

UPTOWN, *a novel*

by

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Prologue

“... quite a coup for the family business-- turning Baltic Avenue into Park Place.”

Mid 2000's, New York, NY

“We all ready to do this?” Dwight Dixon rubbed his palms together, already savoring how sweet this day would be. Glorious sunshine spilled over the morning and through the windows of The Dixon Group’s midtown offices. Now it was 10:58A.M., and he planned for this press conference to All the meetings and maneuvering, wooing the participants, dodging interference, glad-handing and greasing the wheel--Bit took him years to get here and this was just the beginning, his initiation into a rarified society. start precisely on time and run according to schedule-- like everything else about the project.

“No. We’re sitting here waiting for lightning to strike.” King Dixon sprawled in his son’s desk chair, overwhelming it with his wide load- a silver-suited walrus at a glass-topped desk.

Everyone laughed, including Dwight, but not with his eyes.

“The lightning struck a few years back.” Grace Kidder patted King’s arm and stood in her red-soled skyscraper pumps. “And brought us all here together.” She flipped her duckling-blond hair behind her shoulders, lips pursed in the insipid wince that passed for a smile. Dwight thought it made her look like a simple bitch, but he knew the only thing simple about her was her business instinct-- simple like a killer shark.

On cue, Dwight’s assistant, Madeline, whose high, wide forehead and over-tweezed brows made her look perpetually stunned, opened the door, and ushered the assembled participants toward the conference room. Dwight lagged behind, offered an arm to his Aunt Forestina.

“Your mother would just be over the moon.” Delicate and frothy, his mother’s sister still maintained a party girl’s good-hearted charm, pretty much the opposite of Dwight’s mother, her battering ram of an older sister, at least the way Dwight remembered her. Whenever he needed a dose of unconditional gushing, his Auntie Tina filled the bill. And since her late husband, Dr. Braithwaite had been King’s original real estate partner, she knew how far they had come and what it had taken to get to this moment. “I spoke to Avery yesterday. . .from Japan. I told her all about this.”

Dwight let that bit of bubbling float over him, patted his aunt’s hand. He and Avery had grown up right down the block--always together, hanging buddies and confidants, more like big brother and little sister than cousins. But there was no time to dwell on the past with his future blossoming before him. He left Forestina next to King, shook hands with his buildings manager, Eric Wallace, who looked awkward in his new blue suit, bought specially for the occasion, and took his place at the front of the parade where Madeline had saved his spot. Chivalry be damned--this was business. No way he was letting Grace enter that room ahead of him.

Through the glass door he checked out the rows of seated journalists-- photographers and video cameras positioned along the wall. The room was SRO, just like he’d imagined in his wet dream. *Let’s see King flap his lips about this.* As an infant, shortly after he had mastered dada, Dwight learned to call his father King, just like everybody else. Harlemites, who knew King as a hustler, a businessman, a landlord, an associate or a rival, still called Dwight, King

Junior— some out of respect, others meant he was a lightweight knock off. Dwight despised the Junior thing. But his father’s old cronies had been useful. Besides, they were dwindling fast—time keeps on slippin’ slippin’ slippin’ into the future...

Dwight leveled his yellow paisley bow tie, walked briskly into the room, up to the front, like a man with no time to kill. Once flanked by his associates, including district representatives, Chamber of Commerce officials and an influential pastor— he had hoped for the mayor, but got the ‘no-go’ on this round—Dwight stepped to the mike.

“Today is a great day in Harlem.” Ironic, since they were not actually in Harlem, but 60 blocks south, squarely midtown.

“Amen.” “Long time comin’.” “Speak, brother.” Exclamations and applause erupted from community members peppered among the journalistic professionals. Dwight’s wife Renee and daughter Dominique beamed in the first row. Renee looked sharp today. He had picked up the simple, but elegant black pin-dot suit, so she looked the part of a Manhattan developer’s wife, not like the weekend anchor on the Boonie-ville News.

“As a life long resident of this historic and proud community, I, along with my family have continually sought opportunities to highlight and serve this precious Manhattan jewel. At it’s roots, I guess you can call this a family affair.” Pinstripe suit tailored to skim his physique—gym-slim and hard without felon bulk— Dwight looked like one of *those* guys, either the power or the broker. The guy who makes things happen, works the room, gets results. He cultivated the image, knew people envied what they thought they saw, and the swag that came with the package. They just didn’t know all the BS that accompanied the position— not that he was giving it up any time soon. He’d been raised to be on top’ his father never let him forget it. What else would he do?

