

✦ NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR ✦

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SNOW

DAVID MORRELL



THE DAVID MORRELL SHORT FICTION COLLECTION #4

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by

David Morrell

The David Morrell Short Fiction Collection #4

One of the great literary mysteries of the twentieth century concerns J. D. Salinger. In the mid-1960s, the revered creator of *The Catcher in the Rye* suddenly stopped publishing and withdrew from public life. In David Morrell's haunting "The Architecture of Snow," an author similar to Salinger submits a manuscript after a four-decade absence. Why has he abruptly resurfaced? What caused his long-ago disappearance? When editor Tom Neal embarks on a search to a remote New England town, he uncovers the disturbing truth behind a tragic mystery that changes his life in unimaginable ways.

David Morrell is the critically acclaimed author of *First Blood*, *The Brotherhood of the Rose*, and many other bestselling novels. An Edgar, Anthony, and Macavity nominee, he is a recipient of three Bram Stoker awards from the Horror Writers Association as well as the Thriller Master Award from the International Thriller Writers organization. His writing book, *The Successful Novelist*, discusses what he has learned in his four decades as an author.

"Morrell, an absolute master, plays by his own rules and leaves you dazzled."

—Dean Koontz, *New York Times* bestselling author of *77 Shadow Street*

"David Morrell is, to me, the finest thriller writer living today, bar none."

—Steve Berry, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Columbus Affair*

"Everything [David Morrell] writes has a you-are-there quality and that, coupled with his ability to propel characters through a scene, makes reading him like attending a private screening."

—*Washington Post*

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Introduction © 2012 by David Morrell, all rights reserved

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#1 in the David Morrell Short Fiction Collection is “They.”

#2 in The David Morrell Short Fiction Collection is “My Name Is Legion.”

#3 in The David Morrell Short Fiction Collection is “The Interrogator.”

Each installment has more than 9,000 words (one tenth of a novel) and includes an introduction.

BY DAVID MORRELL

NOVELS

First Blood (1972)

Testament (1975)

Last Reveille (1979)

The Totem (1979)

Blood Oath (1982)

The Brotherhood of the Rose (1984)

The Fraternity of the Stone (1985)

Rambo (First Blood Part II) (1985)

The League of Night and Fog (1987)

Rambo III (1988)

The Fifth Profession (1990)

The Covenant of the Flame (1991)

Assumed Identity (1993)

Desperate Measures (1994)

The Totem (Complete and Unaltered) (1994)

Extreme Denial (1996)

Double Image (1998)

Burnt Sienna (2000)

Long Lost (2002)

The Protector (2003)

Creepers (2005)

Scavenger (2007)

The Spy Who Came for Christmas (2008)

The Shimmer (2009)

The Naked Edge (2010)

SHORT FICTION

The Hundred-Year Christmas (1983)

Black Evening (1999)

Nightscape (2004)

ILLUSTRATED FICTION

Captain America: The Chosen (2007)

NONFICTION

John Barth: An Introduction (1976)

Fireflies: A Father's Tale of Love and Loss (1988)

The Successful Novelist (A Lifetime of Lessons about Writing and Publishing) (2008)

EDITED BY

American Fiction, American Myth (Essays by Philip Young)

edited by David Morrell and Sandra Spanier (2000)

Tesseract Thirteen (Chilling Tales of the Great White North)

edited by Nancy Kilpatrick and David Morrell (2009)

Thrillers: 100 Must Reads

edited by David Morrell and Hank Wagner (2010)

INTRODUCTION

Few authors had the mystique of J.D. Salinger. In the mid-1960s, having written four much-discussed books, one of which was already being treated as a classic, the revered author of *The Catcher in the Rye* stopped publishing and withdrew from public life.

He never explained why, but a few possibilities come to mind. His final book, a pairing of novellas, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* and *Seymour: An Introduction*, received mixed critical reactions. Perhaps Salinger's personality was as fragile as the name of his fictional Glass family implied. Perhaps he decided to stop exposing his work to reviewers and preferred to retreat to a simple life where he listened to "the sound of one hand clapping," a Zen Buddhist phrase that he favored.

For whatever reason, his walled compound in the remote town of Cornish, New Hampshire, acquired the reputation of a hermit's lair. Fans who made pilgrimages to the area reported occasional sightings of the lean, aesthetic-looking author, based on a solitary, long-ago book photograph that they had studied. But over the years, these sightings became more rare while the citizens of Cornish closed ranks, refusing to reveal the little information they had about him.

The few reports that surfaced indicate that during the next four decades Salinger wrote obsessively every day and that he had stacks of completed novels in a large safe in his home. In January of 2010, he died at the age of 91. It remains to be seen if those novels will be published. Perhaps they never existed. Perhaps he destroyed them before his death. Perhaps they're unreadable. Or perhaps they are masterpieces, the publication of which will come as unexpectedly as his withdrawal from public life.

These thoughts intrigued me long before Salinger died. In 2004, as I considered the way publishing had changed since my debut novel, *First Blood*, appeared in 1972, I wondered what Salinger would make of the international conglomerates that now control the book world. Publicity has become as important as editing. Marketing is often more important than content..

How would a modern publisher react, I wondered, if—out of nowhere and after so many years—a new Salinger manuscript arrived on an editor's desk? I called the author by another name, and the circumstances of his withdrawal are different, but anyone familiar with Salinger will recognize the inspiration for "The Architecture of Snow."

David Morrell

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SNOW

On the first Monday in October, Samuel Carver, who was 72 and suddenly unemployed, stepped in front of a fast-moving bus. Carver was an editor for Edwin March & Sons, until recently one of the last privately owned publishing houses in New York.

“To describe Carver as an editor is an understatement,” I said in his eulogy. Having indirectly caused his death, March & Sons, now a division of Gladstone International, sent me to represent the company at his funeral. “He was a legend. To find someone with his reputation, you need to go back to the 1920s, to Maxwell Perkins and his relationships with Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe. It was Perkins who massaged Hemingway’s ego, helped Fitzgerald recover from hangovers, and realized that the two feet of manuscript Wolfe lugged into his office could be divided into several novels.”

Standing next to Carver’s coffin at the front of a Presbyterian church in lower Manhattan, I counted ten mourners. “Carver followed Perkins’s example,” I went on. “For much of the past five decades, he discovered an amazing number of major authors. He nurtured them through writer’s block and discouraging reviews. He lent them money. He promoted them tirelessly. He made them realize the scope of their creative powers. R. J. Wentworth’s classic about childhood and stolen innocence, *The Sand Castle*. Carol Fabin’s verse novel, *Wagon Mound*. Roger Kilpatrick’s Vietnam War novel, *The Disinherited*. Eventual recipients of Pulitzer Prizes, these were buried in piles of unsolicited manuscripts that Carver loved to search through.”

Ten mourners. Many of the authors Carver had championed were dead. Others had progressed to huge advances at bigger publishers and seemed to have forgotten their debt to him. A few retired editors paid their respects. *Publishers Weekly* sent someone who took a few notes. Carver’s wife had died seven years earlier. The couple hadn’t been able to have children. The church echoed coldly. So much for being a legend.

The official explanation was that Carver stumbled in front of the bus, but I had no doubt that he committed suicide. Despite my praise about the past five decades, he hadn’t been a creative presence since his wife’s death. Age, ill health, and grief wore him down. At the same time, the book business changed so drastically that his instincts didn’t fit. He was a lover of long shots, with the patience to give talent a chance to develop. But in the profit-obsessed climate of modern publishing, manuscripts needed to survive the focus groups of the marketing department. If the books weren’t easily promotable, they didn’t get accepted. For the past seven years, George March, the grandson of the company’s founder, loyally postponed forcing Carver into retirement, paying him a token amount to come to the office two days a week. The elderly gentleman had a desk in a corner where he studied unsolicited manuscripts. He also functioned as a corporate memory, although it was hard to imagine how stories about the good-old days could help an editor survive in contemporary publishing. Not that it mattered—I was one of the few who asked him anything.

Eventually, March & Sons succumbed to a conglomerate. Gladstone International hoped to strengthen its film-and-broadcast division by acquiring a publisher and ordering it to focus on novels suited for movies and television series. The trade buzzword for this is “synergy.” As usual when a conglomerate takes over a business, the first thing the new owner did was downsize the staff, and Carver was an obvious target for elimination. Maybe

he'd felt that his former contributions made him immune. That would account for his stunned reaction when he came to work that Monday morning and received the bad news.

"What am I going to do?" the old man murmured. His liver-spotted hands shook as he packed framed photographs of his wife and of authors he'd discovered into a flimsy box. "How will I manage? How will I fill the time?"

