

Chapter 1

The jury was ready.

After forty-two hours of deliberations that followed seventy-one days of trial that included 530 hours of testimony from four dozen witnesses, and after a lifetime of sitting silently as the lawyers haggled and the judge lectured and the spectators watched like hawks for telltale signs, the jury was ready. Locked away in the jury room, secluded and secure, ten of them proudly signed their names to the verdict while the other two pouted in their corners, detached and miserable in their dissension. There were hugs and smiles and no small measure of self-congratulation because they had survived this little war and could now march proudly back into the arena with a decision they had rescued through sheer determination and the dogged pursuit of compromise. Their ordeal was over; their civic duty complete. They had served above and beyond. They were ready.

The foreman knocked on the door and rustled Uncle Joe from his slumbers. Uncle Joe, the ancient bailiff, had guarded them while he also arranged their meals, heard their complaints, and quietly slipped their messages to the judge. In his younger years, back when his hearing was better, Uncle Joe was rumored to also eavesdrop on his juries through a flimsy pine door he and he alone had selected and installed. But his listening days were over, and, as he had confided to no one but his wife, after the ordeal of this particular trial he might just hang up his old pistol once and for all. The strain of controlling justice was wearing him down.

He smiled and said, 'That's great. I'll get the judge,' as if the judge were somewhere in the bowels of the courthouse just waiting for a call from Uncle Joe. Instead, by custom, he found a clerk and passed along the wonderful news. It was truly exciting. The old courthouse had never seen a trial so large and so long. To end it with no decision at all would have been a shame.

The clerk tapped lightly on the judge's door, then took a step inside and proudly announced, 'We have a verdict,' as if she had personally labored through the negotiations and now was presenting the result as a gift.

The judge closed his eyes and let loose a deep, satisfying sigh. He smiled a happy, nervous smile of enormous relief, almost disbelief, and finally said, 'Round up the lawyers.'

After almost five days of deliberations, Judge

Harrison had resigned himself to the likelihood of a hung jury, his worst nightmare. After four years of bare-knuckle litigation and four months of a hotly contested trial, the prospect of a draw made him ill. He couldn't begin to imagine the prospect of doing it all again.

He stuck his feet into his old penny loafers, jumped from the chair grinning like a little boy, and reached for his robe. It was finally over, the longest trial of his extremely colorful career.

The clerk's first call went to the firm of Payton & Payton, a local husband-and-wife team now operating out of an abandoned dime store in a lesser part of town. A paralegal picked up the phone, listened for a few seconds, hung up, then shouted, 'The jury has a verdict!' His voice echoed through the cavernous maze of small, temporary workrooms and jolted his colleagues.

He shouted it again as he ran to The Pit, where the rest of the firm was frantically gathering. Wes Payton was already there, and when his wife, Mary Grace, rushed in, their eyes met in a split second of unbridled fear and bewilderment. Two paralegals, two secretaries, and a bookkeeper gathered at the long, cluttered worktable, where they suddenly froze and gawked at one another, all waiting for someone else to speak.

Could it really be over? After they had waited for an eternity, could it end so suddenly? So abruptly? With just a phone call?

'How about a moment of silent prayer,' Wes said, and they held hands in a tight circle and

prayed as they had never prayed before. All manner of petitions were lifted up to God Almighty, but the common plea was for victory. Please, dear Lord, after all this time and effort and money and fear and doubt, please, oh please, grant us a divine victory. And deliver us from humiliation, ruin, bankruptcy, and a host of other evils that a bad verdict will bring.

The clerk's second call was to the cell phone of Jared Kurtin, the architect of the defense. Mr. Kurtin was lounging peacefully on a rented leather sofa in his temporary office on Front Street in downtown Hattiesburg, three blocks from the courthouse. He was reading a biography and watching the hours pass at \$750 per. He listened calmly, slapped the phone shut, and said, 'Let's go. The jury is ready.' His dark-suited soldiers snapped to attention and lined up to escort him down the street in the direction of another crushing victory. They marched away without comment, without prayer.

Other calls went to other lawyers, then to the reporters, and within minutes the word was on the street and spreading rapidly.

Somewhere near the top of a tall building in lower Manhattan, a panic-stricken young man barged into a serious meeting and whispered the urgent news to Mr. Carl Trudeau, who immediately lost interest in the issues on the table, stood abruptly, and said, 'Looks like the jury has reached a verdict.' He marched out of the room

and down the hall to a vast corner suite, where he removed his jacket, loosened his tie, walked to a window, and gazed through the early darkness at the Hudson River in the distance. He waited, and as usual asked himself how, exactly, so much of his empire could rest upon the combined wisdom of twelve average people in backwater Mississippi.

For a man who knew so much, that answer was still elusive.

People were hurrying into the courthouse from all directions when the Paytons parked on the street behind it. They stayed in the car for a moment, still holding hands. For four months they had tried not to touch each other anywhere near the courthouse. Someone was always watching. Maybe a juror or a reporter. It was important to be as professional as possible. The novelty of a married legal team surprised people, and the Paytons tried to treat each other as attorneys and not as spouses.

And, during the trial, there had been precious little touching away from the courthouse or anywhere else.

‘What are you thinking?’ Wes asked without looking at his wife. His heart was racing and his forehead was wet. He still gripped the wheel with his left hand, and he kept telling himself to relax.

Relax. What a joke.

‘I have never been so afraid,’ Mary Grace said.

‘Neither have I.’

A long pause as they breathed deeply and watched a television van almost slaughter a pedestrian.

‘Can we survive a loss?’ she said. ‘That’s the question.’

‘We have to survive; we have no choice. But we’re not going to lose.’

‘Attaboy. Let’s go.’

They joined the rest of their little firm and entered the courthouse together. Waiting in her usual spot on the first floor by the soft drink machines was their client, the plaintiff, Jeannette Baker, and when she saw her lawyers, she immediately began to cry. Wes took one arm, Mary Grace the other, and they escorted Jeannette up the stairs to the main courtroom on the second floor. They could’ve carried her. She weighed less than a hundred pounds and had aged five years during the trial. She was depressed, at times delusional, and though not anorexic, she simply didn’t eat. At thirty-four, she had already buried a child and a husband and was now at the end of a horrible trial she secretly wished she had never pursued.

