

THE FLIGHT

by Roman Sympos

PROLOGUE

Wednesday, May 10, 2023

As the Boeing 757 picked up speed, spiraling toward the ground somewhere above a cornfield in Iowa, Fletcher ("Fletch") Kraft was surprised to discover two things.

First thing: he didn't feel dizzy or weightless. The horizon was spinning almost vertically past his window, dividing it fore and aft into earth and sky, but his body thought he was still firmly attached to his seat and flying parallel to the surface of the planet at a steady 600 mph, just like the tiny, black screen in front of him had said a minute ago. The seat belt had nothing to do with it.

Second thing: he felt calm.

He'd imagined this moment on every transcontinental flight he'd ever taken, and he'd flown this route many times. He'd read the statistics proving that flying was safer than walking past a construction site or crossing the street. How your chances of being struck by a falling I-beam or hit by a car were greater than dying in a plane crash. That is, he remembered the words "street," and "I-beam." He could

never remember the exact numbers. Which was odd, because he'd always been good with numbers.

Even knowing how improbable it was, Fletcher could never help imagining, at some point above a town like Fostoria—which was, just now, the nearest town to the cornfield surging up at him—what a plane crash would feel like. An engine starts burning, or a bomb explodes in the cargo hold, or an important circuit board controlling a crucial wing flap goes “phhht” and the whole machine flips over with a stomach-fluttering lurch. The panic of the inevitable. Then your seat suddenly breaking free with you strapped in as the plane comes apart—if you haven’t already been vaporized. You look over the armrest, or above your head, where the sky should be, and see the ground getting nearer, but taking its time. Or trapped inside, as he was now, with two hundred screaming, weeping, fainting, praying fellow passengers spiraling down toward what he pictured as a big, black doorway in the earth, sliding open to receive them.

Now that it was happening, he was surprised to discover how little he cared, especially considering how much was riding on this trip. It wasn’t courage. It wouldn’t even qualify as indifference. It was just nothing. As though he’d already fallen through that big, black, gaping hole. He didn’t pass out. He didn’t see things in slo-mo or have an out-of-body experience. He just didn’t care. It was like half watching an in-flight movie while doing accounts. Soon this scene would end, but then another scene would begin and the rest of the movie would continue with no end in sight because you weren’t really paying attention. You weren’t really there.

Never having missed a pre-flight safety demonstration, however, Fletch Kraft put on his oxygen mask.

That’s when he noticed the woman sitting next to him. She was clutching her armrests, shoulders raised in a shrug of horror, gasping like a toddler about to blow out a birthday candle. She hyperventilated and passed out just as Fletcher

reached for the yellow cone dangling in front of her. He slipped the thin elastic bands behind the woman's head and centered the mask over her nose and mouth.

At that instant, the one hundred and twenty tons of aluminum, titanium, steel, polyurethane, wool, Formica, polyester, fiberglass, precious metals, curried chicken, deviled egg, lettuce, filtered water, toothpaste, hand sanitizer, human excrement, urine, blood, bone, muscle, entrails, brain tissue, phlegm, plush-toys, and TicTacs stopped spinning and began to level itself into a wide arc.

The horizon resumed its customary position.

Looking out, Fletcher saw rows of corn marching in lock-step below the window, like in an old, speeded up newsreel, then growing smaller as the nose of the jet angled up and he was pressed further down into his seat. The roof of a barn passed below, followed by a silo and then a sty full of white pigs lying on their sides. Gradually, a square mile of patchwork green and brown began to reveal itself, mottled by cloud shadows and outlined on four sides by grey, ruler-straight roads. Then the plane entered a cloud and there was just grey. The lights came on and Fletcher saw his face in the glass, still wearing an oxygen mask. He took it off.

The woman next to him revived as the captain was explaining where they were about to land "for maintenance."

She was a petite brunette, 30s-ish, with hair fastened up in back by an amber claw clip. She opened her handbag and pulled out her phone, waiting obediently until the moment they landed (and cheers broke out) to swipe up the screen.

"Todd?"

