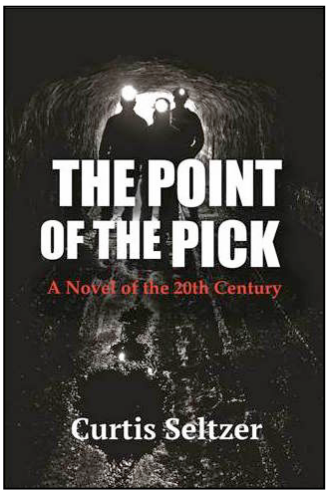

The Point of the Pick

~ A Novel of the 20th Century ~

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Sampler of Excerpts

Featured Excerpt: Three Choices

Chickie Siciliano gives Jeep Delucci three choices, none of them good. Media outlets and reviewers are free to reprint this excerpt (page 318).

A car drives slowly along Quarrier Street downriver from the golden dome of West Virginia's State Capitol.

"Like here are your three choices," Chickie says. "You can say, 'Forget you!' I respect a man of principle. Of course, that ends up you dead. But you'll have my respect.

"Second is you get outa this car after sayin' yes to my proposition. Then you call the FBI or the federal prosecutor. They come after me. You testify against me. I deny everything. They got squat for a case, and you, Mr. Stand-Up Citizen, spend the rest of your very short life in the witness protection program, hoping my friend here never finds you."

"Or three?" Jeep Delucci asked.

"Take the money, win the election and help the miners."

Summary Paragraph #1

"[Jeep] Delucci's nominating victory had fired a warning shot across the bow of every top-down, out-of-touch American trade union, which was almost all of them in Becker's opinion. If Jeep beat Joe Hunt on Friday, December 5, 1975, reform-minded, rank-and-file insurgencies might erupt in many big unions. Coal miners might lead the way in uniting labor in all the energy sectors." (Page 22)

Summary Paragraph #2

"This has to stay in this room," Jeffrey Becker said. "Apparently, Joe Hunt made a deal to sell the American Bank of Washington, the Union's bank, to a Mafia front in the District, a guy named Chickie Siciliano who's working for Tony Bruno out of Pittsburgh. I got that from one of the former ABW directors who had just been booted off the Bank's board. Mob-friendly local business guys are coming on as replacements. Sold for $222 million! That's more than double or triple what it's worth. My guess is Joe got campaign money as part of his agreement to sell." (Page 487)

Land Men

An authentic look at how coal mining took hold in West Virginia after the U.S. Civil War (pages 35-40).

In the late spring of 1874, two agents of the newly formed American Steel Company -- AMSTEEL -- out of Pittsburgh slowly walked their rented horses up the bed of Black Creek, a lively stream that drained a branching network of hollers in northern West Virginia's Monongalia County. The landmen carried rolled-up maps in leather cylinders that were buckled to their saddles like rifle scabbards. The maps were roughly topographic showing estimated elevations. Known and inferred coal deposits were shaded in, and boundary lines were drawn for surface owners.

They were alert for outcrops of the Pittsburgh seam, a horizontal slab of coal, six-to-20-feet thick, which underlay thousands of square miles of southwestern Pennsylvania, southeastern Ohio and northern West Virginia. AMSTEEL geologists thought the Pittsburgh seam might contain as much as 10 billion tons of coal. Some of the Pittsburgh was capable of being processed into the coke that was necessary for making iron and steel. The West Virginia part of the Pittsburgh seam was good, but it wasn't quite the purity of the Connellsville metallurgical-coal deposit about 50 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. Connellsville set the standard for coking coal. It was the foundation of AMSTEEL's preeminent position in the fast-growing steel industry.

A coal outcrop on a hillside or road cut was like a layer of chocolate cake peeking through the icing. The men had pretty good hunches where the Monongalia County cake layers were, how thick and how rich. Millions of dollars lay under Black Creek alone. They stopped to admire an especially large outcrop where the stream exposed it. They actually knew very little about coal. They were hunters, not miners. They were looking for prey. They knew a lot about buying cheap.

Their patient horses walked up the wagon road, which shifted in and out of the creek depending on how much flat ground was available on either bank. Woods covered the hillsides above them on both sides. Every so often, they'd pass an acre or two of flat, open bottom ground recently planted in corn, kernel by kernel. They rode slowly, making sure that anyone observing them could see they were not looking for trouble. It didn't seem that they were in a rush, but they were.

Landmen scheduled these visits so they might "hello" a target cabin in the late afternoon. They'd look for smoke curling lazily from the sandstone chimney. A garden and some apple trees would be off to the side. They'd see a log barn and shy, curious kids hiding in its shadows. An older man would come out and onto the porch. They'd ride up to him, staying in their saddles. They'd "How do?" and the man would "How do?" back. The agents might say something about the farmer's stout split-rail, chestnut fences if the fences were stout, or the nice buck they'd flushed out of a laurel thicket if they couldn't praise the fence.

The farmer quickly registered they weren't carrying the new, lever-action Winchester '73 chambered for a .44-40 cartridge. The rifle cost $100 dollars, he'd

heard. For him, it might as well have been a million. In fact, they carried no rifles at all. Of course, the farmer had a shotgun and his Pap's old flintlock rifle with the curly maple stock that was a straight shooter for 125 yards. The landmen knew he had an itch to try a repeating rifle like the Winchester '73; all of their targets did.

"Don't see many strangers up hyar," the farmer would say.

"First time for us," one would reply, "but we've been in the county for a while."

"Heard that," the farmer would say. "Y'er welcome to stay the night though hit's poor fare by your measure."

The agents smiled and thanked him, their bellies stirring. They knew the more their host belittled the coming meal, the better it was likely to be.

After supper, the three men would sit on the front porch and smoke their pipes. The agents would give the farmer a big can of good-quality pipe tobacco "for tomorrow," they'd say. The farmer's wife would "red up" the dishes and get the children settled in bed. They'd give the farmer a new coffee pot or bonnet for his wife and candy for his kids. The strangers would share news of the goings-on in Morgantown, Pittsburgh, Washington and maybe even Europe. Then they'd talk timber prices, hog cholera and corn borers. And after a second bowlful from a landman's pouch, after the farmer decided that his guests were not government whiskey men, he might break out a sippin' jug and finally get around to asking a question whose answer he thought he knew: "Now what jes' 'zactly brings fellers like you up hyar?"

Then the agents would lay down their pipes, look the mountaineer in his eye and one of the other would say, "Coal."

"Thought as much," the farmer would say, pleased with his perspicacity.

Coy Hunt had heard about landmen who'd been working Monongalia County. They had been buying coal rights all around Black Creek before they came to his place.

