

THE PRICE OF REVENGE

by Dennis Vaughn

CHAPTER ONE

The walk down the stairs that night from the 31st floor to the 30th seemed more like climbing ten floors than descending one. The stairs felt as though they were pitching. Without even observing them, David Fox passed the oil portraits of the firm founders hung prominently at the landing. He had lost all energy, all ability to think. He walked into his office. The automatic light sensor caused the room suddenly to be filled with light. He hit the wall switch, returning the room to darkness, then closed the door. All he wanted was to put his head down on the desk, but he couldn't risk being found in that position. Even beyond regular business hours you couldn't be caught with your head on your desk.

Two or three years earlier a senior partner had walked into an associate's office unannounced and saw his head resting on crossed arms on the desk. "Harmon is down, Harmon is down," the partner yelled out into the hall. It sounded like a dire call on a battle field, not a reference one would expect in the mahogany paneled, wool carpeted environment of a large, big city law firm. Yet, maybe there wasn't that much difference. After all, law firms designated "war rooms" for significant cases and talked in terms of lining up "troops" to throw into battle against tough adversaries.

Jim Ramsey, the firm's chairman, had just threatened him. David was to falsify his internal investigation report in the Ballet matter in order to protect the firm or he would not be

made a partner. For added measure, said Ramsey, play ball or the videotape would be released to the partners. Until the meeting upstairs a few minutes earlier, David had been on a sure track to partnership in the firm. Even Stephen Hill, founder of Hill & Devon, had said as much to him, along with smiles and pats on the back. Everything in David's life told him he couldn't falsify the report. He was ethically obligated to report the facts as he had found them, even if the firm's well-being could be endangered. Even if he would not be made a partner after working his ass off for eight long years.

As important as partnership was, it was learning of the videotape that hit hardest. How could he possibly have known he was being videotaped on that elevator? He often had remembered that night in the elevator with a feeling of warmth. No longer would that be true. Someone might as well have taken a two by four and swung it full force into his belly. He hadn't even been able to respond when Ramsey said that he'd been given the video from building security. Ramsey had supplied the words: What could he have been thinking, using the firm's elevator for a sexual escapade? The partners would have to be informed of a matter showing such colossal bad judgment. They would have to take it into consideration in the partnership decision. Ramsey would even go so far as to tell Stephen Hill, David had no doubt of it. He wouldn't care what the impact might be on the old man. None of that would come to pass though if David changed the report.

It didn't seem possible that this could be happening at one of the biggest, oldest and most highly regarded law firms in the city. A firm well known for excellence in the practice of law, for lawyers of the highest integrity, for good works in the community.

The phone rang. David turned on the desk lamp. Ellen. He looked at his watch. He was

late for dinner. He couldn't deal with talking to her now. He had to be clearer. He started to shuffle papers into piles and organize his desk for the next day, but he couldn't even do that. Late afternoon telephone messages and e-mails would have to go unanswered, hardly his norm on leaving the office. How, he thought, will I ever be able to tell Ellen? She'd be devastated. Yet, she had to know what this bastard – the head of her own grandfather's law firm for Christ sakes – was trying to do to him. The son of a bitch. The dirty son of bitch.

He placed a file on the credenza next to a framed photograph of his father. A friend had been in his office a few weeks earlier and asked what the hell he was doing with a picture of himself behind the desk. When David explained that the photograph was of his father, the friend looked more closely and nodded, yes, the man in the photo was older but David was his absolute clone. David thought what his father would do in the face of Ramsey's threats. There was no question. The letter his father had written him on his thirteenth birthday told him. One word: integrity. David had made his mistakes before. He wouldn't again.

He put his coat on and walked to the door. The lights turned off as he stepped out into the hall and slammed the door shut behind him.

David turned the key in the lock, opened the door and called out.

Ellen's voice came from the kitchen. "You're late. I was worried. I called the office." She put her arms around his neck as he dropped his briefcase. They kissed and held each other for few seconds.

David didn't acknowledge the unanswered call. "Sorry. There were a few late breaking

developments.”

“Like?”