She looked at her phone, then waited as they taxied to the gate.

"Todd?" she repeated. And then, "Uh-huh, it's Amy." After a pause, she began talking, calmly but in a raised voice, the way tourists do when speaking English in a foreign country.

Fletcher tried to guess what Todd was saying. He could hear the man's voice uncoiling out of the phone, but he couldn't make out the words. That's how he became distracted—wondering what Todd was saying—and forgot to call his wife.

Later, waiting for their replacement jet from Nashville at a gate in the Fort Dodge Regional Airport (one of the few nearby where you could land a Boeing 757), Fletcher saw Amy sitting three rows away and remembered. He didn't know why it hadn't occurred to him in the first place. But he felt a sudden urge to go over and see if he'd guessed right, about Todd. Plenty of time to call home. His wife was in her studio anyway. Her phone was in the kitchen and she wouldn't leave the barn to eat lunch and go through the mail until 1 pm. Then she'd check her inbox and talk to her agent before leaving to pick up the girls. No chance she'd see or hear anything about UA 1008 until the evening news, supposing she watched the evening news, and supposing the flight made the evening news. No one was hurt, and she wouldn't expect to hear from him until he'd checked in at the Fairmont. With the delay, that would be long after the fog began flowing around Nob Hill, but perhaps just in time for him to say goodnight to the girls before they went to bed.

Who was 'Todd'? he wondered.

"Excuse me?"

Amy looked up from her Colleen Hoover.

"Did you leave this on your seat?"

It was a man in a white shirt and dark trousers. He was holding out a cell phone.

"No, sorry," she said. "I have mine."

The man stared at her blankly, then looked down at the phone in his hand.

"It's locked. I can't tell who it belongs to."

Amy wanted to tell him to take it to the desk. They'd make an announcement. But the man put the phone in his shirt pocket and continued.

"I can't find my phone. I must have left it on the plane. I guess I was pretty shaken up. They had the plane searched, but they couldn't find it. I need to call home and tell my wife I'm alright."

The plea, though silent, was unmistakable. Amy didn't want to surrender her phone, but then she recognized the man. She hadn't at first because he wasn't wearing his suit jacket.

"You were sitting next to me, weren't you?"

He was the one who put the oxygen mask on her face when she passed out. After what had happened, or almost happened, this struck her as an unmerited act of tenderness. She felt tears coming to her eyes, but refrained from wiping them away and calling attention to them.

"You can use mine." She took her phone out of her purse. "Facial recognition," she said, looking into it, then handed it up.

The man stared at Amy's phone as if he wanted it to recognize him, too. Amy peered into her bag for a Kleenex.

When she looked up again, the man was still staring at her phone, as though it had dropped from Mars and he didn't know how it worked. Then he began tapping the screen with his thumb and moving it up and down. He put the phone to his ear and listened, and then hung up and started jabbing again. "I got the wrong number," he said. "And I can't find her in my contacts."

Amy took her phone and looked at the screen.

"Those are my contacts," she said. She was getting annoyed. "What's her name? Is she on *Twitter*? *What's App*?"

The man looked at her.

"Is it Marilyn?" he asked.

PART I: BOSTON

Wednesday, May 31—Friday, June 2, 2023

Chapter 1

The "ping" came just as the Op (as he liked to think of himself these days) was biting into the second half of a Reuben with extra dressing. He laid it down and looked around for his paper napkin. Missing. Not on his lap, either. There it was, between his feet.

"Ping."

Knowing he'd never reach it in time, he stood up, squeezed his way down the aisle with his hands raised, and reached for the napkin holder. After scrubbing at himself with a wad of three, he took out his phone and looked at it.

"mp asap"

He pulled out a twenty from his pants pocket. "Alan," he called to the man behind the counter as he slapped it down. Then he flew out the door into the rain.