Later that night, he lay in the dark next to his wife, Lucinda, as the two agents slept in his barn loft on loose hay that still smelled a little fresh. "Sounds like a purty good deal for us," he said in a low voice. "All they want is the min'ral rights. Don't want none of our pasture or the timber. Might take an acre or two in the bottom where hit's flat, and they said they might not ever even git around to usin' that, or even minin' at all. *Depends* on the market for steel and iron," Coy said, emphasizing "depends" just as it had been emphasized to him. Lucinda didn't much care for her lot in life—seven living children and four buried on the hill above the cabin, the never-ending labor, the lack of female company. But she liked change she didn't know even less.

"'Purty good deal,' huh," she said in a way that she wanted him to understand she thought the opposite.

"Now, listen at me," Coy whispered. "They jes' want to buy the future right to mine the coal, which ain't a-doin' us a bit of good a-buried beneath us like it is. And our two grown boys can work in the mine if it ever does get up. It's work for cash money, which Lord knows they'll need. And they'll pay us a dollar a deeded acre for selling them the coal rights, maybe more. Jes' for the coal, not the land above. Two thousand acres is $2,000. Christa-mighty, it's like stealin' from 'em. That's more money for doin' nothin' than we'd see in 10 years of loggin' out our trees like slaves."

"Nothin' ain't free," Lucinda said.

"I could buy a team of work horses; no more contrary mules," Coy said. "Percherons. They'd make it easy for plowin' and cultivatin'. Bet I could drag out a 30-inch red oak log, 16-foot-long, with that pair. I know where I could get 'em, too. I could get me a WIN-chester '73. Lever- action .44. Only $100. Plenty be left."

"The mules do the work you ask of them. Your Daddy's flintlock always puts meat on our table."

"Times are movin' along. Better thangs cost money," he said. "The '73 has a *15-round* magazine."

"Are you plannin' to go to war, Coy? That Winchester you're a-pinin' for is a man-killer."

"You never know when a man has to defend himself."

"You need one shot, not 15, to kill a buck," Lucinda said. "Don't make no difference if that comes outa a flintlock or a repeater. Expensive thangs a-doin' the same thang ain't worth their price. It'll just get you in trouble."

"I'll be the judge of what gets me in trouble."

"I'm a-feared that's the truth," Lucinda said. "Coy, listen at me. I wouldn't care to see a coal mine in our bottom where the good dirt is. The noise and commotion would unsettle the cow. There'd be people up here, fer'ners, too. An' Coy, you ain't gonna do much plowing on a pile of coal. Not much huntin' neither."

"Stop bein' contrary," Coy said. "This is our chance."

"Thangs is good enough for me like we is," Lucinda said.

"Well, let me sleep on it," Coy said.

"Now, Coy Hunt, you jes' do that. You sleep on it."

Coy was taken with the idea of Big Money—cash, fast and easy. Others had signed AMSTEEL's dollar-an-acre mineral deeds, selling the coal and whatever else was under the surface. Big Money—in one pile and all at once; Coy Hunt had never had even Small Money in one pile and all at once. And since it was his land, his 2,000 acres by inheritance -- not hers -- by gift of the First Congress of the United States in payment for Revolutionary War service by his great granddad and subsequent purchases, it was his decision, not hers. I ain't no frownin' foot-dragger like Lucinda, he told himself.

Coy heard that a few farmers had refused to sell on the first visit. It was going around that a second offer might come in at up to $1.25 an acre, but he'd also heard that AMSTEEL might walk away after a rejection. If a second offer came, it was carried by the most important lawyer in Morgantown who rode all the way out to talk to each reluctant seller. In most cases, the agents returned to Pittsburgh with a signed letter of intent that bound the farmer to perform on a contract he'd never seen and often could not read. The transaction would be completed in the lawyer's office a week later and then recorded. The severance of the underground minerals from the surface by purchase was forever. Lucinda remembered the phrase, "in perpetuity."

"That's a long time," she'd said to her husband, "even longer than till death do us part."

Coy Hunt bid the two AMSTEEL agents on their way in the morning. He refused pay for the night's lodging, which wasn't much he knew, and the two meals, which were decent enough by any account. When Lucinda cleared the table, she found a new silver dollar under each of their plates. She stuck them in her beaded purse in expectation of a rainy day. Even the farmers who Coy had heard turned them down said the strangers had treated their women right. The agents rode up the holler toward the smaller holdings of Coy's relations, carrying his binding letter of intent. Coy's place was what they had needed. It was the best place to site a future mine.

Coy Hunt had negotiated $1.50 an acre for the sale of his coal, higher than anybody had gotten, higher than anyone had thought possible.

There was just one farmer -- a neighbor named Jacob Olin on Timber Ridge, which bordered Coy's land up the holler -- who turned the agents down and wouldn't even invite them in for a bite to eat. There was no need for a lack of hospitality, Coy thought. It reflected poorly on everyone, on all West Virginians. Olin, he'd heard, said he'd rather sell his blood for a nickel than his coal for a dollar.

Jacob Olin thought of himself as one of those mountaineers who clung to their fear and suspicion of outsiders as if they were keys to survival. He never sold his mineral rights to AMSTEEL or anyone else. He kept his 75 acres in fee-simple ownership. His hillside land and minerals were passed down intact to his son Arvil, and then to his son, Gus.

At the end of the week, George Chilton, dean of the Morgantown bar, handed Coy Hunt $3,000 in cash for his mineral rights and had him sign the deed that would be recorded in the Monongalia County Courthouse. The two landmen were not in Chilton's office that Friday, but Coy asked after them anyway.
And then for more than a decade after Coy and the other Hunts sold their minerals to AMSTEEL nothing changed in Black Creek Holler. Every July 4th and election day, the Hunt men would get together, drink and laugh over their good fortune.

Pick & Becker

Snappy dialogue as Allyson Pickering ("Pick") and Jeffrey Becker ("Becker") take a stroll on New York's Upper West Side (pages 90-92).

"Leaving?" Becker asked Allyson as she got her things together.

"What does it look like? What do you suggest? Curl up at the foot of his bed for 24 hours?"

"No, I suggest leaving," he said. "In fact I suggest I walk you to wherever you're going. It's after 12."

She considered him for a moment. "Are you shit-faced?" she asked. "No, ma'am," he said.

"Why not? Scared of it?"

"Just don't like the taste. Double Scotch on the rocks is my drink, hold the Scotch."

"Lame," she said, putting on her coat. "I can stay with a girlfriend on 106th and Riverside. We've done this before in similar circumstances. Okay, I accept your gallant offer." She smiled at him and threw in a self-mocking curtsy. They walked without hurry in the unseasonably warm March night. The super-bright, crime-prevention street lights bathed them in a yellowy whiteness.

"Who are you?" she asked without any preliminaries.

"Jeff Becker. Jeffrey. Friend of Trip."

"I know that much," she said with impatience.

