

Please read on for an excerpt from
Joseph Amiel's incomparable story of a man and a woman
whose destinies are fated to unite

Deeds

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Prologue

From his penthouse office in Behr House, Ralph Behr had been watching the night, hot and sweaty, slowly pin the day to earth. Only far to the west, well beyond the Hudson, was the day's bloody shoulder still struggling against inevitable defeat.

He shifted his gaze downward, to the insect-sized men and women far below who shuffled slowly through coagulating amber light in shirt-sleeves, shorts, halter tops, as little clothing as possible to alleviate the intense heat that had gripped the city for days. He imagined them looking up with awe and longing at the illumination deposited atop the city's towers like snow capping great mountain peaks.

He could see much of Manhattan from here and several of the skyscrapers he had erected. Proud of them, he was prouder still of having accomplished so much so young, and in New York City, which he considered the locus of the world's most talented people—the best of the best, the winners. Usually he was in motion; he hated inaction, the waste of precious time and the boredom of it. But now he could only wait impatiently for the telephone call from his lawyer at the negotiating session. He was too well known to attend himself—the seller of the property would surely recognize him and raise the price exorbitantly, realizing that the parcel had to be part of a larger site Ralph was assembling for development. In this case, the seller could ask almost anything and Ralph would be forced to pay.

For two years his agents, pretending that they themselves were the actual buyers, not even knowing that Ralph Behr was their ultimate employer, had been quietly using chains of front corporations on his behalf to buy up individual properties in that area. Tonight, Ralph's lawyer was attempting to close on the purchase of the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle that made up the full assemblage, the key piece. Without it the others were useless. The old man had stubbornly refused to sell, insisting that he wanted to pass on to his son the family's auto-body repair business, spread across several of the buildings on the site. He had finally agreed to sell only after another garage was found to which he could relocate.

No one, ever, had built anything higher than the project Ralph envisioned erecting on the site. He had constructed it a hundred times in dozens of configurations in his imagination, perhaps thousands of times if one counted the first vague, shining edifices that had risen in his boyhood imagination. He could almost see it gleaming in the distant darkness, its three skyscrapers piercing the night like slivers of glass. "Topless towers," Marlowe had called them. That image from a play Ralph had read in college had stuck in his mind like his first fireworks display.

The private-phone line rang, and Ralph leaped at the receiver. That would be Phil Rountree.

"There's a snag," were the lawyer's initial words. "The old man wants to break the deal."

"How much more does he want?" Ralph asked grimly.

"It's not money. We were going over the contract of sale and got to the part about having to transfer good and marketable title to the property—the standard requirement. His lawyer explained that it gave us the right to cancel the contract if the title-insurance company finds some defect with the ownership rights. He jumped up and called me an 'oily crook trying to cheat him.'"

"But he owns the property, doesn't he?"

"Sure, but until we hear back from the title-insurance company that's checking it out, we can't really be sure there isn't some sort of technical problem with his title."

"How long have he and his family owned the property?"

"Fifty, sixty years maybe. Before that someone else owned it another fifty or sixty."

"And he's serious about breaking the deal? It's not just a negotiating tactic?"

"I think he means it."

Ralph considered only briefly. "I agree to what he wants. Sign the contract his way."

"As your attorney, I have the obligation to warn you that—"

"Phil, stop thinking like a lawyer. Be realistic. If he walks out now, we'll never get him back to the table. I've already spent millions to buy the surrounding parcels that don't make sense without this last piece."

"Don't just jump into this—"

"When the plane's going down, Phil, you jump . . . and hope your parachute will open."

Ralph's soft voice was wrapped about a steel core. "I expect a call back from you in twenty minutes with the news that I own that parcel."

Ralph hung up and buzzed his secretary on the intercom—Myra never left before he did. She was to telephone Lorna, his date for the evening, that he would be late. He had already changed into one of the tuxedos hanging in his office dressing room.

Going to the bar installed behind the teakwood wall paneling, he removed a bottle of champagne from the refrigerator, uncorked it, and poured some into a glass, which he set beside the telephone. He would drink from it only when Rountree called with the good news. Then he returned to the window, reorienting his gaze by means of the succession of lighted promontories situated to the south of Behr House: MetLife, Empire State, Chrysler, Freedom Tower. He finally located the coveted patch of darkness at the lower end of Manhattan and locked his gaze on it, superstitiously willing the last parcel to become his. There, in that dim quadrangle, his hope for immortality awaited him.