* * * * *

It was a ten-minute walk across Fort Point Channel to Continental's Boston office, in the Seaport, but he managed it in eight. It wasn't just the rain, which had been threatening all morning, that made him hustle, or the ear-splitting noise from the pile-driver directly across the street. He'd already overstayed his lunch break, trying for a checkmate on his Lichess app with LSR 36 ("Laser"? "Loser"? "Elizar"? Avatar: bear. Russian?) when he should have settled for a draw. By the time he lost, his sandwich was cold and his Coke was warm and he couldn't afford to leave them on the counter. He'd just put the phone away when the text came. Monica. The Old Man must be wondering where he was. Again. A missing person could mean a lucrative contract. Often an estate was involved. The case could drag on for months before all the leads were run down. Meanwhile, the meter kept running. Ka-ching!

The case turned out to be all of the above, with an attractive spouse on top, like a maraschino cherry. She was

sitting in the shiny steel and glass foyer when he walked in. Staff was still depleted by the pandemic and the Great Resignation. Even with the official emergency declared over, there was only Monica to handle internal communications, sort field reports, and greet clients. At the moment, she was nowhere to be seen.

The woman stood up to introduce herself, but the Op already recognized her from the Arts and Leisure section of the *Globe*. Brit Patterson. She wore what she was wearing in her photo: a Red Sox cap, untucked men's shirt, baggy, faded jeans. Her leather shoes in three colors topped by bright yellow socks didn't appear in the photo. Neither did her freckles. Her hair—in a pony tail with curly strands poking out above her ears—was redder in person. The high cheek-bones made her look professional, the jeans and shirt, Bohemian. Mid-career, late thirties? The *Globe* didn't give her age. It did say that she had two high-school age daughters. She had no purse, and the wet rain-jacket and cap gave her a bedraggled look.

Her bright blue eyes were open wide, staring at him. All six feet four inches and 350 pounds of him. He was used to that.

As soon as she stood up he saw how tall she was, almost to his chin. "Call me 'Brit,'" she said, finally extending a hand. There was a twang in her voice that was too faint to be Deep South—maybe a Border State? Great Plains? Again, the *Globe* hadn't said.

In his office (which wasn't his, the "offices" at Continental being anonymous and interchangeable, like Ikea display rooms), he took her jacket and cap and hung them up, and then, still breathless, sat down at the desk. The chair, an Aeron knock-off, groaned. He asked if she had an appointment.

"It makes no difference, of course," he added, quickly. "I'm just wondering if we slipped up somewhere. I don't have

you in my calendar." He wanted an excuse for being late. *We*. He felt bad about throwing Monica under the bus. "If so, I apologize."

"Oh! No, no!" She made his tardiness sound like it was her fault. "This was on the spur of the moment. I was at the ICA, supervising an installation—I'm a sculptor—when I got the idea. I heard about your agency from a friend. You helped with her divorce." Brit mentioned a name, but it wasn't familiar. Probably handled by another operative. "Anyway, I looked up the number and called and the woman who picked up asked when would be convenient. I said now, so she said how about one o'clock? That was perfect. We were breaking for lunch, and you're right nearby."

She spoke rapidly. At first he thought she was worried or excited. Later, he realized it was how she spoke, like someone with too much to do and not enough time.

The missing person was her husband, Fletcher Kraft. He'd disappeared three weeks ago on his way to San Francisco for a business meeting. Kraft was chief accountant for an international trading firm with offices there and in Boston. The flight had to make an emergency landing in Iowa. He'd vanished while the passengers were waiting for another jet to arrive.

"The police did what they could, and I have nothing bad to say about them." Then she shook her head. "But really, how can you disappear nowadays with so many ways to find you? How can you—what is it?—'get off the grid' when you're making big muddy footprints as soon as you climb out of bed?"

She told him about Kraft's muddy footprints. For days after the emergency landing she was getting texts updating her on his arrival in San Francisco, how the meetings were going, how he'd have to stay longer to take care of unexpected problems. He said he couldn't call or receive calls because something was wrong with his phone. He'd have it looked at when he got home. Two days after he was originally supposed

to get back she went to pick him up at Logan. He never showed. She texted him for another twenty-four hours and got nothing. That's when she called the police in Weston, where she lived. They said he had to be missing for two days before they could act. She said he hadn't communicated in three.

