

A D V A N C E D   U N C O R R E C T E D   C O P Y

# *The Darkest Glare*

**By Chip Jacobs**

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## Prologue

### *The Cul-de-sac*

THE MAN IN THE rusty Volkswagen had a message, a message he was bursting to share as he rolled up alongside me at the stoplight that I would forever detest. The instant his bus's spindly tires came to rest, he stretched himself across his gearshift, cranked down the passenger-side window, then pantomimed for me to follow suit.

Crap, I thought, let's get this over with—the hasty lecture about how teenage drivers like myself needed to be more careful. And he wouldn't be wrong. Two blocks back, I made him swerve, in the briefest of asphalt drama, when I tried merging my parent's station wagon into the lane that his weather-battered box of bolts was puttering in, sub-speed limit.

Of course, I was distracted. Isn't that shorthand for most seventeen-year-old boys?

"Sorry, sir," I'd tell Mr. VW with bogus wholesomeness. "I'll check my mirrors better next time."

The grouch had already tooted his reedy horn to register his displeasure, so I guessed this was his coda. But when I slid my window down and swiveled my head, intending to nod with sheepish contrition, the guessing was moot. I got a taste of the unforeseen: a pair of seething, bloodshot eyes that sent my core body temperature reeling.

“Hey, motherfucker!” he yelled over his clattering muffler. “I’m gonna get you.”

Get me?

Spittle pelted out of his window every other syllable, and he pumped a fist for emphasis. The stranger gunning for me over a traffic peccadillo was adhering to a codebook whose fine print wouldn’t let “this” go with a disapproving eyebrow.

“Yeah, you, motherfucker,” he said, changing things up. “You.”

I suddenly disliked that pronoun, even as I was too petrified to watch him repeat it. So, I gazed straight through my windshield, piecing together what I’d seen. A stork-ish figure whose hippy-long, chestnut hair splayed over a tattered US Army jacket. Veins bulging around the whiskers of a bearded neck. A fixed glower engraved into his cheeks. If Martin Scorsese needed to cast an everyman one small offense from detonation, he’d found his next Travis Bickle in this hothead.

Seconds dragged out like minutes at the red light trapping me next to him. While I’d checkered my early driving record pretty good, dinging and denting that troop-carrier-size Pontiac Grand Safari, there was no analog for this. We were on Woodman Avenue, a windy road through suburban Altadena, the small, Bohemian city north of my hometown, Pasadena, and I had no idea what to do.

“I’m gonna get you!” the thirty-something regurgitated in a voice still molten with dander. “You.”

Once the light changed, I tapped the gas pedal, praying he would rumble past. Movement in the rear scuttled that delusion. By popping his clutch, he’d jerked his white, orange-trimmed cube behind me in tactical advantage for whatever punishment he was devising. Then the subsequent light flashed red, like it, too, was in on the conspiracy. Idling there, I avoided my mirrors. Viewing that scowl once was enough to make you want to unsee it.

Sitting to my right that misty, spring afternoon in 1979 was my best friend, Dave Ferris, who had never known the car as anything other than a faux-wood-sided chariot for our expanding liberties. In it, we'd traveled to smoky rock concerts at the Fabulous Forum and to keg-fueled house parties blissfully free of chaperones; to the hilltop, all-girls Catholic school where we trolled for dates until the fleet-footed nuns rousted us off the grounds.

On the rain-slickened road, none of that juvenile carousing meant squat now. Neither did the anecdote we were snickering about when all this exploded: how the dentures of our Napoleon-sized history professor recently fell out of his mouth mid-lecture, prompting our class to erupt in hysterics. Apologies, Mr. Hamilton.

I flicked off our preferred radio station, KROQ, leaving us in ringing silence except for the VW exhaust pipe crackling like it had mechanical emphysema. Dave and I stared at each other in disbelief, spectators to our undoing. We were isolated with little other traffic around, and definitely no sheriff patrol cars that we glibly called "Omar" (as in Omar Sharif). Notions about raiding the pantry at my house for an after-school snack were gone. I never felt grimmer about my lifespan.