“Today, The Dixon Group, is proud to announce a historic partnership— a Harlem Trust if you will, dedicated to bringing the luster back to an oft neglected and maligned part of this city.” One by one, Dwight highlighted the principals.

From their first meeting, years ago at an Ailey reception in DC, he had courted Grace Kidder, daughter of Vance Kidder, the Kidder, Theismann founder and the clown prince of Manhattan real estate until a stroke sidelined him. Grace was the understudy, waiting in the wings, and word on the street was that she was making a bid to step into daddy’s big shoes, take over the company reins. So Dwight put his time and energy into wooing her to his project, appealing to her ego, ambition. He never brought up that they were on the same journey—to find their own place in the sun and outshine Big Daddys who cast giant shadows. All in all, it had taken less than a year to get Grace onboard—Vance, who was still Chairman of the Board, had been another story. In the beginning, he wanted nothing to do with a project without his name on it—the giant KT logo out front for every one to see. And Grace, who by then had been given her chance at running the company when it became clear to Vance, that while the show must go on, he would never again be ringmaster, was on a was on a singular quest. To replace the “heiress,” which always appeared after her name, with mogul, tycoon, magnate—she didn’t care which.

And this was exactly the project she needed to make that happen. Always daddy’s girl, and a very good student, Grace used many of the skills she had learned at her father’s knee and made him see the wisdom of labeling such a speculative venture— well above the traditional 96th Street DMZ— for a “native.” The prime location, bordering the fourth and final facet of New York’s emerald, Central Park, and available at a significant discount to comparable acreage elsewhere on the island, was worth the gamble. On the up side— they would be the best, set the

standard, and make gigabytes of money to boot. At worst– a failure would not tarnish the Kidder, Theismann brand.

St. John Talliwell– pronounced ‘sin gin,’ like what you may do after too many Hendrick’s martinis– represented Talliwell Hospitality International, the boutique hotelier, whose latest project, T²-Dubai had been dubbed one of the ten most soigne hotels in the world. T²-Haarlem- they preferred the Dutch spelling– would be their first US property. St. John had explained to Dwight– in a stiff-lipped British accent that almost required subtitles– that he favored exotic locales, and that Harlem, however it was spelled, was the only spot left in Manhattan at the crossroads of urbane sophistication and unbridled naturalism. Jolly good.

Bringing on the architect, Cobb Rowan, lent instant prestige to the project. He had been quoted publicly as saying he would never again work in New York, where developers were only interested in who could build the biggest phallus in the smallest space. Rowan, who always dressed in dazzling white, from his oval-rimmed pearly white glasses, to his white crocodile t-strap shoes, required suitable vistas to appreciate his “environments.” But this project had the lure of one of the world’s most famous front lawns. He had to take the bait.

The intros made Dwight positively giddy. For decades King pontificated about how 110th Street should be more than Manhattan’s back alley, the place to stash the undesirables– a gas station, a correctional facility, folks with slim finances, few choices and basic needs. But he became a skilled bottom feeder, sucking up the properties that were no more than headaches, red ink and liabilities for those who didn’t have the patience to wait for a turnaround, or the stomach to start one, in what had been, since the turn of the twentieth century, strictly Brown Town. But even King didn’t foresee two million dollar penthouses rising in the footprint of the buildings he’d acquired. It took Dwight to make this more than Monopoly. He was on the verge of quite a coup for the family business–turning Baltic Avenue into Park Place.

Finally, Dwight moved beside the velvet-sheathed mystery that hovered on a Lucite base beside the podium. “Envisioned as the gateway to a revitalized Uptown, Dixon Plaza will create thousands of much needed construction and permanent jobs and foster the climate of prosperity, dignity and luxury that will ensure Harlem will assume it’s place as the crown at the top of Manhattan.” And with a flourish he revealed the big wow architectural model. Cue, the ohhs, ahhs, camera flashes and applause. It had made him laugh when five year old Dominique told her friends about her daddy’s new dollhouse. Quite the digs for corporate counsel Barbie or hedge fund Ken. For Dwight the complex was already real–actually surreal. Looking at it he envisioned Maybachs and Bentleys pulling into the circular drive, leaving the well-heeled at the hotel and residential towers, or to browse the boutiques that would provide the toniest new commercial address in the City. The south side of the park had Bergdorfs and The Plaza. The revitalized Central Park North would have the 35 story limestone tri-towers of Dixon Plaza, the gleaming limestone exclamation points at the apex of the park.