The courtroom was in a state of high alert, as if bombs were coming and the sirens were wailing. Dozens of people milled about, or looked for seats, or chatted nervously with their eyes darting around. When Jared Kurtin and the defense army entered from a side door, everyone gawked as if he might know something they didn’t. Day after day for the past four months he had proven that he could see around corners, but

at that moment his face revealed nothing. He huddled gravely with his subordinates.

Across the room, just a few feet away, the Paytons and Jeannette settled into their chairs at the plaintiff's table. Same chairs, same positions, same deliberate strategy to impress upon the jurors that this poor widow and her two lonely lawyers were taking on a giant corporation with unlimited resources. Wes Payton glanced at Jared Kurtin, their eyes met, and each offered a polite nod. The miracle of the trial was that the two men were still able to treat each other with a modest dose of civility, even converse when absolutely necessary. It had become a matter of pride. Regardless of how nasty the situation, and there had been so many nasty ones, each was determined to rise above the gutter and offer a hand.

Mary Grace did not look over, and if she had, she would not have nodded or smiled. And it was a good thing that she did not carry a handgun in her purse, or half of the dark suits on the other side wouldn't be there. She arranged a clean legal pad on the table before her, wrote the date, then her name, then could not think of anything else to log in. In seventy-one days of trial she had filled sixty-six legal pads, all the same size and color and now filed in perfect order in a second-hand metal cabinet in The Pit. She handed a tissue to Jeannette. Though she counted virtually everything, Mary Grace had not kept a running tally on the number of tissue boxes Jeannette had used during the trial. Several dozen at least.

The woman cried almost nonstop, and while Mary Grace was profoundly sympathetic, she was also tired of all the damned crying. She was tired of everything – the exhaustion, the stress, the sleepless nights, the scrutiny, the time away from her children, their run-down apartment, the mountain of unpaid bills, the neglected clients, the cold Chinese food at midnight, the challenge of doing her face and hair every morning so she could be somewhat attractive in front of the jury. It was expected of her.

Stepping into a major trial is like plunging with a weighted belt into a dark and weedy pond. You manage to scramble up for air, but the rest of the world doesn't matter. And you always think you're drowning.

A few rows behind the Paytons, at the end of a bench that was quickly becoming crowded, the Paytons' banker chewed his nails while trying to appear calm. His name was Tom Huff, or Huffy to everyone who knew him. Huffy had dropped in from time to time to watch the trial and offer a silent prayer of his own. The Paytons owed Huffy's bank \$400,000, and the only collateral was a tract of farmland in Cary County owned by Mary Grace's father. On a good day it might fetch \$100,000, leaving, obviously, a substantial chunk of unsecured debt. If the Paytons lost the case, then Huffy's once promising career as a banker would be over. The bank president had long since stopped yelling at him. Now all the threats were by e-mail.

What had begun innocently enough with a simple \$90,000 second-mortgage loan against their lovely suburban home had progressed into a gaping hellhole of red ink and foolish spending. Foolish at least in Huffy's opinion. But the nice home was gone, as was the nice downtown office, and the imported cars, and everything else. The Paytons were risking it all, and Huffy had to admire them. A big verdict, and he was a genius. The wrong verdict, and he'd stand in line behind them at the bankruptcy court.

The moneymen on the other side of the courtroom were not chewing their nails and were not particularly worried about bankruptcy, though it had been discussed. Krane Chemical had plenty of cash and profits and assets, but it also had hundreds of potential plaintiffs waiting like vultures to hear what the world was about to hear. A crazy verdict, and the lawsuits would fly.

But they were a confident bunch at that moment. Jared Kurtin was the best defense lawyer money could buy. The company's stock had dipped only slightly. Mr. Trudeau, up in New York, seemed to be satisfied.

They couldn't wait to get home.

Thank God the markets had closed for the day.

Uncle Joe yelled, 'Keep your seats,' and Judge Harrison entered through the door behind his bench. He had long since cut out the silly routine of requiring everyone to stand just so he could assume his throne.

'Good afternoon,' he said quickly. It was

almost 5:00 p.m. 'I have been informed by the jury that a verdict has been reached.' He was looking around, making sure the players were present. 'I expect decorum at all times. No outbursts. No one leaves until I dismiss the jury. Any questions? Any additional frivolous motions from the defense?'

Jared Kurtin never flinched. He did not acknowledge the judge in any way, but just kept doodling on his legal pad as if he were painting a masterpiece. If Krane Chemical lost, it would appeal with a vengeance, and the cornerstone of its appeal would be the obvious bias of the Honorable Thomas Alsobrook Harrison IV, a former trial lawyer with a proven dislike for all big corporations in general and, now, Krane Chemical in particular.

'Mr. Bailiff, bring in the jury.'

The door next to the jury box opened, and somewhere a giant unseen vacuum sucked every ounce of air from the courtroom. Hearts froze. Bodies stiffened. Eyes found objects to fixate on. The only sound was that of the jurors' feet shuffling across well-worn carpet.

Jared Kurtin continued his methodical scribbling. His routine was to never look at the faces of the jurors when they returned with a verdict. After a hundred trials he knew they were impossible to read. And why bother? Their decision would be announced in a matter of seconds anyway. His team had strict instructions to ignore the jurors and show no reaction whatsoever to the verdict.

Of course Jared Kurtin wasn't facing financial and professional ruin. Wes Payton certainly was, and he could not keep his eyes from the eyes of the jurors as they settled into their seats. The dairy operator looked away, a bad sign. The schoolteacher stared right through Wes, another bad sign. As the foreman handed an envelope to the clerk, the minister's wife glanced at Wes with a look of pity, but then she had been offering the same sad face since the opening statements.

