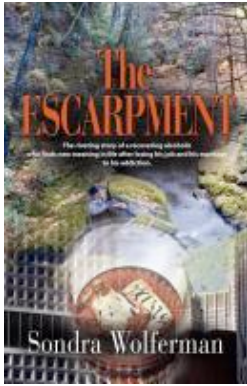




The ESCARPMENT

The riveting story of a recovering alcoholic
who finds new meaning in life after losing his job and his marriage
to his addiction.

Sondra Wolferman



A recovering alcoholic finds new meaning in life after losing his job and his marriage to his addiction.

The Escarpment

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First Edition

Dedication

For Elijah

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

The trail departed from a rusting steel gate and climbed on an old skid road through a forest of red oak, sugar maple and American beech. Half a mile from the start, the woods road curved west to ascend a shallow draw between two spurs, with the dark line of a ridge visible through a stand of silver birch to the right and a sun-washed slope to the left. Where the road narrowed at the head of the draw, dense stands of balsam fir and tamarack crowded the trail, turning the wide logging road into a rough path that pitched sharply upward to begin a steep climb on switchbacks up the sheer eastern face of the Pocono Escarpment. Jake Demornay, Attorney-at-Law, wiped the sweat from his face and breathed deeply of the musk-scented air before scrambling up the last few meters to the height of land at the top of the escarpment. His footfalls grew silent as the crunch of fallen leaves underfoot gave way to a soft bed of pine needles cushioning the rocky surface of the trail. Below him, the foothills blazed in a mantle of yellow-gold and crimson foliage. Above him, the soaring trunks of white pine, larch, and Atlantic cedars towered over a matted understory of mountain laurel and rhododendron, forming an impenetrable barrier on either side of the trail. Though he couldn't have been more than two miles from the trailhead, Jake felt worlds away from the Treatment Center down below where only last week he had earned the privilege to roam the grounds freely after seven months of crushing supervision and surveillance.

Since then he made it his habit to rise every morning at dawn and circle the grounds of what had once been the country estate of a wealthy industrialist and was now the property of the *Fern Ridge Center for the Treatment of Substance Abuse*. His perambulations on this particular morning had led him to the corroded gate at the edge of the Fern Ridge property where it bordered a vast expanse

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of public land managed by the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Although Fern Ridge patients were not supposed to venture beyond the property line, Jake, whose impulsive nature was partly to blame for his irresponsible behavior with regard to alcohol (or so he was told by his substance abuse counselors) couldn't resist the temptation to detour around the gate, beyond which lay the forested slope, the flaming foliage, and the woods road that brought him here, to the summit of a hill known locally as Twelve Pine Ridge.

Jake shed his borrowed nylon daypack and dropped onto a fallen log by the side of the trail to rest amid a silence interrupted only by the chatter of small creatures fattening themselves on the acorns and tree nuts that fell to the ground with a patter like raindrops at the beginning of a thunderstorm. The sky was clear, although a thin haze visible only when the autumnal rays slanted at a low angle through the trees, softened the light. Spent leaves of butterscotch, burnt orange and merlot drifted lazily downward.

Normally Jake would be back at the Center in time for breakfast, which reminded him---he had a banana and a day-old muffin in his rucksack. He had a group therapy session scheduled for four o'clock in the afternoon, but he was free until then and, as long as he showed up for the therapy session it was unlikely anybody would question his whereabouts, or that he would be missed at all. *Enjoy it while it lasts*, he reasoned, for winter came early to these parts and, having arrived at Fern Ridge seven months earlier in the middle of a deep freeze like none he had ever experienced before, Jake knew that once it set in, winter would not lose its grip on this region for many months to come.

He ate his simple breakfast, then traveled on, feeling the stretch in atrophied limbs as he made his way on the decaying road under a fragrant canopy of evergreens that curved along the edge of the escarpment. In a few hundred yards the path veered in a northwesterly direction onto a windswept plain where a multitude

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of pitch pines, stunted by the poor soil and twisted into gnarled shapes by fierce winter winds, protruded from a dense undergrowth of scrub oak, sweet fern, and high bush blueberry. The rutted surface of the skid road---long since abandoned by the logging industry that had clear cut these hills at the turn of the century---was being swallowed up by an encroaching vegetation that discouraged all but the most determined hikers.

