



FICTION

Tribeca Tale

By **KARL TARO GREENFELD**

IN THE LONG afternoon light, the yellow glow extending down the West-East thoroughfares from river to river, casting businessmen and bums and wives and bike messengers all, for a moment, in halo-like glow, so that the most repugnant and repulsive among us looked, for an instant, blessed and beatific, it was too easy to imagine that we had found our noble plot. The end of history—hadn't Rankin heard that? If only it were true, if only it had come to an end and Rankin could be sure of stasis so that each and every move could be made secure with the knowledge that the odds wouldn't suddenly change mid-play. Sure, there had been 9/11, just a few blocks away but already ancient history, a subject his son

KARL TARO GREENFELD, *whose fiction has appeared in The Best American Short Stories annual, is a former writer and editor for Time and Sports Illustrated and the author, most recently, of Boy Alone about his autistic brother Noah.*

came home from school asking about—when bad guys flew planes into the twin towers. We could see them from the roof, Rankin would explain. And somehow, the boy found that answer satisfactory.

He wasn't the type to marvel at how they had all put that behind them, the whole neighborhood, displaced for a few months, sent to hotels and relatives uptown while they waited for the all-clear. Rankin had seen the event for what it was: a buying opportunity. It was actually his emotional response to seeing the buildings aflame from his roof, to watching those falling bodies—they hadn't seemed human to Rankin, or he had managed to convince himself, while he was standing there, that they weren't human. Later he would realize what he had seen. But his first impulse, and it was as deeply felt as any feeling he would ever have, was, remarkably: buy. Buy property. Buy Tribeca.

Where did such pragmatic instincts come from? He didn't know. But as Tiffany loaded the Escalade and made sure Jeremy was strapped into the car seat—Amber had just been born—he found himself wondering if any brokers were open that day.

That had been a universe ago. And that stream trickling out of Tribeca that morning had been more than offset by the vast tidal inflow of many, many more looking to move in. The downward blip in prices had been momentary, and Rankin had been buying, and so as the city had reveled through this almost onanistic celebration of itself and its prosperity, Rankin had felt as deserving of positive strokes as anyone else in the neighborhood.

Now it was ebbing again, the trickle outward, bankers and money runners pulling up, selling short, bailing. Rankin was not subject to herd pessimism. Unleveraged, he bided. Soon it would be time again.

He had become an upstanding member of the community, an early pillar and major donor of the Lower Manhattan Jewish Community Center and its affiliated Hebrew school. He sponsored the planting of maples along his block and gave scores of Yankee Stadium boxes to the PTA auction. He had become, by necessity and intention, a respected member of the community, dependable, reliable, yet still regarded, by anyone who spoke with him, with a certain degree of fear.

Was Rankin connected? Whom, exactly, did he know? Rankin himself couldn't tell you—connected was such a freighted word. He knew an awful lot of guys. Guys he grew up with in Flatbush. Guys he worked with at nightclubs. Guys he paid to deliver him cut-rate booze and other guys he bribed to leave his clubs alone. Guys he hired to work his doors. Guys he trusted to run his betting rooms and guys he knew who collected debts. A bunch of guys. That's all. Hardly any of these guys lived in the neighborhood but you would sometimes see a couple of guys parked outside Rankin's building—he lived in the top three floors and had sold the bottom two to a dentist. Sometimes Tiffany would send the maid down with a couple of sandwiches for the guys or the guys would order from the Mexican on the corner.

When Rankin went out to breakfast with the other fathers from the school, which he did once in a while, he found their conversation slow. Movies. Books. Sports. Rankin had formerly paid a great deal of attention to point spreads but he had since delegated most of that business to a few other guys, preferring instead to simply collect rents on the rooms in which the operations were run and provide, for a huge price, some of the operating capital. He still had his baseball tickets, boxes at Yankee Stadium and Citi, tickets he gave to clients and partners. Guys loved the free tickets. So he didn't add much to the conversation, but the funny thing was, whenever he did speak, all the other dads buttoned. And not out of fear. But because they were really listening to him. When Rankin would mention whatever he was doing that day, going up to look at a space in Chelsea for a club or that he was putting together a syndicate for this credit card debt consolidation business, they would pay attention in a way they didn't with each other.