When the stoplight changed this time, I stomped the accelerator connected to the Pontiac's burly, V-8 engine, thinking we'd zoom away. Unfortunately, it only zoomed us to the next red light. The VW now vibrated inches off my chrome bumper, too close for its obsessive master to spot the neon Led Zeppelin sticker. I needed separation. As soon as this light winked green, I steered slowly into the right lane, trying to act chastened. Maybe if he flipped me the bird, confident that he'd taught me a lesson, he'd tear away.

Yeah, right. He motored up parallel to us a second time to wet his lips and re-screw that frown into his reddened face.

At that moment, even this sheltered, high school junior realized I had to do something drastic or risk being a body bag filmed for the top of the six o'clock TV news. As soon as the stoplight changed, I glided a block—before veering off with a sharp, ninety-degree turn onto the first street we passed.

*Psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est.*

You've been ditched: That's what!

I checked my rear-view mirror, anxious for relief, before feeling another cold stab to the belly. Not only was our pursuer still behind us, his van was obstructing our escape on the bottom of a block. A block that was actually a cul-de-sac devoid of anyone but us.

This “motherfucker” kid had no way out.

The world was a cantankerous, random place then, just as it seems to be today as our iPhones ping alerts about the latest mass shooting, the latest suicide bomber, the latest person pushed beyond their structural limits. There was no Google or Priuses yet, no melting glaciers, Russian hacking, or global pandemics. There were phone booths and tricked-out Camaros, computers as big as steamer crates and eye-watering smog that was supposed to be long gone.

At our school, Flintridge Preparatory, just above the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, we learned about how history waterfalls in cycles, where prosperity crumbles into recession and fascism bristles into nationalism. Yet no grown-up ever explained to us late-stage Baby Boomers why average Americans were lashing out in uncoined road rage and cult violence; why people were hanging state leaders in effigy and applying for gun permits in droves.

To me, as a teenage sociologist, it was generational venting: every twenty years or so, the demoralized were bound to snarl that the system they thought had liberated them from tyranny was a candy-coated mirage more interested in selling them Buicks than

binding societal wounds. Everything was going south in the red, white, and blue. Disillusionment after Vietnam and Watergate had fermented into embitterment and insecurity about the eighties. Twice this decade, Arab nations embargoed the oil that powered the economy while a dour Jimmy Carter cajoled us to turn down our thermostats in his Mr. Rogers sweater.

Here in Southern California, the only folks still portraying the zeitgeist as mellow, or worse, charmingly kooky, worked for the chamber of commerce. Yes, the coastline still shimmered in golden hues and tourists bought maps to the celebrities' homes. Behind those images was the blistering reality of a tottering "paradise" of rising crime and waning opportunity. Local factories were yanking up tent poles in the first whiffs of globalization. In once tranquil neighborhoods, homeowners were double-locking their doors to bar predators—"The Freeway Killer," "The Hillside Strangler," "The Dating Game Killer"—stacking up the corpses.

It's easy to see this dark spirit mirrored in today's refraction. An orange combover, reality-TV star pledging to "Make America Great Again" is a poor-man's Ronald Reagan, who adored comparing America's potential to a "shining city on the hill." Today's sucker-punched middle class was yesteryear's casualties of "stagflation." Wall Street bailouts during the Great Recession recall the \$1.5-billion federal loan to Chrysler Corporation that many jeered as corporate welfare. Citizens mistrustful of public institutions should revisit the national mood after a military helicopter crashed in Iranian sands trying to rescue our hostages.

The American dream: overpromised, under-delivered.