Jake had left his room that morning with the intention of walking his customary loop around the manicured grounds of the Treatment Center---which normally took him about forty-five minutes at a leisurely pace---with nothing but his wallet (because a lifetime of conditioning made him feel naked and vulnerable without *that*), his wristwatch, and a sheer nylon windbreaker he carried in a drawstring book bag he'd fished out of the rehab center's lost and found. With so little to carry, he enjoyed a freedom of movement and a lightness of being he hadn't experienced in years. No briefcase bulging with legal documents dangling from the end of his wrist. No twenty-pound laptop in a specially designed backpack weighing down his shoulders. No cellular phone, calculator, sunglasses or loose change to worry about losing on the subway or the back seat of a taxicab.

Despite his pleasure in the lack of encumbrance, Jake was well aware without a map or a compass, without food, water, bug repellent, first aid kit or, at a minimum a Swiss Army Knife, he was ill-equipped for a long hike into unfamiliar territory, and so, given his lack of preparation, he resolved to turn around and head back down the mountain shortly. Having spotted a structure---an observation tower of some sort, possibly for hunters or birdwatchers---protruding from the brush about a half mile or so ahead on the south side of the trail, he decided to hike to that point and check out the feature before turning back.

The sun was high in the sky, or at least as high as it would get this time of year, when he reached the wooden edifice which

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appeared to be the truncated remains of an old fire tower, about thirty feet high, with latticed sides and a rickety ladder up one side leading to a viewing platform at the top. Finding it the perfect spot to take a break before heading back, Jake launched himself up the ladder to the sun-warmed platform, where he sat cross-legged on the weathered slats enjoying the view over dwarf pines and blueberry fields to the ridges and valleys that undulated in waves across the Pocono plateau.

Notwithstanding the shortness of breath one would expect after a long period of inactivity, he was infused with a sense of well-being. He was going for longer and longer periods without craving, or even thinking about, the substance of his addiction. His recovery was progressing so well in fact that a tentative release date had been set for the end of next month, and he was hoping to spend his first 'dry' Thanksgiving in over a decade at home with his wife in Forest Hills.

Still fresh in his mind was the morning seven months earlier when he stumbled out of the Detox Unit, dazed and shrunken after seven days without sleep, into the laser-sharp glare of the late February sun glinting off a fresh layer of Pocono snow. He'd been warned about the painful awakening of dormant senses after more than a decade---a third of his lifetime!---in a state of numbness, but he was unprepared for the force of the stimuli that greeted him. The smell of wood smoke in the air, normally a pleasing aroma, stung his nostrils, and the innocuous sound of a car engine starting in a nearby parking lot exploded in his head like shrapnel. The staff had given him a pair of dark glasses, but no ear plugs, and the blast of sound was so painful it sent him reeling backward into the gloom of the wooden bungalow that had once been a guest house on the landowner's estate, and more recently a hunting lodge, before it was pressed into service as the detox unit of the Fern Ridge Treatment Center, with its comforting smells of vomit and Pine-Sol.

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Gazing at the hills in the distance, his thoughts wandered back in time to the dizzying descent that had brought him to this place.

Morty Rifkin, head of the mid-sized Manhattan law firm where Jake was employed for the last ten years, called him into his cigar-smelling office high above one of the city's busiest intersections---diagonally across from the Waldorf-Astoria on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue---and informed him bluntly, "I'm taking you off the Molina case."

"*What?*" Jake was working on a routine partition-of-property case involving the heirs of a recently deceased shopping mall developer. "I've been busting my hump until eleven o'clock every night this past month over that file. I've already prepared my Summons and Complaint. What's the problem?"

"Frankly, Jacob, I've been getting complaints from some of our clients about your performance lately..."

Jake kept his trembling hands under control by fiddling with his wedding ring. "What kind of complaints?" he asked ingenuously.

"Let's see..." Rifkin shuffled through some papers on his desk. "Not returning phone calls. Misplaced files. Sarcastic remarks. Showing up late for court appearances with...alcohol on your breath..."