Press packets included elaborate renderings of Rowan’s post-modern design, “Where a retro deco homage enhances the relaxed glamour of the 21st Century.”– 900,000 square feet of luxury surrounding the sanctuary of an inner court. Terraced setbacks would maximize exposure to the priceless work of human-engineered natural art– the dazzling park view. And there was the 1.3 billion dollar budget–huge for any developer, record breaking for an African American. Oh yeah, Dwight liked to be on top.

There was no way to get through the program without including his father, so after the unveiling, Dwight brought King to the podium.. For as much of a loud mouth as he was in

private, King was not much for public speaking. Or did he just not like to be quoted? In any case he was content to sign the ceremonial 100 year first lease for commercial space– the new home of The Dixon Group.

Dwight had barely finished the last syllable of, “Now we’d be happy to take your questions,” when Jasper Christmas lobbed the first one in his direction.

“Do you have a comment on Pastor Phillip Ewing’s statement that. . .” Christmas flipped through his notes. “And I quote. ‘Dixon Plaza is not about building up. It’s about tearing down. This is not renewal. It’s removal.’” Pen poised, he waited for the answer.

When Dwight opened the floor for questions he was planning to call on The Journal. His perfect plan for the day did not include answering a question from Jasper Christmas of the New York Spectator, but he had fast lips and a loud voice.

Dwight took a deep breath, felt for his, “you can pass go,” card, because Pastor Phil was a pro. He’d been at the table for a long time and he usually played with a full deck, and a few hidden up his sleeve. Dwight glanced at Grace, who gave him the, “AThis is your territory. You handle it,” look. He gripped the podium. “With all due respect, I have not spoken with Pastor Ewing about this project, or its impact on the community. . .”

Jasper shot back, “The pastor is right downstairs. I’m sure we can get a clarification.”

Whatever was in Dwight’s stomach curdled. He made his way to the window, but not before his father who growled, “Thought you had sense enough to take care of this.”

A hundred or so demonstrators circled in front of the building carrying signs that read, “Our Homes Are Not For Sale,” and “Might Don’t Make Right.” Pastor Phil, wearing his signature denim shirt and clerical collar, and shoulder sweeping dreadlocks chanted into a bull horn. Above the sudden silence in the room the voices rose up from the street. “We shall not, we shall not be moved. We shall not, we shall not be moved. . .”

Not the theme song Dwight anticipated. *What kind of fresh hell is this?*

Chapter 1

“Time costs nothing if it’s not your money.”

Five years later,
New York, NY

“I have bent over backwards ‘til my head touches my ass, Gordon.” Dwight sat forward and the old wooden chair squeaked, announcing his movement.

“Look, I’m giving it to you straight. Without the additional public space I can guarantee Dixon Plaza won’t pass the Council.” Chester Gordon sat back, his foot propped on the open bottom drawer of the desk in the stuffed cubbyhole of an office. His earnest likeness watched over the meeting from the campaign poster taped to the wall. Pictures of his smiling twins, Chester IV and Rachel looked on from the desk.

“That’s not the guarantee I’m looking for.” It was always strange for Dwight to be sitting on the petitioners side of this desk. It was the same one he’d worked at years ago, during the public service portion of his career, his time on the Council. He’d converted the former liquor store in one of his father’s buildings into his office. “There’s 843 acres of public space across the damn street.”

“Bottom line, either you take ten stories off each tower. . .”

“Another ten stories.” Early in the process the buildings had shrunk to 25 stories, a compromise to make their scale more in keeping with the surroundings.

“Or we need more areas available to the public.”

“And what will that guarantee me? Because at this point I need some assurances.” The hyperbole of that bright morning of the press conference had smacked up against the reality of getting a project off the ground in a city where interests collide and the balance is always in flux. And while Dixon Plaza hadn’t exactly descended into fresh hell, the project had been detained in purgatory, punctuated with hellish episodes. The original timeline called for the buildings to be nearing completion, and although he’d been living, breathing and dreaming DP-CPN they still didn’t have shovels in the ground.

Chester paused, choosing his words deliberately. “I can, with a high degree of probability, say that if you make these adjustments, we should have the votes to get you through.”

Dwight felt like he’d spent the last five years testifying before somebody’s committee, awaiting the results of impact studies, making concessions, modifications, and reassessments. The Economic Development Council, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Budget Office, the Citizens Advisory Committee, the Offices of the Mayor, the Governor, the Council President, the State Legislature— all had to be stroked and massaged, sometimes simultaneously in different directions. Dwight stood up. “I’m sure you understand how important this is to the continued viability of the project and the continued revitalization of the district.” That was code for get it the hell done.

“You know I’ve been a consistent champion of your efforts.”