Since Kraft had been on a business trip for a Boston firm and left from Logan, the Weston cops contacted the Boston cops who contacted the cops in Iowa, a town called Fort Dodge, where the plane had landed. A local constable filled out a form and filed it with NCIC. That was the extent of Fort Dodge's official involvement until the next day, when Boston learned that by "communicated," Brit meant text-messaging, not voice. They called Fort Dodge immediately. A detective sergeant named Gale Cowper was assigned to the case. She showed Kraft's photo to airport personnel. A cleaning woman thought she'd seen him heading out of the waiting area and toward security. The restrooms were also located in that direction, though, and no one had seen him leave the terminal. Cowper also got in touch with United Airlines, who confirmed that Kraft hadn't re-boarded. As a courtesy, they provided the passenger list for the flight, with contact information.

Cowper emailed Kraft's photo to everyone on the list and got one hit: a woman named Amy Briscoe. Kraft had approached her in the waiting area near the gate to ask if he could borrow her phone. Said he'd left his on the plane, but the flight attendants couldn't find it. He needed to call his wife, he said. But he ended up not calling her and wandered off. Briscoe thought he was pretty shaken up by what happened.

"What did happen?"

"The plane nearly crashed. Something went wrong and put it into a nosedive. The pilot managed to pull out of it just in time." Thus, the unplanned stopover in Fort Dodge.

He remembered. Not top of the screen—no fatalities. But worth some pixels.

Amy Briscoe also remembered Kraft sitting next to her on the plane. He was the one who put her oxygen mask over her face after she passed out.

"That sounds like him," Brit added. "Always calm. Always aware of what's going on around him, of other people." She paused, shook her head. In sadness? It was a gesture hard to read.

"Didn't his business associates call to ask where he was?"

"Fletch keeps his business contacts to himself and I don't want to be on their list anyway. Our professional lives are separate. But the police told me they talked to Transcoastal—that's his company—and found out he sent them a text saying he'd missed his flight that morning after testing positive for Covid and going back to bed. Not true, of course. Also, that his phone wasn't working right and he could only exchange texts, like with me."

He hesitated before sharing his first thought. "It sounds like he's trying to throw people off his track. Either that or . . ."

"Or someone found his phone and is trying to impersonate him, right? And not give it away by using their voice. Well, how did they get into it? And if they did, where is *he*? Why hasn't he tried to reach me?" She didn't sound worried so much as impatient. Not with her husband. With the explanations.

"Could be any number of reasons."

"Like?"

The Op hesitated. He didn't want to go there, but was pretty sure she'd already been there. He put it off.

"Any demands for ransom?"

"The police asked the same thing." Now she was annoyed. "Wouldn't I have told them? And no."

"Most likely, judging from what Ms. Briscoe said, he was disoriented, or had a bout of amnesia. That means he should be found sooner or later."

"It's been three weeks."

They were both silent, each waiting for the other to say it: if Kraft wasn't skipping out on her and there was no demand for money, then someone *was* stealing his identity. And if that was the case, and she hadn't heard from him by now, he could very well be dead.

After a few more seconds, the Op decided to move on. "Any ATM withdrawals or cash advances? Any suspicious credit card purchases?"

"Nothing."

"Any cards of his own?"

She thought about it long enough for him to add, "It isn't legal in Massachusetts to open a line of credit your spouse doesn't know about, but it does happen. Does he have a computer at home?"

"A desktop, in his home office. The police asked to see it, poke around in there. At first, I said no. We respect each other's privacy." She paused, then sighed. "I gave in, eventually, but they couldn't find anything."

"Let me try. I assume he travels with a laptop, maybe an iPad, and backs it up when he gets home?" She nodded. "With your permission, I'd also like to search his home office."

"I did that." She looked embarrassed. "That's' how I found his passport. But sure, why not?"

"I'd like to have a scan of that. All the pages. Could you send me one?" She nodded.

"Any relatives?" he continued. "Parents, siblings, extended family?"

"None that I know of. He was an only child. His mom and dad passed a while ago. He never spoke about any aunts or uncles. Or cousins."