Jake never left home without pockets full of breath spray, and he had convinced himself those little bursts of eucalyptus and wintergreen masked all traces of the odor on his breath. "Aw, come on, Morty," he said, rolling his eyes. "So I had a couple of martinis at lunch while schmoozing up a client. We all do it...it's part of the job. You know that."

Rifkin, a teetotaler, ignored the insinuation. He cleared his throat and looked down at his interlaced fingers resting on the oaken desk in front of him, before continuing. "I know you're going through a rough time right now..." he said. "Your wife

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expecting, and all that..." He cleared his throat again, which was starting to get annoying, "That's why I'm going to assign you---on a temporary basis---to some landlord-tenant cases for the time being."

Jake felt his face grow hot. It was the ultimate humiliation. Housing Court was for rookies and retirees, not seasoned lawyers like himself who had been with the same firm for a decade and handled some of their toughest cases. Nonetheless he tried to maintain his composure. "Come on now, Morty..." he fawned. "There's no need for anything like that. We've worked together for ten years. I can explain about the missing files..."

The telephone buzzed on Rifkin's desk and the chief raised his hand to silence Jake as he pushed the answer button and barked into the receiver. "I'm in conference right now... What is it...? Oh. Okay. Tell him I'll be right with him." Rifkin hung up the phone and stood up from his desk to signal the interview with Jake was over. "We'll talk again in a few months...to reassess the situation," he said. "Meanwhile you can pick up some of the housing court files you'll be needing from Miss Torres on your way out."

Jake fumed inwardly as he sauntered out of the office. Sober, he was a mild-mannered man who had spent the better part of his youth fulfilling the hopes of working-class parents desperate to having an 'educated professional' in the family. An introspective, bookish kid with fantasies of becoming an entomologist, Jake grew up instead to become a business attorney, sometimes representing the very real estate moguls who bulldozed the fields and forests where he had roamed as a boy on the fringes of the city hunting beetles and moths for his collection.

Lacking the aggressiveness required of a successful attorney, he turned to alcohol to embolden himself. After a few clandestine sips from the stashes of 'mineral water' he kept in the back of a locked file cabinet, in his briefcase, or behind the removable screen of an air vent in the men's room, he emerged the fast-talking

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shyster of his parents' dreams. With a couple of drinks under his belt he stood taller, talked louder, walked faster, flirted and joked with the women at work, especially an intern named Vanessa who wore pencil skirts with a kick pleat in the back and seamed stockings.

But one sip too many and his confidence turned to arrogance, his innocent flirting into harassment, inappropriate touching, and leering. One sip too many and he became sarcastic and overbearing with clients and colleagues alike, all but calling them 'stupid' when they disagreed with him or couldn't follow his drunken legal meanderings.

Fortunately he was *not* one of those drunks who suffered from memory blackouts. He'd convinced himself, in fact, that alcohol actually *sharpened* his faculties, which was why it was so unfair that he was being penalized just because he went on an occasional bender now and then.

Up here on the ridge top, the sharpness of his newly awakened senses was a blessing as Jake basked in the buttery light and the warmth of Indian summer. Without it he might have missed the twittering of a pair of goldfinches calling to each other from the tree tops as they prepared for the thousand-mile flight to their wintering grounds in the Caribbean. And he surely would not have appreciated, as he did now, the distinctly autumnal smell of microbial life turning leaf litter into topsoil.

Directly in front of him, forty miles to the south, the unbroken line of the Kittatinny Ridge stretched along the horizon from the Delaware River southwest all the way into Maryland and West Virginia. The foothills were well-populated with small towns and farming communities nestled at their bases and the inevitable blight of suburban sprawl creeping up the slopes. Jake could make out the cables and chairlift of a popular ski resort. He turned to face the other direction where the view was more wooded,

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although there too the dusky hills bore the signs of 'progress' in the form of utility poles and power lines marching up and down the slopes, wide swaths of land cleared for gas pipelines, and clusters of radio and microwave towers stuck onto every summit like needles in a giant pin cushion.

Jake shook his head to banish these negative thoughts---the kinds of thoughts that made him want to reach for a bottle. For even at this stage of his recovery, there were times when his hands shook and he broke into a sweat, and the craving was so strong it brought him to his knees. In his mind's eye he saw the amber liquid shimmering at the bottom of a tumbler, ice cubes tapping at the sides of the glass. He imagined the first tart sip lingering at the back of his throat before it suffused his entire being with warmth, causing the annoying minutiae of daily life, the niggling aches and worries, the self-doubts and the fears, to melt away.