Evidently, he'd decided that he wouldn't. The box in one hand, his umbrella in the other, he went outside and let the bus solve his problems.

Because Carver and I seemed to be friends, the new CEO put me in charge of whatever projects Carver was trying to develop. Mostly, that meant sending a few polite rejection letters. Also, I removed some items Carver forgot in his desk drawer: cough drops, chewing gum, and a packet of Kleenex.

* * *

"Mr. Neal?"

"Mmmm?" I glanced up from one of the hundreds of emails I received each day.

My assistant stood in my office doorway. His black turtleneck, black pants, and black sports coat gave him the appearance of authority. Young, tall, thin, and ambitious, he held a book mailer. "This arrived for Mr. Carver. No return address. Should I handle it for you?"

In theory, it was an innocent suggestion. But in the new corporate climate, I doubted there was any such thing as an innocent suggestion. When my assistant offered to take one of my duties, I wondered if it was the first step in assuming *all* of my duties. After Carver was fired, three other editors, each over 50, received termination notices. I'm 46. My assistant keeps calling me Mr. Neal, even though I've asked him to call me Tom. "Mister" isn't only a term of respect—it's also a way of depersonalizing the competition.

"Thanks, but I'll take care of it."

Determined to stake out my territory, I carried the package home. But I forgot about it until Sunday afternoon after I'd worked through several gut-busting boxes of submissions that included two serial-killer novels and a romantic saga about California's wine country. The time-demanding tyranny of those manuscripts is one reason my wife moved out years earlier. She said she lived as if she were single, so she might as well *be* single. Most days, I don't blame her.

A Yankees game was on television. I opened a beer, noticed the package on a side table, and decided to flip through its contents during commercials. When I tore it open, I found a typed manuscript, double-spaced in professional format. With unsolicited manuscripts, you can't count on any of that. It didn't reek of cigarette smoke or food odors, and that too was encouraging. Still, I was troubled not to find an introductory letter and return postage.

The manuscript didn't have the uniform typeface that word processors and printers create. Some letters were faint, others dark. Some were slightly above or below others. The author had actually put this through a typewriter. It was a novel called *The Architecture of Snow*. An evocative title, I decided, although the marketing department would claim that bookstore clerks would mistakenly put it in the arts-and-architecture section. The writer's name was Peter Thomas. Bland. The marketing department preferred last names that had easily remembered concrete nouns like "King" or "Steele."

With zero expectation, I started to read. Hardly any time seemed to pass before the

baseball game ended. My beer glass was empty, but I didn't remember drinking its contents. Surprised, I noticed the darkness outside my apartment's windows. I glanced at my watch. Ten o'clock? Another fifty pages to go. Eager to proceed, I made a sandwich, opened another beer, shut off the TV, and finished one of the best novels I'd read in years.

You dream about something like that. An absolutely perfect manuscript. Nothing to correct. Just a wonderful combination of hypnotic tone, powerful emotion, palpable vividness, beautiful sentences, and characters you never want to leave. The story was about a ten-year-old boy living alone with his divorced father on a farm in Vermont. In the middle of January, a blizzard hits the area. It knocks down electricity and telephone lines. It disables cell-phone relays. It blocks roads and imprisons the boy and his father.

* * *

"The father starts throwing up," I told the marketing/editorial committee. "He gets a high fever. His lower right abdomen's in terrific pain. There's a medical book in the house, and it doesn't take them long to realize the father has appendicitis. But they can't telephone for help, and the father's too sick to drive. Even if he could, his truck would never get through the massive drifts. Meanwhile, with the power off, their furnace doesn't work. The temperature in the house drops to zero. When the boy isn't trying to do something for his father, he works to keep a fire going in the living room, where they retreat. Plus, the animals in the barn need food. The cows need milking. The boy struggles through the storm to reach the barn and keep them alive. With the pipes frozen, he can't get water from the well. He melts snow in pots near the fire. He heats canned soup for his dad, but the man's too sick to keep it down. Finally, the boy hears a snowplow on a nearby road. In desperation, he dresses as warmly as he can. He fights through drifts to try to reach the road."

"So basically it's a Young Adult book," the head of marketing interrupted without enthusiasm. Young Adult is trade jargon for Juvenile.

"A teenager might read it as an adventure, but an adult will see far more than that," I explained. "The emotions carry a world of meaning."

"Does the boy save the father?" the new CEO asked. He came from Gladstone's broadcast division.

"Yes, although the boy nearly dies in the process."

"Well, at least it isn't a downer." The head of marketing shook his head skeptically. "A couple of days on a farm in a blizzard. Feels small. Bestselling novels need global threats and international conspiracies."

"I promise—on the page, those few days feel huge. The ten-year-old becomes the father. The sick father becomes the son. At first, the boy's overwhelmed. Then he manages almost superhuman efforts."

"Child in jeopardy. The book won't appeal to women. What's the title mean?"

"The epigraph indicates that *The Architecture of Snow* is a quote from an Emerson poem about how everything in life is connected as if covered by snow."

The CEO looked bored. "Has anybody heard of the author?"

"No."

"A first novel. A small subject. It'll be hard to persuade the talk shows to promote the book. I don't see movie potential. Send the usual rejection letter."

“Can’t.” I felt on the verge of risking my job. “The author didn’t give a return address.”
“A typical amateur.”

“I don’t think so.” I paused, about to take the biggest gamble of my career. But if my suspicion was correct, I no longer needed to worry about my job. “The book’s beautifully, powerfully written. It has a distinctive, hypnotic rhythm. The punctuation’s distinctive also: an unusual use of dashes and italics. A father and a son. Lost innocence. The book’s style and theme are synonymous with . . .” I took the chance. “They remind me of R. J. Wentworth.”

The CEO thought a moment. “*The Sand Castle?*”

“We sold eight million copies so far, a hundred thousand paperbacks to colleges this year alone.”

“You’re suggesting someone imitated his style?”

“Not at all.”

“Then . . . ?”

“I don’t believe it’s an imitation. I think Peter Thomas *is* R. J. Wentworth.”

The room became so quiet, I heard traffic outside twenty stories below us.

“But isn’t Wentworth *dead?*” a marketer asked. “Wasn’t he killed in a car accident in the sixties?”

“Not exactly.”

* * *

October 15, 1966. Three disasters happened simultaneously. A movie based on one of Wentworth’s short stories premiered that month. The story was called “The Fortune Teller,” but the studio changed the title to “A Valentine for Two.” It also added a couple of songs. Those changes confirmed Wentworth’s suspicions about Hollywood. The only reason he sold the rights to the short story was that every producer was begging for *The Sand Castle* and he decided to use “The Fortune Teller” as a test case. He lived with his wife and two sons in Connecticut. The family begged him to drive them into Manhattan for the premier, to see how truly bad the film was and laugh it off. En route, rain turned to sleet. The car flipped off the road. Wentworth’s wife and two sons were killed.

The film turned out to be dreadful. The story’s New England setting became a cruise ship. A teenage idol played the main character—originally a college professor but now a dance instructor. Every review was scathing. Nearly all of them blamed Wentworth for giving Hollywood the chance to pervert a beloved story. Most critics wrote their attacks in mock Wentworth prose, with his distinctive rhythms and his odd use of dashes and italics.

Meanwhile, his new book, a collection of two novellas, *Opposites Attract*, was published the same day. March & Sons wanted to take advantage of the movie publicity. Of course, when the date was originally chosen, no one could have known how rotten the movie would be. By the time rumors spread, it was too late to change the schedule. Reviewers already had the book in their hands. It was charming. It was entertaining. In many places, it was even meaningful. But it wasn’t as magnificent as *The Sand Castle*. Anticipation led to disappointment, which turned to nastiness. Many reviewers crowed that Wentworth wasn’t the genius some had reputed him to be. They took another look at *The Sand Castle* and now faulted passages in it.

"All on the same day," I told the marketing/editorial committee. "October 15, 1966. Wentworth blamed everything on himself. His fiction is influenced by transcendental writers like Emerson and Thoreau, so it isn't surprising that he followed Thoreau's example and retreated to the New England countryside, where he bought a house on two acres outside a small town called Tipton in Vermont. He enclosed the property with a high fence, and that was the end of his public life. College students began romanticizing his retreat to the countryside—the grieving, guilt-ridden author, father, and husband living in isolation. When the paperback of *Opposites Attract* was published, it became a two-year bestseller. More than that, it was suddenly perceived as a minor masterpiece. Not *The Sand Castle*, of course. But far superior to what critics had first maintained. With each year of his seclusion, his reputation increased."