"Well, I'm a pre-law senior. Not sure I want to be a lawyer or go to law school. Have a couple of acceptance letters. Grew up in Pittsburgh. Not a fraternity brother, but sometimes I go to the parties. More interested in politics than that crowd. Against the War more than they are. Dad has a scrap yard. Mom is the bookkeeper and does volunteer work. Adult literacy. She's active in the community. Only child. Like books. Have a sense that the world is not fair and structured that way."

"You look semi-disheveled. SDS?" she asked.

"I've gone to some rallies at The Sundial. I'm on their call list. I don't have much patience for the internal debates."

"My mother joined the Left in the '30s when she was at Bryn Mawr. A lot of girls from good families felt guilty about The Depression. Some joined the Communist Party like my aunt Maude who insisted on Vassar, which, I suppose, explains her behavior. Some traipsed along beside. Good pearls and the noble oppressed—that is my mother, Jane Andrews Pickering. Her nickname is Boo."

"What about you?" he asked.

"Not sure," she said, stopping and looking directly in his eyes. "I'm a Quaker. Pacifist. I hate the War."

Becker fumbled. "I think Trip's not much of anything. More Rockefeller Republican than Lindsay Democrat I suppose."

"Like Bogart," she said, "he's a drunk, a global citizen when it comes to politics."

"I've only seen him drink on weekends. He's a good student. Makes good grades. He'll do well in finance. I think he'll go into the family business. He'll

make money. Life will be pleasant. You'll be able to buy a new Volvo station wagon every year. Your future could be four doors, four speeds and four kids."

"That was mean," she said. "Random calamities can strike anyone. Not to mention things we do to harm ourselves. Do you have a type of law in mind?"

"Maybe, legal aid to get started. Public interest. Torts—personal injury cases. Fairness interests me. Civil liberties. Not sure after that."

"I see." What Allyson saw was a smart kid who hadn't yet set a career path or been consumed by the turbulence of their times. It was hard, she knew, to keep your eye on a career while Big Things were happening all around you. She, too, wrestled with the same foes.

"Well, you're bigger than you look from a distance," she said.

"You're prettier closer upper."

Allyson Pickering smiled. She looked at Becker again. She took his arm.

Becker stopped at an all-night fruit stand near the corner of 110th and Broadway. He bought a small bunch of green grapes.

"I hope you're not going to start tossing them in the air and catching them in your mouth."

"Who promised anything about catching them?" he laughed. "Actually, I was hoping you might feed them to me one at a time as I recline on your silk pillows."

"Moving right along are we? Think you're on a roll, do you?" She put her head on his shoulder for a second.

"If you don't ask, you don't get," he answered. He put his arm around her.

Allyson snorted, then a giggle came out. Allyson hadn't giggled like that since before her first women's liberation meeting more than six months earlier. They walked down Broadway to 106th feeding grapes to each other. They turned toward Riverside Drive and stopped in front of a four-story walk-up on the north side of the street, one building away from Riverside Park.

"Carolyn's a receptionist at The New Yorker," Allyson said. "Her Dad knows the cartoon editor. Went to Sarah Lawrence. Spent a lot of time there with Jane Austen. Truly fucked her up what with, I'm paraphrasing, if a woman has the misfortune of knowing anything, she should conceal it as much as she can. Now she has a crush on William Hamilton."

"Great cartoonist," Becker said.

"He likes to poke his own kind," Allyson said. "Well..," she said, offering her hand, "thanks for the escort service."

Becker was surprised. "Some roll," he muttered.

"Let's not be greedy," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"It shreds our moral fiber," she said.

"I certainly understand why our moral fiber needs to be conserved."

"I'm not about a roll in the hay," she said without humor.

Becker felt slapped. And then he realized that a roll in the hay was what he'd had in mind.

"Sorry," he said. "Anyway, I can be called again for long-range patrol

and escort duty."

She took the last grape and put it in his mouth. Then she buzzed for entrance, got the return and went inside.

"Ask again," she laughed.

He watched her. She smiled at him just before she vanished into the stairs.

Becker walked back to his apartment on West 110th, trying to puzzle out what had just happened and why he felt light.

The Demise of SDS

A look at the rise and fall of the SDS and the Weather Underground (pages 151-152).

By the end of 1969, SDS national membership had dwindled to a few hundred after its leaders took them through a series of bizarre "actions" to toughen themselves and radicalize white, working-class youth. To promote a communist revolution, they picked fights with working-class guys they called "the grease." Some 70 SDS women ran through Pittsburgh's South Hills High School in September, exposing their breasts, yelling "Jail Break" and chanting slogans for women's liberation and victory for the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. The high-schoolers stared in wonder. Twenty-six women were arrested. More than 250 arrests followed in October during the "Days of Rage," a series of street fights in Chicago between SDS and police. SDS leaders had predicted thousands would show up—only 500 did. This failure led the Gondleman faction to move toward guerrilla war rather than more mass organizing. By the end of the 1960s, SDS could no longer function. It was divided into factions with each promoting a cultish ideology to increasingly fewer adherents. Where it had claimed 100,000 members and 300 chapters in 1968, SDS had whittled itself down to about 50 individuals who were willing to go underground.

The Gondleman faction -- headed by him, Paulette Rotz, Bernadine Dohrn, Jeff Jones, John "JJ" Jacobs, Dave Gilbert, Howard Machtinger, Karen Ashley, Bill Ayers, Mark Rudd, Ted Gold, Terry Robbins and Kathy Boudin -- led itself into a hole of its own digging in early 1970. They called themselves Weathermen—because, they said, you didn't need any ideology other than theirs to know the correct path to communist utopia. They believed in four Maoist ideas: 1) the end justifies the means; 2) violence is the way to acquire and keep political power; 3) nothing would change unless leaders controlled what everyone thought; and 4) top-down leadership and follower obedience was the only way to win.

The approach of the Weathermen -- later the Weather Underground -- in the 1970s was to make war on America by Americans against Americans from within America. This strategy was carried out by hidden cells operating secretly. They were following the *foco* theory of Regis Debray, a French philosophy professor and Guevara friend. Debray argued that small, nimble guerrilla groups could activate a broad, working-class rebellion through violent attacks.

The Weather Underground initiated a decade-long campaign to dismantle American capitalism and its governing system through more than 30 bombings that targeted police facilities, corporations and federal institutions. The communism they sought borrowed heavily from Mao and Castro. Unlike Mao's revolution, the Underground's version shied away from killing, kidnapping or maiming people. It never fought gun battles. It was mild in comparison with what it might have been and with its American precedents.

Riding the Joy

Insider language fills this tight excerpt about Willie Rutherford and the mine roof's caving-in on him (pages 206-209).

The trolley that carried Willie's shift into the mine stopped every so often to let off crews near their working sections. His crew was the last stop. They stashed their lunch buckets in a crosscut close to the face and next to the main that carried fresh intake air. This was their "dinner hole." Each man went to his machine or assignment.

