

THREE  
WEEKS  
LESS  
A  
DAY

*a novel by* Gary D. McGugan



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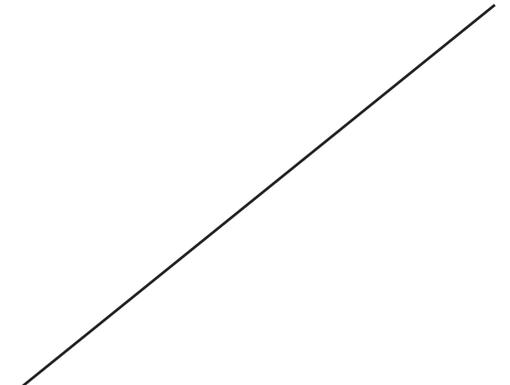
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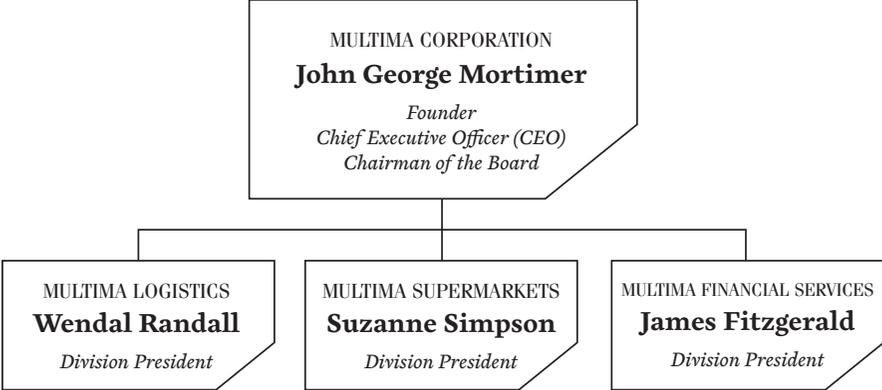
*1. FICTION, THRILLERS*

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For my wife, Linda,  
who planted and nurtured the idea of writing a novel.





# ONE

*Miami.*

*Thursday, February 18, 2016*

Head down, eyes shaded with stylish Serengeti glasses, Wendal Randall bounded down the broad concrete steps. Engrossed in an intense cell phone conversation, he scarcely noticed the tiny wisps of high white clouds accenting a brilliant blue sky. He nodded curtly, then watched as a uniformed limousine driver made eye contact, quickly swiveled around with surprising agility, circled behind the vehicle, and opened the rear door with a grand flourish precisely as his passenger arrived.

Wordlessly, but with a cheerful smile of appreciation, Wendal ducked into the rear compartment, cradling the tan jacket of a tailored Armani suit over his left arm. The driver closed the door and then, within seconds, the luxury German-engineered sedan was on its way while Wendal continued his Bluetooth conversation.

“That time and motion detector is really over the top, Ricky,” he said. “I’ve never seen an app convert data so quickly with such little information. Let’s be sure the patent attorneys get the paperwork finalized today.”

“Already on top of it, WR. You surely taught me that lesson. I may not be as quick as you, but I’ll never come up on the short end of a groundbreaking invention again,” Ricky Technori responded with a laugh.

“Don’t sell yourself short. We both know there’s no one in the business who can churn out code as quickly and accurately as you. And I note that you thoughtfully remind me about that little MIT incident every time we have our chat about your performance,” Wendal responded lightheartedly.

“Don’t you think those nice five figure bonuses more than compensate for your one tiny oversight way back then? Keep coming up with great ideas like this app, and those bonuses will soon have another zero added!” he continued.

“Now, can you summarize all the new benefits in a PowerPoint I can use at that technology conference next week? It’s sure to get us tons of media coverage and maybe even some new business. Can you get it to me by Sunday so I can build it into my presentation?”

“Consider it done,” Technori replied to finish their call.

Relieved to end the call quickly, he could now fully enjoy the tranquility of this short ride from his office just off Biscayne Boulevard to Miami International Airport. Wendal usually diverted incoming calls to voice mail while he traveled, and with some slick computer programming, delayed all incoming email and text messages for thirty minutes. Only a few pre-qualified names could override the complex coding to disturb him in real time. He valued such rare opportunities to escape the constant torrent of telephone calls, emails, and personal meetings that came with his role as president of Multima Logistics, the technology and logistics division of Multima Corporation.