"How do you know so much about him?" the head of marketing asked.

"I wrote several essays about him when I was an undergrad at Penn State."

"And you're convinced this is a genuine Wentworth manuscript?"

"One of the tantalizing rumors about him is that, although he never published anything after 1966, he kept writing every day. He implied as much to a high-school student who knocked on his gate and actually got an interview with him."

"Those essays you wrote made you an expert? You're confident you can tell the real thing from an imitation?"

"The book's set in Vermont, where Wentworth retreated. The boy limps from frostbite on his right foot, the same foot Wentworth injured in the accident. But I have another reason to believe it's genuine. Wentworth's editor, the man who discovered him, was Samuel Carver."

"*Carver?*" The CEO leaned forward in surprise. "After more than forty years, Wentworth finally sent his editor a manuscript? Why the pseudonym? That doesn't make sense?"

"I don't have an answer. But the absence of a letter and a return address tells me that the author expected Carver to know how to get in touch with him. I can think of only one author who could take that for granted."

"Jesus," the CEO said, "if we can prove this was written by Wentworth—"

"Every talk show would want him," the head of marketing enthused. "A legendary hermit coming out of seclusion. A solitary genius ready to tell his story. CNN would jump at the chance. The *Today* show. *Sixty Minutes*. He'd easily make the cover of the major magazines. We'd have a guaranteed number-one bestseller."

"Wait a second," a marketer asked. "How *old* is he?"

"In his early eighties," I answered.

"Maybe he can barely talk. Maybe he'd be useless on the *Today* show."

"That's one of a lot of things you need to find out," the CEO told me. "Track him down. Find out if he wrote this manuscript. Our parent company wants a twenty-percent increase in profits. We won't do that by promoting authors who sell only fifty thousand hardbacks. We need a million seller. I'm meeting the Gladstone executives on Monday. They want to know what progress we're making. It would be fabulous if I could tell them we have Wentworth."

I tried to telephone Wentworth's agent to see if she had contact information. But it turned out that his agent had died twelve years earlier and that no arrangements were made for anyone else to represent Wentworth, who wasn't expected to publish again. I called Vermont's telephone directory assistance and learned that Wentworth didn't have a listed phone number. The Author's Guild couldn't help, either.

My CEO walked in. "What did he tell you? Does he admit he's the author?"

"I haven't been able to ask him. I can't find a way to contact him."

"This is too important. Go up to Vermont. Knock on his door. Keep knocking until he answers."

I checked Google Maps and located Tipton in the southern part of Vermont. A Google search revealed that few people lived there. It was hard to reach by plane or train, so the next morning, I rented a car and drove six hours north through Connecticut and Massachusetts.

In mid-October, Vermont's maple-tree-covered hills had glorious colors, although I was too preoccupied to give them full attention. With difficulty—because a crossroads wasn't clearly marked—I reached Tipton (population 5,073) only after dark and checked into one of its few motels without getting a look at the town.

At eight the next morning, I stepped from my room and breathed cool, clean air. Rustic buildings lined the main street, mostly white clapboards with high-pitched roofs. A church steeple towered above a square. Calm. Clean. Quiet. Ordered. The contrast with Manhattan was dramatic.

Down the street, a sign read MEG'S PANTRY. As I passed an antique store, I had the palpable sense of former years. I imagined that, except for satellite dishes and SUVs, Tipton looked the same now as it had a hundred years earlier, perhaps even *two* hundred years earlier. A plaque confirmed my suspicion: JEREMIAH TIPTON CONSTRUCTED THIS BUILDING IN 1792.

When I opened the door, the smell of coffee, pancakes, eggs, bacon, and hash browns overwhelmed me. A dozen ruddy-faced patrons looked up from their breakfasts. My pale cheeks made me self-conscious, as did my slacks and sports coat. Amid jeans and checkered wool shirts, I obviously wasn't a local. Not that I sensed hostility. A town that earned its income from tourists tolerated strangers.

As they resumed their murmured conversations, I sat at the counter. A gray-haired woman with spectacles came over, gave me a menu, and pulled a notepad from an apron.

"What's the special?" I asked.

"Corned beef and eggs."

I didn't have an appetite, but I knew I couldn't establish rapport if my bill wasn't high enough for the waitress to expect a good tip. "I'll take it."

"Coffee?"

"You bet. Regular. And orange juice."

When she brought the food, I said, "Town's kind of quiet."

"Gets busy on the weekends. Especially now that the leaves are in color."

When she brought the check, I said, "I'm told there's a writer who lives in the neighborhood. R. J. Wentworth."

Everyone looked at me.

"Wentworth? I don't think I ever heard of him," the waitress said. "Mind you, I'm not a reader."

"You'd love his books." The obvious response to a statement like that is, "Really? What are they about?" But all I received was a guarded look. "Keep the change," I said.

Subtlety not having worked, I went outside and noticed a little more activity on the street. Some of it wasn't reassuring. A rumpled guy in ragged clothes came out of an alley. He had the vacant look of a druggie.

Other movement caught my attention. A slender man wearing a cap and a windbreaker reached a bookstore across the street, unlocked its door, and went in. When I crossed to it, I saw that most of the volumes in the window had lush covers depicting covered bridges, autumn foliage, or snow-covered slopes, with titles related to Vermont's history and beauty. But one volume, small and plain, was a history of Tipton. I tried the door and found it was locked.

Through the window, I saw the slender man take off his windbreaker. His cap was already off, revealing thin hair. He turned toward the rattling doorknob and shook his head, motioning courteously for me to leave. When I pretended to be confused, he walked over and unlocked the door.

"I'm not open yet. Can you come back in an hour?"

"Sure. I want to buy that book in the window—the history of Tipton."

That caught his attention. "You've got excellent taste. Come in."

An overhead bell rang when he opened the door wider. The store was filled with pleasant mustiness. He tugged a pen from his shirt pocket.

"I'll autograph the book for you."

"You're the author?"

"Guilty."

I looked at the cover. *Tales of Historic Tipton* by Jonathan Wade. "I'm from New York. An editor for March & Sons. It's always a pleasure to meet an author."

"You're here to see the colors?"

"A little pleasure with business." I paid for the book.

"Business?"

"An author lives around here."

"Oh?"

"R. J. Wentworth."

"Oh?"

"I need to speak to him."

"Couldn't you just write him a letter?"

"I don't have his address."

"I see." Wade pointed at the book in my hands. "And you thought perhaps the address is in *there*?"

"The thought crossed my mind."

"You won't find it. Still want to buy the book?"

"Absolutely. I love history, and when I meet an author, I'm always curious to see how he writes."

"Not with the brilliance of R. J. Wentworth, I regret to say. We used to get people asking about him all the time. Thirty years ago, my father had a thriving business, selling Wentworth's books to people who asked about him. In fact, without Wentworth, my father

wouldn't have made a living. Nor would anybody else in town, for that matter. Tipton would have dried up if not for the tourists Wentworth attracted."

"But not anymore?"

"His fans got old, I guess, and people don't read much these days."

"So a waitress across the street told me."

"This town owes him a lot, even if he didn't mean to do us a favor. In these parts, if you're not born here, you're always an outsider. But after more than forty years of living here, he's definitely one of us. You won't find anybody who'll tell you where he is. I wouldn't be able to look him in the eyes if I violated his privacy."

"In the eyes?" I asked, feeling a chill. "You mean you've spoken with him?"

"Despite Bob's reputation for being a hermit, he isn't anti-social."

"Bob'?" I asked in greater amazement. The familiarity sounded almost profane.

"His first name is Robert, after all. He insists on being called Bob. He comes into town on occasion. Buys books. Eats at the Pantry. Gets a haircut. Watches a baseball game at the tavern down the street."

I continued to be astounded.

"Not often and certainly never on a weekend during peak tourist season," Wade continued. "He picks times when he knows he can move around without being bothered."

"Even at his age?"

"You'd be surprised."

"But what's he like?"

"Polite. Considerate. He doesn't make assumptions about himself. What I mostly notice is how clear his eyes are. You've read his work?"

"Many times."

"Then you know how much he's influenced by Transcendental writers like Emerson and Thoreau. Calm. Still. Reflective. It's soothing to be around him."

"But you won't help me meet him?"

"Definitely not."

"Could you at least phone him and try to arrange a meeting?"

"Can't."

"Okay, I understand."

"I'm not sure you do. I literally can't. Bob doesn't have a telephone. And I'm not about to knock on his door. Why do you need to talk to him?"

I told Wade about the manuscript. "I think it's his work, but it doesn't have his name on it." I added the detail that I hoped would make Wade cooperate. "It was addressed to his editor. But unfortunately, his editor died recently. They were friends. I wonder if he's been told."