As if they knew that Rankin was real. Real real. And the rest of them, rich though they were, were full of shit.

SO WHILE the neighborhood had smugly appreciated, dollars per square foot increasing like vigorish on a loan, Rankin found himself assuming certain airs. He liked these other fathers, the window they provided on to the finer things. No, he wasn't about to

start reading novels or whatever the fuck they were talking about, but he enjoyed the worldliness, the idea that he was part of a community where guys did more than work angles and collect. He hadn't left Flatbush just to find another bunch of fathers sweating over who was running at Aqueduct. Who even played horses anymore? Old people and chinks, that's who. He remembered his father talking to the rest of the fathers outside the Greek's, degenerate horseplayers all of them. His father, a huge man with hands like catchers' mitts and a big, round face like the Mr. Clean logo—Rankin took more after Zeidy—had taken horse and sports bets, and Rankin had run the slips for him and, right then, had gotten to know a few guys.

But even then, so much of the horse action was already Chinese. They would bet on anything. Trotters. Dogs. Jai alai in the Fronton. This was before buses parked three deep under the bridge to take them to Atlantic City or an Indian reservation. The only action was the underground clubs in Chinatown and the track. Chinks loved it. Even old Chinese ladies learned enough English to check off their sucker trifecta bets.

And Rankin wasn't the type you just casually asked, So what do you do? At potluck dinners for class parents, over brisket or cheese plates, occasionally an innocent father making small talk would inquire, and Rankin would shrug, shovel broiled beef onto his paper plate, and say, "I'm a contractor." When he never in his life picked up a hammer except when he was 19 to smash in a windshield.

Having never done anything else but what he couldn't really explain in polite society, he struggled to figure out if it was normal for men to go around asking each other what they did. The guys he knew, they took the measure of each other without so much as a verbal query as to your ways and means. But most of the parents in Jeremy's and Amber's classes, they were all bright-eyed in the morning and within a few days of school starting would practically be asking for your social security number and zodiac sign. Bankers, lawyers, ad men, dentists, all chirping away and expressing pleasant surprise at mutual acquaintances. Sharing all this information and data about themselves so that Rankin could figure a father and his net worth from just a few minutes' morning chitchat. Rankin

rarely made it to school for drop-off anyway, relying on the nanny to get the kids there while he slept off a late one. When he did make it, he fell into the company of the guys who went out to get coffee, only because they didn't seem particularly interested in what anyone else did, self-centered fucks that they were, but Rankin found their disinterest comforting.

He loomed over them. There was only one guy even near his size, some sculptor or something, wife-supported no doubt because who can make a living from that shit? But Rankin could sit and listen for a while, eat his eggs and chicken livers, drink coffee. He found the gossip about the neighborhood useful, which restaurant was closing, which kids store was going out of business, who was foreclosed in 200 Chambers, selling over at 111 Greenwich, who was divorced, who was screwing around, who was taking over the downtown Little League, what the new rabbi had said last Saturday, whether or not the cops had caught the kid who threw eggs from the roof of a building during the Jewish Community Festival. That data was useful. Half the action in this neighborhood probably flowed through his betting shops. If a punter's slips started outpacing his mortgage, Rankin needed to know. And then he could move on a guy's condo.

THE coffee guys were tickled to have a maybe-connected guy like Rankin among them. Though ever vigilant never to mention the subject, they did occasionally turn to Rankin when they needed a crime-related question cleared up, especially as it related to a plot twist in a film or television show they had seen. Rankin would shrug and say what did he know?