She was sitting back in her chair with her hands folded on her lap and her ankles crossed. Now she leaned forward.

"My older daughter is starting college this fall. She's got a soccer scholarship to cover tuition, but not room and board. I can cover it, but not for long. Not on my own, I mean. And

my younger daughter will be graduating from high school in three years. Fletch and I kept our finances separate, but we named each other beneficiaries. I can't touch his estate, or his life insurance, unless he's declared dead, and that can't happen unless we find his body or he's been missing for five years. At least, in this state it can't, right?"

He confirmed her information.

"I'm a single mother for the time being, with an unfixed income. I do pretty well, the work is selling, but I'm paying all the bills for a home in Weston, including taxes. I'm trying to move, but I haven't found an affordable place with a studio, and I want the girls to finish school with their friends."

He guessed what was coming next. To head it off he told her not to worry. Continental could spread out the payments, retainer plus hourly, and would try to minimize any added expenses Before he got to amounts, she cut him off.

"Oh—I'm not worried about paying you, and I don't want you to worry." She leaned back, smiling now. "Fletch's company called this morning to ask if I wanted to hire a private investigator. They offered to help. Later I was talking about it to my friend—she's my agent—and your company came up. She made it sound like you could do miracles!"

A big, heartless international corporation paying to help an employee's wife find her husband? *That* would be a miracle, he thought. But Fletcher Kraft might be a valuable asset, depending on how long he'd been with them, directing traffic for maybe hundreds of millions of dollars a year. And there might be corporate secrets involved. "Bodies buried," as they say. Well-positioned employees had access to all kinds of information that rival companies might kill—or worse—for. Or, it might just be a practical matter. Maybe there was no one lower down who was qualified to step in. Maybe there was trouble finding a suitable replacement and getting them up to speed. What did the Op know? And what did he care, as long as he got paid? And Continental, of course.

"They want to be kept up to date, though," she said.

"So, I'd report to them and to you?"

"Well, it is their money I'm paying you—or rather, they're paying you." She turned off her headlong flow of words at the faucet, as if she wasn't sure, just then, that she was making sense.

"We'll arrange the payments with Transcoastal," he said, "if you've got their contact information?"

As he rose from the Aeron, he remembered to put his hands on the arms so he wouldn't get stuck.

Chapter 2

They agreed on a time for him to stop by the next day and he walked her to the big glass door. He gave her his card and reminded her to send the scan of Kraft's passport. Monica was at reception now and stood up. He introduced her.

"Monica will take you through the paperwork, Ms. Patterson." He caught himself. "Brit."

Monica glanced at him, then finished her welcome. As he walked toward the office cubicles—a.k.a the "Locker Room"—she called to him, in a bright voice, "O.M. would like to see you, if you have a minute."

The Old Man.

He still wasn't used to it. "Don't use his name," Monica told him the first time. "Better yet, don't talk at all." Since getting him hired as an intern, she'd looked out for him, and his rapid rise in the organization was a source of pride to both of them. Junior Operative after only a month. Now Senior. Thus, in his mind at least, "the Op." Monica's "if you have a minute" was to save him embarrassment in front of a new client. As though he'd be doing the boss a favor.

The Old Man had a corner office on the next floor up, but it might as well have been a utility closet because he kept the blinds down and worked with a desk lamp. When he leaned back his face retired into shadow, and he never leaned back before reaching for the stub of an exhausted cigar and taking it with him, relighting it with a Bic he kept in his vest pocket. The Bic would reveal his face for an instant. Then all you could see was an occasional red glow, faintly reflected in the lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses.

The Old Man also kept the blinds down on the hallway side, and over the glass door, but there was no need to knock. His hearing was like a dog's.

"Don't just stand there! Come in!"

On entering, all the Op could see was the desk lamp and the documents scattered beneath its beam. Then the Bic flared and died, followed by the red glow. As usual, he felt it was a bit overdone. But he kept his opinion to himself.