"I only have your word that you're an editor."

"Here's my business card."

"Twenty years ago, a man showed me a business card, claiming he worked in the White House. He said the President wanted to give Bob an award, but he turned out to be an assistant to a Hollywood producer who wanted the movie rights for *The Sand Castle*."

"What harm would it do to put a note in his mailbox?"

"I've never intruded on him. I'm not about to start now."

Outside, a pickup truck rattled past. A few more locals appeared on the sidewalk. Another rumpled guy came out of an alley. A half-block to my right, a Jeep was parked outside an office marked TIPTON REALTY. I walked over and pretended to admire a display of properties for sale: farms, cabins, and historic-looking homes.

When I stepped inside, the hardwood floor creaked. The smell of furniture polish reminded me of my grandmother's house.

At an antique desk, an attractive red-haired woman looked up from a computer screen. "May I help you?" Her voice was pleasant.

"I was wondering if you had a map of the roads around here. My Vermont map doesn't provide much detail."

"Looking for property?"

"Don't know yet. As you can probably tell, I'm not from around here. But the scenery's so magnificent, I thought I might drive around and see if anything appeals to me."

"A weekend place to live?"

"Something like that."

"You're from New York, right?"

"It's that obvious?"

"I meet a lot of people passing through. I'm a good judge of accents. New York's a little far to have a weekend place here."

"I'm not sure it would be just for weekends. I'm a book editor. But I've given some thought to writing a novel."

This attracted her interest.

"I hear the location has inspired other writers," I said. "Doesn't John Irving live in Vermont?"

"And David Mamet and Grace Paley."

"And R. J. Wentworth," I said. "Doesn't he live around here?"

Her expression became guarded.

"Great writer," I said.

Her tone was now curt. "You'll find maps on that table."

* * *

As I walked to my car, I thought that the CIA or the mafia ought to send their recruits for training in Tipton. The townspeople knew how to keep secrets. I chose north, driving along brilliantly wooded back roads. The fragrance of the falling leaves was powerful, reminding me of my boyhood on Long Island, of helping my father rake the yard. He burned the leaves in a pit behind our house. He always let me strike the match. He died from a heart attack when I was twelve.

I turned up a dirt road, passed a cabin, reached a wall of trees, and went back to the main road. Farther along, I turned up another dirt road, passed *two* cabins, reached a stream that blocked the road, and again went back.

My search wasn't as aimless as it seemed. After all, I knew what I was looking for: a high fence that enclosed a couple of acres. The female student who'd been fortunate enough to get an interview with Wentworth years earlier described the property. The high gate was almost indistinguishable from the fence, she wrote. The mailbox was embedded

in the fence and had a hatch on the opposite side so that Wentworth didn't need to leave the compound to get his mail. A sign warned NO SOLICITORS. NO TRESPASSING.

But nothing in the north sector matched that description. Of course, the student's interview was two decades old. Wentworth might have changed things since then, in which case I was wasting my time. How far away from town would he have wanted to live? I arbitrarily decided that fifteen miles was too far and switched my search to the side roads in the west. More farms and cabins, more falling leaves and wood smoke. By the time I finished the western sector and headed south, the afternoon light was fading.

My cell phone rang.

"Have you found him yet?" my boss demanded.

The reception was so poor, I could barely hear him. When I explained the problems I was having, he interrupted. "Just get it done. If Wentworth wrote this book, remind him his last contract with March & Sons gives us the option on it. There's no way I'm going to let anybody else publish it. Do you have the agreement with you?"

"In my jacket."

"Make sure you get him to sign it."

"He'll want to talk to an agent."

"You told me his agent's dead. Anyway, why does he need an agent? Within reason, we'll give him whatever he wants. " The transmission crackled. "This'll go a long way toward proving you're a necessary part of the team." The crackle worsened. "Don't disappoint... Call... soon... find..."

With renewed motivation, I searched the southern sector, not giving up until dark. In town, I refilled the gas tank, ready for an early start the next morning. Then I walked along the shadowy main street, noticing FOR SALE signs on a lot of doors. The financial troubles gave me an idea.

* * *

Tipton Realty had its lights on. I knocked.

"Come in," a woman's voice said.

As I entered, I couldn't help noticing my haggard reflection on the door's window.

Again the hardwood floor creaked.

"Busy day?" The same woman sat at the desk. She was about 35. Her lush red hair hung past her shoulders. Her bright, green eyes were hard to look away from.

"I saw a lot of beautiful country."

"Did you find him?"

"Find...?"

"Bob Wentworth. Everybody in town knows you're looking for him."

I glanced down. "I guess I'd make a poor spy. No, I didn't find him." I held out my hand. "Tom Neal."

She shook it. "Becky Shafer."

"I can't get used to people calling him 'Bob.' I gather you've met him."

"Not as much as other people in Tipton. I'm new."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I came here only twelve years ago."

I chuckled.

"I drove into town with my artist boyfriend," she explained. "We loved the quiet and the scenery. We decided to stay. The boyfriend's long gone. But I'm still a newcomer."

"Sorry about the boyfriend." I noticed she didn't wear a wedding ring.

"No need to be sorry. He turned out to be a creep."

"A lot of that going around." I thought of my CEO.

She gave me a look that made me think she applied the word to me.

"I do have an important reason to see him," I said.

After I told her about the manuscript, she thought a moment. "But why would he use a pseudonym?"

"That's one of many things I'd like to ask him." Thinking of the FOR SALE signs, I took my chance to propose my idea. "To hear the old timers tell it, things got crazy here with so many fans wanting to talk to him. You can imagine the effect a new book would create. The publicity. The pent-up demand. This town would attract a lot of fans again. It would be like the excitement of thirty years ago."

I let the temptation sink in.

Becky didn't respond for several moments. Her gaze hardened. "So all I need to do is show you where Bob lives, and in exchange, next year I'll have more business than I can handle?"

"When you put it that way, I guess that's right."

"Gosh, I didn't realize it was so late." She pulled her car keys from her purse. "You'll have to excuse me. I need to go home."

* * *

The weathered old Tipton Tavern was presumably the place Wade told me about, where Wentworth sometimes watched a baseball game. There was indeed a baseball game on the television, but I was the main interest, patrons setting down their drinks and looking at me. As much as I could tell from recalling the photograph on Wentworth's books (a lean-faced, dark-haired man with soulful eyes), he wasn't in the room.

Heading back to the motel, I didn't go far before I heard wary footsteps behind me. A cold breeze made me shiver as I glanced back toward the shadowy street. The footsteps ended. I resumed walking and again heard the footsteps. My Manhattan instincts took charge. Not quite running, I passed my car and reached the motel. My cold hands fumbled with the room key.

In the night, glass broke outside my room. I phoned the front desk, but no one answered. In the morning, not having slept well, I went out to my car and found the driver's window shattered. A rock lay on the seat. The radio was gone.

The surprised desk clerk told me, "The town constable runs the barbershop."

* * *

"Yes, we've been having incidents lately." The heavysset barber/constable trimmed an elderly man's spindly hair. "A bicycle was stolen. A cabin was broken into."

I took a close look at the man in the chair and decided he wasn't Wentworth.

"Town's changing. Outsiders are hanging around," the barber continued.

I recalled the two druggies I'd seen emerge from an alley the previous day. "What are

you going to do about it?"

"Contact the state police. I hoped the problem would go away as the weather got colder."

"Please remember I reported the stolen radio. The rental car agency will contact you." Trying to catch him off guard, I added, "Where does Bob Wentworth live?"

The barber almost responded, then caught himself. "Can't say."

But like a bad poker player, he hadn't been able to repress a glance past me toward the right side of the street.

* * *

I went to the left to avoid suspicion. Then I walked around the block and returned to the main street, out of sight of the barbershop. As I stepped from an alley, I again had the sense that someone followed, but when I looked behind me, I seemed alone.

More people were on the sidewalk, many dressed like outsiders, the town finally attracting business as the weekend approached. But the locals paid attention only to me. Trying to look casual, I went into a quilt shop, then continued down the street. Wentworth didn't live on a country road, I now realized with growing excitement. He lived in town. But I'd checked all the side streets. In fact, I'd used some of those streets to drive north, west, south, and east. Where was he hiding?

I walked to the end of the street. In a park of brilliant maples, dead leaves crunched under my shoes as I followed a stream along the edge of town. I soon reached a tall fence.

My cell phone rang.

"I hope you've found him," a stern voice warned.

"I'm making progress."

