no match for our men.’

‘How often has he talked to Kozinski?’