The Sisyphean nature of the road that lay ahead of him was never far from his thoughts. Abstaining was easy where there were no temptations. The real test would come when he got out of this secluded place and went back to a profession where deals were made and cases settled over three-martini lunches. Back to a city where every evening at dusk, en route to the subway station or taxi stand, a jungle of neon signs beckoned to him. *Tony's Bar and Grill*, *The Talking Elephant Saloon* (Yes, there really was such a place), and his all-time favorite, *PJ Clark's*. Every city block harbored a drinking establishment, liquor store, or, at the very least a corner bodega where he could plunk down a few bucks and walk out with a case of beer.

CHAPTER TWO

Following his demotion at the Manhattan firm, Jake spent his days in the stifling halls of Queens County Civil Court, Housing Part, representing absentee landlords, making deals with deadbeat tenants, and being frustrated by a system that allowed the deadbeats to stay in their apartments indefinitely without paying rent. Jake would listen patiently to their litany of misfortunes---unemployment, illness, injury, divorce, drug addiction, bankruptcy...and then he would pressure them into signing stipulations they couldn't possibly meet within the allotted time periods. *Who could blame a guy for getting wasted after a day like that?*

After a week of hardening his heart to the plight of the sloppily dressed, ragtag bunch of losers who crowded into the musty, overheated corridors hidden from public view in the basement of the art-deco courthouse adjacent to the House of Detention in Kew Gardens, Jake concluded he could not get through another day of his new assignment without bolstering himself, as he did at the Manhattan office, with a regular infusion of distilled spirits.

Early Friday morning he poured a few ounces of vodka into an empty Evian bottle and tucked it into a compartment of his attaché case. He quickly learned, however, the futility of trying to sneak anything past the uniformed court officers who manned the metal detectors that guarded the entrance to the building. He had hoped the guards would respect him as an attorney and give him the benefit of the doubt, but no, they made him empty his pockets and open his briefcase before passing through the metal detector, as they did everybody else who entered the building. One of the officers, a young upstart, even had the *cajones* to rifle through Jake's briefcase, remove the cap from the Evian bottle, and sniff its contents. The officer wrinkled his nose, then gave Jake a look that

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was the equivalent of a conspiratorial wink before confiscating the contraband and handing Jake a 'claim check' by which he could pick up the item on his way out of the building at the end of the day.

So there he was in his charcoal three-piece suit of worsted wool, his accordion-style leather briefcase bulging with legal documents, being smirked at by a lowly gatekeeper and having his property confiscated as if he were no better than the riffraff he had come there to prosecute. Oddly enough, this affront to his dignity had the effect of making Jake feel somewhat sympathetic toward the deadbeats who were his adversaries. Whereas he was usually inclined to look down on the strapped tenants---he with his law degree from a prestigious university---he now felt a kind of brotherhood with them, a subconscious empathy for the underclass, which was why he made the unconscionable error of turning a sympathetic ear to the clients he was supposed to be steamrolling.

Friday afternoon was the busiest time of the week in housing court. Those tenants who had been served with eviction notices were faced with the prospect of spending an entire weekend in a homeless shelter, or on the floor of some city agency waiting for their cases to be processed, or even, for the least fortunate, on a park bench, under a bridge, on a subway platform, or riding the trains all night. The city's homeless shelters more often than not consisted of the upper floors of some fleabag motel in a crime-ridden neighborhood with drug dealers and prostitutes as neighbors. The possibilities were endless, unless the evictees could get a temporary reprieve from a housing court judge, which would allow them to go back into their apartments for a limited time until they could come up with some money or secure alternate shelter. By three o'clock in the afternoon the dispossessed, hundreds of them, were packed into the stuffy, virus-laden corridors outside the hearing rooms praying that a judge would grant them a few more days, weeks, or months to get it together, or at least grant them

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access to their units to collect some belongings---and it was Jake's job, as a representative of the *landlords*, to make sure they did *not* get any leniency. His job was to get the deadbeat tenants out of their units as quickly as possible so the landlord could take possession of the apartment and rent his property to a viable tenant, or, as was more often the case these days, convert the rental unit into a co-op or condominium and put it up for sale in the lucrative housing market. Feeling sorry for the defendants from whom he was supposed to collect money was a no-no.