For most of the men, however, Rankin also served as the living embodiment of warning. Of whom you don't ever want to turn to. Of a desperation you hope you will never feel. It was understood that he possessed great powers and a web of the kind of unseen connections that order a good portion of this city, that he knew, as it were, cops and robbers. That he had the power to transform your problem or dilemma into a bluntly simple affair. But there would be a cost to that, a terrible cost. They speculated among themselves, when Rankin wasn't around, what that cost might be. He would own you, one

of them, an attorney who knew a little about such things, told them, he would own you.

RANKIN was up early, having stayed in last night rather than dropping in on the clubs. Tiffany always slept in, sleeping off drinks and Percocets. Rankin didn't mind having a dipso wife, as long as she didn't get sloppy and, so far, Tiffany was mothering and wifing like the outer-borough Jewess she was supposed to be. Baked brisket and roast chicken and her sweet-and-sour stuffed cabbage were unimpacted by her narcotic intake; she never failed to collect the kids at 2:50 p.m. and deposit them as required at Little League and Hebrew school and soccer practice. She kept the place tidy. So Rankin made sure her prescription bottles were filled and worried infrequently that he would find her dead in the bathroom and then how do you tell the kids?

He tried, once a week, to get up with the kids to take them to school. He'd tell the nanny to go tidy up somewhere else in the house and would prepare eggs and lox and rye toast, pour the orange juice, and sit down for a few minutes while Jeremy and Amber ate their breakfast and he would ask them about school and do his best to stay interested in their long-winded, half-baked descriptions.

They were lucky when it came to their kids, Rankin knew enough to know. No retards. No gimps. Two healthy little kids, neither of whom needed Ad-derall prescriptions or even, so far, eyeglasses. And Jeremy was a little gangsta. Big-boned, thick-fore-armed, already menacing in his little fourth-grade way. Rankin had him enrolled in every stick-and-ball sports league going and thank God the kid had that. Jeremy was happy in the way that a boy who every other boy in the class knows is the fastest and strongest will always be happy. That was much more important than knowing how to spell.

Amber was another case. Looks is for girls what sports is for boys, and Amber wasn't blessed in that regard. She wasn't ugly, she was just dull-looking but at an age when the girls were starting to segregate according to looks and status. She dealt with it, Rankin saw, by retreating a little. Tiffany said don't worry about it, don't focus on her looks, that's not impor-

tant. But that was easy for her to say; Tiffany had always had the easy self-confidence that accompanies hotness. Amber, Rankin was already sure, wouldn't have that. He told Tiffany that she needed to arrange for the girl more playdates. That would help.

Now, as Amber was pushing eggs and lox around in a greasy puddle, she asked if she had to go to school.

"Of course you have to," Rankin said. "What? You don't like school?"

Amber didn't peep.

But then, on the way to school, as Jeremy was pulling at Rankin's arm to make him walk faster, he could see Amber's face—freckled, slightly too-large nose, blue eyes—she would be like an uglier version of Tiffany, he thought—clouded by concern. What did she have to worry about? he wondered.

Then she told him, tears welling, snot dripping, drool cascading, her whole face turning shiny like it was covered in Crisco. (Where did kids get all this fluid?) Another girl was picking on her. Cooper, another girl in her class, told her she was ugly and wouldn't let Amber play with Cooper's gang in the yard.

Jeremy was tugging at him, "Let's go."

"Shut the fuck up," he snapped. "Show some respect for your sister."

Jeremy quieted.

Rankin was torn between trying to downplay Amber's concerns as just a momentary third-grade spat and going to her classroom, grabbing this Cooper and throwing the little bitch out the third-floor window. Cooper was a pretty little brunette, big round eyes, perfect nose that if it weren't God-given you would have said came from Park Avenue, big lips, a gorgeous smile, slender, the kind of kid you saw in Gap ads or in brochures for new condominiums that wanted to appear family-friendly. Rankin had seen enough of her to know she was a killer, in the way that an 8-year-old who is aware of her looks and social magnetism and is willing to use it to take down other girls can be harder to fight than cancer.

