

## Ambercrothy and Sons: Rare, Collectable, and Curiosities

"Please state your name and occupation." The attorney for the insurance company wore cheap black loafers with worn rubber soles and a dull charcoal suit purchased off-the-rack at some discount men's store. The ventless jacket was completely inappropriate for the sitting and standing of a litigator. Needless to say, Wallace thought little of the look. One hundred forty dollars including underwear and socks, he calculated. Wallace was not surprised that this man represented the insurance company which was, after all, a cut-rate poorly-operated firm that relied heavily on so-called cute advertising to hook penny-pinching policy holders. Corporate value: eighty point five million in holdings yet highly leveraged.

"I am Wallace J. Ambercrothy. I am the owner and curator of *Ambercrothy and Sons: Rare, Collectable, and Curiosities*." Wallace wore a wool suit custom made by Jules Versile of *Versile's Fine Men's Shoppe*—two thousand four hundred and fifty-six dollars.

"Mr. Ambercrothy, please explain to the court why you are qualified to comment on this case." The attorney's haircut distracted Wallace for a moment until he was able to recognize the signature hackings of the discount chain *Scissors For Hire*—twelve dollars plus one dollar tip.

Wallace touched his freshly shaved and washed chin—twenty-seven dollars plus twenty-two percent tip at *Lords*. "I, sir, have served the greater good as an expert appraiser for the past thirty-four years. By reputation and prominence, I believe you will find my aptitude in this area impeccable."

"Thank you, Mr. Ambercrothy. As you are aware, we are here today to determine the monetary value of the unexpected loss of Silas Fern to his family and their farm. Do you feel qualified to comment on this?"

Wallace was slightly annoyed at the oak-veneered courtroom furniture—he of course, preferred 18th century Chippendale. He valued the attorney tables at one hundred and thirty-five dollars each. "My god, my cufflinks are worth twice that," he thought.

"With all due respect to the court, I am a busy man. Would it be possible to cut to the chase and simply confirm the obvious that I am and should be viewed as an expert witness?"

Her Honorable Jade Snyder, in a robe barely passable as a high school graduation gown, eyed the witness. "Mr. Ambercrothy, may I remind you that we are all busy and your time is no more valuable than the Court's. Please answer the question."

"Well, Your Honor, to be honest, I am the expert on 'value,' and the speculation you just asserted as to whose time is more valuable is highly arguable. I shall, however, concede the point and subject myself to the attorney's line of questioning." Wallace turned in his seat to face the attorney. "Let's see, you asked if I am qualified to appraise the loss of Silas Fern ... a loss that you termed as 'unexpected.' That I am obligated to point out that the word 'unexpected' is a subjective descriptor intended to influence the value of an item or, in this case, a deceased person, should erase all doubt concerning my qualifications."

The attorney for the insurance company turned to the judge. "Your Honor, I submit that Mr. Ambercrothy of *Ambercrothy and Sons: Rare, Collectable, and Curiosities* should be tendered as an expert witness and further that his testimony should be viewed as valid and binding."

Wallace, if it were possible, straightened his spine even further as pride washed over his body. Even if the praise originated out of a hideous creature of poor taste, praise was praise.

The judge turned to the attorney for the Fern family. "Does the opposing counsel accept the witness as an expert?"

Wallace was appalled and insulted when the opposing counsel stood and objected. Not only was questioning his authority outrageous, the opposing counsel's department store ensemble was ridiculous. Sixty-two dollars on sale. And that haircut ... Wallace wanted to bring to trial whoever did that.

After receiving permission from the judge, Pauline O'Hare approached Wallace. "Mr. Ambercrothy, your shop name indicates you have sons. Could you please tell the Court the nature of your relationship with your sons?"

The attorney for the insurance company, with little conviction, half rose from his chair. "Objection Your Honor, Mr. Ambercrothy's family and the nature of their relationships are irrelevant."

Pauline O'Hare seemed unfazed by the objection. "Your Honor, I believe if I am permitted to proceed, I will easily establish relevance."

The judge casually sorted some documents that cluttered her bench. "Objection overruled, Counsel may proceed."

Not even the English natural blush powder Wallace wore, seventeen dollars per twelve ounce jar, could hide the reddening of his face. "I have two sons, both of whom at one time or another worked in the store. Currently neither is under my employ."

As she paced in front of Wallace, Pauline O'Hare's wedges squeaked annoyingly—a certain giveaway of knockoff fashion, thought Wallace, most likely a two-for-one-sale purchase.

"Would you please tell the Court why your sons are no longer working for you, Mr. Ambercrothy?"

"Herbert lost interest in the business, and Jobert realized that his appraisal skills were sophomoric at best. Both are better off."

"Better off? What are they currently doing, Mr. Ambercrothy?"

"I have lost contact with Herbert. As for Jobert, he is living with his mother in Pittsburgh."

"Mr. Ambercrothy, are you also acknowledging that you and your wife are separated?"

Wallace twisted the hand-crafted 10k white gold signet ring—one thousand six hundred and fifty-one dollars insurance appraisal value—that he wore on his right index finger. "That is correct."

"Mr Ambercrothy, you have stated that your son Herbert 'lost interest in the business.' Would you please clarify what exactly happened?"