Mary Grace caught the sign, and she wasn't even looking for it. As she handed another tissue to Jeannette Baker, who was practically sobbing now, Mary Grace stole a look at juror number six, the one closest to her, Dr. Leona Rocha, a retired English professor at the university. Dr. Rocha, behind red-framed reading glasses, gave the quickest, prettiest, most sensational wink Mary Grace would ever receive.

'Have you reached a verdict?' Judge Harrison was asking.

'Yes, Your Honor, we have,' the foreman said.

'Is it unanimous?'

'No, sir, it is not.'

'Do at least nine of you agree on the verdict?'

'Yes, sir. The vote is 10 to 2.'

'That's all that matters.'

Mary Grace scribbled a note about the wink, but in the fury of the moment she could not read her own handwriting. Try to appear calm, she kept telling herself.

Judge Harrison took the envelope from the

clerk, removed a sheet of paper, and began reviewing the verdict – heavy wrinkles burrowing into his forehead, eyes frowning as he pinched the bridge of his nose. After an eternity he said, ‘It appears to be in order.’ Not one single twitch or grin or widening of the eyes, nothing to indicate what was written on the sheet of paper.

He looked down and nodded at his court reporter and cleared his throat, thoroughly relishing the moment. Then the wrinkles softened around his eyes, the jaw muscles loosened, the shoulders sagged a bit, and, to Wes anyway, there was suddenly hope that the jury had scorched the defendant.

In a slow, loud voice, Judge Harrison read: ‘Question number one: “Do you find, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the groundwater at issue was contaminated by Krane Chemical Corporation?”’ After a treacherous pause that lasted no more than five seconds, he continued, ‘The answer is “Yes.”’

One side of the courtroom managed to breathe while the other side began to turn blue.

‘Question number two: “Do you find, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the contamination was the proximate cause of the death or deaths of (a) Chad Baker and/or (b) Pete Baker?’ Answer: “Yes, for both.”’

Mary Grace managed to pluck tissues from a box and hand them over with her left hand while writing furiously with her right. Wes managed to steal a glance at juror number four, who

happened to be glancing at him with a humorous grin that seemed to say, 'Now for the good part.'

'Question number three: "For Chad Baker, what amount of money do you award to his mother, Jeannette Baker, as damages for his wrongful death?" Answer: "Five hundred thousand dollars."'

Dead children aren't worth much, because they earn nothing, but Chad's impressive award rang like an alarm because it gave a quick preview of what was to come. Wes stared at the clock above the judge and thanked God that bankruptcy had been averted.

'Question number four: "For Pete Baker, what amount of money do you award to his widow, Jeannette Baker, as damages for his wrongful death?" Answer: "Two and a half million dollars."'

There was a rustle from the money boys in the front row behind Jared Kurtin. Krane could certainly handle a \$3 million hit, but it was the ripple effect that suddenly terrified them. For his part, Mr. Kurtin had yet to flinch.

Not yet.

Jeannette Baker began to slide out of her chair. She was caught by both of her lawyers, who pulled her up, wrapped arms around her frail shoulders, and whispered to her. She was sobbing, out of control.

There were six questions on the list that the lawyers had hammered out, and if the jury answered yes to number five, then the whole

world would go crazy. Judge Harrison was at that point, reading it slowly, clearing his throat, studying the answer. Then he revealed his mean streak. He did so with a smile. He glanced up a few inches, just above the sheet of paper he was holding, just over the cheap reading glasses perched on his nose, and he looked directly at Wes Payton. The grin was tight, conspiratorial, yet filled with gleeful satisfaction.

‘Question number five: “Do you find, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the actions of Krane Chemical Corporation were either intentional or so grossly negligent as to justify the imposition of punitive damages?” Answer: “Yes.”’

Mary Grace stopped writing and looked over the bobbing head of her client to her husband, whose gaze was frozen upon her. They had won, and that alone was an exhilarating, almost indescribable rush of euphoria. But how large was their victory? At that crucial split second, both knew it was indeed a landslide.

‘Question number six: “What is the amount of punitive damages?” Answer: “Thirty-eight million dollars.”’

There were gasps and coughs and soft whistles as the shock waves rattled around the courtroom. Jared Kurtin and his gang were busy writing everything down and trying to appear unfazed by the bomb blast. The honchos from Krane in the front row were trying to recover and breathe normally. Most glared at the jurors and thought

vile thoughts that ran along the lines of ignorant people, backwater stupidity, and so on.

Mr. and Mrs. Payton were again both reaching for their client, who was overcome by the sheer weight of the verdict and trying pitifully to sit up. Wes whispered reassurances to Jeannette while repeating to himself the numbers he had just heard. Somehow, he managed to keep his face serious and avoid a goofy smile.

Huffy the banker stopped crunching his nails. In less than thirty seconds he had gone from a disgraced, bankrupt former bank vice president to a rising star with designs on a bigger salary and office. He even felt smarter. Oh, what a marvelous entrance into the bank's boardroom he would choreograph first thing in the morning. The judge was going on about formalities and thanking the jurors, but Huffy didn't care. He had heard all he needed to hear.

The jurors stood and filed out as Uncle Joe held the door and nodded with approval. He would later tell his wife that he had predicted such a verdict, though she had no memory of it. He claimed he hadn't missed a verdict in the many decades he had worked as a bailiff. When the jurors were gone, Jared Kurtin stood and, with perfect composure, rattled off the usual post-verdict inquiries, which Judge Harrison took with great compassion now that the blood was on the floor. Mary Grace had no response. Mary Grace didn't care. She had what she wanted.

Wes was thinking about the \$41 million and

fighting his emotions. The firm would survive, as would their marriage, their reputations, everything.

When Judge Harrison finally announced, ‘We are adjourned,’ a mob raced from the courtroom. Everyone grabbed a cell phone.

Mr. Trudeau was still standing at the window, watching the last of the sun set far beyond New Jersey. Across the wide room Stu the assistant took the call and ventured forward a few steps before mustering the nerve to say, ‘Sir, that was from Hattiesburg. Three million in actual damages, thirty-eight in punitive.’

From the rear, there was a slight dip in the boss’s shoulder, a quiet exhaling in frustration, then a mumbling of obscenities.