"I want more than progress. The Gladstone executives phoned to remind me they expect a better profit picture when I report on Monday. I hinted I'd have major news. Get Wentworth."

A locked gate sealed off a lane. I managed to climb over, tearing a button off my sports jacket.

Sunlight cast the shadows of branches. To my left were the backyards of houses. But on my right, the fence stretched on. A crow cawed. Leaves rattled as I came to a door that blended with the fence. Signs warned NO SOLICITORS and NO TRESPASSING. A mailbox was recessed into the fence.

When I knocked on the door, the crow stopped cawing. The door shook. I waited, then knocked again, this time harder. The noise echoed. I knocked a third time.

"Mr. Wentworth?"

Leaves fell.

"Mr. Wentworth? My name's Tom Neal. I work for March & Sons. I need to talk to you about a manuscript we think you sent."

A breeze chilled my face.

I knocked a fourth time. "*Mr. Wentworth?*"

Finally, I took out a pen and a notepad. I thought about writing that Carver was dead, but that seemed a harsh way for Wentworth to get the news. So I gave him the name of the motel where I was staying and left my cell-phone number. Then I remembered that Wentworth didn't have a phone. But if he sometimes left his compound, he could use a

phone in town, I concluded. Or he could walk to the motel.

"I'm shoving a note under the gate!"

Back in the park, I sat on a bench and tried to enjoy the view, but the breeze got cooler. After an hour, I returned to Wentworth's gate. A corner of my note remained visible under it.

"Mr. Wentworth, *please*, I need to talk to you! It's important!"

Maybe he's gone for a walk in the woods, I thought. *Or maybe he isn't even in town.*

Hell, he might be in a hospital somewhere.

* * *

"Did you find him?"

In the tavern, I looked up from a glass of beer. "No." Strictly speaking, it wasn't a lie.

Becky Shafer stood next to me at the bar. Her green eyes were as hypnotic as on the previous evening. "I thought about our conversation last night. I came to apologize for being abrupt."

"Hey, I'm from New York, remember? It's impossible to be abrupt to me. Anyway, I can't blame you for trying to protect someone who lives here."

"May I sit down?"

"I welcome the company. Can I buy you a beer?"

"Rye and diet Coke."

"Rye? I admire an honest drinker."

She laughed as the bartender took my order. "Maybe it *would* be good for the town if Bob published another book. Who knows? It's just that I don't like to feel manipulated."

"I'm so used to being manipulated, it feels normal."

She gave me a questioning look.

"When I first became an editor, all I needed to worry about was helping an author write a good book. But now conglomerates own just about every publisher. They think of books as commodities. If authors don't sell a hundred thousand copies, the head office doesn't care about them, and editors who don't find the next blockbuster are taking up space. Every morning, I go to March & Sons, wondering if I still work there."

"I know what you mean." Becky sipped her drink. "I'm also an attorney." My surprised look made her nod. "Yep. Harvard Law School."

"I'm impressed."

"So was the Boston law firm that hired me. But I couldn't bear how the senior partners pitted us against each other to see who generated the most fees. That's why I ended here. I don't earn much money, but I sure enjoy waking up each morning."

"I don't hear many people say *that*."

"Stay here longer. Maybe *you'll* be able to say it."

* * *

Walking back to the motel, I again heard footsteps.

As on the previous night, they stopped when I turned toward the shadows. Their echo resumed when I moved on. Thinking of my broken car window, I increased speed. My cell phone rang, but I didn't have time to answer it. Only after I hurried into my room and locked the door did I listen to the message, hoping it was from Wentworth.

But the voice belonged to my CEO. "You're taking too long," he told me.

* * *

"Mr. Wentworth?" At nine the next morning, amid a strong breeze, I pounded on his gate. "It's really important that I talk to you about your manuscript! And Sam Carver! I need to talk to you about *him!*"

I stared at the bottom of the gate. Part of my note still remained visible. A thought from yesterday struck me. Maybe he isn't home. Maybe he's in a hospital somewhere. Or maybe—a new thought struck harder—maybe he *is* home. Maybe he's sick. Too sick to come to the gate.

"Mr. Wentworth?" I hammered the gate. "Are you all right?" I tried the knob, but it didn't turn. "Mr. Wentworth, can you hear me? Is anything wrong? *Do you need help?*"

Perhaps there was another way in. Chilled by the strengthening breeze, I returned the way I had come and climbed back into the park. I followed the fence to a corner, then continued along the back, struggling through dense trees and undergrowth.

Indeed, there *was* another way in. Hidden among bushes, a gate shuddered as I pounded. "Mr. Wentworth?" I shoved a branch away and tried the knob, but it too wouldn't turn. I rammed my shoulder against the gate, but it held firm. A tree grew next to the fence. I grabbed a branch and pulled myself up. Higher branches acted as steps. Buffeted by the wind, I straddled the fence, squirmed over, dangled, and dropped to a pile of soft leaves.

* * *

Immediately, I felt a difference. The wind stopped. Sounds were muted. The air became cushioned, as if a bubble enclosed the property. A buffer of some kind. No doubt, the tall fence caused the muffling effect. Or maybe it was because I'd entered sacred territory. As far as I knew, I was one of the few ever to set foot there. Although I breathed quickly, I felt a hush.

Apples hung on trees or lay on the ground amid leaves. A few raspberries remained on bushes. A vegetable garden contained the frost-browned remnants of tomato plants. Pumpkins and acorn squash bulged from vines. Continuing to be enveloped in a hush, I walked along a stone path. Ahead were a gazebo, a cottage, and a smaller building.

"Mr. Wentworth?"

When I rounded the gazebo and headed toward the cottage, I heard a door creak open. A man stepped out. He wore sneakers, jeans, and a sweater. He was slender, with slightly graying hair. He had dark intense eyes.

He had a pistol in his hand.

"Wait." I jerked up my hands, thinking, My God, he's been living alone for so long, he lost his mind. He's going to shoot me.

"Walk to the front gate."

"This isn't what it looks like." My chest cramped. "I thought you were ill. I came to see if I can help."

"Stay ahead of me."

"My name's Tom Neal. I knocked on the gate."

"*Move.*"

"I left a note. I'm an editor for March & Sons. Please. I need to talk to you about a manuscript I think you sent us. It was addressed to Sam Carver. He's dead. I took over his

duties. That's why—"

"Stop," the man said.

His command made the air feel stiller. Crows cawing, squirrels scampering along branches, leaves falling—everything seemed to halt.

"Sam's dead?" The man frowned, as if the notion was unthinkable.

"A week ago Monday."

Slowly, he lowered the gun. He had Wentworth's sensitive features and soulful eyes. But Wentworth would be in his early eighties, and this man looked twenty years younger, his cheeks aglow.

"Who *are* you?" I asked.

The man rubbed his forehead in shock. "What? Who . . . ? Nobody. Bob's son. He's out of town. I'm watching the house for him."

Bob's son? But that didn't make sense. The child would have been born when Wentworth was around 20, before he got married, before *The Sand Castle* was published. Later, the furor of interest in Wentworth was so great that it would have been impossible to keep an illegitimate child a secret.

The man continued to look shocked. "What happened to Sam?"

I explained about the firm's new owner and how Carver was fired.

"The way you talk about the bus, are you suggesting . . ."

"I don't think Sam had much to live for. The look on his face when he carried his belongings from the office . . ."

The man seemed to peer at something far away. "Too late."

"What?"

Despondent, he shook his head from side to side. "The gate self-locks. Let yourself out."

As he turned toward the cottage, he limped.

"You're not Wentworth's son."

He paused.

"The limp's from your accident. You're R. J. Wentworth. You look twenty years younger. I don't know how that's possible, but that's who you are."

I've never been looked at so deeply. "Sam was your friend?"

"I admired him."

His dark eyes assessed me. "Wait here."

* * *

When he limped from the house, he held a teapot and two cups. He looked so awkward that I reached to help.

We sat in the gazebo. The air felt more cushioned and soothing. My sense of reality was tested. R. J. Wentworth. Could I actually be talking to him?

"How can you look twenty years younger than you are?"

Wentworth ignored the question and poured the tea.

He stared at the steaming fluid. His voice was tight. "I met Sam Carver in 1958 after he found *The Sand Castle* in a stack of unsolicited manuscripts. At the time, I was a teacher in a grade school in Connecticut. My wife taught there, also. I didn't know about agents and how publishing worked. All I knew about was children and the sadness of watching them

grow up. *The Sand Castle* was rejected by twenty publishers. If Sam hadn't found it, I'd probably have remained a teacher, which in the long run would have been better for me and certainly for my family. Sam understood that. After the accident, he was as regretful as I that *The Sand Castle* gained the attention it did." He raised his cup. "To Sam."