AFTER drop-off he milled around by the gate, waiting as the guys ambled up. Cooper, he knew, was the daughter of that long-haired music producer or whatever he did, the one with the hot

wife. Rankin hadn't exchanged much more conversation with him than to suggest a contractor when the guy was thinking about renovating one of his studio spaces. The guy had been asking lately about a guy to renovate his loft, a new loft he was buying, down closer to the school.

But there was a code among the fathers, Rankin knew, where you didn't mention to another of the dads if his daughter or son was being a little prick. The kids were supposed to work it out for themselves, and Rankin had been a firm believer in this philosophy when it was Jeremy who had been the most likely to terrorize another child. Now, however, with Amber suddenly the victim, he found himself wanting to violate the code. And Rankin was not one to transgress established male boundaries. That seemed so queer to be the father who says your kid is picking on my kid and what should we do about it? You let the kids fight it out, law of the urban jungle.

But he saw how Amber was shrinking right before his eyes. The kid didn't want to go to school. And she was a sweet kid—don't we all think our daughters are of good character? Even music-producer here with his perfect-featured little hag of a child must think she was an angel. Rankin knew bitches, knew assholes, knew every assortment of scumbag, and could tell Amber was none of these.

Amber was a little girl and had no clue how to fight off the feline ostracism of a pretty girl.

At breakfast, he sat with his usual stolid frown, sipping his coffee and listening to the bloated conversational crap about property values and new restaurants. Who could listen to this? They were like women, these guys, in every way but that one rule where you can't call out each other's kids. Who made these rules anyway?

He had done terrible damage to men. It was clear from taking a look at him that he knew a great deal about such hurting. He was in the gym every morning; his shoulders, even through a T-shirt, appeared broad and thick and muscled, the topography grooved and ridged like a shank of ham. He could bench press 400; could do 3 sets of 10 reps at 300, yet he couldn't come up with a way to mention to another dad, hey, your kid is screwing with my kid.

The dilemma obsessed him all morning, even

as he went to sit in on a meeting where they were interviewing a new teacher for the Community Center's Hebrew school. The old one, a hippie lady, had been deemed too loosey-goosey, the kids barely learning how to say "Shana Tova" or ask the four questions, much less read the Torah. As far as Rankin could tell, all they did was eat popcorn and play a Hebrew edition of Monopoly. Not that he gave a shit but if his money was going into that Community Center, then his kids might as well learn some Hebrew. The new guy, a junior rebbe from some uptown synagogue who was looking to move down here, promised to be more strict and traditional than his predecessor, which was no small accomplishment, but was this really the direction they wanted to go in? To end up with a rabbi who was a slightly better-dressed version of the guys Rankin remembered hating when he had gone to Hebrew school back in Flatbush?

The neighborhood really was changing, and for the better, he guessed. Jews were moving in by the hundreds, into the new condominiums at 200 Chambers or 156 Murray. These were bankers, doctors, a more conservative breed than those who had first settled down here, and Rankin had to say he wasn't unhappy to watch his neighborhood take on these sorts of bourgeoisie airs. But these families wanted a real Hebrew school, with a tough rabbi mumbling over his texts while their children suffered in modern, brightly painted rooms. Why, in all other areas of their lives, were these families progressive, but when it came to their children's Hebrew school, they wanted Stone Age? They had been planning an actual school, a K through 5 for families who wanted local, traditional Jewish education. Some parents urged immediate action. They had the space, or at least enough to start up. Once they had the new rabbi, then they could find the teachers.

Not that he gave a crap. He couldn't stand that hippie lady who ran the after-school program before, with her Israel- and America-bashing. You know what, Rankin thought, I don't give a shit about Muslims but I don't need for the first things my kids ever hear about Israel to be how the Zionists are oppressing Palestinians. He hadn't put a quarter-million dollars into the Lower Manhattan Jewish Community Center for that.