Mr. Trudeau slowly turned around and glared at the assistant as if he just might shoot the messenger. ‘You sure you heard that right?’ he asked, and Stu desperately wished he had not.

‘Yes, sir.’

Behind him the door was open. Bobby Ratzlaff appeared in a rush, out of breath, shocked and scared and looking for Mr. Trudeau. Ratzlaff was the chief in-house lawyer, and his neck would be the first on the chopping block. He was already sweating.

‘Get your boys here in five minutes,’ Mr. Trudeau growled, then turned back to his window.

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The press conference materialized on the first floor of the courthouse. In two small groups, Wes and Mary Grace chatted patiently with reporters. Both gave the same answers to the same questions. No, the verdict was not a record for the state of Mississippi. Yes, they felt it was justified. No, it was not expected, not an award that large anyway. Certainly it would be appealed. Wes had great respect for Jared Kurtin, but not for his client. Their firm currently represented thirty other plaintiffs who were suing Krane Chemical. No, they did not expect to settle those cases.

Yes, they were exhausted.

After half an hour they finally begged off, and walked from the Forrest County Circuit Court building hand in hand, each lugging a heavy briefcase. They were photographed getting into their car and driving away.

Alone, they said nothing. Four blocks, five, six. Ten minutes passed without a word. The car, a battered Ford Taurus with a million miles, at least one low tire, and the constant click of a sticking valve, drifted through the streets around the university.

Wes spoke first. 'What's one-third of forty-one million?'

'Don't even think about it.'

'I'm not thinking about it. Just a joke.'

'Just drive.'

'Any place in particular?'

'No.'

The Taurus ventured into the suburbs, going

nowhere but certainly not going back to the office. They stayed far away from the neighborhood with the lovely home they had once owned.

Reality slowly settled in as the numbness began to fade. A lawsuit they had reluctantly filed four years earlier had now been decided in a most dramatic fashion. An excruciating marathon was over, and though they had a temporary victory, the costs had been great. The wounds were raw, the battle scars still very fresh.

The gas gauge showed less than a quarter of a tank, something that Wes would have barely noticed two years earlier. Now it was a much more serious matter. Back then he drove a BMW – Mary Grace had a Jaguar – and when he needed fuel, he simply pulled in to his favorite station and filled the tank with a credit card. He never saw the bills; they were handled by his bookkeeper. Now the credit cards were gone, as were the BMW and the Jaguar, and the same bookkeeper was working at half salary and doling out a few dollars in cash to keep the Payton firm just above the waterline.

Mary Grace glanced at the gauge, too, a recently acquired habit. She noticed and remembered the price of everything – a gallon of gas, a loaf of bread, a half gallon of milk. She was the saver and he was the spender, but not too many years ago, when the clients were calling and the cases were settling, she had relaxed a bit too much and enjoyed their success. Saving and investing had not been a priority. They were

young, the firm was growing, the future had no limits.

Whatever she had managed to put into mutual funds had long since been devoured by the *Baker* case.

An hour earlier they had been broke, on paper, with ruinous debts far outweighing whatever flimsy assets they might list. Now things were different. The liabilities had not gone away, but the black side of their balance sheet had certainly improved.

Or had it?

When might they see some or all of this wonderful verdict? Might Krane now offer a settlement? How long would the appeal take? How much time could they now devote to the rest of their practice?

Neither wanted to ponder the questions that were haunting both of them. They were simply too tired and too relieved. For an eternity they had talked of little else, and now they talked about nothing. Tomorrow or the next day they could begin the debriefing.

‘We’re almost out of gas,’ she said.

No retort came to his weary mind, so Wes said, ‘What about dinner?’

‘Macaroni and cheese with the kids.’

The trial had not only drained them of their energy and assets; it had also burned away any excess weight they might have been carrying at the outset. Wes was down at least fifteen pounds, though he didn’t know for sure because he hadn’t

stepped on the scale in months. Nor was he about to inquire into this delicate matter with his wife, but it was obvious she needed to eat. They had skipped many meals – breakfasts when they were scrambling to dress the kids and get them to school, lunches when one argued motions in Harrison’s office while the other prepared for the next cross-examination, dinners when they worked until midnight and simply forgot to eat. PowerBars and energy drinks had kept them going.

‘Sounds great,’ he said, and turned left onto a street that would take them home.

Ratzlaff and two other lawyers took their seats at the sleek leather table in a corner of Mr. Trudeau’s office suite. The walls were all glass and provided magnificent views of skyscrapers packed into the financial district, though no one was in the mood for scenery. Mr. Trudeau was on the phone across the room behind his chrome desk. The lawyers waited nervously. They had talked nonstop to the eyewitnesses down in Mississippi but still had few answers.

The boss finished his phone conversation and strode purposefully across the room. ‘What happened?’ he snapped. ‘An hour ago you guys were downright cocky. Now we got our asses handed to us. What happened?’ He sat down and glared at Ratzlaff.

‘Trial by jury. It’s full of risks,’ Ratzlaff said.

‘I’ve been through trials, plenty of them, and I

usually win. I thought we were paying the best shysters in the business. The best mouthpieces money can buy. We spared no expense, right?’

‘Oh yes. We paid dearly. Still paying.’

Mr. Trudeau slapped the table and barked, ‘What went wrong?!’

Well, Ratzlaff thought to himself and wanted to say aloud except that he very much treasured his job, let’s start with the fact that our company built a pesticide plant in Podunk, Mississippi, because the land and labor were dirt cheap, then we spent the next thirty years dumping chemicals and waste into the ground and into the rivers, quite illegally of course, and we contaminated the drinking water until it tasted like spoiled milk, which, as bad as it was, wasn’t the worst part, because then people started dying of cancer and leukemia.

That, Mr. Boss and Mr. CEO and Mr. Corporate Raider, is exactly what went wrong.

‘The lawyers feel good about the appeal,’ Ratzlaff said instead, without much conviction.

‘Oh, that’s just super. Right now I really trust these lawyers. Where did you find these clowns?’

‘They’re the best, okay?’