Particularly after Dwight had had made numerous campaign contributions and offered to create a scholarship to Dominique’s school that would facilitate outreach and help create a more “diverse” student body, and had it awarded to the son of one of Chester’s aides. Dwight didn’t have to say, ‘You owe me.’ He was sure Chester was aware of that.

“*Anything on fire.*” Dwight barked at his ever-present Bluetooth earpiece, headed out of the office and into the waiting car. The next meeting was at his office with his architect, and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

“*Your wife called.*”

“*Call her back. Tell her to have my aunt come for dinner tonight.*” Figured he may as well get this over with.

Whether it was the Council or the Community Board, each meeting with Dixon Plaza business on the agenda had brought out a loose coalition of foot stomping, noise making, banner waving, activists, whose stated mission was to save Harlem. That always made Dwight want to laugh and ask them from what, each other? They had the nerve to try to dictate how the Dixon Group could, should and would use their property, acquired at fire sale prices in the 60’s, 70’s and bad old 80’s, when crack and AIDS swept through the neighborhood out of control, and falling asleep to the pop of gunfire was as routine as the Tonight Show. Their raucous indignation at these meeting always reminded him of when he was nine, and he’d spent the day with King, threatening deadbeat tenants, finding local winos for day labor, backslapping political flunkies—a usual day in the neighborhood. King always went armed with a roll of small bills and a stubby 22. Dwight hated those dismal buildings with graffiti tagged hallways that smelled like beer-piss, roach powder and fish fried in old grease.

That evening they showered, and took the bus down Broadway to Lincoln Center. With lights aglow, and elegant patrons milling about the Philharmonic, The Met, and the N.Y. State Theater, Dwight thought it was magical— it was still one of his favorite vistas in the City. King bought him a lemonade, sat him by the dancing fountain, and with all the reverence of a Bible story proceeded to tell him how Robert Moses, the man who reshaped New York City, led the Rockefellers and other moneyed men of influence, to bulldoze acres of loathsome, teeming San Juan Hill tenements, and build the lustrous shrine of the arts. When Dwight asked what happened to all the people who lived there, King cackled. “Every rat can find another hole.” Only now the “rats” had pro bono counsel and advocacy groups.

But there was also a new contingent of homeowners who knew that aside from 40 blocks or so, the brownstones that went for two million on West 75th Street were the same as the ones on 123 Street for \$200,000. Even with a half million in renovation they were way ahead of the game. These concerned citizens were firmly and vocally interested in further renewal in the neighborhood.

And Dwight walked a high-wire between camps, trying not to look down. Trying to keep Grace and the financing in place. The hotel was the first casualty. After two years of delays and the scale back in size, St. John Talliwell pulled out, said Dixon Plaza had missed the cutting edge of the trend. Shortly thereafter, Talliwell Hospitality International announced T² Williamsburgh— they preferred the original English spelling— in the latest Brooklyn hipster enclave. To be built as part of the redevelopment of an historic sugar plant, the project boasted a river front address and sweeping views of lower Manhattan and the East River bridges, in what they labeled the bohemian vitality of a community that blended the Old World German, Polish, Hasidic and Italian communities with Neuyorican intensity and New Millineum artistic expression. To Dwight it sounded more like a colossal load of crap than it did when the hotelier was on their team.

After St. John’s departure, Grace had done her best to rip Dwight a new one. Said he had to get his people in line. If he didn’t need her connections, at least this first time, he’d have had a whole lot more to say. But he took one for the team. The delays reinforced his determination to bring the project to fruition.

Dwight strode into the office, his office, nodded at a few, “Hi Mr. Dixon’s.” King didn’t bother to keep an office their anymore. He’d relinquished day to day duties, preferred to do his sideline quarterbacking from the comfort of home. Dwight past the Dixon Plaza model, let his eyes linger. Seeing it was his booster shot, gave him strength to keep up the fight, even thought it had been taken down a few pegs from it’s to-scale glory. Sometimes, when he needed more, he’d take the silver ceremonial scissors from the top shelf of the closet in his office. All they needed was the opening date engraved on the blade and he’d imagine how outstanding it was going to be to cut that red ribbon on opening day. But that wasn’t now.

“Need to talk to you, Mr. Dixon.” Eric Wallace, clipboard under his arm, appeared at Dwight’s side.

“Is it on fire?” Eric managed the physical maintenance of The Dixon Group holdings. The bolts and screws and leaking roofs of the buildings.

“No, but it’s smoking.” Eric was two thirds torso and one third leg so even though he was slim his shirttails were usually in some stage of escaping his pants. His blue Docker’s were cinched with a tooled leather belt with a silver longhorn buckle.