And now the Community Center was saying they might have to start with just pre-K and K, delay 1 through 5 for a few terms. Some of the committed money had welshed, bankers pleading bonus deprivation. The Community Center would be a few hundred thousand behind where they thought they would be. That's a half-dozen teachers' salaries. The space had already been leased; Rankin had helped negotiate the terms. Now the Community Center was wondering if they could sublease.

Rankin shrugged. Hard in this market. A lot of retail space out there.

He checked his phone messages in the street. Tiffany had called. Amber was in the principal's office crying. Cooper had been teasing her, telling her she was ugly and now she said she had a stomachache and wanted to come home. Tiffany was on her way to get the girl.

IT DIDN'T occur to Rankin the irony of going from the Jewish Center to the Pakistani masjid, but that was exactly his route. He had partnered with a Pakistani gentleman to provide bridge financing to a host of beleaguered small businesses. His deal was he would take over and consolidate all the struggling venture's debt, adding 20 percent on top and then a heavy monthly interest, and the business would then have a percentage of every credit-card transaction go directly into Rankin's accounts, so that a quarter of every dollar would repay the debt and interest. It was a simple, risky, highly volatile, and remarkably lucrative business that a few of the other guys had gotten into, but Rankin was the first to partner with a member of the merchant's own ethnic group so as to get access to a wider range of troubled businesses. It's amazing how hard a small businessman is willing to work, Rankin had observed, Bangladeshi and Pakistani kebab shops that were open 24 hours a day and giving 25 percent of everything they sold over to Rankin.

Not that Rankin was willing to wander up and down Church Street or Broadway, collecting money from loser cell-phone distributors or newsstands. That's why his partnership with the owner of the masjid was such a natural. The masjid was somehow holding out in the middle of Jewifying Tribeca. At

dusk, a hundred or so brown-skinned, mustachioed gents in *kufis* or *taqiyahs* would be shuffling down the concrete stairs to the vast basement prayer hall. Right here, in between mothers walking their daughters to the orthodontist or fathers walking their boys still in cleats back from soccer practice.

Rankin's man was Gulam, a wiry, bespectacled fellow who sat behind a desk in a sweet-smelling room off to the side of the entry, next to the hall the devout traverse on their way to prayers. He had the lease on this space, decades long he insisted, as well as the three floors above him, a fact that both amused and annoyed Rankin, the value of this building having long ago reached into the eight figures and that Rankin would have eagerly exploited if it weren't for this studious-looking Karachi-ite seated behind his old, art-deco-style steel desk.

But Rankin was a pragmatic man, and while he had resigned himself to never being able to profitably expunge the Muslim element from this neighborhood, he had realized that in Gulam he had a valuable associate, an entrée into a whole new needy class of entrepreneur, far hungrier than his fellow upstanding fathers. He, of course, was well aware of every stereotype he was confirming by even showing up here to do business, the archetype of the money-lending Jew. But, he thought, let's face it, which ethnic group now labors under a blacker cloud of bigotry: Jews or these sad Allah-worshipping kebab makers? At least here in Tribeca, Jews had it easy. The Pakistanis were barely tolerated, moving as they did like invisible men, pushing their wagons filled with cut-rate goods or hunks of ground goat meat shaped like beehives up and down Church to deliver to their kin operating out of undesirable ground-floor retail, shaken down by their own and, now, funded by the Jews.

No one had it tougher. Rankin held out no sympathy for them, but he knew hard work when he saw it and knew those disposed to it when he encountered them. His own son? Jeremy? Unlikely to ever put in a day like these humps. And wasn't that the point? Rankin labored and schemed so that his offspring wouldn't have to. They could live the latest version of the American dream, as it was expressed in these fancy New York neighborhoods, some mixture of drinking in bottle-service nightclubs and pursuing a career

in the creative fields. That's what they were being prepared for, Rankin knew, to become video producers or performance artists. He would bet, if you bothered to inquire, that not one of these Pakistani gentlemen had ever for a second in his life considered the possibility of a career in anything that didn't require you either to break your back or get in someone's face and sell the hell out of something. While the Lower Manhattan Jewish Cultural Center hand-wrung about not being Jewy enough, these cats were Allah to their skinny frickin' bones. Respect.