Jake had learned within the first few days of his new assignment that despite its low ranking among the legal profession, housing court nevertheless required a certain degree of skill and craftiness on the part of an attorney to successfully represent landlords in a system that was pitted against them. Jake's mission was to pressure the tenants, most of whom had no legal representation, into either accepting an iron-clad payment plan or into signing a stipulation promising to vacate the premises by a certain date---without pushing them into such desperate circumstances that a judge would grant them more time simply to avoid the rampant homelessness that overwhelmed a city budget already stretched to the breaking point.

A wind-driven mix of rain, sleet, hail and snow pelted the plaza in front of the courthouse when Jake arrived on the scene with a roster of names whose cases had been assigned to him. The smell of wet wool, mothballs and mildew in the airless corridors nauseated him. Goose down parkas with fur-trimmed hoods (rumored to be made of dog hair from China) were in vogue that season, adding to the mix an odor of wet dog and chicken feathers. The incessant coughing and sneezing all around him served as a potent reminder of the unsanitary conditions that prevailed in those poorly ventilated, paint-smelling corridors where the spores and viruses of the huddled masses floated on invisible currents waiting to latch on to the nearest unsuspecting mast cell available. Indeed,

Jake had been battling a nasty head cold ever since his first day on the job.

Jake located the court calendar posted outside one of the hearing rooms, verified his cases and, in a voice husky with laryngitis belted out the name of the first case on his calendar. “Emily Crawford vs. Melos Realty Company!”

From somewhere in the yammering crowd a tremulous, low-pitched female voice hollered back, “Present!”

Jake steered his way through the crowd in the direction of the respondent’s voice. Everybody looked the same in this patchwork of brown, black, gray, and denim, with here and there a burst of red, aqua, or violet---invariably one of the female attorneys, stylishly attired in tailored skirt suits and high-heeled pumps that stood out like daffodils in a field of thatch. Finally he found his mark, a sallow-faced woman of middle age who, in contrast to her fellow defendants had at least made an effort to ‘dress up’ for the occasion in a pair of neatly pressed woolen slacks and a hunter-green cardigan sweater over a white blouse. As a business attorney Jake had always advised his clients to dress in a manner that showed respect for the court, whether that respect was sincere or not---but housing court was a different matter. Being well-dressed could actually work against a defendant, sending a subliminal message to the judge that perhaps this deadbeat was not as poor as he or she claimed to be and was holding back assets that could be better applied toward fulfilling their rental obligations.

The woman’s facial expression was a mixture of fear and disdain for the rabble that surrounded her as she sat primly on one of the low wooden benches that lined the walls of the corridor, sandwiched in between a Hispanic woman with a baby in her lap and a bearded man reading a Hebrew newspaper. Jake approached the defendant in a brisk, businesslike manner meant to convey that they were adversaries. He was representing the woman’s landlord

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which, in this case, happened to be some anonymous corporation called Melos Realty Corp.

“Mrs. Crawford?” he said briskly.

She rose from her seat as he approached, with an eagerness that betrayed her inexperience in the courtroom venue. “Yes,” she said in a voice that was soft-spoken with no trace of the street pronunciation so common in the outer boroughs. Her short brown hair was streaked with gray, and her washed-out face, devoid of makeup, was etched with the signs of worry---deep furrow between the brows, a furtive look in the eyes, and a tense mouth. *Spinsterish* was the word that came to Jake’s mind as he sized her up at a glance. Well-educated, out of her element---and a pushover. Jake knew clothes---he was rather a snappy dresser himself, he liked to think---and this woman’s outfit said *Lord and Taylor* all the way. She had known better times, apparently, but that was none of his concern. He wasted no time with pleasantries. Towering over her petite form, he quickly perused her file.

“You agreed to be out of the apartment by the end of this month. Is that correct?” (The first step in a successful prosecution was getting the defendant to *admit* to the offense.)

She could very well have said no, that she had signed the agreement under duress, but she fell for the ploy and answered meekly, “Yes.”