The surreal events of March 1979 confirmed to this book's protagonist a quirk of Los Angeles topography: even a high-desert area contains ravenous creatures you'd associate with marshland hazards. They just happened to walk upright. As a young space

planner from a cloistered childhood, he never could've imagined that his city of scattered high-rises, Hollywood sets, and aerospace giants would be capable of dispatching do-anything killers after him. Never could've envisioned that he would be on the run before he'd really lived.

Climbing out of his old VW to confront us, the stork man was taller than I surmised, easily 6'3". It seemed to take him only five gangly strides to reach the Pontiac, where Dave and I became statues as he sidled up to the driver's side window. Any moment, I expected his hand would wave a pistol, knife, or club.

Then the oddest thing happened: My mind drifted above my expected doom.

When I should've been fashioning a defense, I found myself perplexed about what existential misery—divorce, illness, unemployment, post-Vietnam voices in his head—he needed to exorcise by splattering blood over the caramel-leather upholstery. Some part of me had to decode his suffering before he mangled us over it.

Now came our comeuppance. The stork man thrust his head so deep into the car's interior that I had to tilt awkwardly toward Dave, while simultaneously trying not to shit myself, to keep from touching his scraggly beard. You could tell an ancient rage smoldered around his temples. Panic coiled around mine.

"Don't ever—ever—do that to me again!" he said with a snort. "You hear me?" His breath reeked of nicotine as well as something harder to define, something diseased.

"Yes, sir," I stammered.

He peered deep into my twitchy eyes, calculating the pros and cons of what he'd like to inflict upon us. His right fist swayed near my chin, which had yet to meet its first razor blade. What was in his other hand, the one concealed outside the car?

*Our father, who art in...*

Abruptly, he seemed to realize what he was doing, that he'd unleashed his inner demons where they didn't belong. He retracted his hand, then his long neck, stomping back to a vehicle synonymous with the peace-and-love movement. Dave and I exhaled, our shirts damp.

"Never again!" he shouted as he floored it away over his *pffff*-*pffff*-ing muffler.

Something tells me that we weren't the last ones he'd stalk over the trivial in the home of the free.

Chip Jacobs  
Pasadena, California, 2020



# Chapter One

## *A Deck for all Seasons*

THEY HUDDLED AT THE base of the stairs. Panting steam. Packing bad intentions.

Above their heads, a patch of soft light glowed through the sliding-glass window outside the master bedroom of the two-story home where two people lay in bed. People oblivious to approaching invaders while rain from another heavy storm pounded down. People who assumed they had all the time in the world to get high and then naked.

The ringleader—here to supervise the task that his minions had bungled with almost comical frequency—whispered how the midnight operation was to unfold. Their movements needed to be cat-quick and meticulous, not so much as a cuticle left behind. The soggy evening with the neighborhood toasty under mid-century roofs was an advantage they dare not squander.

Everything rode on the bullet scheduled to fly from the barrel of a vintage rifle originally mass-produced to kill Nazis. So much hinged on a single projectile needed to free up the spoils in the kickoff of a lucrative enterprise that Los Angeles had never seen before. If the designated shooter misfired, and his chief's brackish vengeance went un-expunged, beware. The next bullet might have his name emblazoned on it.

Whoever said the San Fernando Valley was dishwater dull?

The trio crept up the flight, past a potted fern, toward the deck overlooking a backyard pool sloshing chlorine whitecaps in the deluge. They arranged themselves into position next, just as they'd rehearsed, squatting on the opposite edges of the window to evaluate the scene inside the fishbowl-lit room. What a glorious sight it was! The fellow they'd been hunting for months was mere feet away, reclined sideways on his queen-size bed, listening to a cute woman in a male pajama-top reading.

The assassins who'd driven in from points east were different breeds united by a common purpose. The triggerman was a diminutive, helmet-haired character salivating to use the big gun he'd acquired in a crafty haggle. His wingman was a thin, lyrically named crook without his cohorts' felony notches. Both were atop heroin dragons when tonight's launch button was pressed, but they'd made emergency landings to attempt sobering up in a snap. Coffee. A frigid shower. The last thing they intended to do was quibble over timing with a person whose buzzard-y face was the final visage a handful of unfortunate sorts ever saw.