He used these few moments to lean back in the car’s comfortable rear seat, stretch his long legs, and take a deep breath. He performed the same ritual almost every trip to the airport. Relaxed, he could spend a few minutes thinking of upcoming challenges or past successes.

That made the sudden, intrusive buzz of an arriving text message an annoying interruption. With a sigh, he dutifully reached for his device and read:

*Confidential. JGM to leave at FYE. Call me tonight. Cell. H.*

“Holy shit!” Wendal blurted aloud, attracting his driver’s momentary glance in the rear-view mirror. This was big! Those cryptic words carried important news. Instantly, he started processing the startling message. ‘JGM’ referred to John George Mortimer, founder and chief executive officer of Multima Corporation. Wendal’s boss, this legendary CEO was considered one of the richest men in America with untold billions in personal wealth.

Mortimer’s apparent intention to leave the company at Multima’s fiscal year end was almost unfathomable. Without a doubt, it would have incalculable implications. Whom would the board of directors choose to replace Mortimer? How would the board make such an important decision? Where would Wendal fit in their plans?

‘H’ was Howard Knight, an influential director on the board of Multima Corporation. He was also on the board of powerful Venture Capital Investments, a large private equity fund based in New York, and there was some history between Randall and Knight. Their first encounter took place almost ten years earlier when Wendal owned a small company experiencing dire financial difficulties.

These converging bits of information sent Wendal’s heart rate racing, causing him to think about his promising career and the dramatic upheaval he had already experienced in such a short time. It seemed like a whirlwind had engulfed him since the day he graduated college.

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Those years at Massachusetts Institute of Technology were truly impressive. In fact, Wendal cultivated his earliest exciting ideas at MIT, where he graduated *magna cum laude*, earning a master’s degree in business administration with a major in computer science.

His classmates and professors considered him a genius with almost any aspect of computer technology. Throughout six remarkable academic years, Wendal was also a master electronic gamer, an adventurous hacker, and a creative dreamer. In classes, he listened intently to professors’ lectures about all aspects of international business, then undertook research on his own.

As his college education progressed, Wendal conjured up almost unlimited opportunities to earn money and achieve status. Eventually, he came to realize that companies everywhere move trillions of dollars in goods from factories to distribution warehouses and customers in every corner of the world. He envisioned a compelling need to track all these manufactured products to ensure timely delivery with minimal damage or theft.

He learned that companies also tried to minimize inventory in transit or storage by precisely scheduling shipments of goods to arrive as needed by customers, a concept originally pioneered by Japanese business with just-in-time deliveries.

Wendal grasped that a software package allowing companies to track their shipments accurately could have enormous benefits for purchasers, manufacturers, and all those involved in the many stages between a factory and a customer.

He devoted every spare moment of his last two years at MIT and leveraged from classmates all the expertise he could coax or cajole to invent a miniature tracking device. The result was a work of art. As thin as a sheet of paper and the size of a postage stamp, the device could easily attach to cartons or individual packages with an adhesive. Once the goods entered an area equipped with Wi-Fi, this tiny device would send a signal to a satellite. With the Internet, data could instantly flow to computers around the globe.

Wisely, Wendal secured patents on the tracking device. He and his friends also wrote, tested, and perfected code for a unique and innovative software program they could license for a fee.

After graduating, he recruited three classmates whose brilliance in technology approached his, and they all set out for the Sunshine State. In Miami, they founded Worldwide Logistics Corporation, commonly known as WLC. It was a minuscule business with a grandiose name, but also with a spectacularly unique product.

After just three exciting years, Randall and his colleagues had grown WLC into a multi-million-dollar enterprise doing business with companies on every continent. Then the problems started. Unfortunately, internal expense controls were no match for either the creative genius of its software programming or Wendal's penchant for expensive marketing schemes. Poor financing decisions further compounded problems. Debts piled up fast. Lenders gradually became unwilling to lend.

Eventually, it appeared WLC was teetering on the precipice of bankruptcy, with Wendal about to lose all of his invested money, his business, and his dreams of success.

At that desperate juncture, investment banker Howard Knight suddenly appeared. It was apparent he knew all about Wendal Randall, even before their initial contact. He was well aware of his outstanding education, intellect, and technological genius. The crushing business debt was no concern. Surprisingly, Knight seemed sympathetic to his dire financial circumstances. He said he'd seen it all many times before.

He offered a solution. "Sell WLC to a much larger and financially stronger company, one that can take over the debts. Such a sale will provide a life-saving financial solution for your struggling company."