When Ralph Behr walked into the ballroom, heads turned and hands stretched, as if toward a young sovereign. Nodding, smiling, stopping for a word or two, he moved with an athlete's litheness around groups in evening dress who twisted deferentially or enviously toward him as he

passed. A slim, dark-haired woman in black accompanied him, shaking hands and chatting as she followed just behind him.

On the other side of the room, Dan Ahern, who covered real estate for *The New York Times*, was pointing out prominent guests to his companion: developer Simon Kramer, the charity's guest of honor, who was rumored to be donating a million dollars when he accepted their Man of the Year award later in the evening; Morris Weitzman, who had three buildings going up in Midtown and was in a fight with the community and local officials over every one; Bob and Joan Eigen, up from Palm Beach, where he was developing real estate; Arnold Dale and his wife, she beaming as proudly as in the ads that showed her tyrannizing over their frightened apartment-sales staff.

"If you could bottle the ambition in this room," Ahern concluded, "you could light New York City for a year. They're all here because they want something. The little ones from the bigger ones, the bigger ones from the biggest ones."

Marilyn Watkins was used to the cynicism Dan Ahern imagined protected him from being fouled by the men he wrote about. She herself pursued gossip stories for a local tabloid newspaper. This wealthy real-estate crowd was new and a bit intimidating to her.

"Who do the biggest ones want something from?" she asked.

"God, probably . . . if he'd joint venture."

The commotion near the door drew their attention.

"That's Ralph Behr, isn't it?" she exclaimed, unprofessional excitement in her voice.

"The American hero himself."

"He looks younger than I thought."

"He's thirty-six," Ahern replied grumpily, envy edging into the habit of disdain. "You'd be a successful real-estate developer too if you started out with a father who owns fifteen thousand apartments. Every few years another one of these comets flashes across the skyline: Bill Zeckendorf, Donald Trump, now Ralph Behr. Most burn out and plummet like a piece of coal."

"Do you think I could meet him?"

"He's like all the rest," Ahern grumbled, his lower lip disappearing for a moment into the thickness of his blond mustache. "Someone should offer a reward to the first team to scale his ego."

Ahern knew he should go over there too; Behr was news, and several other reporters had cornered the guy in an impromptu press conference. Marilyn following closely on his heels; he began to snake toward the front of the ballroom.

Those encountering Ralph Behr for the first time were invariably surprised by several things about him. A couple of inches over six feet, he was taller than he appeared to be from a distance or on television and better looking, with a boyish expression that also tended to reduce his size in the mind's eye. The vibrant brown-green of his hazel eyes and the intensity of his gaze were further small astonishments; his eyes held the other person as ferociously as if he had grabbed a fistful of shirt. But as soon as his interest waned, he would instantly move on to something new that might devour his curiosity. His voice was also surprising: despite a circus-barker reputation for dynamism and self-promotion, he spoke with disarming softness.

The woman beside him, Lorna Garrison, was in her early thirties. She carried herself stiffly erect, a study in self-discipline. Her nose was well shaped, if a bit long, and her skin was drawn tightly against high cheekbones and the hollows below. Frosted brown hair was slashed at a fashionable angle just above her eyes, which were dark and deeply set. Her black gown, with its sharply tailored, sequined jacket and straight floor-length skirt, enhanced the handsome severity

of her appearance. She was a partner in a politically influential public-relations firm that represented many of these real-estate developers, but not Ralph Behr, who was a master at getting himself publicity. Her brief glances seemed to cover the entire room, even as her attention was warily focused on Ralph's bantering with one of the reporters.

"Mr. Behr," a trade-magazine reporter asked deferentially, "what do you see ahead for New York City real estate. We've been through some hard times."

"And we always come back bigger than ever. New York's the mecca, where it's at. Everyone who's anyone in the world wants to live here. There's always room for more good buildings."

Another reporter spoke up as the first hurried to scribble down the unremarkable quote. "How does Patagonia look?"