"To Sam." I sipped, tasting a hint of cinnamon and cloves.

"He and his wife visited me each summer. He was a true friend. Perhaps my only one. After his wife died, he didn't come here again, however."

"You sent him *The Architecture of Snow*?"

Wentworth nodded. "Sam wrote me a letter that explained what was happening at March & Sons. You described his stunned look when he was fired. Well, he may have been stunned, but he wasn't surprised. He saw it coming. I sent the manuscript so he could pretend to make one last discovery and buy himself more time at the company."

"But why didn't you use your real name?"

"Because I wanted the manuscript to stand on its own. I didn't want the novel to be published because of the mystique that developed after I disappeared. The deaths of my wife and two sons caused that mystique. I couldn't bear using their deaths to get the book published."

"The manuscript's brilliant."

He hesitated. "Thank you." I've never heard anyone speak more humbly.

"You've been writing all these years?"

"All these years."

He sipped his tea. After a thoughtful silence, he stood and motioned for me to follow. We left the gazebo. Limping, he took me to the small building next to the cottage. He unlocked its door and led me inside.

* * *

His writing studio. For a moment, my heart beat faster. Then the hush of the room spread through me. The place had the calm of a sanctuary. I noticed a fireplace, a desk, a chair, and a manual typewriter.

"I have five more machines just like it—in case I need parts," Wentworth said.

I imagined the typewriter's bell sounding when Wentworth reached the end of each line. A ream of paper lay next to the typewriter, along with a package of carbon paper. A window directed light from behind the desk.

And in front of the desk? I approached shelves upon which were arranged twenty-one manuscripts. I counted them. *Twenty one*. They sent a shiver through me. "All these years," I repeated.

"Writing can be a form of meditation."

"And you never felt the urge to have them published?"

"To satisfy an ego I worked hard to eliminate? No."

"But isn't an unread book the equivalent of one hand clapping?"

He shrugged. "It would mean returning to the world."

"But you did send a manuscript to Sam."

"As Peter Thomas. As a favor to my friend. But I had doubts that the ploy would work. In his final letter, Sam said the changes in publishing were too grim to be described."

"True. In the old days, an editor read a manuscript, liked it, and bought it. But now the

manuscript goes to the marketing department first. If the sales numbers the marketers estimate aren't high enough, the book won't be accepted."

Wentworth was appalled. "How can a book with an original vision get published? After a while, everything will be the same. The strain on your face. Now I understand. You hate the business."

"The way it's become."

"Then why do you stay?"

"Because, God help me, I remember how excited I felt when I discovered a wonderful new book and found readers for it. I keep hoping corporations will realize books aren't potato chips."

Wentworth's searching eyes were amazingly clear. I felt self-conscious, as if he saw directly into me, sensing my frustration.

"It's a pleasant day. Why don't we go back to the gazebo?" he suggested. "I have some things I need to do. But perhaps you could pass the time by reading one of these manuscripts. I'd like your opinion."

For a moment, I was too surprised to respond. "You're serious?"

"An editor's perspective would be helpful."

"The last thing you need is my help." I couldn't believe my good fortune. "But I'd love to read something else you've written."

* * *

Wentworth's chores turned out to be raking leaves, putting them in a compost bin, and cleaning his gardens for winter. Surrounded by the calming air, I sat in the gazebo and watched him, reminded of my father. Amid the muted sounds of crows, squirrels, and leaves, I finished my cup of tea, poured another, and started the manuscript, *A Cloud of Witnesses*.

I read about a slum in Boston, where a five-year-old boy named Eddie lived with his mother, who was seldom at home. The implication was that she haunted bars, prostituting herself in exchange for alcohol. Because Eddie was forbidden to leave the crummy apartment (the even worse hallways were filled with drug dealers and perverts), he didn't have any friends. The television was broken. He resorted to the radio and, by trial and error, found a station with an afternoon call-in program, "You Get It Straight from Jake," hosted by a comedian named Jake Barton. Jake had an irreverent way of relating to the day's events, and even though Eddie didn't understand most of the events referred to, he loved the way Jake talked. In fact, Jake accomplished a rare thing—he made Eddie laugh.

As I turned the pages, the sound of crows, squirrels, and leaves became muffled. I heard Wentworth raking but as if from a great distance, farther and fainter. My vision narrowed until I was conscious only of the page in front of me, Eddie looking forward to each day's broadcast of "You Get It Straight from Jake," Eddie laughing at Jake's tone, Eddie wishing he had a father like Jake, Eddie . . .

A hand nudged my shoulder, the touch so gentle I barely felt it.

"Tom," a voice whispered.

"Uh."

"Tom, wake up."

My eyelids flickered. Wentworth stood before me. It was difficult to see him;

everything was so shadowy. I was flat on my back on the bench. I jerked upright.

"My God, I fell asleep," I said.

"You certainly did." Wentworth looked amused.

I glanced around. It was dusk. "All day? I slept all day? I'm so sorry."

"Why?"

"Well, I barge in on you, but you're generous enough to let me read a manuscript, and then I fall asleep reading it, and—"

"You needed the rest. Otherwise, you wouldn't have dozed."

"Dozed? I haven't slept that soundly in years. It had nothing to do with . . . Your book's wonderful. It's moving and painful and yet funny and . . . I just got to the part where Jake announces he's been fired from the radio station and Eddie can't bear losing the only thing in his life he enjoys."

"There's plenty of time. Read more after we eat."

"Eat?"

"I made soup and a salad."

"But I can't impose."

"I insist."

* * *

Except for a stove and refrigerator, the kitchen might have looked the same two hundred years earlier. The floor, the cabinets, and the walls were aged wood, with a golden hue that made me think they were maple. The table and chairs were dark, perhaps oak, with dents here and there from a lifetime of use. Flaming logs crackled in a fireplace.

I smelled freshly baked bread and, for the first time in a long while, felt hungry. The soup was vegetable. I ate three servings and two helpings of salad, not to mention a half loaf of bread.

"The potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and carrots, everything in the soup comes from my garden," Wentworth explained. "The growing season is brief here. I need to be resourceful. For example, the lettuce comes from a late summer planting that I keep in a glass frame so I can harvest it in the winter."

The fresh taste was powerful, warming my stomach. Somehow, I had room for two slices of apple pie, which was also homemade, the fruit from Wentworth's trees. And tea. Two cups of tea.

Helping to clean the dishes, I yawned. Embarrassed, I covered my mouth. "Sorry."

"Don't be. It's natural to feel sleepy after we eat. That's what mammals do. After they eat, they sleep."

"But I slept all day."

"A sign of how much rest you need. Lie down on the sofa in the living room. Read more of my book."

"But I ought to go back to my motel room."

"Nonsense." Limping, Wentworth guided me into the living room. The furnishings reminded me of those I saw long ago in my grandmother's house. The sofa was covered with a blanket.

"I won't be an imposition?"

"I welcome your reaction to my manuscript. I won't let you take it with you to the

motel, so if you want to read it, you need to do it here.”

I suppressed another yawn, so tired that I knew I wouldn't be alert enough to deal with anyone following me to the motel. “Thank you.”

“You're more than welcome.” Wentworth brought me the rest of the manuscript, and again I felt amazed that I was in his company.

The fireplace warmed me. On the sofa, I sat against a cushion and turned the pages, once more absorbed in the story. Jake announced that his sense of humor had gotten him fired from the radio station. He told his listeners that he had only two more broadcasts and then would leave Boston for a talk show in Cincinnati. Eddie was devastated. He hadn't seen his mother in two days. All he had to eat was peanut butter and crackers. He put them in a pillowcase. He added his only change of clothes, then went to the door and listened. He heard footsteps. Somebody cursed. When the sounds became distant, Eddie did the forbidden—he unlocked and opened the door. The lights were broken in most of the hallway. Garbage was stacked in corners. The smell of urine and cabbage made Eddie sick. Shadows threatened, but the curses and footsteps were more distant, and Eddie stepped through the doorway.

The crackling in Wentworth's fireplace seemed to come from far away, like the faint tap of a typewriter.

* * *

The hand on my shoulder was again so gentle I barely felt it. When I opened my eyes, Wentworth stood over me, but this time he was silhouetted by light.

“Good morning.” He smiled.

“Morning?”

“It's eleven o'clock.”

“I slept thirteen hours?” I asked in shock.

“You're more tired than I imagined. Would you like some breakfast?”

My stomach rumbled. I couldn't recall waking up with so strong an appetite. “Starved. Just give me a moment to . . .”

“There's an extra toothbrush and razor in the bathroom.”