Further, Knight implied there might even be an opportunity for Wendal to continue managing his venture after the acquisition. "Success is still achievable. You just need the financial umbrella of an already well-established and profitable company."

At that point, Wendal had few other options. Given the impending fiscal disaster, it all looked incredibly elegant. They started discussions to sell Wendal's faltering company to John George Mortimer and become part of his formidable enterprise, Multima Corporation.

Howard Knight served as intermediary and talks progressed well. Mortimer had been looking for technology expertise to improve the critical logistics of his sprawling Multima Supermarkets division and

was also prepared to let Wendal continue to manage the business, just as Howard Knight had predicted.

Mortimer's offer to purchase came with three conditions. He would appoint a new chief financial officer to better control company finances. The WLC name would immediately change to Multima Logistics. And, most importantly, Randall must understand that the supermarkets division of Multima Corporation would become his number one focus.

Their deal closed within months, and John George Mortimer created a new operating division—Multima Logistics. Wendal Randall became its relieved and debt-free president while Mortimer became Wendal's first-ever boss.

Their transaction proved to be brilliant. Multima Logistics continued to grow its sales dramatically over the next ten years. Its innovative technology helped Multima Supermarkets become a leader in shipping, warehousing, deliveries, and inventory management. In fact, Multima Supermarkets gradually became one of the lowest cost operators in all of America's intensely competitive retail industry.

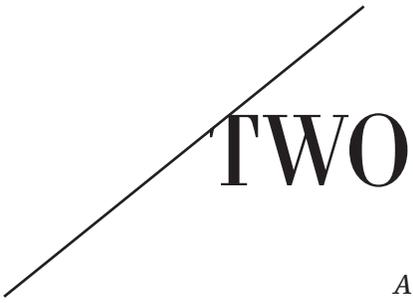
Meanwhile, Wendal continued to advance his sophisticated GPS technology to include other valuable customers such as car rental outlets, heavy-equipment suppliers, and finance companies.

Wendal Randall and John George Mortimer also became close friends, despite a thirty-year gap in their ages. Randall's genius with technology constantly intrigued Mortimer, who in turn repeatedly impressed Wendal with his unrivaled business acumen.

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As Wendal's limousine glided into the private jet section in a corner of Miami International Airport, his thoughts returned to Knight's earlier text message. Much was about to change. If Howard Knight's secret information proved correct, within a few months an entirely new business era would be underway at Multima. With that sobering thought, Randall felt an odd tingling sensation on the back of his neck. His few moments of quiet time were over.

Jolted back to real time, a newfound conviction seized him without much more consideration. He must find a way to become Multima Corporation's leader and define the company's future. That evening's call with Howard Knight promised to be an interesting one.



# TWO

*An office tower near Wall Street, New York.  
Late night, February 18, 2016*

Howard Knight reached for the ringing smartphone.

“Knight here.” His tone was soft yet intense.

“Wendal Randall returning your message. Sorry it’s a little late. I expect you didn’t want our conversation overheard by a driver and thought it better to call you from the privacy of a hotel room.”

Knight nodded in silent agreement, acknowledging that Wendal was showing improved judgment with such sensitive matters. He assured Randall the late hour was not a problem and added that this conversation would likely be his last, after a long sixteen-hour day of constant focus.

Although anxious to get on with the purpose of the call, Wendal was apprehensive about how best to proceed. Howard Knight was, after all, a powerful director of the company. Moreover, their prior conversations had not always been pleasant.

“Your text message today was certainly unusual,” Randall said tentatively.

“Yes. This new development is interesting for all of us,” Knight responded. “In fact, some of us on the board have been expecting it and waiting patiently for it for some time now. John George Mortimer is a business legend, and there’s no doubt he’s developed a successful company, but he’s aging and seems to be losing his competitive edge. Some of us think Multima Corporation would benefit from someone new running the company, someone more creative and energetic.”

*Interesting start*, Wendal thought. “Sounds like you may welcome a leadership change,” he said.

“Some of us think that might rejuvenate the business,” Knight responded. “And let me say, Wendal, some of us are thinking about you as a potential CEO candidate. Do you want it?”

Wendal tried to suppress an audible gulp for air as the resounding importance of this question registered.

Desperately, he tried to process both the suggestion and its implications to structure an appropriate response. Of course he wanted the

job. Virtually every business executive in America would covet such a role. But he knew he should not appear too anxious or the price of Knight’s support might go up.