Again, only raising slightly from his seat, the attorney for the insurance company challenged the question. "Objection Your Honor, this is ludicrous. Mr. Ambercrothy's family dynamic is not on trial here."

Pauline O'Hare, as if following a script that anticipated the objection, turned to the judge. "With all due respect, Your Honor, I believe uncovering Mr. Ambercrothy's world view, including his family dynamic, is important in determining to what extent, if any, he is to be considered an expert witness."

The judge continued to shuffle stacks of papers. "Objection overruled, I will allow the question."

Out of habit, Wallace reached for the handmade Italian Greci pipe—seventy-five dollars—that was typically extending from his mouth before realizing that the pipe was in its case back at the store—no smoking in court. "Herbert felt constricted and uncomfortable working within the boundaries of professional appraisal. Thus, after trying it on, we mutually agreed that he would be better off pursuing other interests."

"Mr Ambercrothy, would you agree that 'mutually agreed' is not exactly the way most observers would describe what happened between you and Herbert?"

"I make it a habit, Ms. O'Hare, not to speculate on what others might say, but as I like to say, *together*, Herbert and I agreed that severing business connections was in the best interest of both parties."

"Mr. Ambercrothy, isn't it true that your son Herbert worked for you for over a period of nine years from age twelve to age twenty-one and not once did you pay him for his work?"

"Ms. O'Hare, I assure you there are many ways a person is compensated."

"Could you list some of those ways, Mr Ambercrothy?"

"Certainly. First and foremost, Herbert was receiving first-hand valuable training in the trade ... an apprenticeship one might even call it. While receiving this training, Herbert was in a temperature controlled environment, was fed, and provided a room for sleeping and a shared bath. He was, so-to-speak, putting in his time."

"Mr. Ambercrothy, isn't it true that Herbert was home-schooled and required to work seven days a week in the shop? ... That his 'training' was primarily in the art of vacuuming, cleaning, and polishing silver? ... That his 'room' was a small storage closet in the back of the store? ... And, that at age twenty-one, when he stumbled upon a compassionate attorney, who, pro bono, agreed to file a restraining order against you, that he could barely read and that he essentially owned nothing? Further, isn't it true that Herbert is currently working as a custodian in the West Gate mall in Billings, Montana?"

"Ms. O'Hare, there are many ways to spin the truth. I suppose from one perspective your account is accurate, but as the professional appraiser here, I'd value the experiences I offered Herbert much higher than you are implying, and the menial tasks you mentioned, I also believe are much more valuable than you make them sound. Had Herbert followed through, he would have realized that he was investing in his future, he was improving his value with time. His mistake was selling too soon. This, I might add, is the most common error amongst inexperienced collectors—knowing when to divest is perhaps the greatest insight a successful collector perfects. Herbert, as it turns out, was not, and will likely never be, a successful collector."

"Now, Mr. Ambercrothy, you also mentioned that your son Jobert had 'sophomoric appraisal skills.' Would you please elaborate."

Again Wallace grabbed for his non-existent tobacco pipe. "Jobert had a tendency to overvalue some items and undervalue other items."

"Would you be able to recall specific examples, Mr. Ambercrothy?"

"Certainly. For example, Jobert tended to overvalue cocaine and women of ill repute and undervalue the abilities of local law enforcement."

"Mr Ambercrothy, isn't it true that Jobert is actually serving house arrest in your ex-wife's, his mother's, home in Pittsburgh?"

"Again, Ms. O'Hare, this is a matter of semantics. One certainly could spin it that way; however, I prefer to see his residency as an opportunity to reflect on and improve his skills in assessing value and risk."

When Pauline O'Hare turned to the judge, her shoes squeaked again. "Your Honor, my first objection to Mr. Ambercrothy's expertise is in the clear fact that he is unable to appraise the value of his own family. With this lack of insight, how could he possibly appraise the value of the loss of a son to the Fern family?"

"Objection Your Honor, Mr Ambercrothy's personal life is irrelevant. His professional qualifications are impeccable." This time the attorney for the insurance company stood all the way up.

The judge looked at the attorney for the insurance company, paused, then looked at Pauline O'Hare. "Ms. O'Hare, I have to agree. While Mr. Ambercrothy's relationship with his children and spouse are certainly questionable, families are complicated and cannot be used as a reflection of Mr. Ambercrothy's professional abilities. Either proceed with a different line of questioning, or accept Mr. Ambercrothy as an expert witness."

Wallace bounced his left leg in irritation. Ms. O'Hare turned back to him.

"Mr. Ambercrothy, is it true that you recently valued a standard sixty watt incandescent lightbulb at four thousand six hundred dollars?"

Wallace smiled. "That is true."

"Mr. Ambercrothy, such a light bulb is readily available in numerous stores and online for approximately three to five dollars. Would you please explain this appraisal?"

Wallace turned to the judge. "The item in question is being discussed out of context Your Honor. In general, my clients are people of taste and distinction. They understand that much of an appraisal value is based on condition, packaging, and potential value. Further, my clients are knowledgeable about collecting and recognize the speculative nature of investing in the future. The client in question currently holds an unused, pristine sixty watt GE incandescent light bulb in its original packaging. Further the item is currently wrapped in protective bubble wrap and being stored in a temperature-controlled secure location. With all this in mind, there is little doubt that in eighty to one hundred years, the item will certainly command my rather conservative appraisal value."

