

Chapter One

"All things considered," Blandish said. "I'd opt for personal bankruptcy."

"Would you?" Zane ejaculated, masking the rhetorical sarcasm with a hacking cough.

"Are you all right?" Blandish whispered, his gaze sweeping the bank's sound-muted interior. Thickness was the theme: thick carpets that crept up to the ceiling's dentil-work trim, thick marble-topped desk tops, a thick carved wood door with heavy brass knockers.

Zane followed Blandish's surveying eyes, which alighted briefly on the hung offerings of Beverly Hills National's monthly art exhibit. This month it was yet another wealth fantasy: sleek racehorses, hides glistening with oily sweat, flowered horseshoe wreaths hanging from their graceful equine necks, winners all. Zane remembered a month of sailing yachts, their sails serenely bending in the wind.

"Am I washed up?" Zane asked, belaboring the obvious. He owed the bank \$3.7 million, not including the \$1.3 million mortgage on the house on Angelo Drive. An even 5 mil, give or take a hundred thou, and going, going.

I'm a goddamned American success story, he thought, reaching futilely for a vein of rebellious pride.

"I would have used a more euphemistic phrase," Blandish said. In keeping with the bank's theme, his hair was thick, also his lips, on whose moist, liver-like redness Zane fixed his stare. He would not, under any circumstances, look the man in his fishy eyes.

"Like what?"

"Fucked up," Blandish said, lips flecking saliva on his chin.

"That idiot director."

"We're all to blame. Movitz, Becker and me," Zane said bravely. Movitz had been the director on *Drowned Rats*, Becker the writer. "We had a creative consensus based on aesthetic principles." His voice broke. "And high hopes that others had the good taste to understand."

"It was only a damned movie," Blandish said, "not a revelation from God."

"You're entitled to your opinion," Zane said, reaching for the insulting edge of contempt. "And we still believe in it."

"So it's Hitler in the bunker, is it?" Blandish sighed, then, gathering steam, raised his voice to a snappish lecturing tone. "It was a firm negative pickup, Zane. All you had to do was match the script. You had to deliver the negative like it was in the script. It was in the contract."

"But it was so much better than the original," Zane protested. "The idea evolved as we went along." He had gone through it ad infinitum. Of course, the ending cried to be changed. It was wrong. Stupid.

Drowned Rats was going to be a breakthrough film, a potential classic. Generations beyond theirs would see it as long as the planet lived. The characters were, indeed, rats. Everything they touched became infected with the virus of evil. They deserved to die, the whole lot of them. Unfortunately, the deal, pickup, distribution, ancillaries also died with the characters.

Worse, it was to be Mim's film debut, freeing her at last from their emotional and financial ménage à trois. Aesthetics, creative consensus, the words triggered inner effluvia, nauseating him.

The aftermath in the screening room of the studio had somehow transformed itself into a recurring dream. A nightmare, actually, raw, harsh, and searing. No pussyfooting around with substitute symbols. He saw the faces of the studio executives again and again, heard their words. In the dream, the words were spoken with deadly accuracy in tone and meaning.

"This movie stinks like a gargantuan turd of pure giraffe dung."

The critique, undoubtedly the most creative sentence ever concocted by the studio executive, echoed and reechoed through the dismal void of the stark screening room in the bleak dreamscape.

"You made the fatal error, Zane. You signed the note," Blandish said, shocking him back to this ugly moment in real time. The man's tongue seemed to dart out and shiver, like a rattlesnake, as if poised to squirt its venom.

"You made me sign, remember. It was an act of revenge. You threatened to call the loan." He coughed into his fist. "When Mim left."

"The studio's paper was shaky," Blandish muttered.

"Not that shaky," Zane shot back.

"Then you should have shopped around. You forgot the cardinal rule of Hollywood. OPM."

He was rubbing it in now. OPM meant other people's money. Okay, so he'd signed. At that point it had seemed such a sure thing. The negative pickup was firm, ironclad.

"The least you could have done was to lend me another mil, give or take, to change the ending back to the original." Zane scratched his head. Money. Numbers. He was suffering from transactional overload. To mask the numbness in his mind, he forced a bright and unconvincing smile. "Would have made good business sense."