“I wouldn’t use the term ‘want’ because I remain satisfied working with my team in Miami. However, if offered such a position, a division president of Multima would be foolish not to consider it seriously,” Wendal responded.

*Right*, Howard Knight thought. *He’s trying to play the reluctant leader. We’ll dispense with that crap immediately.*

“Let’s not waste each other’s time, Wendal. Those of us who are considering this issue have no time for games. If the board offers you the CEO position at Multima, will you accept it or not?”

“I might like to discuss a relocation of the corporate headquarters to Miami and perhaps other details, but I’d be very interested in the job,” Wendal conceded.

“Good,” Knight replied. “Pleased to learn you’re willing if selected. But it’s going to be imperative that we handle your succession to the CEO role very delicately if we want to win support from the entire board. Let me explain what’s going on and how we’ll need to prepare.

“This whole matter must remain totally under the radar. No information shared with anybody. Mortimer had us all sign some ridiculous binding confidentiality agreements. We’re not supposed to disclose any details about his planned retirement. Sharing this with you already puts me in violation, and if anyone traces it back to me, there will be severe consequences. Are we clear?”

Wendal swallowed hard and quickly responded that he understood the ground rules. He had experienced some of Knight’s ‘severe consequences’ a few years earlier. He certainly didn’t want that to happen again.

As he listened, Randall was disarmed and surprised by both Knight’s candor and his open declaration of apparent support. Tentatively, a broad smile took form as he digested both the extraordinary new information and implied assistance to catapult him into the most powerful position in the company.

There didn’t seem to be any strings attached, and he couldn’t immediately identify any new costs. It certainly appeared that Knight had become a secret ally in Wendal’s career progression efforts. This development was truly a dramatic departure from bygone days.

“Now, Wendal,” Knight said. “Tell me about some of the exciting new projects you and your team are working on down there in Miami.”

Without a moment's hesitation, he began. For the next fifteen minutes, Wendal articulated an idea that had been incubating in his mind for several weeks. It was a radical plan, an idea he had previously been reluctant to discuss with his CEO because he knew Mortimer would have serious reservations.

This conversation created an opportunity to move that far-reaching idea forward. Now, he could ferret out waste and duplication of human resources that cost Multima enormously every year. Should his ambitious idea win the support of the board, hundreds of millions of dollars more would flow to the bottom line profits every year. Not a bad circumstance for a new CEO.

Wendal sensed this might be an ideal time to enlist the support of the board to re-engineer basic operations in the Multima Supermarkets division, realizing profits dramatically higher with advanced technologies. As he outlined his idea to Knight, Wendal grew convinced this opportunity was the golden chance he had been seeking. Further, the exercise would showcase the diverse talent and technical brilliance of management throughout his division.

Most crucially, it might also be an opportunity to move right to the top of the Multima organization chart in a role he unquestionably deserved.



# THREE

*Venture Capital Investments' offices, New York.  
Almost midnight, February 18, 2016*

Howard Knight was relieved to be back in his office after an exhausting business day. Using the VCI business jet, he started with a three-hour flight from New York early in the morning, then another three for his return from Fort Myers. In between, he had participated in that momentous meeting of the Multima board of directors when John George Mortimer divulged his shocking and company-changing retirement plans.

His conversation with Wendal Randall concluded this unusual day in a peculiarly satisfying way.

Mortimer's disclosure of his imminent retirement as CEO of Multima Corporation was a development Knight had privately predicted and anticipated with increasing eagerness for more than a year. He had detected small signs of fatigue starting to appear in Mortimer's facial expressions and body language. Further, he wasn't entirely satisfied with some of Mortimer's recent decisions. The CEO was aging, and with the onset of advancing years, even the most successful business legends lose a little of that intangible mystique that sets them apart.

Howard Knight knew his call with Wendal Randall involved high personal risks. Nevertheless, he was certain Randall would keep it confidential. That was not a problem. The real issue was Randall's judgment. It had some major flaws.

Knight grimaced as he recalled with distaste a nasty issue back in Wendal Randall's college days. That unsavory problem had gurgled to the surface during the delicate negotiations with Multima Corporation to buy Wendal's failing company.

Of course, some understandable factors led to the incident. Wendal was the consummate geek throughout his teen years. Addicted to technology and electronic games, he barely experienced what most people would consider a normal social life. In fact, he never learned how to relate to women. He had never dated, even in college. So it was somewhat understandable that his one college sexual adventure went terribly awry.