The silence lasted long enough for the smoke to reach his nose. Overdone, yes, but effective. Broadway lost a Tony Award winner when Continental hired the Old Man. Of course, he wasn't old then. He'd just turned 17.

"Late." The voice was raspy, full of gravel. But quiet. Disappointed.

"And money on the table." Same level tone. Monica must have filled him in. (Jesus, she was fast! He shouldn't have stopped to pee.)

"You seem to think we can't get along without you."

Disgust now. Sarcasm would be next.

"Is that it? You can do what you want because we're short-handed and you're all that's left at the Roundtable?" He heard a faint hiss as the glow came and went. Smoke spiraled into the light. "We promoted you so you could work independently. Emphasis on 'work'."

The Old Man didn't ask about the case. He never did. He was like a concert pianist who couldn't be bothered to pay attention to what the pinky on his left hand was doing in the middle of a recital. Unless it was cramping up. But the Old Man knew better than to let things get to that point. He was a virtuoso. Keep all the moving parts limber and they'll take care of you.

Sometimes you had to crack your knuckles.

"And another thing."

A disembodied face pushed halfway into the light and squinted up at him.

"Get yourself a suit that fits!" The cigar was jumping up and down. "Not some tent off the rack at Men's Wearhouse!"

Full throttle. Zero to sixty, like that.

The Old Man put the cigar down and peered at his desk. "You're a Senior Operative now. You represent Continental—*me*, son." He found the document he was searching for and studied it. That was the signal to leave.

Closing the door behind him, the Op knew he wouldn't be standing in front of it again. This was his last warning.

He was right.

* * *

Bannon was waiting when he got to his cubicle. The Locker Room was nearly empty. Not everyone had stayed home after the emergency was over. Some were out on assignments. Still. This used to be a "hive of activity," according to Monica. Now the only hum came from the water cooler.

Bannon was his supervisor, the one who'd recommended him for his last promotion instead of sacking him when he cracked the Bevilacqua case without consulting his partner first. As the newbie's senior, Talbot was pissed off, and rightfully so. The Op had nearly gotten them both killed. Bannon's decision didn't sit well with her. Talbot was at home now, free-lancing. Like so many of her co-workers she'd gotten attached to Zoom, where she only had to dress from the waist up to meet with clients and didn't lose half a day commuting back and forth on the T, that death trap disguised as public transportation. Plus, she could spend more time with her kids and less money on day care. A win all around.

Talbot's story corresponded, in part or entirety, to that of nearly everyone else lost to the Great Resignation. There were, in fact, fewer knights at the roundtable. The new Senior Operative had lots of elbow room.

"So?" asked Bannon.

"I need a suit."

"I know a tailor in Chinatown," said Bannon, not missing a beat. "Arrived from Hong Kong a month ago, fleeing the crack-down. Needs to build a client list, so he's cheap, as these

things go. Might even do it on layaway." Bannon gave the name but couldn't recall the address, so he described the location.

He could see the young man needed more than a tailor, though.

"Listen. O.M. doesn't bother with the rank and file just because they screw up. He leaves that to the foremen, like me. He's interested in you." The Op's face showed blank disbelief. "You should be flattered. I've only seen him once. Most of us haven't seen him at all." The initiated, including Monica, had compared notes: blinds down, desk lamp, cigar. All that B-movie stuff. They didn't share their notes with the uninitiated.

"Rumor has it he lives in Brookline with his wife," said Bannon, "but no one's ever seen him come or go. I know for a fact he hates the Seaport." The only time Bannon got called upstairs the Old Man went on and on. Two more lines to ride—putting your life in your hands every time you board. "And what's the point of calling it 'the Silver Line' anyway? It's a god-damned articulated bus!"

Bannon was snarling. It was a good imitation. He smiled and shook his head. "He wishes we were still at Park Street. Straight shot on the Green Line. 'And there's nothing to eat around here—just grass!'"

"What you're wearing, that's the tailor's?" asked the Op.

"This? I've got my own tailor. The guy I mean is somebody I heard about from an ear."

Ear. Informant.

"Why did the ear think you'd be interested?"