‘Sure. And let’s just explain to the press that we’re ecstatic about our appeal and perhaps our stock won’t crash tomorrow. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘We can spin it,’ Ratzlaff said. The other two lawyers were glancing at the glass walls. Who wanted to be the first to jump?

One of Mr. Trudeau's cell phones rang and he snatched it off the table. 'Hi, honey,' he said as he stood and walked away. It was (the third) Mrs. Trudeau, the latest trophy, a deadly young woman whom Ratzlaff and everyone else at the company avoided at all costs. Her husband was whispering, then said goodbye.

He walked to a window near the lawyers and gazed at the sparkling towers around him. 'Bobby,' he said without looking, 'do you have any idea where the jury got the figure of thirty-eight million for punitive damages?'

'Not right offhand.'

'Of course you don't. For the first nine months of this year, Krane has averaged thirty-eight million a month in profits. A bunch of ignorant rednecks who collectively couldn't earn a hundred grand a year, and they sit there like gods taking from the rich and giving to the poor.'

'We still have the money, Carl,' Ratzlaff said. 'It'll be years before a dime changes hands, if, in fact, that ever happens.'

'Great! Spin that to the wolves tomorrow while our stock goes down the drain.'

Ratzlaff shut up and slumped in his chair. The other two lawyers were not about to utter a sound.

Mr. Trudeau was pacing dramatically. 'Forty-one million dollars. And there are how many other cases out there, Bobby? Did someone say two hundred, three hundred? Well, if there were

three hundred this morning, there will be three thousand tomorrow morning. Every redneck in south Mississippi with a fever blister will now claim to have sipped the magic brew from Bowmore. Every two-bit ambulance chaser with a law degree is driving there now to sign up clients. This wasn't supposed to happen, Bobby. You assured me.'

Ratzlaff had a memo under lock and key. It was eight years old and had been prepared under his supervision. It ran for a hundred pages and described in gruesome detail the company's illegal dumping of toxic waste at the Bowmore plant. It summarized the company's elaborate efforts to hide the dumping, to dupe the Environmental Protection Agency, and to buy off the politicians at the local, state, and federal level. It recommended a clandestine but effective cleanup of the waste site, at a cost of some \$50 million. It begged anyone who read it to stop the dumping.

And, most important at this critical moment, it predicted a bad verdict someday in a courtroom.

Only luck and a flagrant disregard for the rules of civil procedure had allowed Ratzlaff to keep the memo a secret.

Mr. Trudeau had been given a copy of it eight years earlier, though he now denied he'd ever seen it. Ratzlaff was tempted to dust it off now and read a few selected passages, but, again, he treasured his job.

Mr. Trudeau walked to the table, placed both

palms flat on the Italian leather, glared at Bobby Ratzlaff, and said, 'I swear to you, it will never happen. Not one dime of our hard-earned profits will ever get into the hands of those trailer park peasants.'

The three lawyers stared at their boss, whose eyes were narrow and glowing. He was breathing fire, and finished by saying, 'If I have to bankrupt it or break it into fifteen pieces, I swear to you on my mother's grave that not one dime of Krane's money will ever be touched by those ignorant people.'

And with that promise, he walked across the Persian rug, lifted his jacket from a rack, and left the office.

Chapter 2

Jeannette Baker was taken by her relatives back to Bowmore, her hometown twenty miles from the courthouse. She was weak from shock and sedated as usual, and she did not want to see a crowd and pretend to celebrate. The numbers represented a victory, but the verdict was also the end of a long, arduous journey. And her husband and little boy were still quite dead.

She lived in an old trailer with Bette, her stepsister, on a gravel road in a forlorn Bowmore neighborhood known as Pine Grove. Other trailers were scattered along other unpaved streets. Most of the cars and trucks parked around the trailers were decades old, unpainted and dented. There were a few homes of the permanent variety, immobile, anchored on slabs fifty years earlier, but they, too, were aging badly and showed signs of obvious neglect. There were few jobs in Bowmore and even fewer in Pine Grove, and a quick stroll along Jeannette's street would depress any visitor.

The news arrived before she did, and a small crowd was gathering when she got home. They put her to bed, then they sat in the cramped den and whispered about the verdict and speculated about what it all meant.

Forty-one million dollars? How would it affect the other lawsuits? Would Krane be forced to clean up its mess? When could she expect to see some of the money? They were cautious not to dwell on this last question, but it was the dominant thought.

More friends arrived and the crowd spilled out of the trailer and onto a shaky wooden deck, where they pulled up lawn chairs and sat and talked in the cool air of the early evening. They drank bottled water and soft drinks. For a long-suffering people, the victory was sweet. Finally, they had won. Something. They had struck back at Krane, a company they hated with every ounce of energy they could muster, and they had finally landed a retaliatory blow. Maybe the tide was turning. Somewhere out there beyond Bowmore someone had finally listened.

They talked about lawyers and depositions and the Environmental Protection Agency and the latest toxicology and geological reports. Though they were not well educated, they were fluent in the lingo of toxic waste and groundwater contamination and cancer clusters. They were living the nightmare.

Jeannette was awake in her dark bedroom, listening to the muffled conversations around

her. She felt secure. These were her people, friends and family and fellow victims. The bonds were tight, the suffering shared. And the money would be, too. If she ever saw a dime, she planned to spread it around.

As she stared at the dark ceiling, she was not overwhelmed by the verdict. Her relief at being finished with the ordeal of the trial far outweighed the thrill of winning. She wanted to sleep for a week and wake up in a brand-new world with her little family intact and everyone happy and healthy. But, for the first time since she heard the verdict, she asked herself what, exactly, she might purchase with the award.

Dignity. A dignified place to live and a dignified place to work. Somewhere else of course. She would move away from Bowmore and Cary County and its polluted rivers and streams and aquifers. Not far, though, because everyone she loved lived nearby. But she dreamed of a new life in a new house with clean water running through it, water that did not stink and stain and cause sickness and death.