It was a shame Randall hadn't been able to adequately contain the damage. Instead, Knight was forced to use external resources to make the problem go away. He was now out of pocket more than one hundred thousand dollars. Of even greater importance, he also owed The Organization something in return. This new development with Multima might help to settle that lingering obligation. After a decade of patience, the Multima Project appeared ready to bring those lucrative investment returns The Organization desperately craved.

It had been a long time coming. Knight originally conceived his idea to acquire Multima Corporation more than a decade ago while laboring in his office at Venture Capital Investments. For months, he meticulously toiled through detailed investment research to absorb everything he could about the Multima empire.

First, he pored over corporate presentations, annual reports, and analyst recommendations. Then, he learned the company structure, who owned shares, how the board of directors governed the company, and even how John George Mortimer's thought process seemed to work. Additionally, he thoroughly investigated the personal backgrounds of all senior members of Multima's management team.

Knight scrutinized Multima's many business successes and even managed to identify a few strategic errors. Back in those days of mind-numbing research and investigation, Howard Knight probably knew more about Multima than any individual outside the company. Moreover, he liked what he saw.

When Knight learned about Wendal and his struggling company, he recognized he might have the desired investment carrot to entice Mortimer. He had been confident that Mortimer eventually would agree to almost anything to gain control of that tiny, failing logistics firm headed by an owner who also happened to be *the* technology genius of his generation.

It had been a grinding process to put the transaction together, but his prediction had proven correct. Mortimer eventually agreed to surrender a good chunk of Multima's ownership control to acquire Wendal Randall and his little technology company.

VCI's billion-dollar investment to purchase fifteen percent of all Multima Corporation preferred shares had been steep. To date, the return on that investment had been adequate. However, The Organization didn't invest its money to earn just adequate returns. They expected stellar results every time.

Now, it looked like a genuine payoff might be around the corner. With Mortimer relinquishing day-to-day management of the company, Knight was poised to implement some drastic new corporate operating policies that could genuinely benefit The Organization. Wendal Randall would become an essential component of such changes, and his ascension to the position of CEO was crucial.

With more than \$150 million per week flowing through Multima Supermarkets, he could only imagine the limitless opportunities to move and conceal money that otherwise might be problematic. The Organization already had a patchwork of solutions to hide and launder cash, but this opportunity might become the golden goose they had craved for an entire generation—a respected and visible company where no one would suspect money laundering activities.

At last, the ultimate success of his plan to control Multima Corporation appeared achievable. Of course, Knight would need to ensure that Randall and his colleagues performed well in the little management transition charade Mortimer was trying to stage.

Knight would also need to do some work with other members of the board of directors to influence the outcome. Nevertheless, he knew his plan to please The Organization required Wendal Randall to become chief executive officer. For the next few months, at least, Knight vowed to keep a close eye on him to avoid any further nasty surprises like that sordid mess with the college girl.

His mission would be to ensure there were no surprises at all. The Organization didn't react well to bad news, and Howard Knight had no desire to test the patience of the powerful interests he served.

# FOUR

*Fort Myers, Florida.  
February 23, 2016*

John George Mortimer confidently strolled towards his car parked outside his elegant home on Caloosa Drive. It was ten minutes before the scheduled start of his meeting with the three division presidents and small executive staff at Multima Corporation's headquarters.

Initially, some found it curious that Mortimer chose to relocate to a somnolent locale like Fort Myers. Many considered the mid-sized city on the west coast of Florida mainly a community catering to seasonal 'snowbirds' seeking relief from the miserable weather of their northern habitats. But Mortimer loved to spend time at his waterfront home on the slow-moving and aimlessly winding Caloosahatchee River. It was only a mile from the picturesque locations Thomas Edison and Henry Ford had both selected to build their winter estates a century earlier. He considered it an honor to reside in the same neighborhood those legendary icons of American business once called home.

John George had purchased his property several years earlier. Initially, he had used this home as a seasonal retreat until he made the big decision to relocate permanently from Atlanta. He loved the year-round Florida sunshine and warm, almost tropical, climate. Plus, he favored the idea of locating Multima's corporate offices away from the three operating divisions to reduce his personal involvement in day-to-day operations.