Pauline O'Hare wrote something on a legal pad with a plastic Bic pen. Wallace thought of the Pelikan Special Edition M205 Star Ruby Fountain Pen in his jacket pocket—one hundred sixty-five dollars.

"Thank you Mr. Ambercrothy. Now, is it true that recently you published an article in *Collector Quarterly*?"

Wallace tugged his left ear as he was in the habit of doing whenever he was pleasantly surprised, and he, indeed, was a bit more than surprised to hear that the poorly attired Pauline O'Hare was aware of such a distinguished trade journal. "That is correct Ms. O'Hare. Are you a regular reader of the journal?"

"Mr. Ambercrothy, if you would please ... I will ask the questions."

So she doesn't read it, just as Wallace suspected, a typical lay person with merely a passing knowledge of the profession. Oh well, at least she knew enough to know about it.

O'Hare picked the edition containing Wallace's article off the table. "Mr. Wallace, would you mind reading us the title and the first two paragraphs of your published article?"

"A public reading of my work ... well I'd be happy too." Wallace retrieved his Saint Laurent tortoiseshell reading glasses—three hundred thirty-five dollars—from the inside breast pocket of his jacket, gently wiped them with the clean silk cloth in which they were wrapped, and placed them on his face. He quietly cleared his throat and began.

"*Coins or Love* by Wallace J. Ambercrothy. Over the years as an appraiser, I have been called upon to appraise many ordinary items—jewelry, furniture, firearms, art etcetera. I have also occasionally been charged with more challenging appraisals of shall we say unusual items: an eighteenth century New England hen house, a twelfth century golden egg from the Orient, a fragment believed to be from the original Crown of Thorns (DNA evidence demonstrated it to be fraudulent), and even a valve stem from one of Evil Kenevil's motorcycles tragically crashed in a stunt. I had never, however, been more intrigued by an unusual request than when, at a soiree, Robert and Odessa Jones, of the West Hampton Jones', approached me for an appraisal of, of all things, their relationship. Well, as my reader might suspect, at first I thought this just light-hearted cocktail party gibberish, but,

to my surprise, one thing led to another and the next day there they were, sitting across from me in my office, serious as a stolen Rolex.

"As is my protocol, I first diligently recorded what Odessa and Robert reported as tangible assets—property, vehicles, valuables, investments and such. Then I listed what they believed to be the, let's say, intangible valuables of their relationship—companionship, intimacy, support, potential for progeny, joy, love. Next I considered the relationship's age—twelve years at that point. I then speculated on the projected overall length of the relationship. I considered the inevitable end of the relationship either due to death or separation. From averages, it was clear to me that if the couple remained together—a sixty-three percent chance—until 'death doth them part'—considering their age at the time of the appraisal and average life spans this calculated to roughly forty to fifty years hence, that the total relationship length would be perhaps sixty-four years. The following paragraphs will break down these declared tangible and intangible valuable aspects of the relationship and calculations to determine overall value.

"Item one: the value of companionship..."

"Thank you Mr. Ambercrothy, you may stop there." Wallace glared at Pauline O'Hare. How dare she cut him off when the calculations were just beginning, but Wallace's glare quickly shifted to a smile when she asked him to read the concluding paragraph aloud for the Court. To Wallace, her poorly manicured finger seemed like a rotten carrot as she pointed to the passage to be recited.

"So, in conclusion, Odessa and Robert Jones' relationship is, in fact, valued at negative four hundred twenty-six thousand dollars. Further, in the humble opinion of this appraiser, the relationship should be terminated immediately as it depreciates daily. Running it to its full level of depreciation is imprudent, poor investing, and foolhardy. I strongly recommended that Odessa and Robert Jones take any and all salvageable assets, liquidate them, and invest in collectible coins, preferably ancient Sumerian coins. It is clear, however, that the liquified assets of the dissolved relationship alone will not produce enough positive equity to invest in ancient Sumerian coins without additional capital."

Wallace, who was very proud of this article—his twenty-seventh appearance in *Collector Quarterly*, and to his estimation, his best work—handed the journal back to Pauline O'Hare.

"Mr Ambercrothy, does your conclusion as printed in the article still represent your views on relationships in general?"

This time not even bothering to stand at all, the attorney for the insurance company mumbled. "Objection Your Honor, the article in question is concerning an individual relationship and cannot be generalized to represent Mr. Ambercrothy's personal views on the value of human relationships."

Again, as if reading from a script, the judge spoke her lines. "It is a highly unusual question Ms. O'Hare, but this is also a highly unusual conclusion. I will allow the question."

"As an appraiser, I am generally uncomfortable with blanket statements and much prefer looking at each item individually; yet, there is certainly precedence of acknowledging certain types of assets as generally more collectable and valuable than other types. Thus, if forced to make a claim, I would hesitantly claim that human relationships are generally of negligible value and more often than not likely to generate a negative-value appraisal."