She heard another car door slam shut, and she was grateful for her friends. Perhaps she should fix her hair and venture out to say hello. She stepped into the tiny bathroom next to her bed, turned on the light, turned on the faucet at the sink, then sat on the edge of the tub and stared at the stream of grayish water running into the dark stains of the fake-porcelain bowl.

It was fit for flushing human waste, nothing

else. The pumping station that produced the water was owned by the City of Bowmore, and the city itself prohibited the drinking of its own water. Three years earlier the council had passed a resolution urging the citizens to use it only for flushing. Warning signs were posted in every public restroom. 'DON'T DRINK THE WATER, by Order of the City Council.' Clean water was trucked in from Hattiesburg, and every home in Bowmore, mobile and otherwise, had a five-gallon tank and dispenser. Those who could afford it had hundred-gallon reservoirs mounted on stilts near their back porches. And the nicest homes had cisterns for rainwater.

Water was a daily challenge in Bowmore. Every cup was contemplated, fussed over, and used sparingly because the supply was uncertain. And every drop that entered or touched a human body came from a bottle that came from a source that had been inspected and certified. Drinking and cooking were easy compared with bathing and cleaning. Hygiene was a struggle, and most of the women of Bowmore wore their hair short. Many of the men wore beards.

The water was legendary. Ten years earlier, the city installed an irrigation system for its youth baseball field, only to watch the grass turn brown and die. The city swimming pool was closed when a consultant tried treating the water with massive amounts of chlorine, only to watch it turn brackish and reek like a sewage pit. When the Methodist church burned, the firemen

realized, during a losing battle, that the water, pumped from an untreated supply, was having an incendiary effect. Years before that, some residents of Bowmore suspected the water caused tiny cracks in the paint of their automobiles after a few wash jobs.

And we drank the stuff for years, Jeannette said to herself. We drank it when it started to stink. We drank it when it changed colors. We drank it while we complained bitterly to the city. We drank it after it was tested and the city assured us it was safe. We drank it after we boiled it. We drank it in our coffee and tea, certain the heat would cure it. And when we stopped drinking it, we showered and bathed in it and inhaled its steam.

What were we supposed to do? Gather at the well each morning like the ancient Egyptians and carry it home in pots on our heads? Sink our own wells at \$2,000 a hole and find the same putrid mix the city had found? Drive to Hattiesburg and find a spare tap and haul it back in buckets?

She could hear the denials – those from long ago when the experts pointed at their charts and lectured the city council and the mob packed into a crowded boardroom, telling them over and over that the water had been tested and was just fine if properly cleansed with massive doses of chlorine. She could hear the fancy experts Krane Chemical had brought in at trial to tell the jury that, yes, there may have been some minor ‘leakage’ over the years at the Bowmore plant, but not to worry

because bichloronylene and other 'unauthorized' substances had actually been absorbed by the soil and eventually carried away in an underground stream that posed no threat whatsoever to the town's drinking water. She could hear the government scientists with their lofty vocabularies talk down to the people and assure them that the water they could barely stand to smell was fine to drink.

Denials all around as the body count rose. Cancer struck everywhere in Bowmore, on every street, in almost every family. Four times the national average. Then six times, then ten. At her trial, an expert hired by the Paytons explained to the jury that for the geographical area as defined by the Bowmore city limits, the rate of cancer was fifteen times the national average.

There was so much cancer that they got themselves studied by all manner of public and private researchers. The term 'cancer cluster' became common around town, and Bowmore was radioactive. A clever magazine journalist labeled Cary County as Cancer County, U.S.A., and the nickname stuck.

Cancer County, U.S.A. The water placed quite a strain on the Bowmore Chamber of Commerce. Economic development disappeared, and the town began a rapid decline.

Jeannette turned off the tap, but the water was still there, unseen in the pipes that ran unseen through the walls and into the ground somewhere underneath her. It was always there, waiting like

a stalker with unlimited patience. Quiet and deadly, pumped from the earth so polluted by Krane Chemical.

She often lay awake at night listening for the water somewhere in the walls.

A dripping faucet was treated like an armed prowler.

She brushed her hair with little purpose, once again tried not to look at herself too long in the mirror, then brushed her teeth with water from a jug that was always on the sink. She flipped on the light to her room, opened the door, forced a smile, then stepped into the cramped den, where her friends were packed around the walls.

It was time for church.

Mr. Trudeau's car was a black Bentley with a black chauffeur named Toliver who claimed to be Jamaican, though his immigration documents were as suspicious as his affected Caribbean accent. Toliver had been driving the great man for a decade and could read his moods. This was a bad one, Toliver determined quickly as they fought the traffic along the FDR toward midtown. The first signal had been clearly delivered when Mr. Trudeau slammed the right rear door himself before a lunging Toliver could fulfill his duties.

His boss, he had read, could have nerves of cold steel in the boardroom. Unflappable, decisive, calculating, and so on. But in the solitude of the backseat, even with the privacy window rolled

up as tightly as possible, his real character often emerged. The man was a hothead with a massive ego who hated to lose.

And he had definitely lost this one. He was on the phone back there, not yelling but certainly not whispering. The stock would crash. The lawyers were fools. Everyone had lied to him. Damage control. Toliver caught only pieces of what was being said, but it was obvious whatever happened down there in Mississippi had been disastrous.

His boss was sixty-one years old and, according to *Forbes*, had a net worth of almost \$2 billion. Toliver often wondered, how much was enough? What would he do with another billion, then another? Why work so hard when he had more than he could ever spend? Homes, jets, wives, boats, Bentleys, all the toys a real white man could ever want.

But Toliver knew the truth. No amount of money could ever satisfy Mr. Trudeau. There were bigger men in town, and he was running hard to catch them.

Toliver turned west on Sixty-third and inched his way to Fifth, where he turned suddenly and faced a set of thick iron gates that quickly swung back. The Bentley disappeared underground, where it stopped and a security guard stood waiting. He opened the rear door. 'We'll leave in an hour,' Mr. Trudeau barked in Toliver's general direction, then disappeared, carrying two thick briefcases.