Anyone fuzzy about what "Pat" was capable of doing should interview their ex-associate, the one who'd developed misgivings after accepting this contract and fled town. Welching on his promise had visited terror on his family and nearly resulted in his own skull being rearranged with a .357-Magnum on a San Francisco sidewalk. Someone else who'd infuriated Pat was unable to vocalize any warnings. He'd gone from sipping cocktails on a fall afternoon to being set ablaze in the scrubland outside LA. Pat's management philosophy about his underlings completing their assignments was absolute. He'd tolerate no job-suggestion boxes. Only compliance.

Now he crouched over his marksman's shoulder, eyes glazed, mouth ajar, waiting for the muzzle flash that he'd been fantasizing to rubberneck.

*Ding!*

What better timing for another in a series of *what-now* hiccups to frustrate them again like klutzes in a clown show? He'd been seconds from flashing the signal. The new message: how fickle opportunity can be.

The target, a college boy, real estate entrepreneur who once employed him in a manipulative partnership, must've heeded the beep of a Darwinian radar; must've attuned to the radar blinking that he and his woman might not be as alone as they figured. The rustling of feet; a squeaky plank; heebie-jeebies that foreign eyes were watching them: whatever his sixth sense detected was worth investigating.

The man they'd come to obliterate lifted his drowsy head off his snugly comforter, twisting it the opposite direction of the blonde with him. Next, he did something nobody here had anticipated in their elaborate preparations: he stared directly at *them*, behind the window representing the single barrier between him and his supposed last gasps of air.

Hey, was someone out there?

From his recesses, Pat cringed and cursed, fit to be tied, questioning if he should've toted along a lucky rabbit's foot. How gruesome things would get for prey and predators alike, he knew, if that window's glare didn't thwart his quarry from seeing the truth.

From realizing what lurked beneath his dripping eaves.

## Chapter Two

### *The Space Men of Miracle Mile*

**T**HIRTEEN MONTHS BEFORE THAT disquieting bunch assembled on the sun deck, Gerald “Jerry” Schneiderman pulled up a chair inside a tacky Mexican restaurant, preparing himself to hear out a man excited about a little greed. Richard Kasparov—his coiffed, older partner—was already in presentation mode by the time Jerry strolled in from Pico Boulevard with a sales chart poking from his breast pocket and a schedule cleared for the afternoon.

Jerry, unable to recall the last time that he arrived at a meeting after his chronically late associate, blurted the obvious.

“Wow, Richard. This must be a big deal.”

“Be nice,” Richard said with a Cheshire cat grin. “You’re going to be thanking me later.”

For the next ninety minutes, Richard attempted with an impassioned appeal to show how they could enrich themselves by further expanding their footprint. They were already risk takers compared with their more seasoned competitors, who staked their tent poles diagramming interior layouts on schematics given to general contractors to “build out.” By giving their space-design clientele the ability to hire their suite building and furniture-services subsidiaries, they had created a “one-stop shop” that maximized efficiencies in what was often a dizzying decision-making process.

Executive offices and secretarial pods, conference rooms and smart hallways, wallcoverings and light fixtures, electrical outlets and reception areas: there was little that Richard and Jerry couldn't streamline.

Richard's genius notion now? To export those skills into remodeling luxury homes. It was quixotic. It was daring. And it was so Richard, who craved to socialize and schmooze the LA money crowd.

"Think about it," he said mid-pitch. "We've been in real estate forever. We know the trades. We have the back-office staff. And it could introduce us to a new set of people, maybe even investors. Stop me whenever I reach a negative."

"As if I could," Jerry said, crunching a tortilla chip.

"You've got to say yes. Look where we are."