“I’ve got an appointment, catch me up after.”

He drummed his fingers on Madeline's desk on the way by.

"Mr Rowan is waiting for you."

Back to reality. When Chester gave Dwight news of the necessary changes, his architect was among the first people Dwight wanted to get in gear.

"This . . . this . . . is, is, is, is, is, is, is, is...It is a fiasco." Cobb Rowan stood with such force he tipped the slim leather and steel chair. It thunked on the rug. "This. . .this is not even the same project. These buildings will be nothing but. . . stumps." In his white turtleneck and trousers, face glowing crimson, he paced Dwight's office, looking like a giant match, ready for striking, although he was actually already inflamed. Cobb's assistant, dressed noir to Cobb's blanc, sat on the sofa, taking notes on a mini laptop.

"Cobb, I assure you. . ."

"You can assure me of nothing."

He had a point, but Dwight still had a tremendous advantage, although he'd never intended to use it. He planted his hands firmly on his desk, as much to appear calm as to keep from wrapping them around Rowan's neck. "We have access to additional property. . ."

"Where will you get it? From the moon?"

"We are likely to be able to acquire an additional 10,000 square feet from an adjacent property on 111th Street. . ."

"Likely, possibly, maybe. . . it is all Swiss cheese."

"Fortunately, the building belongs to a relative." Or unfortunately. His Aunt Forestina inherited it when her husband died, owned it jointly with her daughter, Avery. It was one of the first King and Doc B had acquired, back when they were partners. "That means we can accommodate the added public space and maintain the integrity and intent of your original design." Dwight took a breath, prepared for some ego stroking, with extra cheese. "These buildings will be iconic. No one can conceptualize space in the innovative way you do. . ."

"Do not patronize me. This will take a complete re-imagination. I'm sick of builders patting me on the head. 'Now go work your miracle,' as if I can move the pieces around like. . . like chessmen."

But you will, and we'll be suitably impressed. And you'll keep sending me the damn bill. Millions of dollars worth and they weren't done yet. Dwight shot the architect one of his "Lean on Me," looks. "I'd like to think that after this many years in the trenches, you know me Cobb. And you know that Dixon Group has nothing but the highest regard. . ."

"Please. . ." Cobb waved away Dwight's declaration. "I'm sick of you builders smearing my plans in excrement." He headed toward the door, his assistant already in front, hand on the knob. "I don't know what I'm going to do about this."

Annoy the piss out of me, make the damn changes, and cash the shitty checks. Rowan would bemoan the artistic travesty a while longer, then revise the blueprints and pronounce it 'a staggering synthesis of vertical habitability and horizontal visibility,' or some other crazy dictum he was sure Rowan coined while admiring himself in the mirror. Dwight wondered if the big name was worth the aggravation, but it wasn't the first time he'd found first class looked better from the outside than it felt on the inside.

Before he could call her, Madeline walked in. "Your favorite, Jasper Christmas has called three times."

Dwight scowled. "Give him the PR firm. That's what we pay them for." Dwight resented his questioning, the way it seemed to imply wrong-doing. From that first press

conference he had the feeling Jasper Christmas was looking for the ‘gotcha’. A scoop to raise his profile at Dwight’s expense.

“He says he’d like your perspective.” Madeline laid the message on his desk, gave him the been there, take your medicine eye. “It’s always worse when you don’t call them back. You hate it when the article says, “Dixon Group president Dwight Dixon declined. . .”

“I’ll get to him when I’m ready. Everything he needs to know is a matter of public record.”

Madeline handed him a baseball cap and worked to keep her lips from poking out. “Sean is waiting downstairs. Will you be back?”

“Depends. I’ll check in.”

“Got a minute.” Eric popped his head in the door.

“Thirty seconds.” Dwight pulled his bow tie loose, unbuttoned the neck of his shirt.

“It’s the furnace at 547 again.”

“Can it be patched?” Dwight got up.

“Yeah, but it’s older than my granddaddy, converted from coal. We’re at the point of diminishing returns. I’ve done some research on replacements. Long term the increased fuel efficiency will save. . .”

“Let’s deal with short term for now.” Dwight grabbed his cap, came from around the desk. “If you can keep it going let’s do that. Anything else.”

“I’m heading over to 24 to look at the elevator.”

“Good man.” Dwight popped his earpiece in.

Each address came with an inventory of broke down, patched and reconditioned fixtures and utilities. Some of the buildings were more than 100 years old. They don’t make ‘em like that any more— often for a reason. Having to provide additional affordable housing in order to proceed with their luxury conversion had not been on their list of projected expenses, but to move on with Dixon Plaza it had to be done. And the money had to come from somewhere. Dwight arranged loans against some of their other properties, which squeezed their cash flow, in the short term. But his sights were set on the blue horizon. No pain, no gain. He would make it work. He was willing to make sacrifices to get there. And their tenants would have to as well.