Lightheartedly, he had noted that Fort Myers successfully worked as corporate headquarters for such diverse companies as fashion retailer Chico's, medical specialist 21st Century Oncology, and media publisher Source Interlink Companies. If it could work for them, it would work for his small team that provided oversight for the three operating divisions of Multima Corporation.

*This will be a significant day*, he thought as he opened the door to his car. With a gentle press of the ignition button, the engine started, and he smoothly engaged the transmission of his BMW Z435 convertible.

This splendid sports car was one of his few indulgences and a recent purchase. With sparkling black metallic paint and a seven-speed

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double clutch transmission, it was eye-catching and fun to drive. Mortimer accelerated quickly and swung the vehicle out from the cobblestone driveway onto Caloosa Drive. Then he turned left onto McGregor Boulevard and cruised toward his office with the top down, his hair blowing freely in the wind.

John George actually enjoyed the brief commute. It always stimulated his senses. He admired the swaying royal palm trees that majestically lined both sides of McGregor Boulevard leading to the city center. He was always in awe of the elegant and graceful motion of the palm leaves swaying in a seemingly permanent breeze wafting from the Gulf of Mexico.

He thought the scene appeared almost choreographed and smiled as he considered the irony of naming Fort Myers the 'City of Palms'. The royal palm tree wasn't indigenous to Florida, and few people realized that Thomas Edison had originally imported them to Fort Myers by barge from nearby Cuba around the beginning of the twentieth century.

Regardless, such regal trees decorated the route towards the center of an evolving city that Mortimer appreciated. Still, Fort Myers' current leaders were working diligently to rejuvenate the core and create a unique municipal persona to compete with several other redeveloped and equally appealing cities along Florida's increasingly popular southwest coast.

He recalled the previous evening's spectacular sunset as he drove. Fiery shades of red and brilliant orange with a soft background of yellow had all formed a colorful mosaic. The sky became a dramatic contrast with the dark and brooding blue of the Caloosahatchee as it journeyed towards the Gulf.

It was another powerful reminder of the many good personal reasons John George had decided to make Fort Myers home. It also served to reinforce his earlier conclusion. It had become time to enjoy more golf, more travel for pleasure, and more Florida sunsets. Of course, full indulgence would need to come later, after this newly diagnosed challenge with cancer achieved the remission stage.

For a few moments, wistful thoughts about his contented private life were overshadowed by a gnawing concern about the upcoming surgery and underlying reasons for the meeting he was about to conduct, but he forced himself to set aside his health to focus on final preparation for the imminent session with his team of direct reports.

He knew this meeting would be crucial, perhaps one of the single most significant in his long career. John George realized it would be paramount to choose his words carefully and manage his body language with care. For his strategy to play out as hoped, the potential CEO candidates

must not become aware of either his illness or intention to retire. So, he had planned for this day with his usual attention to detail.

The cancer diagnosis triggered doubts about his ability to continue leading the company. After receiving the dreaded news, Mortimer spent several days evaluating his options before meticulously formulating a strategy. He decided to retire from the company at the end of June. The end of his storied career would coincide with the last day of Multima's fiscal year.

However, he was not ready for the world at large to learn about such a crucial decision. Instead, he wanted to hold all the cards when it came time to name a successor. That might not be possible, should the business media start to speculate openly about potential candidates to succeed him and possibly short-circuit his personal preference.

Even worse, his diagnosis was serious. Should they become aware of this motivation for him to retire, the board of directors might even choose to remove him and appoint interim leadership immediately. Thus, his recent secret disclosure to the board concealed his health concerns and instead focused on a proposal for a covert contest to select his replacement.

Today, he earnestly wanted to avoid giving any signal about the upcoming surgery or the resignation timetable he'd shared with his board. On the other hand, he was anxious to convey the importance of their assignments eloquently. It was crucial that the three division presidents approach their upcoming projects with a collective sense of urgency to make the plan work. It had to work, because Mortimer fully expected one of them to be chosen CEO by the board.

Mortimer usually read the people on his board and their individual quirks quite well. He was confident each would undertake seriously his or her responsibility to choose someone with all the attributes necessary to lead a successful multi-billion dollar corporation.

John George had also incessantly focused the board's attention on Multima's business culture over many years. There was already broad acceptance among directors that his successor should be someone from within the corporation, and everyone accepted his several good reasons an executive with practical experience leading a Multima business unit should become CEO. However, John George knew some board members harbored lingering concerns about the bench strength of supporting management in the operating units.