"Sure you're not just looking for a betting tip, Eddie?" The others chuckled, knowing the man to be an avid racetrack fan. "His ankle's coming along well. He should be ready for Saratoga."

Ralph Behr was staring at Marilyn. Nervous, she felt compelled to ask a question. "Any new projects on the horizon?"

His gaze did not waver. "I wasn't going to announce it yet, but since you put the question directly . . ." He lowered his voice, as if confiding to the circle about him. "I'm celebrating tonight. Just a few minutes ago I sewed up a big assemblage in Lower Manhattan. I'm planning to develop an office building, a hotel, and an apartment building there. Each one will be a hundred and fifty stories high."

"A hundred and fifty stories!" Even Ahern was impressed.

Ralph's broad smile swept the circle. He had been hoarding that news, like a man waiting to yell, surprise party!

"Taller than the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, those towers in Kuala Lumpur, and the one in Chicago. New York City is the greatest city in the world and should have the tallest building in the world. I'm going to give it—" he paused to increase the drama "—the three tallest, most spectacular structures ever built by man."

"You're serious," Ahern observed.

"Preliminary plans are almost finished, and the model will be ready next week. The towers are only the beginning. They'll be at the edge of a huge, circular atrium, along with three department stores and the world's finest, chicest shops, four-star restaurants, the works. This is more than a project, it's *the* real-estate project of our time."

"Where is it?" a reporter wanted to know.

"I can't reveal that just yet . . . one or two loose ends. But I bought the last parcel only half an hour ago."

Ralph cast a glance at Lorna, his grin indicating his triumph at having surprised even her along with everyone else while planning this massive undertaking. She seemed hungry for the information; she fed on such fare. The reporters seemed to be groping futilely for questions that would afford them a grip on the immensity of what he was proposing: to build the three tallest structures the world had ever seen.

Lorna was concerned. This was big news—the reporters would be on the phones within minutes filing stories that could well make page one. She pulled Ralph away.

"Damn it, Ralph, Simon Kramer is going to be furious. This is a big night for him. He invited these reporters here to cover his award, and you stole the spotlight from him again."

Ralph feigned innocence, but the smile was impish. "I can't help it if they print what I say."

Lorna, too, was now grinning. "Naturally, you also can't help it that all their stories will be filed by the time Simon delivers his speech." She paused. "You really *are* planning this project, not just fishing for newsprint?"

He crossed his heart, the boyish expression conscious now. "Want to see the site?"

"Oh, God, could I?"

He laughed. "I could get anything out of you in return for a secret."

"Ralph, if you're telling the truth about this thing, it really is the greatest real-estate project ever built."

"You bet it is." His face grew serious. "If I take you there, you have to give me your word not to reveal the location to a soul until I'm ready."

She nodded.

"Swear it."

"My God, you're a suspicious man. Ralph, you know if I say I won't tell anyone where it is, I won't."

"Let's get out of here." He started to walk toward the door. She reached forward to halt him.

"We'd better wait until the dinner is over. Kramer's going to be angry enough when he reads about you in the morning papers without your leaving an empty space on the dais."

"Hey, I wouldn't want to spoil Simon Kramer's party."

The heat seemed to have sucked all the oxygen out of the night and left a vacuum that propelled pedestrians by the power of inertia. Even the short walk beneath the canopy's lights, from the hotel's revolving doors to the silver-gray limousine, was oppressive.

Lorna fell back against the cold leather seat. Ralph gave his driver the address, and the car door closed to seal them in.

"Kramer made the most pompous, boring speech New York has heard in years," Ralph grumbled.

"It wasn't that bad. Besides, I like Simon."

"All that phony cultured suaveness? You just want his business."

The project site was in a deteriorated section of Lower Manhattan. The limousine parked beside an empty lot that formed an outer corner of the four-block expanse. As Ralph and Lorna walked onto it, the heat fell upon them like walls collapsed by a fire. The street-lamps, tall pickets guarding the periphery of the sidewalk, seemed to aim their small yellow suns at the improbably dressed couple who disputed the hegemony of the rubble and the tenacious claim of the crabgrass tufts.