Dwight headed around the corner to the usual pick-up spot, in the “No Standing Anytime” zone, right behind the stinky souvlaki lunch truck. It was a good afternoon to talk to some kids, smile for a few photos. He ducked into the beat up Crown Vic, rolled down the window. It felt like Sean Booker had documented every hand shake and back slap of Dwight’s last 15 years, but a good photo op was worth all the words nobody was going to read anyhow. “When you gonna wash this tub of shit.” Dwight massaged his cap brim, shaping it.

“Urban camouflage.” Maps, parking tickets, French fry containers and coffee cups littered the back seat. “Gets me where I want to go, under the radar.” Sean’s scraggly beard, baggy jeans and double XXL RocaWear t-shirt complimented the decor. But his camera bag and photo vest were always organized. He’d been a kid, stocking shelves at C-Town when Dwight first started seeing him hustling photos at rallies, community meetings, block parties— wherever people gathered and wanted to document the occasion. Dwight threw him a few bones, found out he delivered on time and the pictures were good, so he’d been calling ever since.

“Oh come on!” Dwight reached across and mashed the car horn at the mini van waiting to make a left. “You drive like an old man.”

“You fly, you die. Chill. We’ll be on time.”

To keep from losing his mind in stalled traffic, Dwight pulled out his phone. Checked some email— yes, Dixon Group would buy a table for the Conservancy benefit. That would make Renee happy. More shopping, even though it always looked like she bought the same gown— modest, appropriate, boring. He answered texts from Madeline— *Christmas again.*

Dwight didn't see Dancer and Blitzen— *Tell him later.*

— *Tee Time Sat 10AM*

— *AOK. Tell Renee.*

She had left him a voice mail too, probably about dinner, but he didn't have the head for it now. Vance Kidder had put together this foursome at the last minute. Even before his stroke he was the worst golfer to ever pick up a Big Bertha, but the outings seemed to do him good. Dwight wasn't fond of the sport— too slow. But he'd developed a passable game for the socializing and when the old boy called, Dwight went. You never knew who would round out the party. Last time it was a recently retired pro quarterback, who spent 18 holes wondering if maybe he really had another season in him. And Dwight had developed a budding acquaintanceship with the hedge fund director in the group. He'd have to make apologies to Dominique for missing the matinee they had planned as a family outing. Renee wouldn't be thrilled either. *She'll get over it.*

“So when is the other building coming down?” Sean maneuvered around a double parked truck, stopped as the light turned yellow.

“You could have taken that.” Dwight huffed, settled back in his seat. “It would be dust tomorrow if I could arrange it.” Two years ago they'd started demolition. It was one of Dwight's shining moments. A rendering of the completed project graced the sidewalk shed surrounding the site. King was quiet, strangely melancholy that morning watching his building come down, floor by floor, but Dwight was effervescent. He'd stood there in his yellow construction helmet, and each blow to the facade, each dump truck full of rubble felt like a victory. They had completed one tear down before they were hit with an injunction. Dwight had been scrambling ever since.

“It's gonna look kinda strange. . . skyscrapers on 110th Street. Rich people living in 'em.”

“Doesn't look strange on Central Park South. Why should it on Central Park North?”

Sean shrugged. “It's never been like that.”

“Everything changes. You'll forget the way it was so fast you'll think it was a dream.”

The air conditioned coaches were already parked out front when Dwight and Sean arrived. Hudson Common, the two buildings The Dixon Group had rehabbed in the West 120's— both bought as boarded up shells at City auction— sat back to back with a shared play area— basketball court, swings, slides, benches. It was a private, secure park— not Central Park, but Dwight felt it was an admirable consolation prize, a more than adequate warehouse for the people he needed to displace.

After a great deal of posturing and negotiations, he was able to get Pastor Phil to see it that way too, and stop the demonstrations, which had escalated and moved to include the Kidder, Theismann headquarters. That made for very unfortunate footage on the local news— babies in strollers with protest signs on top, Dwight's brusque, “No comment.” Jasper Christmas had done a series of interviews with long-time tenants, who had no idea where they would go if they had to move. That's when Dwight knew it was time to change strategy.

Unlike other developers who promised affordable housing, The Dixon Group had actually delivered. The renovated properties had been occupied for two years. King told him he

was a jackass, but Dwight had a heart, or at least recognized a PR advantage in showing some, like by sponsoring two bus loads of kids to go up to the Bronx for a ball game this afternoon.