While he thought all directors clearly recognized the genius of Wendal Randall, some had quietly expressed apprehension about the

depth and practical business skills of the technology-obsessed folks reporting to him. Although subordinates might be called 'direct reports' at Multima, the board recognized the nomenclature of second line management mattered little. Rather, it was the team's collective leadership skills that would determine future successes should the board pluck Wendal from their division to head the entire corporation.

While the brilliance of James Fitzgerald in all matters financial was unquestioned, Mortimer knew the board sometimes perceived the style of his direct reports at Multima Financial Services as somewhat methodical and plodding.

Meanwhile, Suzanne Simpson's polished people skills and larger than life personality had become legendary at Multima Supermarkets. As a consequence, some board members quietly wondered if it would be possible to maintain the unit's stellar level of labor harmony and unwavering employee loyalty should Suzanne leave the business.

These insights about the board's concerns were underlying factors in the way John George molded his succession plan. It would be crucial that the three management teams identify outstanding new business initiatives to radically overhaul their business units. It was equally essential for each of them to develop powerful new ideas and present them succinctly to the board of directors for review and approval. Indeed, Mortimer wanted the three division presidents to treat this project as career defining. Creating such urgency would be his mission today.

If the division presidents successfully rose to this challenge and impressed the board with their business acumen, Mortimer had little doubt his preferred candidate would ultimately seize the opportunity and outshine the others. That would make it easier for the board to endorse his choice. It would also make it easier for him to step away from the CEO role and transition to private life as just a major shareholder.

As Mortimer made the left turn from McGregor Boulevard onto Altamont Avenue, he quickly reviewed the division presidents and some characteristics he had observed working with them.

Wendal Randall was clearly the most technology-savvy of the group, and the way he looked, dressed, and acted conjured the commonly held image of a nerd. The MIT graduate lived up to all the advance billing Howard Knight had described before Multima's purchase of Wendal's company. Randall was quick thinking, fast-talking, and always showed an unusually high energy level. John George suppressed a smile as he tried to visualize Randall's brain churning restlessly as it

perpetually processed data with lightning speed and spewed out streams of innovative ideas.

Wendal seemed to gush with enthusiasm and passion. Of course, all of the division presidents were smart, but Randall clearly and consistently exhibited the highest intellect. However, he occasionally failed to analyze his ideas with enough depth, causing a failure to assess all possible implications. No doubt that tendency contributed to the earlier financial problems that allowed Multima to take over his company. On the positive side, Wendal seemed aware of this limitation and appeared to have learned much from his previous mistakes.

He had responded positively when Mortimer injected Joseph Kowntz, his hand-picked financial operations leader, to control the purse strings of the newly acquired technology and logistics group. Not only did Wendal accept that requirement, but he also seemed to embrace the new circumstance. Apparently, he now consulted with Kowntz and tested ideas with him before implementing them or making proposals to the board.

Randall would almost certainly be a first choice as a CEO candidate with several directors, and he would respond with enthusiasm to the challenge Mortimer was about to issue. In fact, Randall's sole difficulty might be limiting ideas to just one. He would need to do that first, and then precisely focus his direct reports around a single concept to create enough structure and detail to sell it to the board.

Wendal should be alright with the assignment and would probably welcome an opportunity to demonstrate his considerable creativity and intellect. From a big picture perspective, some on the board might still wonder if he lacked consistently grounded business judgment.

James Fitzgerald might need an extra jolt, John George mused as his thoughts shifted to the president of Multima's Financial Services division. Fitzgerald projected the classic, clean-cut image of a seasoned and highly successful executive. Tall, handsome, fit, and usually dressed in finely tailored suits, he always carried himself with confidence and poise.

James had joined Multima Supermarkets right after graduating near the top of his class at Harvard. During the following few years, he successfully earned his Certified Public Accountant credentials and quickly progressed through the management ranks of Multima Supermarkets, eventually becoming chief financial officer. He had been an extraordinary CFO.

He seemed to grasp all aspects of the financial world. From the subtle intricacies of financial markets through the mundane complexities of accounting and tax regulations, he had consistently demonstrated

superior knowledge and almost total recall of minute details. What's more, Fitzgerald had another rare business attribute: vision.

To his credit, the idea to create a financial services company originated with James. He had clearly visualized the long-term value of generating greater customer loyalty by offering a credit card that customers could use to pay for purchases at Multima stores. He had articulated how the cards would become more powerful tools when used to reward customers.