Ralph pointed out the spots he had chosen for the three towers, the department stores, and, in the land's very center, the atrium. Someone had planted a garden there, on an empty lot at one of the inner street corners. He told Lorna he planned to bury the intersecting thoroughfares beneath the atrium and construct turn-offs into subterranean parking garages.

Then he fell silent and stared upward at the stars searing the night.

"Nobody's ever done it before," he finally declared with passion. "A hundred fifty stories. Nobody. Do you know what that means?"

"You'll be a billionaire."

"Nearly two thousand feet high. Nobody's ever built a project like this one."

He picked a stone from the debris at their feet and threw it upward as hard as he could. He continued to stare into the blackness into which it had disappeared.

"Three towers reaching toward heaven." He grinned at her. "If I never build another thing, I'll be remembered forever."

"Are you going to name it after yourself?"

"After my father. The Henry Behr Center. I want to honor him with something that will knock the eyes out of the sons of bitches who turned their backs on him and my grandfather."

"He's got to be thrilled," Lorna said.

"I'm going to surprise him."

Ralph's gaze drifted upward again. "The towers will be made of steel," he said. The last word hung in the air as if he had hammered the sound from an anvil to demonstrate the metal's strength. "Only steel can go up that high."

Lorna failed to notice the intensity in his voice. She pointed to a couple of tenement buildings on a part of the site that abutted the lot. "Who lives over there?"

"Squatters. The guy who owned that parcel said they just started moving into the empty buildings one day. They don't have any right to occupy the apartments—they don't have a lease or pay rent—but he never threw them out because it kept the buildings safer to have people living in them."

Ralph's arm swept a wide arc. "You have no idea how incredible this site is. Forget the seediness of the neighborhood, the debris, the disreputable characters slinking around out there. Instead, look at the transit lines and the wide avenues that go right by it. Look at how close it is to the financial district. Shopping and residential areas around here are starting to come back. Most important, look at the zoning code. Zoning makes this a miracle just waiting to happen. That piece over there with the tenements is zoned residential, and I'll put the condo tower on it. The rest of the site is zoned commercial. I have the right to build anything I want and go as high as the moon."

"And you don't have to get the city's permission for any of it?"

"Not for a damned thing. Well, maybe some tax abatements we're entitled to and for putting those streets that cross in the middle underground, but if they try to block me, I'll do it another way. But why the hell shouldn't they give those to me? I'm going to turn this whole slum area into a jewel."

"If you've already bought the last piece, why didn't you want to tell the reporters where it's located?"

"My title-insurance company is taking a little longer than usual to check the chain of title on this one." He pointed. "That big garage over there."

Lorna was surprised. "You mean you bought it before you knew whether the title was good?"

"If I had waited, and this last parcel had gotten away from me, the whole project would have gone down the drain and left me sitting with three and a half worthless blocks. Besides, when I do make the announcement, it will be with bands marching and flags waving. I want to have the model ready. Everything."

"You can't handle the press alone on something this big."

"We'll see." He flung an arm around her. "What do you think?"

"It's awesome," she answered huskily. "Those three towers will dominate New York's skyline. You weren't exaggerating. The greatest real-estate project ever built."

She pulled his head down to hers and kissed him hungrily. "Jesus, I'm turned on."

"If that's all it takes, I'll build one of these suckers every week."

Ralph undid his bow tie and the top shirt button and slipped down into the mauve club chair. He crossed and extended his feet before him. Lorna had lowered the living-room lights and put on soft music. Through the wide windows at the end of the room, he could see, across Central Park, the shapes of buildings formed out of tiny lighted squares. Usually, as soon as they got back to her place or his, the two of them were so aroused they could barely wait to undress, but tonight she said she wanted everything to be just right. She had gone to the kitchen for champagne.

Ralph reflected that he had dated her for a couple of years now and still enjoyed her company. That was something to a man who had a reputation for running through relationships like an express train past local stations; he attracted women easily and became bored with them even more easily. Certainly she had good taste and a sense of style: the way she dressed, this apartment. But it was something about the intensity of her interest in him that kept him going out with her, as if she was trying to wrench an equivalent interest from him. That was flattering and intriguing in occasional doses.

Ralph sensed movement and looked up. Now absolutely naked, Lorna was carrying into the room a Lucite tray that supported a champagne bottle and glasses. Her body was lean and sharply angled at the joints, a testament to her self-discipline. She set the tray down on the end table and then glanced up wickedly.