Willie found his 60-ton, Joy12CM continuous-miner parked about 20 feet back from the working face in the section called Two North Entry. The fire boss had just come though checking for methane and told Willie it was "good to go."

Willie's crew was advancing four faces into the coal seam from this section. Once Willie's continuous-miner had advanced his entry into the face about 16 feet forward, he would back out and tram the miner to the next face. Pins would take Willie's place and bolt up the just-mined, unsupported roof between the pillars. In this fashion each of the four faces in Willie's section were advanced and bolted in turn. The Joy could cut 20 tons a minute when everything was right.

Willie circled his Joy. He checked the cutting drum to make sure that its carbide tips were sharp. If they were dull, they'd have to be changed out. He examined the two lobster-like gathering arms on a metal pan that caught the dropped coal as the cutting drum tore it from the face. He took a grease gun and lubed some fittings. One of the water sprays was still bunged up. He flashed his light on the conveyor that ran through the machine, looking for problems in the chain and sprockets. As he walked, he checked the bulldozer treads for wear and looseness. At the rear, he looked at the take-up reel that automatically let out and spooled up the thick insulated cable that carried 440 volts to the miner. All the hydraulic hoses looked good—no leaks. The splices in the power cable were tight.

He saw no cracks in the welds that formed a canopy over his seat in the miner. UNICOAL had recently ordered American Eagle's shop to fabricate a canopy out of steel plate and four lengths of tube steel that was welded to the miner's frame. The Mining Enforcement Safety Administration had let the industry know that it was about to issue a regulation requiring cabs or canopies on all underground mobile equipment. Everyone felt better about the MESA rule. Without a canopy, nothing would protect Willie in a roof fall.

Willie eased into the cramped metal seat and made sure his sight lines were as clear as they could be. He scooted around adjusting the raggedy pad beneath him, searching for maximum thickness over maximum area. He'd admitted years ago that old pillows provided mostly psychological protection against the bumps and jostling. He could never understand why a $400,000 machine couldn't be outfitted with a decent seat—and when that one wore out, why it wasn't replaced. Mining would go better and faster with $10 worth of two-inch-thick foam under him and behind his back. Maybe, I'll just buy some cushion with my own money, he thought. But then he'd either have to leave it underground or take it in and out with him on the mantrip each shift. If he left it, someone would steal it. If he carried it around like a briefcase, he'd start up a

round of hemorrhoid jokes. Maybe UNICOAL would go for pads now that they put in canopies. It was possible. They could experiment—see if a comfortable seat in their mobile equipment got them more coal each shift. He was glad he'd remembered to pop two aspirin before he left the bathhouse. They took a bite out of the discomfort he'd feel in his back about dinner break.

He activated the machine. Lights came on. Gauges moved. He raised and lowered the cutting drum, worked the gathering arms and the conveyor and made sure the machine tracked backward and forward, left and right.

Willie trammed up to the face where he stopped under roof that Jasper had bolted an hour earlier. He checked the pattern—three-foot centers, not fours. He thought about waiting for a buggy to mate in behind him to accept the roof rock he was going to remove, but he was anxious to see what the roof's consistency was before he started pulling coal out from beneath unsupported top. He wouldn't need a buggy for the little cut he planned to make. He raised the miner's boom, which was 15 feet in front of where he sat. He delicately eased its rotating drum into the angle where coal met roof rock. Then instead of going forward into the coal to make a normal cut, he slowly raised the boom into the sandstone. The sprays cut the rock dust a little, but soon he was two feet into the roof and cutting mostly by touch.

It didn't feel right. He could sense the roof loosening in pieces. He backed out and cut the power under bolted roof. He wanted to hear what the roof was saying, what it had on its mind. He sat still in the quiet.

Willie Rutherford heard the roof come down in a thunder crack. It fell so fast that he saw it only as a flash in the beam of his cap lamp. It sounded like a flood of boulders. At 12:48 a.m. on a peaceful Saturday morning, Willie Rutherford was buried alive as he sat listening to ancient geology in his Joy mining machine.

Willie didn't try to move after the roof swallowed him in its fallen chaos. The cave-in's concussive force had taken his breath. He coughed in the silence. He concentrated on breathing. He tasted the dust from the rocks covering his machine. He listened hard for more movement above him. It was dead quiet. He touched the canopy's new steel supports and was thankful that they'd held. He felt the steel plate above his head. It wasn't bent downward. He had no idea whether a one-foot-thick layer of roof had fallen on him or 30 feet. He figured it was rubbly, not solid, but he couldn't see into the hole above him. He rubbed the steel plate—for more luck.

Willie knew he'd been given a pass. The roof fall could have collapsed his canopy and crushed him. He'd carried out miners with backs, arms and legs broken in roof falls. He'd seen one dead from a collapse, eyes popped out of his face. Then it came to him: he'd forgotten to rub the fossil in the roof.

"Damn," he said aloud. "Okay, let's see what I got to work with." He licked the Tiparillo taste on his dry teeth—that was good. He had no water or food on board—that was bad. He swallowed. Could be a long time before I have any water, he thought. He moved his head slowly anticipating pain but felt none. He wiggled his hands, arms, back, left leg—all good.

Right leg was wedged in by a sandstone slab. The leg didn't seem crushed, but it was mostly immobile. Wiggled his right-foot toes, they worked. He made

his mind drag along his right leg, beginning at his toes. He moved up—foot good, ankle good, knee. KNEE! Pain exploded when he moved his knee. He lost his breath and sweat beaded on his forehead. He felt chilled and slightly nauseous. He flashed his cap light on his right knee. He saw no blood on his pants leg or bone sticking out. Probably broke, he thought; maybe the knee cap's crushed or dislocated. Don't want to go into shock. He felt himself sweating.

"Okay! Okay, knee," Willie said to his right leg. "We do a deal. I don't move you, and you don't hurt me."

Willie reached for the rock hammer that was strapped to the miner's chassis on his left. He would tap on the canopy's steel supports to signal that he was alive. He toggled the miner's switch. Nothing—falling rock had cut the power cable. His light showed chunks of rock in front and on both sides. He twisted his head to look behind. The miner was rocked in.

He turned off his cap lamp. Pitch black had never scared him. He held out his hand. He couldn't see it. White hand be the same, he thought and laughed. "Life is just a bed of roses," he said to the roof fall, "but sometimes you find yourself layin' on more thorns than petals." He wiggled around on his pad, careful not to disturb his right leg. "Shoulda bought me that foam," he said, "'stead of jes' runnin' my mouth." He thought of Susie. He thought of her peach pie. He thought of his kids, Mikey and Connie.