The elevator raced up sixteen levels to the top,

where Mr. and Mrs. Trudeau lived in lavish splendor. Their penthouse rambled over the top two floors and looked out from its many giant windows at Central Park. They had purchased the place for \$28 million shortly after their momentous wedding six years earlier, then spent another \$10 million or so bringing it up to designer-magazine quality. The overhead included two maids, a chef, a butler, his and hers valets, at least one nanny, and of course the obligatory personal assistant to keep Mrs. Trudeau properly organized and at lunch on time.

A valet took his briefcases and overcoat as he flung them off. He bounded up the stairs to the master suite, looking for his wife. He had no real desire to see her at the moment, but their little rituals were expected. She was in her dressing room, a hairdresser on each side, both working feverishly on her straight blond hair.

‘Hello, darling,’ he said dutifully, more for the benefit of the hairdressers, both young males who seemed not the least bit affected by the fact that she was practically nude.

‘Do you like my hair?’ Brianna asked, glaring at the mirror as the boys stroked and fussed, all four hands doing something. Not, ‘How was your day?’ Not, ‘Hello, dear.’ Not, ‘What happened with the trial?’ Just simply, ‘Do you like my hair?’

‘It’s lovely,’ he said, already backing away. Ritual complete, he was free to go and leave her with her handlers. He stopped at their massive bed and looked at her evening gown – ‘Valentino,’ she

had already advised him. It was bright red with a plunging neckline that might or might not adequately cover her fantastic new breasts. It was short, almost sheer, probably weighed less than two ounces, and probably cost at least \$25,000. It was a size 2, which meant it would sufficiently drape and hang on her emaciated body so the other anorexics at the party would drool in mock admiration at how ‘fit’ she looked. Frankly, Carl was growing weary of her obsessive routines: an hour a day with a trainer (\$300 per), an hour of one-on-one yoga (\$300 per), an hour a day with a nutritionist (\$200 per), all in an effort to burn off every last fat cell in her body and keep her weight between ninety and ninety-five pounds. She was always ready for sex – that was part of the deal – but now he sometimes worried about getting poked with a hip bone or simply crushing her in the pile. She was only thirty-one, but he had noticed a wrinkle or two just above her nose. Surgery could fix the problems, but wasn’t she paying a price for all this aggressive starvation?

He had more important things to worry about. A young, gorgeous wife was just one part of his magnificent persona, and Brianna Trudeau could still stop traffic.

They had a child, one that Carl could easily have forgone. He already had six, plenty, he reasoned. Three were older than Brianna. But she insisted, and for obvious reasons. A child was security, and since she was married to a man who loved ladies and adored the institution of

marriage, the child meant family and ties and roots and, left unsaid, legal complications in the event things unraveled. A child was the protection every trophy wife needed.

Brianna delivered a girl and selected the hideous name of Sadler MacGregor Trudeau, MacGregor being Brianna's maiden name and Sadler being pulled from the air. She at first claimed Sadler had been a roguish Scottish relative of some variety, but abandoned that little fiction when Carl stumbled across a book of baby names. He really didn't care. The child was his by DNA only. He had already tried the father bit with prior families and had failed miserably.

Sadler was now five and had virtually been abandoned by both parents. Brianna, once so heroic in her efforts to become a mother, had quickly lost interest in things maternal and had delegated her duties to a series of nannies. The current one was a thick young woman from Russia whose papers were as dubious as Toliver's. Carl could not, at that moment, remember her name. Brianna hired her and was thrilled because she spoke Russian and could perhaps pass on the language to Sadler.

'What language did you expect her to speak?' Carl had asked.

But Brianna had no response.

He stepped into the playroom, swooped up the child as if he couldn't wait to see her, exchanged hugs and kisses, asked how her day had been, and within minutes managed a graceful escape to his

office, where he grabbed a phone and began yelling at Bobby Ratzlaff.

After a few fruitless calls, he showered, dried his perfectly dyed hair, half-gray, and got himself into his newest Armani tux. The waistband was a bit snug, probably a 34, up an inch from the early days when Brianna stalked him around the penthouse. As he dressed himself, he cursed the evening ahead and the party and the people he would see there. They would know. At that very moment, the news was racing around the financial world. Phones were buzzing as his rivals roared with laughter and gloated over Krane's misfortune. The Internet was bursting with the latest from Mississippi.

For any other party, he, the great Carl Trudeau, would simply call in sick. Every day of his life he did whatever he damned well pleased, and if he decided to rudely skip a party at the last minute, what the hell? But this was not just any event.

Brianna had wormed her way onto the board of the Museum of Abstract Art, and tonight was their biggest blowout. There would be designer gowns, tummy tucks and stout new breasts, new chins and perfect tans, diamonds, champagne, foie gras, caviar, dinner by a celebrity chef, a silent auction for the pinch hitters and a live auction for the sluggers. And, most important, there would be cameras on top of cameras, enough to convince the elite guests that they and only they were the center of the world. Oscar night, eat your heart out.

The highlight of the evening, at least for some, would be the auctioning of a work of art. Each year the committee commissioned an ‘emerging’ painter or sculptor to create something just for the event, and usually forked over a million bucks or so for the result. Last year’s painting had been a bewildering rendering of a human brain after a gunshot, and it went for six mill. This year’s item was a depressing pile of black clay with bronze rods rising into the vague outline of a young girl. It bore the mystifying title *Abused Imelda* and would have sat neglected in a gallery in Duluth if not for the sculptor, a tortured Argentine genius rumored to be on the verge of suicide, a sad fate that would instantly double the value of his creations, something that was not lost on savvy New York art investors. Brianna had left brochures around the penthouse and had dropped several hints to the effect that *Abused Imelda* would be stunning in their foyer, just off the elevator entrance.

Carl knew he was expected to buy the damned thing and was hoping there would not be a frenzy. And if he became its owner, he was already hoping for a quick suicide.

She and Valentino appeared from the dressing room. The hair boys were gone, and she had managed to get into the gown and the jewelry all by herself. ‘Fabulous,’ Carl said, and it was indeed true. In spite of the bones and ribs, she was still a beautiful woman. The hair very much resembled what he had seen at six that morning

when he kissed her goodbye as she sipped her coffee. Now, a thousand dollars later, he could tell little difference.