"Hong Kong is China, now, and this guy's new. Papers are clean, but he doesn't know anybody, and nobody knows him. No relatives. That raises suspicions."

It was probably why the guy was so cheap.

* * *

Before he left for Chinatown, he called BPD to confirm the details Brit had given him and see if there were any others she might have forgotten, or didn't know about. Brady was his contact in Missing Persons. Tom Brady. When the GOAT left town to win Superbowls for the Bucs, Tom thought the jokes would stop, but they only got worse: Tom Brady was "missing"!

He was a huge Pats fan, which only made it worse.

Brady seemed to like the Op. Maybe it was because he never made jokes about Tom Brady. In fact, he never made jokes. About anybody. But Brady didn't know that.

"Anything else that would help?"

"Got a call from Kraft's firm," said Brady. "They're interested in finding him, too. Help out the wife. 'Concerned' is what they said. Ask me, they're 'concerned' about something else, too."

"Any hint?"

"Nah. Just a feeling. I've been at this from before you-know-who came to Foxboro." Brady knew it was safe to say this to the Op, who grew up in Eastie and would get the reference but leave it alone.

After talking to Brady, he called a friend of his at Parker and Houk, corporate law, who might know something useful about Transcoastal. Sam wasn't in, so he left a message. He didn't call Transcoastal. Monica had connected the money hose by now, and from what Brady said he was pretty sure they'd call.

He finished some routine stuff on a couple of other cases before heading out the door. Small change—formal requests for information, acknowledgements of receipt. He'd been tailing one client's ex-spouse for a week to support a claim for more alimony. Another case had to do with a work-related disability. Surveillance. Long nights. He wasn't good at tailing on the street because of his size, but sitting in a car made it manageable. He didn't own a car, so he had to use one

of the company's, and because he was big, it had to be full-size. Or a van. He wasn't what you'd call inconspicuous. The only real problem was finding a place to park in Boston.

The rain had stopped. On his way to Chinatown, he realized he was hungry. He'd left half his lunch at Alan's, but that wasn't it. He was always hungry. He realized it only occasionally, and only when he was by himself. No, when he was by himself and had nothing to distract him. Like a chess problem. Or a good book. Or music, any kind. Even an interesting sidewalk scrawl (like that one—was it a bird?) could anchor his attention. He could only focus on one thing at a time. When his mind was untethered, the prevailing winds usually blew it in the direction of food. Sometimes, it came loose when it was supposed to be concentrating on really important things, like what he was already calling, in his head, "The Fletch Kraft Affair." His first big case as a Senior Operative.

He stopped at a hot pretzel stand next to the Rose Kennedy Greenway and ordered two, with mustard. Then he headed for the gate to Chinatown holding one in each hand.

Once he was eating, he didn't have to think about food.

Chapter 3

It wasn't until he got home, after work, that Transcoastal phoned. A Mr. George Nevis, head of Security. When it came, he was feeding his fish. One of the tetras was sick.

He didn't recognize the number and was about to let it go to voicemail when he remembered what the Old Man had said. Besides, this wouldn't take long.

"Good evening. Is this Mr. . . uh . . .?"

He helped Mr. Nevis out.

"Yes." Mr. Nevis didn't go near it. He sounded British. After introducing himself, he continued.

"I'm calling about Fletcher Kraft. I believe you spoke to his wife, Ms. Patterson, this afternoon?"

There wasn't much to tell that wasn't in the police report. He added that he was following some leads.

What leads? Mr. Nevis wanted to know.

"Kraft has a home office. I'll be out there tomorrow morning looking at receipts, bills, anything that might help. He's got a computer. If I can get in--"

"We will send someone from IT to help with that."

"No, that's ok. I'll figure it out. But thanks for the offer." He wasn't sure he'd figure it out, but if not, Continental had its own geek. He didn't want Transcoastal looking over his shoulder. Not yet, anyway. Maybe not ever.

"Well, be sure to call us, whether or not you find anything. We might have information that could help."

And you're paying me, he thought. Mr. Nevis's tone implied that he didn't like having to call.