Both men laughed with a whimsical tinge. Don Ricardo's was wedged in the basement of the checkerboard-mirrored office building across from the Hillcrest Country Club, where they hatched Space Matters, their double-entendre-named firm, eighteen months earlier. They'd scarfed down many a burrito here under the cramped stucco ceiling since then before relocating to a larger office after demand for their business swelled.

Something, though, was different, something obvious. Jerry had rarely seen Richard's face so animated, even in their hectic, early days when they were punch-drunk from pulling all-nighters on bad coffee and other stimulants.

"Peruse this, dude," he said, "while I hit the head. It'll get your heart pumping."

He slid over a freehanded chart depicting projected sales curling up like a ski jump. As Richard strode off, several attractive female lunch patrons shot him flirtatious glances without his libido broadcasting interest.

“Never changes,” Jerry muttered under his breath.

And it never would.

At thirty-eight, Richard could have fallen out of a GQ magazine spread featuring beautiful California males. He was a lean 6’1” with a clipped beard-moustache combination and a thick mane of feathered brown hair. His million-dollar smile and extroverted air worked synergistically with a blocky forehead and full lips. Clothes also adored him. Whether in tailored suits at a high-stakes meeting, or in a secondhand Army jacket flipping burgers at a backyard BBQ, Richard evoked a sizzle that made ladies swoon and some men envious. In his bachelor days, he probably spent more time cavorting just at Pip’s and the Friars Club than his partner spent in bars his entire life.

Jerry had envisaged this odd-couple team precisely because he lacked Richard’s gregariousness, lacked the flair that made people want to root for him. He was a skinny 5’10”, 160 pounds, with medium-brown hair that twirled into a natural frizz. His unlined, youthful face caused more than a few executives to mistake him for a college student or intern. Sleepy, green-brown eyes and faint smile lines gave him a kind of mousey cuteness. To appear older than his twenty-six years, he outfitted himself in suits that weren’t just off the rack.

“Why hamstring ourselves just to the commercial market?” Richard continued, scooting up his ratty, Naugahyde chair. “I have a group of rich people interested in us doing their houses.”

“You do?”

“I don’t see much downside, only blue sky that might not come again.”

Jerry quizzed Richard about the specifics of his proposal. His response, a pastiche of exuberance, salesmanship, and detail, represented an entrepreneur who aspired for more. Jerry didn’t

know that Richard would suggest they broaden into the residential market, but he always expected something like this was inevitable. After all, they were both strivers. When he urged Richard to leave the space-design conglomerate where they met to charter their own company, visions of money, challenge, and legacy danced in his own head.

Richard's pitch continued for another twenty minutes before Jerry lofted a palm.

"You sold me," he said with a grin. "Let's do it."

"Really? You're not just acquiescing?"

"Really."

"Here's to a new adventure, then. And pouncing on what others haven't."

A clink of their margarita glasses formalized it. They'd christen their home-remodeling offshoot "CM-2," as in "Construction Management, Too."

Jerry's frijoles had gone cold while Richard hyped their futures.

From the Mexican restaurant, Jerry steered his white Mercedes-Benz convertible north onto La Cienega Boulevard, hanging a right onto one of the city's mainstay thoroughfares. Wilshire Boulevard was still lined by signature architecture—vintage towers crowned with mounted clocks, the Art Deco Bullocks department store, the Mediterranean-meets-grandeur of the Ambassador Hotel—as well as more contemporary, mirrored high-rises on its ends.

A few miles east of the La Brea Tar Pits, where fake prehistoric animals sat in murky-black pools, Jerry pulled off Wilshire into the company parking lot. Then he scurried inside. The office that swallowed him fifty to sixty hours a week was a funky, Spanish-style mansion on the edge of one of LA's oldest blue-blood communities. He and Richard wanted a headquarters with curb appeal as unique as the designs they were crafting, and the old manor with a red-tile

roof and pimply, white stucco exterior called out to them. Vaulted ceilings and French doors accented the interior, with wrought-iron railings across the upper floor and the haunting bust of a woman in front. The staff and Richard worked on the second level of the five-thousand-five-hundred-square-foot building, Jerry the only soul on the ground floor.