Oh, well. He knew very well the price of trophies. The prenuptial gave her \$100,000 a month to play with while married and twenty million when they split. She also got Sadler with liberal visitation for the father, if he so chose.

In the Bentley, they hurried from beneath the apartment building and were onto Fifth Avenue when Brianna said, 'Oh, my, I forgot to kiss Sadler. What kind of mother am I?'

'She's fine,' Carl said, who likewise had failed to say good night to the child.

'I feel awful,' Brianna said, feigning disgust. Her full-length black Prada coat was split so that the backseat was dominated by her amazing legs. Legs from the floor up to her armpits. Legs unadorned by hosiery or clothing or anything whatsoever. Legs for Carl to see and admire and touch and fondle and she really didn't care if Toliver had a good look, either. She was on display, as always.

Carl rubbed them because they felt nice, but he wanted to say something like 'These things are beginning to resemble broomsticks.'

He let it pass.

'Any word from the trial?' she finally asked.

'The jury nailed us,' he said.

'I'm so sorry.'

'We're fine.'

'How much?'

‘Forty-one million.’

‘Those ignorant people.’

Carl told her little about the complicated and mysterious world of the Trudeau Group. She had her charities and causes and lunches and trainers, and that kept her busy. He didn’t want and didn’t tolerate too many questions.

Brianna had checked online and knew exactly what the jury decided. She knew what the lawyers were saying about the appeal, and she knew Krane’s stock would take a major hit early the next morning. She did her research and kept her secret notes. She was gorgeous and thin, but she was not stupid. Carl was on the phone.

The MuAb building was a few blocks south, between Fifth and Madison. As the traffic inched closer, they could see the popping flashes of a hundred cameras. Brianna perked up, crunched her perfect abs, brought her new additions to attention, and said, ‘God, I hate those people.’

‘Who?’

‘All those photographers.’

He snickered at the obvious lie. The car stopped and an attendant in a tuxedo opened the door as the cameras swung to the black Bentley. The great Carl Trudeau popped out without a smile, then the legs followed. Brianna knew precisely how to give the photographers, and thus the gossip pages and maybe, just maybe, a fashion magazine or two, what they wanted – miles of sensuous flesh without revealing everything. The right foot landed first, shoed with

Jimmy Choo at a hundred bucks per toe, and as she expertly swung around, the coat opened and Valentino cooperated upward and the whole world saw the real benefit of being a billionaire and owning a trophy.

Arm in arm they glided across the red carpet, waving at the photographers and ignoring the handful of reporters, one of whom had the audacity to yell, 'Hey, Carl, any comment on the verdict in Mississippi?' Carl of course did not hear, or pretended not to. But his pace quickened slightly and they were soon inside, on somewhat safer turf. He hoped. They were greeted by paid greeters; coats were taken; smiles were offered; friendly cameras appeared; old pals materialized; and they were soon lost in the warm cluster of seriously rich people pretending to enjoy one another's company.

Brianna found her soul mate, another anorexic trophy with the same unusual body – everything superbly starved but the ridiculous breasts. Carl went straight for the bar, and almost made it before he was practically tackled by the one jerk he hoped to avoid. 'Carl, ole boy, bad news down south I hear,' the man boomed as loudly as possible.

'Yes, very bad,' Carl said in a much lower voice as he grabbed a champagne flute and began to drain it.

Pete Flint was number 228 on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans. Carl was number 310, and each man knew exactly where the other fit on

the roster. Numbers 87 and 141 were also in the crowd, along with a host of unranked contenders.

‘Thought your boys had things under control,’ Flint pressed on, slurping a tall glass full of either scotch or bourbon. He somehow managed a frown while working hard to conceal his delight.

‘Yes, we thought so, too,’ Carl said, wishing he could slap the fat jowls twelve inches away.

‘What about the appeal?’ Flint asked gravely.

‘We’re in great shape.’

At last year’s auction, Flint had valiantly hung on to the frenzied end and walked away with the *Brain After Gunshot*, a \$6 million artistic waste but one that launched the MuAb’s current capital campaign. No doubt he would be in the hunt for tonight’s grand prize.

‘Good thing we shorted Krane last week,’ he said.

Carl started to curse him but kept his cool. Flint ran a hedge fund famous for its daring. Had he really shorted Krane Chemical in anticipation of a bad verdict? Carl’s puzzled glare concealed nothing.

‘Oh yes,’ Flint went on, pulling on his glass and smacking his lips. ‘Our man down there said you were screwed.’

‘We’ll never pay a dime,’ Carl said gamely.

‘You’ll pay in the morning, ole boy. We’re betting Krane’s stock drops 20 percent.’ And with that he turned and walked away, leaving Carl to finish off his drink and lunge for another. Twenty percent? Carl’s laser-quick mind did the

math. He owned 45 percent of the outstanding common shares of Krane Chemical, a company with a market value of \$3.2 billion, based on the day's closing price. A 20 percent decline would cost him \$280 million, on paper. No real cash losses, of course, but still a rough day around the office.

Ten percent was more like it, he thought. The boys in finance agreed with him.

Could Flint's hedge fund short a significant chunk of Krane's stock without Carl knowing about it? He stared at a confused bartender and pondered the question. Yes, it was possible, but not likely. Flint was simply rubbing a little salt.

The museum's director appeared from nowhere, and Carl was delighted to see him. He would never mention the verdict, if he in fact knew about it. He would say only nice things to Carl, and of course he would comment on how fabulous Brianna looked. He would ask about Sadler and inquire into the renovation of their home in the Hamptons.

They chatted about such things as they carried their drinks through the crowded lobby, dodging little pockets of dangerous conversations, and settled themselves before *Abused Imelda*. 'Magnificent, isn't it?' the director mused.

'Beautiful,' Carl said, glancing to his left as number 141 happened by. 'What will it go for?'

'We've been debating that all day around here. Who knows with this crowd. I say at least five million.'