Fitzgerald thought loyalty points should earn discounts or special prices for subsequent purchases, and he intuitively anticipated that many customers would also use their cards at many other merchants, generating attractive transaction fees for Multima with every purchase.

Well ahead of Mortimer, Fitzgerald had foreseen that about seventy percent of customers would pay their full outstanding credit card balance every month. The remaining thirty percent would make the minimum payment required and generate lucrative interest income on their balances. With interest charges calculated at about twenty percent annually, Fitzgerald demonstrated to Mortimer that Multima could almost double its net profits from annual supermarket sales by adding financial services to its business model.

When they all became convinced it could work, John George created an entirely new operating division, Multima Financial Services, and appointed James Fitzgerald to lead it. He had never disappointed. Every year, he and his team generated increasing profits. As forecasted, financial services made almost as much profit for Multima as the original supermarket business.

James Fitzgerald's decisions always seemed well considered. Then, his team intricately planned strategies and almost flawlessly executed them. The one potential board concern was Fitzgerald's direct reports.

John George recalled one director's candid comments over a drink. "They're all unquestionably accomplished, but they're also finance professionals with a little grayness to their style."

"What do you mean by that?" John George remembered inquiring.

"Every decision seems ponderous as key participants debate all identifiable risks, explore multiple execution strategies, and try to mitigate every risk. This approach works well in the financial services industry where loss mitigation is critical to success, but it also can make them appear dithering or indecisive," he said.

Just to be sure James Fitzgerald and his team would attach the requisite urgency to the upcoming assignment, Mortimer knew he must create an unusual twist. It was imperative Fitzgerald and his direct

reports not only match but surpass the anticipated brilliance of the Wendal Randall team. He made a mental note to inject an extra jolt for James at the coming meeting.

Suzanne Simpson was the third key player in the drama Mortimer was trying to direct. If he were to describe her in one word, it would be 'extraordinary'. Among the top of her graduating class in the MBA program at Stanford, Suzanne had consistently demonstrated superior intellect and unwavering willingness to tackle any challenge.

She was so beautiful and poised that many wondered if she might have once been a beauty pageant candidate. But she would never have competed to become Miss America as she was from Canada. Actually, she was Québécoise, as she and other women from Quebec prefer to be called. Like many Québécoise, Suzanne exhibited a flair for fashion and elegance that set her apart from her colleagues, male or female.

More importantly, Suzanne displayed people skills that distinguished her from her peers. She consistently demonstrated a remarkable ability to recall instantly the name of almost every person she met. Thousands of them, it seemed. She projected an unusually positive outlook and exuded genuine warmth and enthusiasm in every personal encounter. She embodied the image of a 'people person'.

Mortimer thought she combined an outstanding intellect with an ability to consistently make and execute tough decisions. The result was a business leader who became president of a Canadian supermarket chain before the age of thirty-five, then president of Multima Supermarkets soon after John George Mortimer acquired her company a dozen years earlier.

The board of directors knew Suzanne's direct reports well. Her management style emphasized teamwork, and she always highlighted accomplishments of those reporting to her in presentations to the board. She also invariably invited some member of her management team to join her for board meetings, the only division president to do so.

Mortimer expected that most directors would become comfortable with the bench strength and business acumen of more than one member of Suzanne's team. Nevertheless, an important question lingered. Could the directors picture a woman—even one of her stature—as head of a corporation as large and complex as Multima? Regrettably, as with most other boards in America, he had seen strains of conservative reluctance among a few of his directors.

He had little doubt Suzanne would rise to the challenge and find a superior solution to the project Mortimer was about to demand. She was also sensitive to minute shifts in the economy and would probably

tilt intuitively towards the urgency Mortimer would request. He could remain confident that Suzanne Simpson and her team would present formidable competition for the two male division presidents.

All factors considered, he was growing increasingly confident the board of directors would reach a consensus on the candidate he felt most suited to move into the crucial role of chief executive officer.

Adequately reassured, John George arrived at the nondescript four-story building that housed Multima Corporation's headquarters in downtown Fort Myers. He parked in the outdoor lot and paused a moment to gaze out over the slow-moving body of water. As he collected his thoughts, he drew in a deep breath of the clear, refreshing Gulf of Mexico air carried up the Caloosahatchee River on a gentle breeze.

He closed the BMW convertible top, locked the doors, and strode with purpose towards the building. He was off to chair a very interesting meeting.