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Dismissed! Wallace had never been so humiliated in all his life. The snarky Ms. O'Hare with her Bic pen and squeaky wedges. Who did she think she was? This is Wallace J. Ambercrothy we are talking about, not some pawn store shyster or hoarder of back issues of *The National Geographic*. Wallace wanted to punch a wall or smash a window, and had he not prided himself in always maintaining the manners of a gentleman, he certainly would have, but he knew that the most dignified way to calm himself was to take a leisurely stroll down Grand Street, window shop the high-end boutiques and perhaps stop at The Olde Tea Shoppe and mull over a cup of Rwanda black tea—seven dollars.

As he walked, Wallace thought about the value he had been prepared to place on the life of Silas Fern. Silas was twenty-four at the time of his death—an overturned tractor crushed his skull. He was unmarried, relatively uneducated, a hard worker, and a loyal son.

All indications were that, had he lived, he would have eventually taken over the seventy-five acre family dairy farm. Yet, Wallace also knew that small family-run dairy farms were quickly becoming obsolete in the age of thousand acre corporate farms. What chance did Silas really have of keeping a sinking ship afloat. After all, at the time of his death, the farm was operating in the red for the seventh consecutive year. Truth be told, the farm had no value and was unlikely to ever rebound. Thus, in Wallace's view, as an appraiser, Silas Fern's death actually saved the farm money. Had Wallace been allowed to testify, he felt certain that he would have successfully argued that not only did the insurance company owe the Fern family nothing, but that, in truth, the Ferns actually owed the insurance company ... But wait ... what do we have here? In the display window of *Robertsson's*, a vintage houndstooth wool sports coat circa nineteen fifty—six hundred fifty-five dollars. It even looked to be Wallace's size.

Slipping in the door, Wallace was greeted by Veronica Wilcox. Veronica wore a black fitted blazer over a green silk blouse, black cigarette pants and tasteful Chelsea boots—four hundred fifty dollars.

"Well hello Mr. Ambercrothy. It's so nice to see you again."

Wallace stumbled slightly. He had shared a drink a few days ago with Veronica Wilcox, and Wallace now found her elegance and charm slightly unnerving. Her white pearl necklace caught his eye—three hundred forty dollars. "Why hello Ms. Wilcox, it certainly is good to see a familiar face today."

Veronica offered Wallace a small bottle of Italian sparkling water. Her black bangs fell stylishly above her eyes. "Well I'm glad to be of service. Have you had a rough day?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I was called to serve as an expert witness in an accidental death case involving a farm and a young man. Truly tragic. The young man was in the prime of his life, and the family is devastated as you might imagine."

"Oh dear, that sounds very sad."

"Yes. But the worst thing about it was the insurance company was attempting to bamboozle the family out of compensation." Wallace walked over to the display window and fingered the material of the coat.

"Would you care to try the jacket on, Mr. Ambercrothy? We just got it in. It comes from an upstate New York private estate. Truly a beautiful coat."

"Yes, please, after a day like today, one needs a little pampering." Veronica helped Wallace off with his custom wool suit coat and then held the houndstooth blazer up for Wallace to slip his arms into. "Well, if you don't mind me asking, how did the case turn out?"

Wallace eyed himself in the three panel mirror. "Due to my expert testimony, I convinced the Court to award two million dollars in compensation to the family. The family was so pleased that they even offered me a lifetime supply of milk—a gallon every two weeks which equates to a bit over two-thousand dollars worth of milk. I refused, on principle, of course."

As an appraiser, Wallace knew the value of a lie—generally between two hundred and six thousand dollars, and he especially knew the value of a lie that most certainly would never be exposed—generally double the value of a riskier lie. After all, what were the chances that the results of the court case would be of interest to the public. Why not make himself heroic? He was Wallace J. Ambercrothy, and he had been cruelly humiliated by Ms. O'Hare. No, Veronica Wilcox did not need to know what had actually happened. What good would that serve?

"You look very handsome in this coat, Mr. Ambercrothy, very handsome indeed."

Wallace puffed out his chest and sucked in his gut. He did look handsome in this coat, didn't he? And wasn't he impressing Veronica Wilcox?

He slid the coat off, handed it to Veronica. "Please, call me Wallace, and thank you, I believe I'll take it."

Veronica smiled. "Excellent choice, Mr. Ambercrothy ... I mean Wallace ... and I believe I can arrange a ten percent discount for such a loyal customer, especially after the good work you did today."

"Why aren't you sweet, but please allow me to exchange the discount for an offer of dinner with me tonight after you finish up here."

Veronica blushed. "Mr. Ambercrothy, I don't know what to say ... I mean ... "

"Call me Wallace and just say, Yes that would be lovely."

"Well, then, yes, that would be lovely. Shall we say seven thirty? You can meet me out front here."

"Should I wear the new jacket?"

"Certainly, Mr. Ambercro... I mean Wallace."

Wallace charged the coat to his *Robertsson's* account and bounced out of the store with a new lightness to his step. Just to think, merely an hour ago he was being humiliated by that wretched Ms. O'Hare, and now he was the owner of a vintage houndstooth jacket and the lucky fellow who would accompany Veronica Wilcox to dinner tonight. He'd better make reservations, and he knew exactly where—*The Boar and Bones*. Wallace felt so happy that he forgot about stopping in for the Rwanda black tea—seven dollars.