"This is your night. Whatever you want. Here's a preview."

She poured one of the glasses full, then stood and dipped her index finger into it. She slipped between his legs, bent over him, and ran her wet finger across his lips.

Ralph licked at the wetness. "Miss, do you have any of those little goldfish crackers to go with it?"

Smiling, she dropped to her knees. "No goldfish."

Her hand reached out for his pants' zipper.

"How about those nacho things?" he asked as her hand reached inside.

Her head began to lower to his lap. "Say another word, and you're an inch shorter."

Later, they made love together in her bedroom. When they finally lay spent, her head in the crook of his elbow, her eyes remained on his face, lit only by the reflection from the thin stripe of light that extended from the crack in the doorway and across their bodies like a sash.

"The first time I met you," she reminisced, "was at the East River Tennis Club. Do you remember that?"

"No."

"A long time ago. I had been the youngest deputy mayor in history. My new husband and I were just starting our PR firm and I was learning that he was a lousy businessman and worse in bed. You were a brash kid from Brooklyn with a rich father and a great backhand who hadn't built so much as an outhouse on your own yet, but you had more confidence than developers who'd built a dozen buildings. I fell for you like a ton of bricks. I was twenty pounds heavier, and you wouldn't look twice at me. That day I went on a diet and promised myself several things: to divorce Chet, to find a new business partner, to do a million a year in billings—and last, but I assure you far from least, I vowed that someday I would fuck you. All the other things came

easy. But it took me until almost three years ago to date you and a few weeks after that until I could get you into bed."

"Why are you telling me all this now?"

"Because now I want more." She hesitated only an instant. "I want to marry you, Ralph."

"That's what this performance was leading up to?"

"It wasn't a performance. It was a way of showing how good I could be for you. Nobody will ever make you a better wife. I'm as ambitious as you, and I know everyone worth knowing. And God, but I want you so much."

She kissed him again, grinding her mouth on his. "No, don't say anything now, tonight. We have plenty of time. Think about it. You'll never find a woman who understands you better or is a better lover. I would kill for you."

She rolled on top of him and stared down into his eyes, a verdancy as dark and obscure in the dim light as the secret at the heart of a forest.

"You're like me, Ralph. There are no rules for people like us. That's why we get what we want in life. And why we're dangerous."

Ralph lived on the top two floors of a Fifth Avenue apartment house which had been the first project he had ever built on his own. He had kept the penthouse. The rental apartments were eventually sold to their occupants at a handsome profit. It was after two A.M. when he let himself in, bow tie dangling untied on either side of an open collar, hair a little messy. Usually the butler left only the foyer light on when Ralph was out, but tonight the rooms beyond were lit as well. Ralph smelled familiar cigar smoke and went into the living room. His father sat in a tall wing chair facing the entrance.

"If I'd known you were here, I'd have been home earlier," Ralph said and strode across the Turkish carpet to kiss his father on the cheek, a ritual of affection Ralph's maturation had not ended.

Henry was seventy-seven years old and, although he had given up trying to lose the extra weight that had accumulated over the years, he was fit for his age. Only occasional shreds of gray at his temples wove through a fairly full head of black hair. His eyebrows too were a bit gray, and bushier now than when he was younger. The jowls drawing down the corners of his mouth only partially divulged his age, while making him appear more contemplative than he was. All in all, the passage of years had been kind to him.

Ralph's success had been on a scale so remarkable that envy or meddling by Henry was out of the question. He concentrated on managing the apartment buildings he had built or bought in the outer boroughs and rarely visited Manhattan. Ralph occupied himself with new projects here, which was where the vast increase in their net worth had occurred. Ralph still took the trouble to consult with his father before embarking on a new venture, and Henry appreciated the courtesy, but both men knew that it was just that.

"Been waiting long?" Ralph asked.

"Since about ten."

"How could you be sure I'd come home tonight?"

"You hate to sleep in someone else's bed. Since you were a boy."

Ralph ran a tired hand through his hair and fell back onto the sofa. "A problem? Everybody well?"