“How’s it goin’ Mr. D?” The uniformed security guard shook Dwight’s hand, ushered them inside.

“How they hangin’, Buster?” Dwight clapped him on the back. A short, dark man with biceps like cannonballs, Buster had been a tenant in one of the CPN buildings. When the renovation was complete, he was one of the first to move in. It was a strategy Dwight learned from King. If you employ your tenants, you know they can pay the rent. It also gives you extra eyes and ears on the place, so you know what’s really going on.

“Hangin’ high. Keepin’ it that way.”

Laughter and squeals came from the community room and the playground. During the school year the Hope House Foundation— a not-for-profit generously funded by The Dixon Group through the Dixon Plaza financing, and overseen by Pastor Phil— ran an after-school, homework help center, and a day camp in the summer.

“Oh, Mr D,” Buster called after him. “Crawford said he wants to talk to you. Think he’s in the basement.”

Dwight left Sean setting up, grabbed the elevator down, found his chief superintendent bagging recyclables in the compactor room.

“Just the man I want to see.” Crawford wiped his hands on the protruding belly of his coveralls.

Dwight hoped it was quick. The aroma of fermenting garbage laced the air and it was hard to have a conversation while holding his breath.

“Upper cabinets in another couple of units pulled away from the wall.”

“You tell them not to do chin ups from the handles?” Dwight had heard it all— a three foot alligator in the bathtub, a sink stained purple after being used to stomp grapes for homemade wine, pipes that burst when a tenant snuck off in the middle of the night and left the windows wide open on a twelve degree night. At this point, nothing surprised him.

“Not this time. When I took a look, seemed like they weren’t installed to the studs.”

“You talk to Eric?” Dwight wanted to bring this to a conclusion.

“Yep. And I got ‘em secure. Reinforced ‘em with mollies. Better than new.”

“That’s why you are the man, Crawford.” Dwight skipped the handshake, bound up the stairs to get away from the smell. It lingered in his nostrils.

Upstairs Dwight took off his suit jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and put on his baseball cap.

Counselors and parent chaperons— including a larger than usual number of men for a trip in the middle of the day— had rounded up the young people, got them outside to the buses.

“Fine day for some baseball, Brother Dixon.” Pastor Phil, whose locs now extended half way down his back with a carefully hidden bald spot in the middle, clasped Dwight in a handshake.

Dwight could skip the brother bit. There had not been fellowshipping when they sat across a table from each other at Phil’s church and worked out how they would each get what they wanted. “I can make your life miserable, and make you personally look like an uncaring, money grubbing son of Satan for as long as you want. And don’t think your folks downtown won’t ditch you if it gets too hot.” The housing development, the center and an anonymous donation to the church’s building fund brought about the kumbaya moment.

But the afternoon was meant for fun and sport so the builder and the preacher stood side by side amid a sea of bright shining faces and blue and gold Project Hope T-shirts— Harlem Opportunity to Pursue Excellence— and smiled for Sean’s camera. The pictures would make the Hudson Common Hope House newsletter, distributed among the tenants— both here and back in the old block, so they’d know how their former neighbors were doing. There was a website too, for those on the techno-edge and for The Dixon Group’s PR agency to distribute as necessary, to highlight their corporate caring.

With the buses off to the game, Dwight tossed his cap in Sean’s back seat. “Can you drop me at 34th Street? Need to pick up something for the wife.”

“How is Mrs. Dixon?”

Dwight gave his standard answer “Great and getting better. I’ll tell her you asked.”

At the corner of Seventh Avenue Dwight got out by the world’s largest department store, waved as he headed through the revolving doors. He stood inside by the retro pay phones, called Madeline on his cell. “*Anything on fire?*”

“*No smoke.*”

“I’m going to do a little shopping for the Mrs. See you in the morning.”

Dwight headed through mens, fingered a few bow ties— nothing special, but this wasn’t his regular stomping ground. He wandered into the perfume mezzanine, picked up a bottle of his favorite fragrance— a little musk, a little citrus, funky and fresh. Petite shopping bag in hand he made another call. “I’ll be on the 4:28. Pick me up at the airport. Terminal A.”

Dwight left the store, made his way across the street to Penn Station, and bought a New Jersey Transit ticket. He didn’t bother sitting on the train, stood by the doors, drumming his fingers, staring at the marsh grass in the Meadowlands. *It’s all coming together.* He’d lived with this project longer than he’d lived with his child. When he closed his eyes at night he saw those towers, gleaming hot in the afternoon sun. He just had to raise them up.