His happiness quickly soured though as Wallace was nearly run over by a city bus. He had been so lost in his thoughts that he had walked right in front of the oncoming bus. Had the driver not stopped quickly, Wallace would have found himself sitting next to Silas Fern in the great curiosity shop in the sky. Unfortunately, the houndstooth jacket did not fare as well as Wallace had. In the moment of the near accident, startled, Wallace had tossed his arms into the air and dropped the jacket. As fate would have it, the jacket landed in an oily puddle beside the curb. Wallace snatched the jacket off the road, examined the damage, waved a wave of apology to the bus driver, and stepped back onto the sidewalk. The jacket was ruined, even with dry cleaning the value was now negligible.

Upset about the ruined jacket, Wallace tried to calm his nerves. He supported himself by leaning against a city light post—the jacket at his feet, his hands above his bowed head and his forehead resting on the cold metal. After several minutes like this, Wallace decided to head into *The Knights of The Round Table Pub* for a scotch and water—Macallan twelve years old, twenty-four dollars. The whiskey further calmed his nerves, and Wallace slowly recovered from the tragic demise of the houndstooth coat. But then the thought occurred to him that he would need to explain to Veronica Wilcox why he was not wearing the coat when they had dinner tonight. He dismissed this after a few minutes as he realized that he would simply tell her that he had not had time to change out of his custom-made wool suit since the demands of his services were great. Yes, this would

further impress her and may even increase his value in her eyes. He called *The Boar and Bones*, reserved a table for two, and ordered a second Macallan twelve years old and water. Everything was going to be fine, and, in fact, everything would have been fine if the honorable Jade Snyder and the Ferns' attorney Pauline O'Hare had not walked into *The Knights of The Round Table Pub* and noticed Wallace drinking at the bar.

"Well hello Mr. Ambercrothy," the honorable Jade Snyder said. She and Pauline O'Hare stood on his left. "Sorry about all that in court today, but we do have a responsibility to run things as fairly as they can be run."

Jade Snyder's pilled turtleneck sweater looked like it had been washed several more times than any article of clothing should be washed. Wallace didn't even bother to estimate what discount price she may have paid for it at some second-hand designer resale shop.

"Yes, we all have to do what we have to do Ms. Syder, no hard feelings." Although Wallace did harbor great resentment, he feigned politeness hoping the two were simply acknowledging his presence and then moving on to a booth.

"Let me buy you a drink," Pauline O'Hare said. "What are you drinking?"

"Macallan twelve years old and water, but that is certainly unnecessary."

Pauline O'Hare motioned to the bartender and ordered three off-label scotches and water—seven dollars each. "Oh, don't be silly. We rode you pretty hard today, it's the least we can do. Mind if we cozy up to the bar with you for a bit?" Without waiting for an answer, Pauline took the stool to Wallace's left while the judge took the one on his right.

The judge noticed the ruined coat draped on the back of Wallace's stool. "What on Earth happened to this coat?"

Wallace sniffed the cheap drink that had replaced his Macallan twelve years old. It smelled like smokey sewage. "A rather unfortunate run in with an oily puddle."

"Well that's too bad, but I'm sure a dry cleaner could snaz it right up."

Wallace winced. The thought that he was going to need to expose a vintage houndstooth jacket to a dry cleaner's chemical agents nearly turned his stomach. "Perhaps, Ms. Snyder, perhaps."

Pauline sucked some of her whiskey through a red plastic swizzle stick. "Wouldn't you like to know how things turned out, Mr. Ambercrothy?"

Wallace, having absolutely no interest in how things turned out, said, "Yes, how did the case end up?"

"The Ferns were awarded half the insurance payment they were asking for and everyone was mildly appeased," said Pauline O'Hare.

"Yes, the true nature of the justice system," piped in the judge. "No one actually gets what they want, but everyone gets just enough to go away without much fight left in them."

"Perhaps if I would have been permitted to offer my opinion, it would have turned out differently." Wallace could not help himself; his pride was still injured.

"Oh I very much doubt that, Mr. Ambercrothy," the judge said. "The case was pretty much decided before we ever walked into the courtroom. Most cases are." At least the judge knew enough to remove her swizzle stick and place it on a cocktail napkin before she sipped her drink.

"So I was irrelevant from the start?" asked Wallace. "Then why challenge my authority with such vehemence?"

"It's all a matter of protocol, Mr. Ambercrothy. I assumed you knew that going in. The insurance company calls an expert to verify their opinion, and the opposing attorney discredits the expert. Have you not played this game before?" Pauline O'Hare asked.

"Ms. O'Hare, with all due respect, I am shocked. I am an important person after all, not some pawn in your game. I would have greatly appreciated knowing this before I was asked to testify. I certainly would have declined."

"Don't be sour, Mr Ambercrothy. We all had some fun. I'll admit you were a bit easier to discredit than some of the experts, but that's all water under the bridge, and now you're getting a free drink out of us." Pauline chuckled.