"Uncle Marvin would have shit."

"Not if it was a runaway hit," Zane said gamely.

"Uncle Marvin doesn't give second chances," Blandish said. "Most of the time he doesn't give first chances." He had lowered his voice to drive the point home. The fact was that Uncle Marvin had moved in with lightning speed. The bank had immediately put a lien on the negative.

"You had no right to kill off the little girl and the dog," Blandish said.

"Even the bankers want to get into creative." Zane sighed. Blandish had also seen the screening.

"Like the man said. It was giraffe dung," he murmured mali-

ciously, scratching the scab of memory.

Zane let it pass. No point in reinventing the wheel. All criticism was subjective. Problem was the gatekeepers were assholes, and Blandish was no exception. Of course he and the banker had both danced around the real issue between them, which was Mim.

Drowned Rats was to be Blandish's bouquet to Mim, the chance she had yearned for, studied for. Whether by deliberate cunning, random selection, or dumb luck, she had found a job as Blandish's secretary. Her contention had always been that it was a stopgap to keep her financially viable while she waited, fretted, cajoled, and studied to satisfy her obsession to be an actress. How was she to know that Blandish would develop the wished for malady, a severe case of unrequited love?

Then Zane had arrived, negative pickup agreement in hand, seeking a loan to fund *Rats'* production costs. In retrospect, the scenario did indeed have all the aspects of a ménage à trois perpetrated by consenting adults.

Who could foresee the mindless hand of fate? Emotional accidents do happen. How was he to know that he and Mim were composed of highly reactive chemical ingredients? Not every wish becomes a reality, despite the degree of manipulative clout employed to gain one's end. The fact was he tried like hell to get Mim's emotional attention.

Considering how his hopes for Mim's affection had been detonated, Blandish had every right to be excruciatingly vindictive and gloating over Zane's failure. He had fucked with the man's emotions, for crying out loud.

"I need more time," Zane said, striking out with an explosive offense of optimism. "*Tunnel of Love* was a hit. I did it once. I'll do it again."

"I gave you time," Blandish sneered. He had, if only to keep him dangling like a fish, ensuring that the hook would sink deeper into his vulnerable flesh and, therefore, cause more pain.

"I'll find a way. I always find a way," Zane squealed, echoing

his mother's blindly uncritical and unwavering support.

"Having one hit does not ensure omnipotence," Blandish said pointedly. It had been Zane's fifth movie, of which only one could qualify as a hit of sorts. Suddenly Blandish moved in his swivel chair, lifting his chin toward the glass of the see-through office.

"It's not time you need, Galvin," Blandish said. Under his tone was a sinister giggle of irony. His chin bounced several times toward the glass. Zane turned. A deeply tanned man with an open shirt revealing curly gray chest hairs moved past the office. He carried an oversized alligator attaché case.

"It's what's in that briefcase."

"Cash?"

"Beverly Hills goodies. Cash, jewels, coins, negotiable paper. In the land of conspicuous consumption, think what is hidden. We see the edge of the iceberg, man. Boggles the mind."

Zane braced himself for Blandish's rapture to subside. He prayed for a lecture, but he knew that Blandish had every intention of lowering the boom. Then he pictured the contents of his own safe-deposit box in the very same vault, once bright with promising valuables, insurance policies, Doreen's engagement ring, the kids' birth certificates, savings bonds. Cash, too.

"So it's high noon in Hollywood," he heard himself say, wondering if it was mere internal monologue. He had done a great deal of that lately and was having difficulty distinguishing between reflection and articulation.

"And that one," Blandish said, chin jumping again toward an old woman hobbling toward the vault area. He was, Zane decided, postponing the inevitable. Was the man capable of guilt? Had they really been friends, or simply Beverly Hills buddies? Pals for profit?

In the banker-producer courting period, they had played tennis, were doubles partners no less. And when Doreen had walked out and gone east with the kids, before he and Mim had succumbed to emotional compulsion, he and Blandish had wom-

anized together. Who provided the checks? Surely that qualified as a male-bonding experience.