"Fine, fine," his father said, brushing away that area of conversation with a wave of his cigar as he paused to recall his approach. "As of the end of last month, I calculate you and I together, our firm, we're worth in round numbers two hundred million dollars."

"Give or take a few million either way that's probably accurate. And?"

"Half of that doesn't belong to us."

Ralph was too startled to react. Then he thought it might be one of his father's infrequent jokes. "If you're going to tell me the IRS is our silent partner, I'd be inclined to agree with you."

Henry shook his head. "Abe Weintraub."

Ralph was bewildered. "Who the hell is Abe Weintraub?"

"He and I were in business together in the early fifties."

Ralph searched his memory. "That accountant you once owned some buildings with maybe, what, twenty, twenty-five years ago."

"Twenty, exactly twenty. We were partners, down the line. We had a few small apartment buildings, a couple of commercial taxpayers, but we were partners."

"So you were partners on some buildings then. But you said that he owns half of our assets. Not our *present* assets."

"There was no other way. I never told you before probably because I was hoping he'd die or something else might happen to him. Or . . ."

Ralph was growing angry. "Or what—that it wasn't important enough to bother me with?"

"I was ashamed," Henry retorted, his voice rising to meet his son's, then dropping into a timbre of humiliation as he began to speak again. "Not that I did anything wrong, but it was a . . . stain, I guess would be the best way to describe it."

"Maybe you'd better start from the very beginning and take it very slowly."

Henry relit his cigar to give himself time to choose the right phrases that would best begin to reveal to his son the ugly secret he had harbored for twenty years, the secret on which all their prosperity had been built. He blew the smoke toward the ceiling and watched it for a few seconds before lowering his gaze to his son's.

"We had built up a nice little real-estate business, nothing major, but enough to give us a solid income. That was when I heard that Hampshire Gardens was for sale."

Ralph nodded. Hampshire Gardens had been his father's first large real-estate purchase: twenty-one apartment buildings, four to ten stories high.

"I was working on the owner to bring down the price and trying at the same time to stop him from turning the deal over to brokers, who could get him maybe thirty, forty percent more than we were offering. Abe's job was to find the financing. That was always his job. Finding the properties and negotiating for them was mine. A few days later he told me he had a bank willing to give us a big mortgage and that I should close the purchase with the owner. I did, while Abe worked with our lawyer to draw up the contracts. But I never imagined that he had done something illegal."

The butler, a middle-aged Englishman named Deighton, appeared in the archway leading to the foyer. He wore his robe over pajamas and carried a pot of coffee, which he substituted for one left for the elder Mr. Behr on the marble coffee table earlier in the evening. After Deighton had poured coffee for both men and left, Ralph instantly swung back to his father.

"What was it this partner of yours did illegally?"

"He inflated the figures we'd be paying for Hampshire Gardens in the documents he gave the bank. You know, to get a bigger bank loan, so we wouldn't have to put up any money of our own as equity. Hell, we didn't *have* any money."

"Didn't the bank talk to the seller or hire an appraiser to check out the value?"

"Any price can be justified—you know that. Look, the bank didn't *want* to know the real value. The whole thing went through because the bank president was Abe's buddy." Henry punched the air with his cigar. "What Abe did was understandable—what with our having only a few thousand dollars between us. But he never told me about it—only that everything was taken care of. He had gotten a great mortgage, he said, and I didn't have to worry about a thing. The closing went through. Abe signed on behalf of our partnership."

Henry took a long drag on the cigar, trying to put off the moment when he must go on. Finally, he looked back at his son.

"A few days later one of the bank auditors happened to do some checking and found out what the real purchase price was."

"You're saying that this partner of yours used fraud to obtain the mortgage. Well, he got caught at it, so that's his bad—"

"Let me finish," Henry interrupted forcefully. "When Abe was about to be questioned by the grand jury, to see whether they would indict him—and it was certain they would—he threatened to testify that I was in on the whole thing from the beginning. That wasn't true, but he was desperate, and he knew there was no way I could defend myself against that kind of a lie—after all, I was an equal partner with him. The point was he wanted to make a deal with me."

Ralph leaned forward. "What kind of a deal?"

"His proposal was that he would take all the blame if he secretly remained a partner in my business while he was in prison. I would provide for his family with cash in the meantime and then give him half of what I was worth when he got out."