At two hundred thirty-two thousand dollars, the place was a steal. And theirs.

On the day they took the plunge into home-remodeling, Space Matters' existing success tickled Jerry's senses. He watched Bert, one of several Filipino employees there, examining an architectural schematic, and overheard his French-born decorator, Lillian, speaking frenetically to a supplier. The sound of collective bustle—the crinkle of unfurling blueprints, the thud of the front door closing as someone rushed out to an appointment, the jingling phones—had become a second heartbeat. So, after he caught up on messages, Jerry galloped up the stairs, shifting from desk to desk to ensure that his people had their projects under control. When he was done, he returned to his paper-blizzarded office to resume drawing himself.

The next time he lifted his head from his sketches to check his watch he was dumbfounded to see that the hour hand was in a full sprint. At 7:45 p.m. he was the last one left in the building. Before fishing his car keys out, he took another stroll upstairs, sniffing a few fabric samples stacked on a desk. It was heady. They were on pace to finish the year with two hundred thousand dollars in net profits, about two-thirds of that in design work—a handsome dividend for an upstart firm.

All those grueling hours, all his belief turned his savings into generational achievement. Jerry, well before thirty, was earning triple what his father had ever made. And he had accomplished



it as the youngest person at his own firm, all without a lick of management experience.

He daydreamed about all this on a commute home that whisked him across Hollywood's Vine Street, by the stacked-disk Capitol Records building, then onto the 101 Freeway near Universal Studios. When he got to one of LA's newer super-highways, the 118 Freeway, to take him west, he turned on the radio he usually listened to for company. But Jerry wasn't a classic-rock connoisseur. He favored AM news stations like KFI, which repeated its top story. It was all too familiar. The body of a twenty-year-old woman had been discovered in the trunk of an orange Datsun off Angeles Crest Highway, a twisting road in the San Gabriel Mountains not far from where Jerry was raised. Police speculated it was the handiwork of the serial killer nicknamed the "Hillside Strangler."

Pretty soon, Jerry was at his exit, climbing the road toward his house under the mustardy foothills of Northridge on the western scrim of the San Fernando Valley. When he opened the door, his peppy wife, Tammy, was there with their one-month-old son cooing in her arms.

"Congratulate me," he said with wry fatigue. "Richard talked me into a new business."

"And was your shirt collar like this all day?" Tammy said, trying to tamp it down.

Sometimes as he lay in bed trying to quiet his frenetic mind, Jerry bounced his legs on the mattress as a reality check. This splendid life he was cobbling was no hoax. It had arrived.

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RICHARD ALWAYS EXCELLED IN TWO areas: spitballing ideas and displaying showmanship at the onset of something fresh, be it romance, friendships, or a new job. It was the granular detail and

unglamorous devotion to see endeavors through where he often sabotaged himself. CM-2 was his opportunity to prove to everyone, himself included, that he had learned from his mistakes as gray flecks crept into his scalp.

So, when an old colleague, at a firm he once tried convincing to merge with theirs, expressed reservations about CM-2, which strayed from Space Matters' bailiwick, Richard decided to listen carefully, even though it deprived him of the affirmation he was craving to hear from a respected associate.

"C'mon," this man named David said. "What do you guys know about the technical side of home renovations? It's a lot more intense than room measurements. It's about the people."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That you have to be careful managing some of these guys with tool belts and circular saws. They're different. Someone once compared it to animal training. And you never know what animals are thinking up on those beams. What I'm saying is this could backfire."