“So why are you here today?” he asked, keeping his eyes on the papers in front of him.

“I...need a little more time...to find another place to live...” Her voice quavered, but Jake was unmoved.

“Why did you sign the agreement?”

“I lost my job a year ago. My unemployment benefits ran out in January. I couldn’t pay my rent, and the building management offered me a deal, so I took it. I thought I would have my act together by now, but...I haven’t found another job yet, and I have no place to go.”

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It so happened the city was just then in a frenzy of converting rental units to co-ops and condominiums. Building owners and landlords were offering deals to tenants---lease buyouts in some cases, and in other cases several months' free rent---in exchange for the tenant's promise to vacate the apartment so the landlord could refurbish the unit and put it on the market for sale as a co-op or condominium. Apparently Ms. Crawford had taken the latter deal, for among the documents in her case file was a signed agreement promising to vacate the unit by March 1st in exchange for three months free rent. Her term was up at the end of the month, two weeks hence. She had come to court to ask for more time---or maybe even to withdraw from the agreement altogether, Jake presumed. Unfortunately, there was a post-it note, written in Morty Rifkin's own sloppy handwriting, attached to the woman's case file, which read: *Building conversion pending. No adjournments!*

"What kind of work were you doing?" Jake asked her, delaying the moment of truth.

"I taught Geography at a private school in New Jersey.." she said.

Jake congratulated himself inwardly for having pegged her as a schoolteacher. "You got laid off?" he asked

"They fired me when they found out I was a lesbian."

A lesbian schoolteacher. So what else is new? It was more than Jake cared to know about her, but immediately his lawyer's instincts kicked in. "Did you file a discrimination lawsuit?"

"I can't prove anything," she said. "They told me I was fired because my student's test scores were too low."

Jake smirked at this but kept his thoughts to himself. He wasn't supposed to be giving her legal advice. "How are you supporting yourself?" he asked instead.

"I'm living on credit, mostly. I have some savings... I just need a little more time. I have some job interviews coming up."

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Jake glanced at the post-it note again, and balked. It was one thing to bully the millionaires and the CEOs he dealt with in corporate law, but it was something else to face an out-of-work schoolteacher being put out of her rent-stabilized apartment so that some anonymous holding company could make a windfall. Without Rifkin's note he might have had some leeway, but a directive from his boss, the head of the law firm, was indisputable. The only person who could save her now was a judge, and the housing court judges were known to favor the landlords in such cases.

I'm not authorized to give you an extension---you'll have to see the judge, was what he meant to say, but what came out of his mouth instead was "Have you applied for Public Assistance?"

"No... I didn't think I would qualify."

"Can you pay anything towards this rent today?"

"A couple hundred, maybe..."

"If you put up half of what you owe I can give you a 30-day adjournment in which to apply to DSS for rental assistance. One month from today, you'll have to come back to court with proof that you applied for Public Assistance and file an Order to Show Cause asking for more time."

"Thank you..."

Jake scribbled out the paperwork and had her sign the new stipulation. "You'll need a money order," he said. "Bring these papers with the money order to the cashier upstairs."

Jake walked away, disgusted with 'the system', and with himself.

It went downhill from there. The wet parkas festered in the stifling air. From somewhere behind him he heard what sounded like a tubercular old man coughing up sputum on his death bed, but when he turned to look he saw the cougher was a young mother with two kids in tow. He moved on to his next case.

"Hoffman!"

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A young couple approached him, pushing a baby stroller. The man wore an olive-drab parka that was better suited to a backcountry campsite than a big city courthouse, but hey, who could blame a guy for dressing down in this type of weather. The woman had an acne-scarred chin, an overbite, and was visibly pregnant. Both had gaunt faces and feverish eyes. *Now don't jump to conclusions*, Jake told himself, but as soon as the young man opened his mouth he knew they were junkies.

“Hey, man, how's it going?” sputtered the fellow.

“Not bad,” Jake replied. *Always be courteous*. “And you?”

“Been better.”