As I washed my face, I was puzzled by my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks were no longer drawn. Wrinkles on my brow and around my eyes were less distinct. My eyes looked bright, my skin healthy.

At the kitchen table, I ate a fruit salad Wentworth prepared—oranges, bananas, pears, and apples (the latter two from his trees, he reminded me). I refilled my bowl three times. As always, there was tea.

“Is it drugged? Is that why I'm sleeping so much?”

Wentworth almost smiled. “We both drank from the same pot. Wouldn't I have been sleepy, also?”

I studied him as hard as he had studied me. Despite his age, his cheeks glowed. His eyes were clear. His hair was gray instead of white. “You're in your early eighties, correct?”

“Correct.”

“But you look at least twenty years younger. I don't understand.”

“Perhaps you do.”

I glanced around the old kitchen. I peered toward the trees and bushes outside. The

sun cast a glow on falling leaves. "This place?"

"A similar compound in another area would have produced the same effect. But yes, this place. Over the years, I acquired a natural rhythm. I lived with the land. I blended with the passage of the sun and moon and seasons. After a while, I noticed a change in my appearance, or rather the *lack* of change in my appearance. I wasn't aging at the rate that I should have. I came to savor the delight of waking each day and enjoying what my small version of the universe had in store for me."

"That doesn't seem compatible with your gun."

"I brought that with me when I first retreated here. The loss of my family . . . Each morning was a struggle not to shoot myself."

I looked away, self-conscious.

"But one day crept into another. Somehow, I persisted. I read Emerson and Thoreau again and again, trying to empty myself of my not-so-quiet desperation. Along with these infinite two acres, Emerson and Thoreau saved my life. I came to feel my family through the flowers and trees and . . . Nothing dies. It's only transformed. I know what you're thinking—that I found a sentimental way to compensate. Perhaps I did. But compare your life to mine. When you came here, when you snuck onto my property, you looked so desperate that for the first time in many years I was frightened. I knew that homes had been broken into. I got the gun from a drawer. I hoped I wouldn't need to defend myself."

Shame burned my cheeks. "Perhaps I'd better go."

"Then I realized you were truly desperate, not because of drugs or greed, but because of a profound unhappiness. I invited you to stay because I hoped this place would save you."

As so often with Wentworth, I couldn't speak. Finally, I managed to say "Thank you," and was reminded of how humbly he used those words when I told him how brilliant *The Architecture of Snow* was.

"I have some coveralls that might fit you," he said. "Would you like to help me clean my gardens?"

* * *

It was one of the finest afternoons of my life, raking leaves, trimming frost-killed flowers, putting them in the compost bin. We harvested squash and apples. The only day I can compare it to was my final afternoon with my father so long ago, a comparably lovely autumn day when we raked leaves, before my father bent over and died.

A sound jolted me: my cell phone. I looked at the caller ID display. Finally, the ringing stopped.

Wentworth gave me a questioning look.

"My boss," I explained.

"You don't want to talk to him?"

"He's meeting the company's directors on Monday. He's under orders to squeeze out more profits. He wants to announce that *The Architecture of Snow* is on our list."

Wentworth glanced at the falling leaves. "Would the announcement help you?"

"My instructions are not to come back if I don't return with a signed contract."

Wentworth looked as if I'd told a slight joke. "That explains what drove you to climb over my fence."

"I really did worry that you were ill."

"Of course." Wentworth studied more falling leaves. "Monday?"

"Yes."

"If you go back, you'll lose sleep again."

"Somebody's got to fight them."

"Maybe we need to save ourselves before we save anything else. How would you like to help me split firewood?"

* * *

For supper, we ate the rest of the soup, the bread, and the apple pie. They tasted as fresh as on the previous night. Again, I felt sleepy, but this time from unaccustomed physical exertion. My skin glowed from the sun and the breeze.

I finished my tea and yawned. "I'd better get back to the motel."

"No. Lie on the sofa. Finish my manuscript."

The logs crackled. I might have heard the distant clatter of a typewriter as I turned the pages.

In the story, Eddie braved the dangers of the rat-infested apartment building, needing all his cleverness to escape perverts and drug dealers. Outside, on a dark rainy street, he faced greater dangers. Every shadow was a threat. Meanwhile, a chapter about Jake revealed that he was a nasty drunk when he wasn't on the air. The station's owner was glad for the chance to fire him when Jake insulted one of the sponsors during the program. But Eddie idealized him and was ready to brave anything to find him. As the rain fell harder, he wondered how to find the radio station. He couldn't just ask a stranger on the street. He saw a store that sold newspapers and magazines and hurried from awning to awning toward it.

* * *

This time, Wentworth didn't need to touch me. I sensed his presence and opened my eyes to the glorious morning.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Very. But I'm afraid I didn't finish it. I'm where Eddie found the radio station's address in—"

"Next time," Wentworth said.

"Next time?"

"When you come back, you can finish it."

"You'd like me to come back?"

Instead of answering, Wentworth said, "I've given your problem a great deal of thought. Before I tell you my decision, I want *you* to tell *me* what you think of my manuscript so far."

"I love it."

"And? If I were your author, is that all you'd say to me as an editor? Is there nothing you want changed?"

"The sentences are wonderful. Your style's so consistent, it would be difficult to change anything without causing problems in other places."

"Does that imply a few sections would benefit from changes?"

"Just a few cuts."

"A few? Why so hesitant? Are you overwhelmed by the great man's talent? Do you know how Sam and I worked as editor and author? We fought over every page. He wasn't satisfied until he made me justify every word in every sentence. Some authors wouldn't have put up with it. But I loved the experience. He challenged me. He made me try harder and reach deeper. If *you* were my editor, what would you say to challenge me?"

"You really want an answer?" I took a breath. "I meant what I said. This is a terrific book. It's moving and dramatic and funny when it needs to be and . . . I love it."

"But . . ."

"The boy in *The Architecture of Snow* struggles through a blizzard to save his father. Eddie in *this* novel struggles to get out of a slum and find a father. You're running variations on a theme. An important theme, granted. But the same one as in *The Sand Castle*."

"Continue."

"That may be why the critics turned against your last book. Because *it* was a variation on *The Sand Castle*, also."

"Maybe some writers only have one theme."

"Perhaps that's true. But if I were your editor, I'd push you to learn if that were the case."

Wentworth considered me with those clear probing eyes. "My father molested me when I was eight."

I felt as if I'd been hit.

"My mother found out and divorced him. We moved to another city. I never saw my father again. She never remarried. Fathers and sons. A powerful need when a boy's growing up. That's why I became a grade-school teacher: to be a surrogate father for the children who needed one. It's the reason I became a writer: to understand the hollowness in me. I lied to you. I told you that when I heard you coming across the yard, when I saw your desperate features, I pulled my gun from a drawer to protect myself. In fact, the gun was already in my hand. Friday. The day you crawled over the fence. Do you know what date it was?"

"No."

"October 15."

"October 15?" The date sounded vaguely familiar. Then it hit me. "Oh . . . The day your family died in the accident."

For the first time, Wentworth started to look his true age, his cheeks shrinking, his eyes clouding. "I deceive myself by blaming my work. I trick myself into thinking that, if I hadn't sold 'The Fortune Teller' to Hollywood, we wouldn't have driven to New York to see the damned movie. But the movie didn't kill my family. The movie wasn't driving the car when it flipped."

"The weather turned bad. It was an accident."

"So I tell myself. But every time I write another novel about a father and a son, I think about my two boys crushed in a heap of steel. Each year, it seems easier to handle. But some anniversaries . . . Even after all these years . . ."

"The gun was in your hand?"

"In my mouth. I want to save *you* because you saved *me*. I'll sign a contract for *The Architecture of Snow*."

Throughout the long drive back to Manhattan, I felt a familiar heaviness creep over me. I reached my apartment around midnight, but as Wentworth predicted, I slept poorly.

"Terrific!" My boss slapped my back when I gave him the news Monday morning. "Outstanding! I won't forget this!"

After the magic of the compound, the office was depressing. "But Wentworth has three conditions," I said.

"Fine, fine. Just give me the contract you took up there to get signed."

"He didn't sign it."

"*What?* But you said—"

"That contract's made out to R. J. Wentworth. He wants *another* contract, one made out to Peter Thomas."

"The pseudonym on the manuscript?"

"That's the first condition. The second is that the book needs to be published with the name Peter Thomas on the cover."

The head of marketing gasped.

"The third condition is that Wentworth won't do interviews."