Richard, too prideful to abandon what he just sweet-talked Jerry into, realized they overlooked an important element. Simply put, they were unequipped to run so much hard-hat work simultaneously while tending to their forte, space planning and design. He conferred with Jerry, and they agreed they needed someone with battle-tested field experience to oversee the day-to-day activities not just for CM-2, but their commercial projects as well. Neither of them ever logged a shift slicing carpet padding with utility knives or hanging sixty-pound solid core doors that felt like one hundred. Neither understood the nuances of hiring union-protected tradesmen or ordering drywall by the pallet.

In no time they drew up the criteria for a construction supervisor. He needed to be a multitasker capable of juggling

multiple job sites, troubleshooting errors, and interpreting blueprints, someone committed to making money without letting it become a circus. They quizzed their industry contacts if they knew anyone who fit their bill. The response was underwhelming. Richard, unbeknownst to Jerry, afterward took the initiative by widening the net. He bought ad space in the *Los Angeles Times* and other papers seeking a “superintendent familiar with high-rise interiors.”

A man who noticed the solicitation phoned Richard expressing interest. His chief reference was his last boss at the local branch of New York-based Smythe & Hargill, which at the time owned and managed millions of square feet of real estate across the country. Richard phoned the company’s top LA executive to inquire further about Howard Garrett. Victor Platte’s response was heartening. He called Howard dependable, proficient, and well-qualified. And who was he to argue with the estimable Smythe & Hargill, whose local portfolio sparkled with the historic Roosevelt and Jewelry Mart buildings downtown, west LA’s Wilshire-Comstock Apartments, and Manhattan’s Empire State Building? (It wasn’t until 1992 that the multibillion-dollar company’s reputation was dinged when the woman who managed its hotels, a flamboyant, tyrannical doyenne who famously scoffed at peasants who paid their taxes, went to prison for tax fraud.)

In his thirty years employed in the industry, Platte told Richard, Howard had supervised dozens of projects for them. Name a major building in town and chances are Howard either worked in it or knew someone who did. In recent years, he was an independent contractor and freelance foreman choosy about where he practiced his craft.

Richard, elated at what somebody with his credentials could mean, invited him to a sit-down interview at Space Matters’

mansion. Howard Landis Garrett Jr. was polite, quiet, coarse around the edges—and positive that he was their guy. Next to some of the hairier projects he had ridden herd over for Smythe & Hargill and another employer, realtor Alma Smith, this would be a breeze. Ever repair a disabled fire alarm system in a subterranean garage? Pour a massive foundation with a shoestring staff? Frame hundreds of square feet over a weekend with a trick back? Well, he had.

Forty-seven-year-old Howard looked the part. He had a narrow face marked by leathery jowls, penetrating blue-green eyes, and stringy, dirty-blond hair he swept over a faint bald spot. Though he was a wiry 6'1," his belly pouched out, suggesting a weekend beer drinker. One acquaintance compared him to a fair-skinned Charles Bronson; to Jerry, he could've been a wind-burned cowboy from a 1950s TV western. What you saw with him was what you got: a grizzled, seen-it-all journeyman who referred to the suits in charge as "chief" and idiots as "clowns." He could light a menthol cigarette with one hand while toting a nail gun in the other. There was an intrinsic toughness about him, as if he'd been a Marine. He lived in a Pasadena condo after downsizing from a ranch-style house close to Santa Anita Park in Arcadia.

Though old Howard was not going to win any personality contests, he nevertheless could smile; when he laughed, it rattled with the bronchial crackle of a nicotine enthusiast. Besides his experience, Richard was plenty impressed with Howard's entrepreneurial spirit. Not only did he stockpile his own carpentry gear, he still maintained two small design businesses. Howard, in fact, said that he had once brimmed with so many clients himself that he leased an office. Commercial, residential, industrial: he assured Richard he could do it all.

They jumped to salary negotiations. Richard offered him a twenty-two-thousand-dollar-a-year salary. Sounded dandy to him,

Howard said. Richard wanted him on his payroll for more than worksite street cred. That's because Howard owned a golden ticket in his long-held California general contractor's license, something that his potential employers needed to comply with state regulations for residential work. Without such a certification, Richard or Jerry themselves would have to enroll in school and pass an exam. That effort alone could gobble up a year. Who knew where fickle California real estate would be by then? Yep, Howard seemed ideal.