And who was it that had the clout at the time to guarantee Blandish the choice tables at Bistro Garden, Jimmy's, and Spago's? Now he had the choice of tables nearest the men's room, the Hollywood metaphor for wooden stocks. Sitting there meant being offered to public view as he who had sinned, Zane Galvin, the schmuck who had signed his name to a note for movie financing.

"I'm begging for help, Mark. For old times sake." His voice seemed cracked, shrill. He was facing the Hollywood abyss. *Forgive me, Blandish for fucking you over, absconding with the girl of your dreams*, he cried in his heart. Not a muscle moved in Blandish's face, not a gesture of response, as he continued to look beyond the glass wall.

"Every day she goes in there," Blandish went on, ignoring the entreaty. It took Zane a moment to remember Blandish's reference to the old woman. "Puts on her rings and bracelets. A tiara, too. One of the girls came into the room by accident and saw her all decked out like the Statue of Liberty. Nowhere to go but that plush little cubby in the vault. Stuff like that keeps the wolf away, kiddo."

To Zane the reference seemed charged with ridicule. As if he were saying: So how are you gonna keep the wolf away, kiddo?

"Coupla months," Zane pleaded, pride and pretense wilting like a dead daisy. He forced himself to lift his gaze toward Blandish's. "I got some high concepts in the hopper." It was Blandish whose eyes turned first. *Disgust, disbelief, or embarrassment?* Zane wondered. He had hoped instead for compassion.

"If only you had something stashed, Galvin. Something tangible. Like good old cash." He bent over and whispered through warm breath. "I got a laundry here you wouldn't believe." A giggle gargled in his throat. "Show me cash and I could go to the committees."

"Fuck committees," Zane hissed with macho surliness, regret-

ting it instantly. Besides, Uncle Marvin ran all the committees at the bank. Committees were the cross he bore through the thirteen stations of Hollywood. The count was wrong but the image right. Damned studio committees, the peach-fuzzed round tables.

"What about Meyers?" Blandish asked suddenly, his tone rapier-like. The man was torturing him now without mercy.

"You don't read the trades?" Zane snapped. "He's been defanged. Fired." Sent to earth in a platinum parachute.

It was Sheldon Meyers who had given him his negative pick-up "go." He had been head of the studio then. Zane had given up plenty for it, aside from the kickback. Little Puss, Meyers' girlfriend, had to have the female lead. Which meant that Mim had to be downgraded. Unfortunately, it had been too late for Blandish to pull the loan without legal consequences.

"Screwed seven ways toward the middle," Blandish had bitterly complained. By then, Mim had left her job as his secretary and had moved in with Zane.

"These things happen," he had tried to point out. It wasn't as if she and Blandish had been married or lovers. The poor bastard had loved and lost is all. The knowledge of all this intrigue at that point would not exactly have thrilled good old Uncle Marvin. "It's the business," he had told Blandish at the time. Hadn't that explained everything?

His apologies to Mim about the loss of the promised part had been elaborate and dramatic. Tears had sluiced like mountain runoffs. He had soothed her with promises, champagne, and sex.

"Trust me," he had begged. In foreplay it had been a request, at insertion a command, and in afterplay a solemn oath.

His stomach lurched with the memory. A sincere promise had transformed itself into an elaborate deception. Her trust had been severely misplaced. She had no idea that his future was falling apart. He masked an involuntary groan with another hacking cough. Worse, both Little Puss and Mim had transcended their mediocrity. In the damned film both of them had been almost

wonderful, albeit not quite charismatic.

"Better get that tended to," Blandish said with a hint of expectation.

"Won't matter, Blandish. My policies have lapsed."

"Jesus, Galvin. I'm trying to save your ass."

"Then give me time, Mark." The religious reference sparked yet another biblical image. "Don't hang me on the cross. Not yet."

"Personal bankruptcy will give you time."

"I'm pitching all over town. The studios. Agents. I'm taking a lunch with an agent today." He looked at his watch. "Twelve thirty at the Bistro Garden. Murray Spitzer. He's at Morris now. A packager. How would it look if he knew I was going belly-up, Mark?"