"And you took that deal?" Ralph asked in disbelief.

Henry nodded. "I signed a contract that he hid in a vault somewhere and a false confession he could release if I double-crossed him. I had to go along. Either both of us went to jail or he did. There was no way I could prove I was innocent if he refused to testify for me. We were both sure he'd be out in a couple of years at the most, and then the partnership would end. Look, he was already a partner in whatever we had. And we still owned Hampshire Gardens; the bank directors were so afraid of bad publicity because their president had been in on it with Abe that they agreed to let me keep the property if Abe pleaded guilty and everything was hushed up."

"But that was twenty years ago."

Sadness flickered on Henry's pursed lips. "It didn't work out like our lawyer thought it would. The judge suspected there was more to this guilty plea than met the eye. He decided to make an example of Abe. He sentenced him to consecutive prison terms on the various counts, which meant Abe would have to serve a minimum of twenty years. The judge figured with that heavy a sentence hanging over him, Abe would then bargain for a shorter one by offering to spill the beans about everyone else who was involved."

"But he didn't?"

"He's been in prison all this time. And Hampshire Gardens was the beginning of our fortune."

"And, now that he's getting out, you want to turn over half of it to him."

"It's his."

Ralph jumped to his feet. "What the hell does that mean—*his*? He blackmailed you into signing something. All right, there's a contract. You have to give him something. What were you two worth twenty years ago? A couple of hundred thousand? Half a million with Hampshire Gardens? Double it. Give him a million. Two. Hell, give him five! He'll be happy as a pig in shit. He can live like a king for the rest of his life." Ralph's voice dropped. "But half? Half of what *I*

built up? You were worth maybe twenty million free and clear when I started. Half of another hundred and eighty million dollars he had nothing to do with? That I left in both our names only because we always agreed that what I was building up was mine and that you would pass your part on to me and Jeff? Now you tell me that all along I've had a partner who gets the giant share! Well, there's no way I'm going to give that money—*my money*—to some crook! Even if he spent a *thousand* years in prison!"

"Half!" Henry repeated in a voice that admitted of no argument. "That could have been me in there. I never blamed Abe for pressuring me. Maybe if I had been the one in charge of trying to find the financing, I'd have done the same thing he did. Maybe I would be the one getting out of jail after twenty years."

"Then give him half of what you built up *before* I joined you."

"How long would it have taken you to get where you are without that capital behind you?" The older man shook his head firmly. "He has a contract, and it's very clear. Besides, if I don't give him what's coming to him, he can turn over my confession to the D.A. There's no statute of limitations on fraud. When Abe gets his money, I get back the confession."

Ralph tossed up his hands in anger and frustration and spun away, striding to a window. He stared at the park without seeing it and then, in control of himself, went back to the sofa.

"What will people think when we just hand over half of everything we own to a convict? They'll know damned well why he's getting the money and what you did to stay out of jail."

"Abe and I were worried about that, but I think we came up with a solution that allows you and me to transfer half of our assets to him without arousing suspicion and without having to pay heavy taxes. Actually I came up with it, and it works."

Henry sat back and took a sip of his coffee. He spoke more quietly, hoping to reduce the tension in the air. "Abe isn't very healthy and doesn't really want the money for himself. He has a daughter named Gail. I guess she's thirty now." Henry wanted to look at his son when he said the next words, but could not. "The way around all of these problems is for you and Gail to marry."

"What?" Ralph was flabbergasted.

"Just hear me out. It wouldn't be a real marriage. You'd go out together, be seen together in public so that there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that it was a real marriage—the servants here and everyone else would consider you just like any other married couple. But in private, even though you both lived in this apartment, you would lead separate lives. More married couples than you can imagine really live like that anyway."

Henry hunched forward to the front of the chair as he spelled out the rest of the plan. Except for a couple of million dollars accumulated in his own name over the years, he would immediately turn over to Ralph all of his interest in the firm. Canceling some large liabilities in his own name would allow that to be accomplished without a big tax bite. Then he would retire. When his other son, Jeff, was a little more mature, Ralph would take on the obligation of financing him, as he himself had done for Ralph. Ralph and Gail would sign a prenuptial agreement that would grant her half Ralph's property in the event of divorce or death. In two years, when no court could doubt the marriage had lasted long enough for the wife to be entitled to a substantial settlement, Gail and Ralph would be divorced.