It's goin' to be a long night, he thought. I need to be tough, whatever comes. Probably enough air in the rubble. Can go two or three days without water. He laughed as he thought: Comp'ny'll have to pay me for the time I spend underground. Time-and-a-half for Saturday shifts and double time if I loaf it out into Sunday. Susie won't have enough money to get by. She'll miss me. She'll be angry. But we done okay, considerin' we started with weddin' cash of $12.50. Hope she remarries. A man'd be lucky to get her. She knows this is the way thangs are in McDowell County. You takes your chances in the mines. 'Course you also takes your chances walkin' across the street or jes' gettin' outa bed in the morning. Sure don't want her goin' into the mines to work. Hope she can get by with the ACMU accidental-death benefit and a pension. Maybe UNICOAL will give her somethin'.

Willie settled in as best he could, careful not to disturb the armistice he'd negotiated with his knee. He knew there was nothing he could do to get himself out of this coffin. He just had to wait and see what came next.

Was never much for church, Willie conceded. But I tried to do right. Even Korea never pushed me through them church doors. Don't see the point now. Prayin' can't hurt, but if anybody's gonna get me outa this damn hole, it's gonna be miners like me. "I ain't the best soul in the world," he said aloud, "but I ain't the worst neither. Cut me a break if you got the time and the inclination. Much appreciated and best wishes. Willie Rutherford. Amen."

Gob Dam!

Horrifying details of the 1972 Buffalo Creek disaster that destroyed 16 towns and 500 homes (pages 229-235).

"It was after the Buffalo Creek disaster in Logan County, three years ago in the fall of '72," Charlie began. "Owen was still with the News Leader in Richmond, covering whatever he covered for that piece of shit."

"My derriére, mostly," Owen inserted. "Lifestyle, features, the poohbahs and their good works. Three tasteful cheers for the prosperous."

"Julie hadn't taken over The Sentinel yet. Your Daddy was there. I was at Buffalo Creek for The Gazette. There was the AP guy and the UPI girl.

"I was probably the first pencil-and-notebook guy up that holler, or what was left of it after the dam broke on February 26th. Flew in with the toad who ran the State's Department of Mining on Governor Arch Moore's helicopter. The Governor ordered the State Police to block all road access into the holler."

"What kind of dam?" Owen asked.

"Gob dam," Charlie said. "It was like this. Buffalo Mining is a subsidiary of the Pittston Corporation—they have coal mines and Brinks. Buffalo Mining had three gob dams at the head of Buffalo Creek, that is, all the way at the back end, at the top where the holler narrows. Gob is the shit that's left after the preparation plant extracts the coal. It's rock, ash, junk, dust, sand, dirt, slate—loose material, like tons of pennies. There's weight but not much stick-um. They dump this stuff across the holler and then dam up water behind the pile. Usually, they pump the waste-water slurry from the coal washing in behind these dams. The slurry's fines -- the gunk -- settle out over time, eventually filling in behind the dams. They can take the clean water from the top of the impoundment and run it back through the prep plant to wash coal.

"Buffalo Mining just slung the gob across the holler to block up their wastewater. Number 3 dam was farthest up. It had been inspected four days earlier and given an okay. It rained hard the night before. People who lived below the dams had worried for years. The men who worked at the mine lived in the little towns strung out 17 miles downstream from the dams. They knew these impoundments were not engineered. They had no spillways or outlet pipes. They knew full ones could be breached or collapse. Buffalo Mining had been dumping 1,000 tons a day of mine refuse up there. That hard rain kept people up all night.

"Rain kept falling heavy into the early morning. But Buffalo Mining never stopped pumping black water into Number 3 impoundment. The coal fines buried in the dam itself had been smoldering and smoking for years. So when the water finally saturated the dam that morning, it hit the burning core and a steam explosion blew the whole thing to hell. All of that happened about 6 a.m.

"A 20-foot-high wall of black water and whatever else swept down Buffalo Creek after blowing through the two lower dams. Doing 60 miles per hour, they estimated. One-hundred-and-thirty-million gallons ran over 16 little coal-camp towns. Five hundred homes totally wiped out. Four thousand left homeless. I saw train rails twisted like vines around trees and bridge piers. Houses, trailers, vehicles and people washed up miles from where they'd started.

One-hundred-and-twenty-five killed, more than 1,100 injured. Seven missing. Woooosh! No more Saunders, West Virginia. No more Pardee, Lorado, Craneco, Lundale, Stowe, Crites, Latrobe, Robinette, Amherstdale, Becco, Braeholm, Accoville, Crown, Kistler and Man. The National Guard was digging bodies out of the muck for a week. Everyone was traumatized. Little kids, adults, too. Three years later, they still freak out when it rains no matter where they are.

"Big lawsuits were filed against Pittston. Its lawyers said it was an 'Act of God,' which meant it wasn't the Company's fault. Sue The Lord, folks. Some 600 survivors sued Pittston and settled for $13,000 each after legal costs. About 350 child survivors settled for $4.8 million, a little bit less per head after the lawyers were paid. Governor Arch Moore filed a $100 million suit against Pittston for the state's costs of relief and clean-up. Then he and his lawyer, Stanley Preiser, settled with Pittston for a flat $1 million and no further liability three days before his gubernatorial term ends. When all was said and done, West Virginia -- not Pittston -- had to pay the Corps of Engineers more than $9 million for its clean-up costs.

"And get this. Good ol' Buster Skaggs, who led a Democratic faction in Logan County that had backed Republican Moore in '72, was the one who built the unlicensed dam when he owned Buffalo Mining, which he sold to Pittston. Moore was protecting ol' Buster and Pittston—his real constituents. Arch Moore had no shame. And get this. Nobody was indicted for any blessed thing. All of Pittston management from top to bottom got off. Oval Damron, the prosecutor in Logan County, showed no defensiveness about the absence of prosecutions. The dams never had a state license, but ol' Oval says that's just a misdemeanor and don't count anyhow since there's a one-year statute of limitations. And after all, Oval says with regard to homicide, 'there's no way to put a corporation in jail.' Made me want to puke."

"The question you didn't ask, Charlie?" Julie said.

"Gettin' there, darlin'. My train starts slowly but gathers speed when it's goin' downhill in a righteous cause. Now there was this guy. Mr. Browning. A real big guy, maybe six-six or seven, about 60 or so. Heavy set. Wearing bib overalls. Working in low coal would have been hard for him. Crewcut. Normal guy. Had a hawkish nose, but a fleshy face. Well, Mr. Browning had lost his wife, one of his kids, several grandkids, neighbors. You could see him wrestling with his grief and the terror of his own inexplicable survival.

"Governor Moore holds a press conference in the lunch room of the grade school at Accoville, near the mouth of Buffalo Creek. The West Virginia National Guard had worked all night shoveling the muck out of the lunchroom and wiping down the tables, chairs and walls to make it look half-normal. But you could still see the brown scum line that showed how high the water had gotten inside the room. And there was this gritty, black powder on the linoleum tiles, the ones that hadn't come up after being drowned. They set up a generator outside so the lights would come on. Provided drinking water out of plastic barrels and coptered in portable johns special for the Governor and his entourage. Had some cheese-and-baloney sandwiches on white bread set out at one table. Had fresh jars of mayonnaise and mustard, too. Who said there ain't no free lunch?