The thought of his lunch triggered anxieties. God forbid they should not seat him in the gardens.

"What about friends?" Blandish asked.

It occurred to Zane suddenly that Blandish, too, could also be on the horns of a dilemma. He had the two bad loans that required action from Uncle Marvin's and the bank's point of view. Zane was now behind six months on his mortgage payments.

Indeed, Blandish's entire business career seemed concentrated on avoiding Uncle Marvin's wrath. In his heart, Zane speculated, Blandish surely wanted to screw him to the wall. At the same time, the banker did not want to totally abandon any secret hopes he might still be harboring concerning Mim. Such assumptions kept open a tiny window of hope.

"Friends? You're kidding. Five mil in hock. They see me, they take immediate evasive action." He looked at Blandish pointedly, hoping his squinting skeptical look would send its message, perhaps provoke a modicum of guilt. *I'm Gary Cooper, prick*, he spoke in his mind. Blandish's eyes seemed to glaze with indifference.

"Relatives, then?"

"That I got," Zane said gloomily, mentally exempting his mother. "Thank God, they're all in Cincinnati." He had brought

his mother west and set her up in a comfortable retirement apartment in Pasadena. It chilled him to think of her fate should he go down the chute financially.

Relatives had asked him favors when he was riding high. Distant cousins, even an illegitimate nephew of his great-aunt. His name on the titles of his movies had flushed out gaggles of blood-relative actors.

"Doreen?"

"She took her half east with her and the kids." For a brief moment he contemplated the possibility. "With that accountant husband of hers? Fat chance. Besides, I'm backed up on child support."

Blandish hesitated, lifting his eyes to focus pointedly on Zane. They were like the two headlights of an oncoming truck. Zane felt himself shrink and wrinkle like a squashed prune.

"What about Mim?"

"Mim?"

It was the moment of standoff hesitation. Two stallions, breathing fire and kicking the dirt with their hooves. Had he suggested that he trade Mim for time?

Informed of the circumstances, she might even go along. In the interests of survival, people have been known to make even greater sacrifices. It was not as if she would be asked to cut her wrists. He gave Blandish a long appraising look. After that, the possibility fizzled on a note of anger. Was Blandish suggesting that he was a man without scruples?

Blandish's interest in Mim had never been kept secret from Zane. He had unabashedly admitted his very specific designs on her. Indeed, Zane had played to this emotion. The promised part had sealed the loan, although Blandish had forced him to make it quite clear to Mim that it was her welfare that motivated his approval. *Stupid schmuck*, Zane had thought at the time. By then, Mim and he were already a secret item.

Blandish's resentment when their affair was revealed was understandable. He was a rejected suitor. Worse, he must have felt

used and abused, sexually scorned and rejected, manipulated and manhandled.

Yet he did not burn his bridges with Mim. When she quit, he gave her a big going-away party complete with cake and champagne. He also had sung her praises in a mushy toast that wished her every success. At the time his conduct seemed magnanimous—classy. Only now he was beginning to understand the diabolical treachery that lurked behind the charitable manner.

"You bedecked her with baubles, Zane," Blandish said, breaking the pregnant silence.

"I couldn't do that to her. Those jewels were gifts from the heart."

He could, of course, but he was frightened silly that she would flunk the test of fealty. The sincerity of actresses was, at best, a dubious commodity. It was an axiom of the business that lingered persistently in his mind. Besides, the so-called baubles were copies.

In a weak moment, when his ego had blimped to its breaking point, he had foolishly put a price on them. "Worth a mil, give or take a thou or two," he had told Blandish at the "anniversary" party, celebrating their year together at the Angelo Drive place. The jewels looked it, too. Cost plenty for phonies.

"I'm on the line, Zane," Blandish said. "I'm only the president of this bank." Dangerous humility was now entering the game.

"Can't you just shuffle them in with the rest of the bad debts?"

"I have."

"Then why can't you keep shuffling?"

"Federal examiners, Zane. Nosy bastards. I can't hide it anymore."

"Sure you can," Zane cajoled. "Greedy bankers can do anything."