At the Newark Airport stop he bolted, took the monorail to the terminal. Not long after he walked outside a gray Suburban stopped. He hopped in. They took off.

“A present, you shouldn’t have?” Mitch Branigan’s meaty hands made the steering wheel look like a toy. The sleeves of his blue oxford cloth shirt were rolled to below the elbow revealing sun-baked, furry arms.

“Yeah. Let me spray some behind your ears.” Dwight dropped the flowery bag on the floor. Dun-Right Construction had handled many projects for The Dixon Group, including Hudson Common. Dwight and Mitch had developed a working understanding. Dwight told him what he wanted. Mitch found a way to make it happen, on time and on budget. “Change of plan. Looks like DP is about to expand. For part of the structure we’re going through to 111th Street”

Mitch maneuvered past airport shuttle buses, triple-parked cars, and confused travelers cruising for the right door for Air Antarctica or wherever they were going. “Halle-frickin’-lujah. Where’d you get the property? Pull it outta your ass?”

“Exactly. I told you my shit was golden.” In Manhattan that was always the multi-million dollar question. If you wanted it bad enough, it was likely to cost you a fortune. But once again, King’s omnivorous appetite for real estate would put them in good stead. Dwight just wished he’d kept 111th Street, but it was all going to work out. It had to.

Mitch headed along an access road, pulled into the post office parking lot.

“So what’s with the cloak and dagger bit.” Mitch had called that morning, said he needed to talk— out of the office. Not that Dwight minded. He wasn’t big on Dun-Right’s headquarters, down a desolate road, somewhere below the Pulaski Skyway.

Mitch reached over, turned on the radio— bottom of the 2nd play-by-play.

“This is a heads-up. . . probably nothing, but there could be problems with some of the drywall that went up at Hudson Common.” The blue light in his ear blinked, keeping time.

“What the hell kind of problems?” Dwight had enough of those. He was interested in solutions.

Mitch slid his hands over his thicket of black hair, cupped them behind his head.

“Some of the product might be defective.”

“Defective how? We got some loose uppers in a couple of kitchens. That have anything to do with it?” He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, pushed to ignore the call.

Mitch dropped his hands to the steering wheel. “Naw. The cabinets are in the margin of error. That drywall came from China though. They’re saying it might leach some chemicals, cause a bad smell. I don’t really see. . .”

“Might cause?” Hudson Common was already a check mark on his ‘to-do’ list. Dwight wasn’t interested in a do-over. “How much of it did you use? Are we talking ten percent? Fifty percent?”

Mitch shrugged. “Can’t tell you.”

Dwight reached out, pressed his hands against the dashboard. “You put defective drywall in my buildings and you can’t tell me how much?”

“You didn’t ask me all that when you liked the bid.”

Dwight looked straight ahead at the woman walking behind her two kids who made a game of pushing a shopping cart with a box the size of a big screen TV toward the building.

“What are we supposed to do?”

“You could replace it.”

“You *might* have used *some* and I’m supposed to replace all the damn drywall in two buildings?” And relocate the tenants. And put up with the fallout. And risk more delays on Dixon Plaza. And keep shelling out cash. Time costs nothing if it’s not your money, but Dixon Group had been footing the bill for the delays. “Next option.”

“Wait. Could be nothing.”

They were silent through the bases loaded walk that brought in a run.

“I’m going with Plan B.” Dwight hadn’t heard anything about bad smells and he wasn’t going looking for a solution in search of a problem.

“Look. Just be ready to start up the rest of the 110th Street demo as soon as we get the Council approval. And as soon as we have title to 111th, I need you to move on it. Before another damn injunction hits my desk.”

They were back at the terminal by the top of the 4th inning, two outs. Dwight hopped out.

“Don’t forget your bag.” Mitch held it with two fingertips, pinkie in the air.

Dwight snatched it. “Funny.” He’d have tossed the bag and put the box in his pocket, but he knew Renee liked all the fluff-stuff. It would earn him some points, or at least keep the status quo. He checked the missed called— Renee, like he thought. Somehow her vibrations felt different, higher pitched, more annoying. He figured she had some words for him about bailing on their family theater outing. It could wait till he got home. Dwight’s personal life interrupted

his workflow, so whenever possible he kept a firewall between them. In the end, it was to their benefit to leave him alone. He was taking care of his family.

Before calling home, he voiced dialed another number while he walked back to the train. “Any cancellations tonight?” Dwight was hoping to make use of his free time. “OK, may I have seven forty five tomorrow morning? . . .No. I won’t be late. . . Thank you.”