"You're finished?" asked Ralph, who had been barely able to contain himself throughout his father's explanation.

Henry nodded.

"Good! Then let me tell you: you're crazy if you think I'm going to get married!"

"You have a better way?"

Ralph fell silent and worked through every scenario that appeared to make the slightest bit of sense. Each one had a fatal defect. He had already rejected a simple transfer of cash or property; its purpose was transparent and it would trigger a huge gift tax. A sale of half their buildings with no down payment and a low-interest mortgage would impose a capital gains tax on the Behrs and debt on the Weintraubs. Contriving some sort of lawsuit that the two sides might appear to be settling would also alert the authorities, who might wonder why the Behrs did not defend it in court, which would doubtless cost them far less. Only a marriage and subsequent divorce accomplished everything the two old men wanted.

Ralph reached for his coffee. It had grown cold, but he did not notice. "I'll grant you that it works. And I agree that you don't seem to have any other choice."

"I'm doing this at your expense, I know, Ralph. It creates certain inconveniences for you for a few years."

"Inconveniences!"

"Call it . . . I don't know . . . a favor to repay me for whatever help I've been to your success . . . or one of those things you sometimes have to do for family. They're the only ones in the world who care about you and, when it gets down to it, who really mean anything to you, right?" He himself would have sacrificed everything he owned for his own father—if only he could have.

"But keep in mind," Henry continued, "none of us can dare risk telling a soul that the marriage is a sham. If word got out, the government would invalidate the marriage, and this whole transfer would come tumbling down. The government would start to dig up the past. Look, even a rumor about why you're marrying Abe's daughter could destroy a reputation I spent my whole life building up."

Throughout the conversation Ralph had been focusing on the loss of half his fortune, but at that moment the realization sank in that he would actually be marrying this unknown woman, living here in this apartment with her, having meals with her, going out with her. And only they and their fathers could be allowed to know the truth, and probably his brother as well. But no one else. "This girl Gail?" he finally asked. "What's she like?"

"Pretty."

"That's something, at least."

"One little complication, though . . ." his father added after a moment of hesitation. "She's married. To an artist."

"Just a little complication."

"She's already agreed to fly to the Caribbean for one of those quickie divorces just as soon as you say yes."

"What does her husband think about it?"

"He's all for it, I understand."

"I'll bet he is."

"They'll remarry after the two years are up."

"And then he gets to share all that money."

Two years! Ralph thought despondently. Two years of living with some woman he didn't know, who would end up a hundred million dollars richer for doing nothing but hanging around. This could not have come at a worse time, just when he needed the firm's full resources behind Behr Center's development and his total concentration focused on the effort. Now that he had announced the project, all the jackals would go on the attack to gain some personal advantage: the politicians and the misguided community do-gooders would be snapping at his heels, and every powerful real-estate developer in the city would be employing political influence to cut

himself in on the deal. Of all the times in his life to have this woman dumped on his back, now had to be the worst. But he couldn't turn his father down. He loved him so deeply and admired him even more. His father had gone through so much to get where he was, had struggled so long and hard to build a good life for his family. Ralph knew that if his father had asked him to give back everything, not just half, he would have. He felt a pang of sadness that he would have to wait for a better time to tell his father that he intended to name the new project after him.

"All right," Ralph finally conceded with resignation. "All right, I'll do it."

He instantly felt wounded, impaired, earthbound. He had always been a superb natural athlete—twisting, dipping, faking, then breaking for the basket and leaping high above the others to score: unstoppable. That sense of the inevitability of his triumph in whatever he did had remained with him. Until this moment he had glided through life, over life, as if those between him and his goals were schoolchildren flailing vainly at his irresistible moves. But now, blindsided, crippled by a circumstance he could not have anticipated, he felt as if that perfect grace was suddenly gone and his luck fled, as if he would forever be hobbling down the court on one good leg, like a bird trying to fly with a shattered wing.

Ralph took a deep breath, trying to clear his face and voice of the gloom he felt.

"When's the happy day?" he asked.

The rest of *Deeds* is available for purchase where you bought this book.