So his children were soft, what was wrong with that? But then his own daughter was getting bullied by another girl, was the victim of some sort of preteen *Mean Girls* bullshit and he knew who the perpetrator was. He wasn't making millions so that his daughter would get stomachaches because she was so frightened of some monstrous little 8-year-old.

He found himself mentioning his daughter to Gulam. The middle-aged Pakistani who sat behind the art-deco desk, chewing Nicorette gum and looking at a printed-out list through his reading glasses. He had a light beard and mustache, a long narrow nose, wide veiny eyes, and a broad, arched forehead beneath a little woven cap he wore that looked like a yarmulke. He was a slender man, and surprisingly tall, and reminded Rankin, more than any other historical figure, of Abraham Lincoln, only less wrinkled.

"This is a successful program," Gulam was saying, nodding. "Satisfactory participation. A boon for the masjid—"

"You have kids, right?" Rankin asked. He had to restrain himself from putting his feet up on Gulam's desk.

Gulam nodded, "Inshallah. Two girls."

"How old?"

"Twelve and 14."

"They happy at school?"

They attended a Muslim girls' school, Gulam explained, a private school, the best in the city. Expensive.

"My daughter is getting picked on," Rankin explained. "By another girl. She's 8. She comes home crying. It's making her sick."

"Children are cruel," Gulam nodded. "And females are the most cruel."

"I don't know what to do," Rankin said.

"Talk to the father of the girl," Gulam advised. "Tell him his daughter is behaving negatively."

"We don't do that," Rankin said. "You don't complain to another father about his kid. Not when the kid is 8."

Gulam, not for the first time, found himself wondering at these Jews and their mysterious codes of behavior.

"Then perhaps your wife should talk to the mother," Gulam suggested.

Rankin considered that as he took the printed-out sheet from Gulam, looked it over, and then tore it into tiny pieces, leaving a few scraps in the wastebasket and taking the rest with him. Damn if he was going to leave a paper trail. "Don't ever print this stuff out," Rankin said, suddenly back on the subject.

Gulam nodded. "Inshallah."

AMONG the petty gripes of Tiffany regarding her husband's muscular earning power was that despite his vast holdings, more extensive, she knew, than he would ever let on, he still pissed away most of his day wandering back and forth to his various ventures, ensuring the continued progress to windfall that Rankin was sure required his supervision. They were rich, and Tiffany appreciated that as she drank 30-year-old Barolo. But the prick could be home more than once in a while and now here he was telling her to call this blonde bitch a few blocks away to tell her to control her children.

"You have breakfast with her father every morning," she said. Her voice could be all nose, so that when she said *father* she almost sounded like a Kennedy.

"I can't mention it to the guys," Rankin said, standing in the kitchen. His shaved head shone beneath the skylight.

"What's wrong with you retards?" Tiffany asked. "Then what do you talk about?"

"Not that," Rankin said.

"Fine," Tiffany said, sipping her wine.

He went downstairs to the middle floor of the apartment. Rankin had three floors of a 25'-by-100' building, a monstrous space in which, for example,

he had never accurately counted how many flat-screen televisions had been installed. Just the other day, using the bathroom near the rear of the bottom floor, the building's third, he had been surprised to find a flat screen mounted in front of the toilet. Amber had her own, of course, across from her bed. Rankin had wondered about the wisdom of giving his children their own flat-screen televisions, but then had realized, as long as he was renovating the place, they might as well get installed now.

Amber was sitting in her room, on her bed, playing with a heart-shaped cardboard box full of buttons.

"How's your stomach, kiddo?" he asked.