Jake glanced at their file. Both had recent arrests, the man for stealing bicycles, the woman for prostitution, and yet, they had managed to cling to their unit in a rent-controlled building in an upscale neighborhood, paid for with a combination of Social Security Disability Income and Section Eight Housing---until they were caught selling food stamps for cash. Their SSI was cut off and they hadn't paid a dime in rent since October. But unlike Jake's previous case, these two were seasoned pros at the housing court game, filing order after order to show cause why they should be allowed to remain in their home.

“We got toxic mold and roaches in the apartment,” drawled the young man in that inimitable way of junkies everywhere, half asleep and yet fidgety with paranoia, eyes darting from side to side. “Our kid got sick from the mold...”

Against his better judgment Jake allowed himself a glance at the baby in the stroller that was strategically placed directly in front of him, a common ploy to garner sympathy for the parents. The little girl, about two years old, was dressed in a pink, thrift-store snowsuit and matching knit cap, both of which were surprisingly clean, considering the circumstances. Her pale, translucent eyelids were closed in blissful ignorance of the complicated future that awaited her, but her tiny hands were balled

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into little fists as if she were already preparing for the battles she was going to face for the rest of her life. He suspected the kid was under the care of somebody other than the unfit mother, a grandmother perhaps. Jake forced his attention back to the unpleasant business at hand. It was hard to concentrate, standing there in the crowded hallway with people chattering all around him. "I have an affidavit from the landlord saying he made several attempts to send an exterminator and nobody answered the door," he told the couple.

"We can't be home 24-7, man..."

"Can you leave a key with the Superintendent so he can let the exterminator in?"

"My home is my castle, man. I don't let nobody in there when I'm not home."

"When will somebody be home so the repairs can be made?" Jake asked impatiently. Unlike the previous case he had no sympathy for these dirt bags, and yet...most likely they would be the ones to keep their apartment for another year or more, while the schoolteacher would be out on the street.

"We told the Super we be home on *Sundays*...right Babe?" The man looked pointedly at his silent partner, whose baby bump stretched the front of her soiled poly-fill jacket. Stone-faced, the woman nodded her assent.

"They don't wanna send nobody on Sundays. Whose fault is that, man?" her partner whined.

The child moaned, fidgeted in the stroller for a moment, and went back to sleep. Jake's heart sank. "I'm going to set up an appointment with the mold inspector for next Sunday, February 27th, at ten o'clock in the morning," he said. "I'm also going to prepare an order allowing the landlord to enter the premises for the purpose of repairs in your absence. Do you agree to that?"

"Can you make it the Sunday after that?"

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“No. I’m giving you a break here. If you want more time, you’ll have to see the judge today to ask for an adjournment, and you’d better have a good reason.”

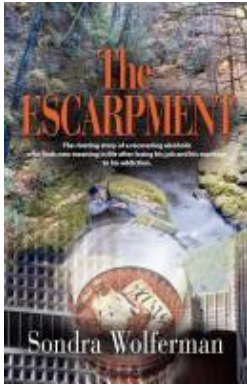
“We’ll take the deal.”

“Sign here.”

I’m in deep shit now..., Jake thought as he walked away from that one. He had sold two of his firm’s landlord clients down the river, and, by sending a tenant to DSS he had quite possibly saddled the state with a long-term burden that would be impossible to get rid of.

There were three more cases on his roster. Four o’clock in the afternoon and he was already parched. Ordinarily he would be ducking into the men’s room at the Manhattan suite right about now for a pick-me-up, but all he could do here was think longingly of the confiscated Evian bottle in the security office upstairs. He headed to the mezzanine for some fresh air and then, ignoring the derisive glances of the security guards, pushed through the revolving doors and emerged onto the broad, wet plaza in front of the building. The winter storm was winding down, but a brisk wind blew ice crystals that trickled down his neck and underneath his coat collar. On the other side of Queens Boulevard, tucked in among the notary publics, bail bondsmen, insurance brokers, realtors and bodegas, was the unassuming façade of the Jury Box Pub. He could easily dash across the street, down a couple of shots, and come back in time to finish his caseload.

*I deserve it...*he rationalized, stepping off the curb into six inches of slush the consistency of frozen juice concentrate that filled his leather oxfords with icy liquid. *No wonder people headed south in droves this time of year.*



A recovering alcoholic finds new meaning in life after losing his job and his marriage to his addiction.

The Escarpment

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