His only stumbling block was a commitment that would take him away from LA for a couple of weeks. As much as he hated bringing it up, it was a standing obligation. In March, he would need time off to be in San Bernardino, the sparsely populated, rugged county east of here. He said he was a witness in a court case starting then, and the district attorney was relying on his testimony to put a crook away. Prosecutors were unsympathetic when Howard recently informed them that his mandatory appearance inland might interrupt his formative time at a new job. They threatened to subpoena him, which blue-collar Howard said he was unable to abide. He apologized for the inconvenience that his absence might create.

Richard, visualizing a money machine within his grasp, said no sweat. Even stellar candidates tote complex histories. Jerry was miffed that his partner solicited a specific candidate without consulting him first, but he valued Richard's industriousness. Then he gave his blessing. They had found their foreman after a single interview!

From the moment Howard scrawled his name on the dotted line, Space Matters would never be the same. What was a two-man team metamorphosed into a three-headed hydra? Lines of responsibilities were divvied up. Jerry would continue designing for prized clients while tending to in-house administration. Rainmaking

Richard would add home remodels to his other standing duties. Newbie Howard would coordinate the flannel-and-boots laborers they hired ad hoc, accustomed to picking dust out of his teeth.

Brains, flash, and grit: it was the makings of a dynamite team of space builders open to anything.

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ITS BEGINNING WAS EVERYTHING Richard promised and more. Under Howard's watch, suite building commenced at the Pacific Stock Exchange downtown, a few skyscrapers to the west, and at the house owned by Michael "Mikey" Krakow, a smarmy Valley tax lawyer whom Jerry knew from way back. Unexpected opportunities cropped up too. An elderly OB-GYN pleased with the remodel that the company finished at his West LA medical office inquired if Richard and Howard, whom he got to know during the construction, would nurture his own get-rich aspirations. Dr. Joseph Marmet was hoping to develop a 160-home subdivision in western San Bernardino County, sensing in Jerry's associates the expertise that he sorely lacked. Asked if they were interested, both said absolutely.

Working on so many types of properties simultaneously required heaps of coordination, and that kept Richard and Howard offsite much of the day. It also engendered surprises, such as the latent friendship the pair developed despite personalities as dissimilar as their appearances. After they became better acquainted, they swilled after-work drinks at Richard's tastefully decorated Van Nuys home. When they discovered that they and their spouses would be in Palm Springs during Father's Day weekend in mid-June, it presented another chance for socializing. The four dined at Pal Joey's, a popular hangout favored by white-shoes celebrities. Richard's wife would never forget the atmosphere.

Jerry, who heard only nuggets about the Richard-Howard buddy-loop as the nerdy one in the group, generally confined himself at the office. Swept up in the grind of managing Space Matters, he barely even knew about Dr. Marmet's flirtations to recruit his associates into his subdivision development. An inbox bulging by the day acted like a chain around his leg, if a welcome one at that. Commercial clients in belt-cinching mode as the US sputtered into recession saw the beauty of a company able to be their one-stop shop. Richard's salesmanship reeled in the contracts with well-heeled homeowners, just as he promised. Howard, thankfully, was as good as advertised: adept at his job without much oversight. Whatever the staff impression of him as a taciturn redneck who left earwax on the office phone and swore like a football coach, the man saw his projects through to completion. Combine it all and the checks were coming in as fast as Jerry could count them.

Jerry needed to acknowledge that his partner's instincts on expansion were well calibrated. People you'd never expect to see working hand in glove—him, the shy workaholic from nondescript North Hollywood; Richard, the West LA charmer as the public face of the company; and calloused-hands Howard originally from ham-and-egger Alhambra—appeared to have coalesced as one.