Now the head of marketing turned red, as if choking on something. "We'll lose CNN and the *Today* show and the magazine covers and —"

"No interviews? That makes it worthless," my CEO complained. "Who the hell's going to buy a book about a kid in a snowstorm when its author's a nobody?"

"Those are his conditions."

"*Couldn't you talk him out of that?*"

"He wants the book to speak for itself. He says part of the reason he's famous is that his family died. He won't capitalize on that, and he won't allow himself to be asked about it."

"Worthless," my boss moaned. "How can I tell the Gladstone executives we won't have a million seller? I'll lose my job. You've already lost *yours*."

"There's a way to get around Wentworth's conditions," a voice said.

Everyone looked in that direction, toward the person next to me: my assistant, who wore his usual black turtleneck and black sports jacket.

"Make out the contract to Peter Thomas," my assistant continued. "Put in clauses guaranteeing that the book will be published under that name and that there won't be any interviews."

"Weren't you listening? An unknown author. No interviews. No serial killer or global conspiracy in the plot. We'll be lucky to sell ten copies."

"A million. You'll get the million," my assistant promised.

"Will you *please* start making sense."

"The Internet will take care of everything. A month from pub date, I'll leak rumors to hundreds of chat groups. I'll put up a fan website. On the social networks, I'll spread the word that Wentworth's the actual author. I'll point out parallels between his early work and this one. I'll talk about the mysterious arrival of the manuscript just as his editor died. I'll mention that a March & Sons editor, Robert Neal, had a weekend conference at Wentworth's home in October, something that can be verified by checking with the motel

where Mr. Neal stayed. I'll juice it up until everyone buys the rumor. Believe me, the Internet thrives on gossip. It'll get out of control fast. Since what passes for news these days is half speculation, reporters and TV commentators will do pieces about the rumors. After a week, it'll be taken for granted that Peter Thomas is R. J. Wentworth. People will want to be the first to buy the book to see what all the fuss is about. Believe me, you'll sell a million copies."

I was too stunned to say anything.

So were the others.

Finally my boss opened his mouth. "I love the way this guy thinks." He gave me a dismissive glance. "Take the new contract back to Wentworth. Tell him he'll get everything he wants."

* * *

So, on Tuesday, I drove back to Tipton. Because I was now familiar with the route, I made excellent time and arrived at four in the afternoon. Indeed, I often broke the speed limit, eager to see Wentworth again and warn him how March & Sons intended to betray him.

I saw the smoke before I got to town. As I approached the main street, I found it deserted. With a terrible premonition, I stopped at the park. The smoke shrouded Wentworth's compound. His fence was down. A fire engine rumbled next to it. Running through the leaves, I saw townspeople gathered in shock. I saw the waitress from Meg's Pantry, the waiter from the Tipton Tavern, Jonathan Wade from the book store, the barber who was the town constable, and Becky. I raced toward her.

"What happened?"

The constable turned from speaking to three state policemen. "The two outsiders who've been hanging around town broke into Bob's place. The state police found fresh cigarette butts at the back fence. Next to a locked gate, there's a tree so close to the fence it's almost a ladder."

My knees weakened when I realized he was talking about the tree I'd climbed to get over the fence. *I showed them the way, I thought. I taught them how to get into the compound.*

"Some of the neighbors thought they heard a shot," the constable said, "but since this is hunting season, the shot didn't seem unusual, except that it was close to town. Then the neighbors noticed smoke rising from the compound. Seems that after the outsiders stole what they could, they set fire to the place—to make Bob's death look like an accident."

"Death?" I could barely say the word.

"The county fire department found his body in the embers."

My legs were so unsteady that I feared I'd collapse. I reached for something to support me. Becky's shoulder. She held me up.

"The police caught the two guys who did it," the constable said.

I wanted to get my hands on them and—

"Bob came to see me after you drove back to New York," Becky said. "As you know, he needed an attorney."

"What are you talking about?"

Becky looked puzzled. "You aren't aware he changed his will?"

“His will?”

“He said you were the kind of man he hoped that his sons would have grown up to be. He made you his heir, his literary executor, everything. This place is yours now.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks. They rolled even harder an hour later when the firemen let Becky and me onto the property and showed us where they’d found Wentworth’s body in the charred kitchen. The corpse was gone now, but the outline in the ashes was vivid. I stared at the blackened timbers of the gazebo. I walked toward Wentworth’s gutted writing studio. A fireman stopped me from getting too close. But even from twenty feet away, I saw the clump of twisted metal that was once a typewriter. And the piles of ashes that had once been twenty-one manuscripts.

* * *

Now you know the background. I spend a lot of time trying to rebuild the compound, although I doubt I’ll ever regain its magic. Becky often comes to help me. I couldn’t do it without her.

But *The Architecture of Snow* is what I mostly think about. I told March & Sons to go to hell, with a special invitation to my assistant, my boss, and the head of marketing. I arranged for the novel to be privately printed under the name Peter Thomas. A Tipton artist designed a cover that shows the hint of a farmhouse within gusting snow, almost as if the snow is constructing the house. There’s no author’s biography. Exactly as Wentworth intended.

I keep boxes of the novel in my car. I drive from book store to book store throughout New England, but only a few will take the chance on an unknown author. I tell them it’s an absolutely wonderful book, and they look blank as if “wonderful” isn’t what customers want these days. Is there a serial killer or a global conspiracy?

Wade has dozens of copies in his store. His front window’s filled with it. He tries to convince visitors to buy it, but his tourist customers want books that have photographs of ski slopes and covered bridges. He hasn’t sold even one. The townspeople? The waitress at Meg’s Pantry spoke the truth. She isn’t much of a reader. Nor is anybody else. I’ve tried until I don’t know what else to do. I’m so desperate I finally betrayed Wentworth’s trust and told you who wrote it. Take my word—it’s wonderful. Buy it, will you? Please. Buy this book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Morrell is the award-winning author of *First Blood*, the novel in which Rambo was created. He was born in 1943 in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. In 1960, at the age of seventeen, he became a fan of the classic television series, *Route 66*, about two young men in a Corvette convertible traveling the United States in search of America and themselves. The scripts by Stirling Silliphant so impressed Morrell that he decided to become a writer.

In 1966, the work of another writer (Hemingway scholar Philip Young) prompted Morrell to move to the United States, where he studied with Young at the Pennsylvania State University and received his M.A. and Ph. D. in American literature. There, he also met the esteemed science-fiction author William Tenn (real name Philip Klass), who taught Morrell the basics of fiction writing. The result was *First Blood*, a ground-breaking novel about a returned Vietnam veteran suffering from post-trauma stress disorder who comes into conflict with a small-town police chief and fights his own version of the Vietnam War.

That “father” of modern action novels was published in 1972 while Morrell was a professor in the English department at the University of Iowa. He taught there from 1970 to 1986, simultaneously writing other novels, many of them international bestsellers, including the classic spy trilogy, *The Brotherhood of the Rose* (the basis for a top-rated NBC miniseries that premiered after a Super Bowl), *The Fraternity of the Stone*, and *The League of Night and Fog*.

Eventually wearying of two professions, Morrell gave up his academic tenure in order to write full time. Shortly afterward, his fifteen-year-old son Matthew was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer and died in 1987, a loss that haunts not only Morrell’s life but his work, as in his memoir about Matthew, *Fireflies*, and his novel *Desperate Measures*, whose main character lost a son.

“The mild-mannered professor with the bloody-minded visions,” as one reviewer called him, Morrell is the author of thirty-three books, including such high-action thrillers as *The Naked Edge*, *Creepers*, and *The Spy Who Came for Christmas* (set in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he lives). Always interested in different ways to tell a story, he wrote the six-part comic-book series, *Captain America: The Chosen*. His writing book, *The Successful Novelist*, analyzes what he has learned during his four decades as an author.

Morrell is a co-founder of the International Thriller Writers organization. Noted for his research, he is a graduate of the National Outdoor Leadership School for wilderness survival as well as the G. Gordon Liddy Academy of Corporate Security. He is also an honorary lifetime member of the Special Operations Association and the Association of Intelligence Officers. He has been trained in firearms, hostage negotiation, assuming identities, executive protection, and car fighting, among numerous other action skills that he describes in his novels. To research the aerial sequences in *The Shimmer*, he became a private pilot.

Morrell is an Edgar, Anthony, and Macavity nominee as well as a three-time recipient of the distinguished Stoker Award from the Horror Writers Association. The International Thriller Writers organization gave him its prestigious career-achievement Thriller Master Award. His short stories have appeared in numerous *Year’s Best* collections. With eighteen million copies in print, his work has been translated into twenty-six languages. To send him an email, please go to the CONTACT page of his website, www.davidmorrell.net.