"Everyone's sitting on these brown metal folding chairs a size too small. Governor Moore is standing behind the lectern with the TV lights on. He's up on

the stage, 'cause the lunchroom doubled as the auditorium. Mr. Browning is in the back just in front of the milk machine and the candy dispensers. He's trying to fit into one of the elementary-school chairs. He's bent over at the waist, holding his head in these huge, gnarled hands. His palms are in his eyes. He doesn't want to see what's in front of him, or behind, or ahead. He's just shaking his head in his own blackness.

"Well, ol' Arch stands up and, nice as you please, he drops the busted dam in the lap of the Lord. Says nothing about Buster Skaggs and Pittston never engineering those gob dams or failing to get a state permit. Not a word about the absence of overflow pipes or emergency spillways. Says nothing about his own dip-shit inspection agency that knew the dangers of these dams and dozens of others just like them in the coalfields. Regulation without eyes on the ground and enforcement amounts to not much. Says nothing about how Pittston never warned the people below the dams that the water was close to the top. Says, instead, it was an 'Act of God.' Gave Pittston its courtroom defense against liability suits and criminal prosecution. He had to have worked this out with Pittston and the lawyers before he got to that sorry lunchroom in Accoville.

"Soon as Arch shifts liability onto the Lord and lifts Pittston and his own complicit administration out of the negligence briar patch, you can see those silky Pittston lawyers down from Connecticut -- they're all lined up along one side of the lunchroom under the finger paintings that didn't get drowned -- they all stop sweating. They get to relaxing so much that they lean up against the cinder-block wall and walk around for the rest of the day with flood scum on the back of their suits.

"Mr. Browning was a born-again Christian and all that. Probably got saved in his teens and filled with the Holy Ghost in his 20s. Worked in the mines his whole life. Never took a step out of line or over a line. Paid his taxes. Didn't bitch about payin' ACMU dues. Probably a WWII vet. Voted Democrat, but never gave a shit about politics. And you could just see the ponderous trouble he had asking why his Lord would do such a thing to him and his. It was like Jesus had just up and pissed on his good Christian head for no reason. I expect Jews in the Nazi concentration camps pondered the same.

"So Mr. Browning stands up after the Governor finishes. He keeps his hands straight down at his sides. He has tears rolling down his face, and he starts testifying:

> Mr. Gov'nor. My name is Tolbert Browning. I done lived my whole life -- 60 yars -- in this holler, workin' for Buffalo and the Piss-ton Comp'ny, too. I never got no education hyar, 'cept what I l'arned under the mountain. Coal minin's in my blood, and coal dust is in my lungs. I never ate ahead of my paycheck, and many's the time back in the '50s and '60s when we was laid-off, I had nothin' but a speck of gov-mint cheese and a dab of peanut butter to eat—and mighty glad to have 'em too.
>
> Four days ago, I had me a wife, two daughters, one son, an' three grandkids. Four days ago, I had me a house in Amherstdale, a garden patch and a Ford truck. Now I got almost nothin'. Almost nothin'. Lost my wife, a daughter and two grands.

I want to say their names right h'yar so they'll be remembered and not just warshed away like so much dirt in a laundry tub: Alice Browning, my wife; Jessie Lyn Blankenship, my daughter; her kids, Boyce and Bonnie.

Comp'ny done mashed up my Daddy under a runaway mine car in nineteen-and-twenty-seven, because they was still usin' wood sprags to brake the wheels. Comp'ny done took my oldest boy, six y'ars ago. Gas 'splosion. Done took two brothers. Lungs was filled full of the dust.

Comp'ny done took my wife, my girl and the babies, even. My house, my car. They done took it all.

I wish'd to God the Comp'ny took me 'stead of mine.

Mr. Gov'nor, Mr. Moore. You say hit was an Act of God.

T'weren't no such thang! T'was an act of man. T'was an act of the Piss-ton Coal Comp'ny. T'was an act of that man, a-standin' right thar, plain as day—Steve Dasovich, Buffalo Mine superintendent. And Buster Skaggs—he's a sittin' up on that stage. Buster, he built them gob dams. Then sold them to Piss-ton. Buster started 'em. And Steve Dasovich, he run all that black water in behind 'em from the warsh plant. He done run that water right up to when the dam broke. Steve Dasovich was a-feared to shut down production.

Everyone up this holler knowed what Buffalo Minin' was a-doin'. They wasn't hidin' nothin', 'cause they couldn't hide it from those of us hyar who was a-doin' their labor. But there wasn't nothin' that anyone like me could say. Who in Piss-ton would listen to me? An' Piss-ton knowed nothin' was ever to goin' to happen to them for a-breakin' your rules. So they had no reason to hide nothin' from nobody.

Those men from Piss-ton a- standin' along that wall over thar are a-listenin' to me now only because they have to. They ain't hearin' nothin' for the future. They're just figurin' out what to say back to make me disappear. They jes' want to get out of this as cheap as they can. They jes' want to warsh me away like they done my family, 'cept they want to do me with paper and words, not warsh-plant water from up Buffalo holler.

Comp'ny done it, Mr. Gov'nor. Comp'ny done it.

Not God. Not Jesus.

Comp'ny done it, and you, too.

"Mr. Browning just stands in front of his seat. No one says a word. He just keeps standing there, waiting. I heard feet shufflin' and noses snifflin'. But nobody says a blessed word against the truth.

"The Pittston lawyers have not twitched muscle one, but I could see that they were frantic to figure out how to get the Governor off the hook and how to move the coming trials o-u-t of Logan County, say to the North Slope of Siberia. Ol' Arch is still standing still as stone at the podium, lookin' like he's just been told his fly zipper's open, but he's too ashamed to go down and pull it up. The

silence is so powerful, so overwhelming, that even I was rooting for somebody to get things moving again.

"Finally -- it must have been three or four minutes of silence -- the head Pittston lawyer slides up next to Arch. He clears his $100-an-hour throat and starts blah-blahing about legal this and legal that. Says Mr. Browning's 'heartfelt statement' is not legally admissible in a court of law. That, at this point, it's hearsay, though he doesn't doubt Mr. Browning's loss. He gave everyone in that room a chance to breathe. Bullshit probably saved the lives of a dozen or so folks who would have otherwise self-suffocated. The Governor, and I'll give him this, at least he had the decency to keep lookin' at his brightly polished cordovan shoes. The corrupt bastard couldn't look an honest man like Mr. Browning in the eye.