Wallace stiffened. "As an appraiser, I pride myself on integrity and honesty—on calling a spade a spade. This nonsense is not how I operate."

"Mr Ambercro ... I mean Wallace? Whatever happened to the coat?" Out of thin air, it was Veronica Wilcox. Still wearing what she had on in *Robertsson's* but now standing

behind him at the bar. "It looks like you tossed it carelessly into an oily puddle or something."

Although startled, Wallace attempted to maintain his composure. "Actually, the coat did land in an oily puddle, but I assure you it was not due to carelessness, Ms. Wilcox, but rather an unfortunate sacrifice for the greater good."

"The greater good ... oh Mr. Ambercrothy, do tell." Pauline O'Hare leaned in.

"Are these your friends, Mr. Ambercro ... Wallace?" Veronica asked. "Hi, I'm Veronica."

"Hello Veronica, I'm Jade and this is Pauline. We just happened to run into Mr. Ambercrothy here, and, considering the day we all had in court today, we thought we at least owed him a drink."

"Oh, I see, yes, Mr. Ambercro... Wallace... told me all about it. I'll bet that insurance company had no idea what they were getting into going up against this one." Veronica placed her hands on Wallace's shoulders and squeezed them gently. "Wallace, aren't you going to offer to buy me a drink? I know we aren't supposed to have dinner till later, but I closed up a bit early and thought I'd stop in for a cocktail before I went home and changed. What a pleasant surprise to find you here."

"The drink is on me. What'll you have?" the judge asked.

"Well, thank you very much ... a vodka martini if you don't mind."

The judge motioned to the bartender, ordered the drink for Veronica, then turned to Wallace. "Mr. Ambercrothy ... so you went up against the big mean insurance company and knocked them down a few notches? Are these the spins you use to impress your dates?"

"Now Ms. Snyder, please ... there are many ways to report occurrences. You of all people should understand that."

"There are also many ways to try to impress people." The judge laughed.

"As an appraiser I always emphasize the *optimal scenario*."

"I'm sure you do, Mr Ambercrothy, I'm sure you do," said the judge.

"So, what *optimal scenario* do you have for the oily coat?" Pauline O'Hare asked.

The bartender set Veronica's vodka martini on the bar. Veronica's chest pressed against Wallace's arm as she reached around him for her drink. Wallace took this as a sign of pleasant things to come.

"Wait ... the coat's one thing, but Mr. Ambercro ... I mean Wallace ... what's this about emphasizing the *optimal scenario*?" Veronica smiled.

"Oh, it's nothing Veronica. These two are just poking a little fun."

The judge sipped her drink. "Why Veronica, yes, we are playing a bit, but please do tell what Mr. Ambercrothy has told you about his appearance in court today."

The judge and Pauline O'Hare laughed as Veronica reported what she believed to be the heroic and admirable performance Wallace had delivered early that day in the courtroom.

Pauline O'Hare patted Wallace on the back. "Well Veronica my dear ... that is certainly the definition of emphasizing the *optimal scenario*. Isn't it Mr. Ambercrothy?"

"So Mr. Ambercro... I mean Wallace, you didn't really win a big insurance settlement for those poor people who lost their son?"

Wallace was sweating. He dabbed his brow with a monogrammed silk handkerchief that he drew from his pocket. He forgot to remember its value. "I'm afraid ladies that all good things must come to an end. I have an appointment with a dry cleaner and then some business to attend to before I meet Ms. Wilcox for dinner. So if you'll excuse me." Wallace began to stand, but the judge put her hand on his shoulder.

"Not so fast there, Mr. Ambercrothy. It seems that maybe you have coerced Ms. Wilcox here into accepting a dinner date with you under false pretenses. As a representative of the justice system, I don't think this can be allowed without clarification."

Pauline O'Hare sucked more scotch and water through her swizzle stick. "I couldn't agree more, and we still have not solved the mystery of the oily coat."

The judge and Pauline O'Hare both laughed, but Wallace was not enjoying this game. Never had he liked being the butt of the joke, not to mention all this happening in front of Veronica Wilcox. He reached for his nonexistent handmade Italian Grenci pipe— seventy-five dollars.

"I assure you that I have not coerced anyone into anything and there is no mystery around what happened to the blazer. Ms. Wilcox and I are merely having dinner tonight and the blazer tragically fell into an oily puddle when I was attempting to prevent a distracted pedestrian from walking in front of a moving bus. May I go now?"

Veronica smiled and placed her hand on Wallace's arm. "Mr. Ambercro ... Wallace, you mean you sacrificed the jacket to save some poor soul. Why you certainly do lead a rather incredible life. You won two million dollars for a poor family that lost their son and then you saved a life, all in one afternoon. Why all I did today was watch a cooking show, sell a few items of vintage clothing, and stop in here for a drink." Veronica batted her eyes. Wallace thought she might have even rewarded him with a kiss if it would not have required some awkward adjusting of their positions at the bar.

"Well thank you Veronica for acknowledging what these somewhat jaded members of our judicial system are unable to appreciate. You see, after a certain time working in the courts, one begins to undervalue many things. I shall look forward to seeing you at seven thirty." Wallace stood, lifted the ruined houndstooth jacket off the back of the stool and left without settling up his tab. Let the honorable judge pay for the two drinks he had before they arrived. It was the least she could do after nearly exposing him in front of Veronica Wilcox.