"Too late. Your loan has been tagged by the examiners."

"You mean Uncle Marvin has been alerted."

"That's one way to put it."

"So it's toss the fish on the stoop and let the alley cats leave

everything but the bare bones," Zane said, searching for the right image to trigger pity. "Bones whitening in the sun."

"You're still young, Zane. It's not over."

"Young? Forty is geriatric. The power is in the hands of dribbling teenyboppers in basketball shorts." It was a phenomenon of the business these days for the production heads of studios to work out their competitive neuroses on the basketball courts twice a week.

"I wish I could help, Zane. Really I do."

Zane searched his face for sincerity, found none, but pressed on.

"Not only me that's on the balls of his ass. I got these guys to work for expenses. Both Movitz and Becker got zippo up front."

"Pricks," Blandish muttered.

"Artists," Zane countered. How else could they be justified to the marketing morons who ran this business?

"Bankruptcy, Calvin. The only way."

"I'll come back, you'll see."

"So tell me how?" Blandish asked, his words accompanied by a forceful spray.

"Age is on the march." He waved a finger toward the sprinkle of gray on Blandish's thick hair. "And I've been practicing my layups."

Blandish's eyes peered back at him blankly. His forehead furrowed in confusion. He bent close to Zane's ear and spoke in a low tone. "Be bankrupt, Galvin. Get out of my life. Maybe we'll be lucky and get a nickel on the dollar."

"Where's the business logic then?"

"Better to get this one off the books. Examiners see smoke, they look for fire. We throw them your bad loan, it satisfies their hunger to find others. Capish? These are tough times for banks."

"I gave you my signature, Mark."

"We'll cherish it forever, along with the negative of *Drowned Rats*."

"Keep me alive and I'll get it all back. I give you my word."

"Which is as good as your signature."

"Jesus, the negative of *Rats*. My life is in it."

"Wrong. Only your money is in it. You're lucky. When it's over you'll still have your life."

Blandish took a call.

"I have someone with me," he told the party on the phone. He looked at his watch. "About five minutes."

Before, when he'd slaved and scraped to get Zane hooked into the loans, Blandish would make a big show of stopping all calls.

"Five minutes left to make my pitch," Zane said.

"You made the pitch, kiddo. I gave you the bottom line. See your lawyer. Save yourself. *If* our lawyers go after you, you'll be lucky if they leave you with a loincloth."

Zane felt little pockets of perspiration well in the concavity of his lower back. He started to say something, but the words became garbled in his mind. The man did not mean loincloth. He meant what it covered. In his present state those parts took on a far disproportionate meaning to his future.

He saw Blandish's chin rise again toward the office's glass wall. Once again he followed where it pointed and saw a gray-haired woman carrying a net shopping bag filled with brown paper bags.

"Mrs. Amotta's coke run," Blandish said. "Now there's a business with cash flow. Probably five, six mil in the boxes she rents for the boys."

"She looks like a bag lady," Zane said.

"Not too loud. Jake Amotta's boys don't like people insulting their mothers." Zane recognized the name of the Mafia kingpin of the Southland.

Behind her, Zane noted three dark menacing men who had fanned about the bank floor, beady eyes on the woman's heavy rear.

"Mob stuff is good for business. Gives the customer a sense of security," Blandish said. Again his chin pointed. "For him, too." An officious-looking man passed them carrying a leather brief-

case. "Nothing in it," Blandish continued. For Zane the distraction was torture. "He's just checking the possessions of a certain Philippine lady." Blandish winked, implying extraordinary inside knowledge. "Thars gold in them thar hills of Beverly."

"Always the same," Zane said. "It's the rich that gets the money, it's the poor that gets the blyme," he trilled to an old English music hall tune.

"You got it, Galvin."

When he turned, his gaze locked into Blandish. Eyes opaque, like smoky glass. He felt like an insect. It was pointless to grovel further.

"Is there no compassion in Hollywood?" Zane whispered, desperately trying for tears. But anger overlarded all other emotions.

"On the screen, kiddo," Blandish said. "Only sensible place for it."

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