"But Mr. Browning is still standing. All six-six, six-seven of him. Just looking at the Governor. He doesn't know what else to do. He didn't know he was supposed to ask a question, not make a statement. He doesn't know it's time for him to move out. He's waiting for someone in Authority to explain things to him. The lawyer is filling air time. Mr. Browning wants the powerful to talk to him, man to man. Maybe apologize. After another five minutes or so, he finally feels that his time has come and gone. There is no answer to his testimony, except confessions by Pittston and Arch Moore, which ain't gonna happen. It's now kind of embarrassing. He doesn't sit. Other people have started to ask questions. All of us sophisticated types from Charleston and beyond, we know that after you say your lines, you're supposed to get your ass off the stage.

"We ask Arch some reporter-type questions. I watch Mr. Browning wander out of the school. No one talks to him, comforts him. Ain't nothing to say. Ain't no comfort. Then a tiny little woman he knows, about his age, comes up to him. She hugs him the best she can. Comes up to a little over his belt. Doesn't say a word. Just wraps her arms as far around him as she can get. He's crying. She's crying. Finally, her husband comes over, says something to Tolbert, and takes her away.

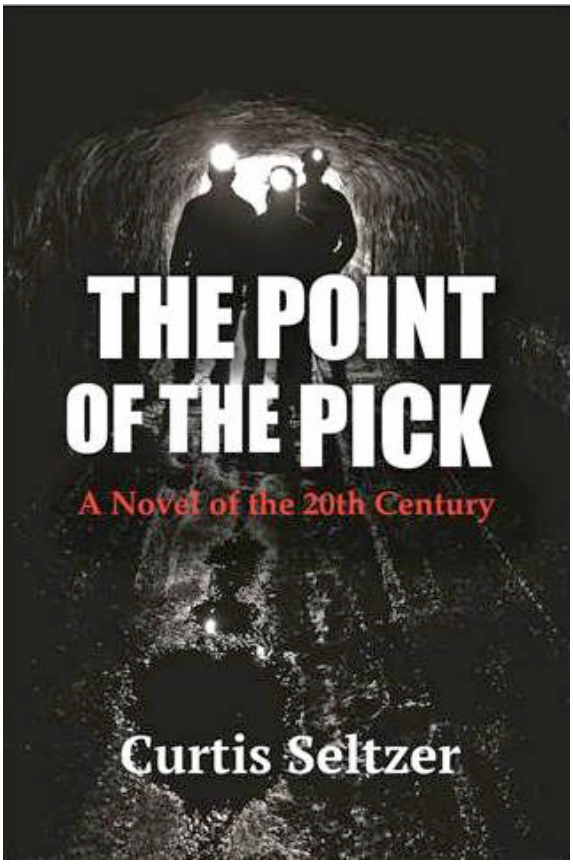
"I follow him. I don't give a shit about what Arch Moore is saying. Mr. Browning is walking through the devastation toward what was his place in Amherstdale, a couple of miles. There's a kind of path that's been bulldozed through the wreckage. I trail behind. I want to talk to him. I want his story. I want people to know.

"He just keeps walkin' up the holler in a daze. I'm almost stalking him. And then I slow down. Then I stop altogether next to the spilled guts of somebody's trailer. I'm standing on little-girl dresses in the mud. I look down, and then I see him still walking. I turn and go back to the school.

Long Excerpt

Long Wall

This recommended excerpt is the entire text of Chapter 17, Two North, October 12, 1975 (pages 247-262). This excerpt contains fantastic detail on mining practices along with claustrophobic suspense as miners try to recue Willie Rutherford from a roof cave-in. Due to the length, we have not included the excerpt in this Sampler. We're happy to send you the file if you need it.



Buzzy Maggard Explains the Economics of Coal

(pages 416-417)

After the meal, John-Cee asked Buzzy to say a few words.

Buzzy stood. "Ladies. I was raised up in Pike County, Kentucky, just across the Tug River from Mingo County, next to you all. My Daddy was an ACMU miner. Joined in Nineteen and Thirty-three. He died a Union miner. I myself never had an ACMU card, because the Union had been run out of Pike County. But I woulda been proud to carry one. We was as poor as anybody. You an' me know all the ways to make cornbread taste like somethin' a little richer.

"Now I own Appalcoal, a non-Union operator. I'm jes' like that rich feller Smithers settin' there next to Mrs. Rutherford on one side and Mrs. Estep on the other. Your husbands made their livin' in the coal bidness workin' for us. We make our livin' in the coal bidness sellin' what your men dug out of the mountain. It's a hard, nasty bidness, and I ain't a-tellin' you widders nothin' you don't know firsthand.

"I cannot bring your men back. Ifn I could, I'd spend my last penny a-doin' it. In a minit. B'lieve me, I would. I thank the Lord that Willie Rutherford, Byron Lewis and Mike Decker made it out.

"We know you all are a-hurtin' and' you're mad as a hive of stirred-up hornits. Ya got every right to be.

"We can't make thangs the same for you, but we're a-willin' to make thangs as right as we can.

"Now this wildcat strike is a-hurtin' us. No two ways 'bout it.

"Most of us operators didn't make much money in coal for most of the '50s and '60s. That's when we had to mechanize and cut our work force and labor costs. Had no choice. OPEC boosted coal demand, and prices have more than tripled in the last couple of years. If we can mine coal, we can make a lot of money right now.

"Was there a speed-up? Of course, there was! We all did it. We was tryin' to get as much coal shipped as we could, because we was makin' so much on every ton. We was workin' 'round the clock. Sundays. Holidays. Vacation days. Was we pushin' hard to get the coal? By God, yes, each and every one of us was pushin' your men. And they were getting paid overtime for the extra hours. That time-and-a-half, that double time, was buyin' you new washin' machines, new TVs, thangs you wanted.

"But -- and ladies this is a mighty big 'but' -- this prosperity, these prices, ain't a-gonna last. Coal bidness is seven years of lean for maybe a year or two of fat. The market gets out of whack on the upside, and then prices fall. Regression to the mean is what the fancy-pants economists at the University of Kentucky call it. Prices are going to settle down to historical trend lines sooner or later.

"Let me say it another way. We want black numbers, not red numbers. Black numbers mean we made some money that quarter, or at that mine, or on that shift. Red numbers mean we didn't. Too many reds, and we have to shut down the losing operation if we can't fix it. If we don't try to put up as many black numbers as we can, your men won't have jobs, your Daddies won't have

pensions and you and your kids won't have health care and food. When we have the opportunity to run up a string of big, black numbers, we have to do it as fast as we can, because we know the reds are coming to bite our be-hinds pretty soon.

"America has got a lot of coal. But here is the second 'but.' Coal is a rock that we gotta dig out of the ground. And 'cause it comes out of the ground, it has other stuff in it, like mercury and arsenic and sulfur. There ain't nothin' nice and clean about coal. And that's why I think coal in this country is a gangplank industry. More and more folks are going to object to strip mining. And air-pollution regulations are goin' to increase the cost of burning coal so that our customers will likely switch to cleaner fuels to make electricity. I can't tell you when all that's goin' to happen, but it will.