At seven thirty, after a good relaxing pipe and two playings of side one of Uchida's Mozart's Piano Concertos Nos 20 & 27 on his vintage Ariston turntable—a steal at three hundred fifty dollars from a collector selling low, Wallace stood outside the closed *Robertsson's* and waited for Veronica Wilcox. He had hung the oil-stained houndstooth jacket in the backroom of his shop where he would leave it until figuring out how to salvage anything of value out of it. The night was chilly, and Wallace paced back and forth to ward off the cold. At seven forty-five, just as Wallace was beginning to think that she might not show, Veronica Wilcox walked around the corner. Her vintage mink shawl—one hundred fifty dollars—draped loosely over her shoulders and clasped over her midsection. "So sorry I'm late Wallace, the judge and Ms. O'Hare just could not stop talking. What interesting people you know." Veronica winked and flashed a grin that made Wallace question what

exactly the three had been discussing after his departure from the pub. "Where are we dining?"

"Well first let me say how lovely you look tonight. I am truly honored to be escorting such a beautiful and tasteful woman to dinner. We shall be dining at *The Boar and Bones*. Their rack of lamb—sixty-four dollars for two people—is the best in the city, not to mention their simply unequaled wine list. You do drink wine Veronica, do you not?" Wallace extended his elbow. Veronica slid her arm through. "Oh of course silly, who doesn't."

As they walked, the wind picked up a bit and blew in their faces. Wallace tried to hurry the pace, but Veronica's Italian-made stilettos—ninety-five dollars—prevented her from walking briskly. Slightly annoyed but always the gentleman, Wallace slowed his pace, gritted his teeth and fell in step with his slower companion. The walk—five blocks—was just long enough to be unpleasant in the chilly wind, but not long enough to justify a taxi. They walked past the courthouse and *The Knights of The Round Table Pub*. The courthouse was softly lit in amber flood lights and the sound of Celtic music was just audible from the pub. Three city buses, seemingly in a caravan, drove past in the lane closest to the sidewalk leaving black smoke and diesel fumes which temporarily engulfed them. Wallace thought about making a joke about the buses being out to get people today, but the chill and the slow pace had soured his sense of humor. Veronica too was tacit and stared straight ahead as if the walk were more like running a gauntlet than a stroll to dinner. Although she allowed her arm to remain in the arm of her escort, her skin goosebumped and the shortness of her skirt offered little protection against the cold. All in all, the walk was a terrible beginning to what Wallace had hoped would be a night that would end with Veronica Wilcox, the cute and stylish *Robbertsson's* clerk, in his antique sleigh bed—four hundred sixty-two dollars. Wallace tried to imagine her naked, and, in spite of the wind and chill, felt himself becoming slightly aroused.

Finally, they arrived at *The Boar and the Bone* only to find out that there had been a mistake in the reservation. The maitre d' could not explain how it possibly could have happened, but the restaurant was overbooked and there would be no chance at a table tonight. Wallace was furious. All thoughts of a nude Veronica Wilcox faded as did his partial

arousal. Just to think, Wallace J. Ambercrothy's evening ruined by a lowly maitre d'—thirty-two thousand annual at best—too inept to properly handle reservations. How outrageous. For the second time that day, Wallace wanted to break a window or punch a wall, but, as he did earlier, he swallowed his rage and suggested to Veronica Wilcox that they try their luck at *The Boston Room*, after all, it was certainly at least as good as *The Boar and Bones* with only a slightly inferior wine list. In the taxi, Veronica smiled as Wallace rested his arm around her shoulders and snuggled her in. The cab was overheated, however, and although Wallace demanded that the driver turn down the heat, the driver—feigning a language barrier—kept the blower on high. Soon they both felt clammy and separated to their respective sides. Wallace tried to get back in the mood by imagining what it would be like to stroke Veronica Wilcox's body, but the driver's erratic speed-ups and brakings prevented Wallace from getting anywhere close to aroused. Like *The Boar and Bones*, *The Boston Room* was also booked for the night. In fact so were the other five elegant dining locations Wallace ordered the driver to. When it was all said and done, both Wallace and Veronica were so hungry from the hour and a half they had been looking for a suitable restaurant and so uncomfortable from climbing in and out of various overheated cab only to meet the wind and chill of the night, that they found themselves with no option but to eat so-called spring salads from large ceramic bowls in a chain restaurant that Wallace refused to even mention by name. Even though the salads were ridiculously cheap—ten dollars and fifty cents each even with grilled chicken added—combined with the taxi fare, Wallace had spent what would have been the price of the rack of lamb for two at *The Boar and Bones*. And to top it off, the restaurant only had two wine choices. The server simply asked if they would like white or red. Disgusted, Wallace settled on water, while Veronica ordered the five dollar red. Red wine with salad, my god what sort of simpleton am I sitting with, though Wallace as he watched in distaste while Veronica drank the dark red wine served in a wine glass clearly made for whites. The food, along with a second glass of wine perked Veronica Wilcox up, and she smiled freely and reassured Wallace that the dinner shambles was something they would laugh about some day. That she was thinking of them being together *some day* brightened Wallace's spirits as well, and he once again allowed himself to