He put his jacket down on the back of a chair. “Let me wind down. Then we’ll talk.” He was still absorbed, as he had been during the fifteen minute drive to her condominium, by how, when and what to tell her.

Winding down for David meant a couple of beers followed by a bottle of wine shared with Ellen at dinner. There was no time tonight for the beer. Dinner had been ready a long time. He opened a bottle of pinot and they sat down. Usually, they would burst with conversation over dinner about what the day had brought them. Not so tonight. They ate largely in silence. David looked around the room, not at Ellen. The scene was comfortable, even if he was not. He was there often, in recent months almost nightly. Her condo set a standard his could never equal, with the antiques, paintings, silver, crystal and china inherited from her parents. The paintings were not by major names as far as he knew, but they weren’t sappy with clowns holding balloons or ubiquitous with waves crashing on rocks. Her things exuded class, as did she by her very manner and bearing. He loved to look at her, those large bright eyes dancing as she expressed her thoughts often enlivened with a quip or two. She had flair. His life never would be boring with her around.

For his part, David hadn’t gotten around to his personal surroundings. His condominium was what might best be described as serviceable. About as far as he’d progressed was to rid himself of some of the junky furniture that had followed him from law school to the apartments he had occupied in the early days with the firm.

“Are you unwound enough to talk now?”

“Sure.” He lied. He couldn’t hold it off forever.

“What’s wrong, David?”

“It’s tough.”

Ellen’s brow peaked, a sure sign she was worried or serious. “Nothing’s too tough for us.”

“Remember that night, weeks ago, when we were at the office late? When we were in the elevator?”

“No, don’t remember a thing about it.” Ellen’s face changed. Her eyes were stars again. She winked.

“Come on, Ellen.” He frowned. “You must.”

“Okay. I don’t want to threaten your male ego. How could I forget?”

“It’s a serious situation.” He filled their glasses with more wine. “They have us on video- tape.”

“What? Who’s they?” Her voice rose. The twinkle disappeared.

“Ramsey got it. From building security. He’s threatening me with it.”

Ellen stood and walked to the fireplace. It wasn’t a real fire, just a gas log ignited by the touch of a switch, but it gave off a aura of warmth that drew her close.

“Threatening what?” she asked in an unaccustomed, deliberate tone.

“That I’ve got to dummy up on the internal investigation report I’m doing for the Ballet or he’ll scuttle my partnership.” David paused. “And tell the partners about the video.”

Ellen was motionless as it began to sink in, then started to shake her head. “I can’t believe this. Granddad would”

“Go crazy if he knew about it, you’re right.”

“He’ll stop Ramsey. He doesn’t like him all that much anyway.”

“We can’t let him be involved. He’ll learn about the videotape.”

Ellen looked steadily at him. With some vague combination of anger and fright, she said slowly, “That cannot happen.”

“Only I’m identifiable. You’re not.”

“Oh, great.” She raised her arms. “That’s a big consolation.”

They were both silent. In a low voice, she asked, “What’s so terrible about changing the report?”

“They want me not to report some of the things I found in the investigation that are important. It would be dishonest.”

“Well, there must be a way to write it to satisfy him, to make your point but still not knock anybody over the head with it.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’m going to have to see.” He went to her. Over the fireplace hung an oil painting of the Maroon Bells, located high in the Rocky Mountains near Aspen dramatic but peaceful scene of snow on majestic red mountains viewed through fall aspen leaves. She’d bought it at a flea market they stopped by on a weekend in the mountains at Jazz Aspen. It would never have occurred to him to buy it, but she snapped it up without hesitation. He put his arms around her shoulders and back. She trembled. Her cheeks were damp. “Please try,” she said as her fists fell lightly on his chest.

His voice caught. How could he tell her there was no way he could change the report? Now wasn’t the time. He’d see what could be done. Let her have a chance to

absorb it. “It’ll be all right, El. We’ll work it out. Come, sit down.”

He guided her to the couch. He held her. They didn’t talk. He tried to be calm and to extend his calmness to her but he was tested by his recurrent thoughts of Ramsey.

What an asshole he was. David couldn’t believe what was happening.