"So we have to make money while we can. We bein' us operators and you miner families. We have to be reliable to make that gangplank stick out as long as we can before we all fall off. If we can't be a dependable and cheap supply of a 'bad' product, then we operators are gonna go under one by one, and we'll take down every miner who works for us. Not 'cause we want to. Because that's the way it'll work.

"There's one winner so far in this wildcat strike. It ain't me, and it ain't none of you. It's the comp'nies that supply oil and gas, like Exxon, Chevron, Gulf and Amoco. It's also the utilities with nukes. It's the hippies with them windmills. You show everybody that coal can't be counted on, they're gonna shift to somethin' else. Oil and gas are reliable, they'll say; coal's a crapshoot. An' then my customers start importing coal from Canada, Australia and South America where production is reliable and cheap. What you think you gonna do if you runnin' an electric utility that needs a hydrocarbon to burn to make steam to turn a turbine? You gonna go with what's cheap and reliable. If it's just cheap, that ain't good enough. So our American coal is cheap, but it ain't reliable, and it ain't clean. We have to stick out that gangplank as far as we can for as long as we can. That's in the interest of all of us in this room. But mind—all of us are a-walkin' on it together.

"Now us boys have given some thought to how to settle this with you. What do you need?"

Something Is Not Supposed to Happen

Tony Bruno and John Thomas Stuart discuss whacking Becker and Allyson (pages 615-618).

Tony parked his Cadillac in Scrip Way, the alley behind the Frick Building. He walked to the southeast corner of the intersection and waited beside a street-level window. He pulled up the collar of his jacket against the cold. In a few minutes, John Thomas Stuart rolled up Grant Street in an Impala and stopped.

"Tony," he said, through the lowered window. "You'll catch your death of cold out on a night like this."

"Yeah," Tony said, getting in.

"This won't take long. I'll drive while we talk. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I sent Roberta to do Becker, and she never come back. Fucking disappeared."

"Left?"

"Why would she run out on a job? The girl ain't like that."

"She must be dead," John Thomas said.

"Her car turns up in Highland County, Virginia, in the George Washington National Forest, 200 miles from Becker's place."

"Where is this county?"

"Between Charleston and Washington. I asked around. Don't have more than 3,000 people. It's trees an' baaa-baaas an' moo-moos. I figure whoever did her, took her car and dropped it there clean. Probably on their way from Becker's place to wherever they were going."

"Why didn't you send Corelli?"

"I wanted to," Tony said, "but John said he knew Becker from high school or some shit. He refused the contract."

"Do you think Becker killed Roberta?"

"A lawyer kill her? Naw. Something happened we don't know."

"'Something happened.' Bombardo and Frankie figured that out—'something happened.' They have a million dollars in this coal miners' election and several hundred million in buying their bank. 'Something' is not supposed to happen!"

"I can't make Corelli do a job. I've lost three people so far. The girl was pretty good. The other two would not make the varsity."

"We can send someone from New York if need be."

"I'm down to Jerry Multirosa for Becker," Tony said. "And he didn't get that girl reporter done."

"First I've heard of that."

"Art Greiner, a local detective, stepped between Jerry and the job."

John Thomas Stuart said nothing for a few minutes. Tony lit a cigarette and dropped the window one-third of the way.

"Greiner...isn't he one of yours?"

"Sort of," Tony said. "We have an understanding, kinda. He lays off most of our interests, but I don't do certain things. Him and myself go back to elementary school. His girl married me, not him. I think Artie got a soft heart for

this girl reporter, Pickering. He told me I have to think of her like she's a cop. No messin' her up."

"What does she have?"

"Depends on what Greiner gave her," Tony said, "if anything. He has files on me and yinz in New York, too. He didn't say he gave her anything, and I think he didn't. I don't see why he would. But he could. But that would go against our understanding, me and him."

"What understanding?"

"I stay out of heroin, and he lays off the rest of my shit. Marijuana, he don't care about. No whackin' civilians—I guess he cares about that too. That's why he stopped Jerry Multirosa from whackin' her. I promised him we'd lay off the girl. It was that or he was going to come down on me, personal."

"How much do you think she knows?"

"She might be able to connect our cash goin' to both Hunt and Delucci. But that don't mean nothin'. There's no limit on contributions to union elections. She probably has some information on the bank sale to Chickie. I doubt she has anythin' on who done Biggie Stover. She'll connect Lazarro and Hyskra to me, but that's a big so-what? She can't prove nothin'. No one can. Those two ain't gonna rat me out. Stover was the guy who done my two mutts in my opinion."

"Frank gave this work to Bombardo who gave it to you, Tony," John Thomas said. "A coal miner, a lawyer and a girl reporter. You managed to get one of the three and lost three of your own in the process. There's no percentage in doing our business like that."

"I'll get Corelli to do the girl."

"No. Greiner's protecting her now. You have to live up to your arrangement with him. It's worse for us if you don't."

"What about Becker?" Tony asked.

"I've talked to Clippinger about him. If Delucci loses, we don't need to do anything about Becker. I saw in the paper that Becker has resigned from the campaign. If Delucci wins, we will persuade him that he can be president of the American Coal Miner's Union without having Becker around."

"Persuade how?"

"You will show him the error of his ways if he wants to bring Becker back."

"I can do that," Tony said.

"You might want to bring in Chickie and Clip on those discussions with Delucci if he wins. So hold off on Becker for now."

"Okay," Tony said. "I'm sure Delucci knew what Stover was going to do. Maybe he ordered it, maybe not. My bet is Delucci okayed it in advance. That's what I'd do. Our whacks are authorized. My people don't go around freelancin' people off cliffs when they get an itch to see a flyin' car."

"After the election, we'll find out what Delucci did with your two Western Union boys," John Thomas said. "That will give us more leverage on him."

"I don't know for sure that Delucci gave Stover the go ahead," Tony said.

"You don't have to know it, Tony, to make what you don't know work for you. You just have to say it in a way that makes Delucci think you believe it. It doesn't have to be true, it just has to be in front of his nose. What matters is you tell him you believe what you're saying, regardless of whether you do or don't."

"I'm followin'," Tony said. "If he didn't do it, he'll give up the truth. This is good."

"Delucci doesn't want to be in court defending himself against a double murder after his election. He wants to come across as a clean new face without baggage."

"I understand. Shit don't have to be true. Shit is useful whether it's true or not."

"There you go," John Thomas said. "Hold off on Pickering. I have another way into her, which I'll check on tomorrow morning. As for Becker, let's see who wins. Right now, we don't want to call attention to our business. Leave him alone. Got it?"

"Got it."