entertain fantasies of the naked Veronica Wilcox in his bed—a highly valued event. In an attempt to regain some of the lost romance from the lack of an elegant dinner, Wallace suggested dessert and drinks at the rooftop bar in the Edward's building. Veronica thought that sounded lovely, and the two found themselves once again in the back of a cab heading across town. The ride would take a good fifteen minutes, and Wallace thought this would be a good time to at least let Veronica know that he highly valued the prospect of taking her to bed tonight. Slowly he leaned over to her and moved in to kiss her lips. Veronica had just applied a new coat of red lipstick, and, as Wallace drew closer, the taxi struck a pothole and Veronica's lips glazed his forehead leaving a glossy red trail. Veronica chuckled, but Wallace was not amused. He pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket and with little help from Veronica who thought the whole incident quite amusing, attempted to rub the smear from his brow. He did get most of it, but a red blotch remained almost dead in the middle of his forehead slightly resembling an Indian woman's bindi.

It was pouring rain when the taxi stopped in front of the Edward's building and, without umbrellas and without being able to run due to her Italian-made stilettos, Wallace and Veronica were quite wet by the time they reached the door to the lobby which was locked. A handwritten sign was taped to the inside of the glass door indicating that due to a power outage, the rooftop lounge was closed for the evening. Of all the rotten luck, thought Wallace. Veronica's hair was flat from the weather and her vintage mink stole was beginning to look like a matted bathroom shag rug. Veronica, though, seemed to think all this was great fun as she again pointed out how funny this date would sound when talked about in the future. Wallace, however, was not anywhere near believing that this was turning into a quirky first date. Instead, he was upset about the rain on his custom-made wool suit, the absence of romance during the evening, and the lack of sufficient alcohol that he hoped would have lowered Veronica Wilcox's inhibitions. Although he wanted to punch it, Wallace aggressively slapped the stone wall of the Edward's building—a silly and shameful action, yet one he could not help but express. Veronica hugged Wallace and reassured him that despite the setbacks of the evening, she was having a great time and that none of the mishaps had been Wallace's fault anyway. Wallace shook his stinging palm

and accepted Veronica's caresses. Perhaps all was not lost after all, maybe there was still a play to be made. Wallace had already invested a great deal of time and a bit of money to get this far, maybe he should not yet chalk this up as a loss. For in truth, even with flat hair and a matted shawl, Veronica Wilcox was still a woman, and under those clothes was still a body that could deliver pleasure.

Wallace took Veronica's hand and looked directly into her eyes. "Veronica, I'm so sorry for this outrageous evening, and I would not blame you one bit if you merely wanted to call separate taxis and retire to our respective dwellings at this point, but I believe that the evening can only improve from here. I have a very special bordeaux at the shop—two hundred thirty five dollars retail—and I would be honored if you would help me taste it. I also have, if I may say so myself, quite a tasteful collection of collectable classical music albums—fourteen."

"Mr. Ambercro ... I mean Wallace... are you asking me back to your place? ... I'm not so sure that's such a good idea."

"I assure you Ms. Wilcox, I am a true gentleman. There is no ulterior motive in my invitation. We simply seem to be striking out right and left in the city tonight, and I for one would like to share a good glass of wine with a beautiful woman such as you." Wallace hoped she would believe this. It was grasping at straws and he knew it, but if he were going to get Veronica Wilcox in bed, definitely a highly valued accomplishment, he had to make a move.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Ambercro ... Wallace ... I'll agree on one condition."

"Anything Veronica, anything."

"Tell me what really happened in court today and what really happened to that houndstooth jacket."

Wallace, caught off guard, nearly stumbled backward. Of all the silly demands. Must he humiliate himself in front of this woman if he were to have a chance of sleeping with her. How much might she already know? What might have that jaded judge and that silly attorney told Veronica about what actually happened? And the jacket ... absolutely careless and humiliating, a six hundred and fifty-five dollar vintage houndstooth blazer, preserved

impeccably for over sixty years, carelessly ruined in an oily puddle just minutes after he had carried it out of the shop. No, the value of Wallace's pride was greater than the value of any woman's affection. He would not bow to humiliation and debasement just to sleep with Veronica Wilcox. Wallace did a quick mental calculation—Pride, thirty thousand roughly, sex with Veronica Wilcox, four hundred fifty for a comparable call girl. Easy decision if he did not let his arousal influence his thinking and, as an expert appraiser, he was well schooled in basing his appraisals on true value as opposed to sentimental and emotional desires.

"Why Veronica dear, but you already know."

"Do I, Wallace? Really?"

"Why yes, we talked about this in the shop and in the bar. There is little value in restating already known occurrences."

Wallace Ambercrothy stepped out into the rain and watched Veronica Wilcox's shapely behind as the beautiful *Robertsson's* clerk, draped in a vintage mink shawl, walked without concern about getting wet, down the sidewalk to hail a cab to take her home.

Wallace Ambercrothy would return to his home to sleep with his pride intact, but he would also return to his home to sleep alone.