"Fine," she said.

"Not bothering you?"

"It only bothers me at school," she explained.

"Where does it hurt?"

"I don't know. All over."

Rankin sat down on the bed. "That girl is still bothering you?"

She nodded. Little face, tiny eyes welling up, sniffing starting. "Idon'twannagotoschool."

"Mommy's gonna talk to Cooper's mommy," Rankin assured Amber.

"NOOOOOO!" Amber seemed terrified.

His daughter was afraid of being a rat. Even kids hate rats. But what choice did they have? His own daughter was crying, having these psychosomatic pains, it was up to his wife to confront that WASPy Connecticut bitch and tell her to tell her kid to knock it off.

THE answer Tiffany relayed back was disappointing. Let little girls be little girls was Cooper's mother's response. They need to learn how to socialize. We can't be there every minute for them. What the fuck? Amber was practically doubled over with pain as she walked to school and this WASPy bitch is saying she doesn't want to get involved? Rankin saw the father and his daughters on the way through the gate, the smug bastard and his cute little kids. The long hair, the expensive-looking coat, the fancy sneakers, he looked like a bigger version of one of the kids, an overgrown little boy. What happened to grown-ups?

Rankin wondered. When did every mom and dad start to look like an oversize version of the shorties they were dropping off in the yard?

He watched how Cooper interacted with Amber in the yard before school. She was too smart to do anything while parents were around, but he noticed Amber sneaking wary glances at Cooper. She stood by herself, next to Rankin, unwilling to let him go while Cooper stood in the center of a gang of four girls, with two more girls at the periphery of this inner group. Beyond them a few boys were watching this little cluster of girls. Rankin was an observer of power, and Cooper ruled. Amber didn't really have a chance.

And here was the dad, Rankin's nominal buddy, sliding over for morning bullshit.

"Wassup, playa?" he asked.

"G'morning," Rankin offered nothing more. Rankin towered over the music producer. He could, and he was suppressing this urge, take his head in the palm of his hand and push him down, just press him into the earth so that he would be on his stomach, his face being ground into the schoolyard. It would serve him right, the oblivious bastard.

Amber was by now marching into the building with the other children. The teacher, the parents, everyone unaware of her torment.

HOW do you silence a little girl? It had been years since Rankin had even thought about having to get rid of someone. His real estate was worth in the eight figures, his off-the-books income enough to fund another empire, he was a more legit businessman than some guy whacking up, reassembling and then peddling mortgages in securitized tranches.

So what should he do? Hire a bunch of 9-year-olds to rough her up? That was one idea, but kids, even Jeremy, can't keep their mouths shut. Or could they? Say a bigger kid approached her, in the yard or the Park, threatened her, told her to knock it off, to leave Amber alone, how would that play out, exactly?

Or another kid, a big brown-skinned boy, from another neighborhood entirely, a kid nobody knew or knew where to find?

Or...

THE conflagration visible from his roof was to the north this time, a burning building up Broadway, toward Soho, the small glow orange in the misty and smoky sky, a reassuring hue like the inside of a jack-o-lantern that projected its warmth into Rankin's heart. He'd had to go outside his usual network of guys for this job, to hire a few of Gulam's connections through the masjid, to set fire to the music producer's studio, to that bitch's father's business. Rankin watched the flame with some satisfaction; it was a sorry epigone of that which he had watched all those years ago to the south, but this was satisfying instead of ominous, a pleasing sight that gave Rankin

some small measure of revenge. See what you get when you fuck with my daughter? See how I extract vengeance? I am different. Stronger. More powerful. A man of action.

Or—and now he snapped out of his reverie, and he realized he had finally come to the truth. He would never burn down the building. How would that save his daughter? How would it change a thing at school?

No, he realized, now he would have to write a big check to the Lower Manhattan Jewish Community Center and urge them to hurry up and start that new school. Because he would soon be taking Amber out of this one. No other move a dad in his position could make. ▶