The Op assured him he'd send a daily update.

"No emails, please," said Mr. Nevis. "Do it by phone. I want to ask questions as they occur to me."

"Before you hang up: I understand Transcoastal got a text message the day Kraft disappeared. What did it say?"

"That he had Covid and had to skip the flight."

"Who received the text?"

"John Lorrimer, our West Coast regional manager. He was the one coordinating the meeting."

"Any further contact?"

"No."

"Do you have the exact words?"

"Wait a moment."

After a few seconds, Mr. Nevis's voice came back on.

"Can't make meeting. Tested positive Covid am. Will quarantine. Text only—calls not getting through. Apologies!"

"Time received?"

"6:22 pm, Pacific Daylight Time."

"No one thought it odd that Kraft would tell them he missed his flight . . ."—he paused to calculate the difference in time zones, gave up—"hours after it was supposed to arrive in San Francisco?"

"Not at the time. Lorrimer told me he was surprised that Kraft hadn't shown up for cocktails in the hotel bar before dinner. That was just a few minutes before receiving the text message. It wasn't like him to be late. Ever."

"Anything since?"

"Not a word."

He returned to the aquarium and looked for the tetra. There it was, staring at a crumb that had fallen between two pebbles. At least it was interested.

Do they know how beautiful they are? he wondered, not for the first time. Or is their world a grey blank speckled with freeze-dried krill and bloodworms? It was one of the things that drew him to their world. Not just the beauty, but that question. Also, the quiet. And the dim light. And the routine. The regularity of feeding, testing the water, changing the water, checking the temperature, the salinity. A transparent box of protocol in the haphazard sea of his life. Tidy and self-

contained. Like a good book, or a poem, or a painting, or a song. Or Byrne vs. Fisher. (Barely thirteen. And with Black! And to top it off: Na4. The beginning of the end.

Götterdämmerung!)

The dim light of the aquarium and its slow-moving glints of color put him in mind of Mr. Shun.

Bannon's directions had led him to a red-brick, five-story office building that seemed to be empty. The cornerstone said "1929" and on one of the front double-doors there was a No Trespassing sign. The windows were caked with grime. He later learned it was scheduled for demolition, but there'd been a delay over some technicality. Maybe a lawsuit. Mr. Shun was a squatter.

Finding the front doors locked, he walked back to the cornerstone, where he'd seen a gap between this building and the next. At the end of it he found a sign taped inside a row of unlit basement windows. "Shun Fine Tailoring and Alterations." He walked down the short flight of steps.

The room was expansive but low-ceilinged, and lined with fabrics hanging from bolts tucked every which way on long shelves. It was also stifling hot. A big industrial fan in one corner blew the fabrics languidly about. Apparently, Mr. Shun was siphoning heat from a furnace serving a cluster of buildings, including this one. To do so, he'd by-passed the thermostat. The fan and a fluorescent ceiling fixture over a work-table in the corner told him Mr. Shun was siphoning electricity, too. The basement windows were the only other source of light. Mr. Shun didn't want to call attention to himself.

As if to confirm this assumption, the room was empty.

When Mr. Shun entered, he registered no surprise at the Op's race, or his size. The Op was surprised, however, at how poorly Mr. Shun spoke or understood English. Hong Kong had been an English possession for, what? A century and a half? But with the help of printed diagrams and color swatches

and charts covered with ideograms and dollar signs, the style, fabric, and terms were soon arrived at. Three-piece, single breasted, double vent, cuffed. Dark blue worsted, faint pin stripe. The extra fabric would add to the cost: \$50 a month for 18 months.

"Cash," said Mr. Shun, holding out his hand.

"ATM," he replied.

Mr. Shun bowed.

The Op left and returned clutching a fifty.

Measurements were something else. He couldn't use the pedestal, of course. He was almost ducking his head already. Mr. Shun had him stand on the floor and hold out his left arm. Just then his phone rang. He reached into his pocket with his right hand and held the device to his ear. It was Sam.

"Hey, my man, sorry I was out. You say you need the dope on Transcoastal?"

At that moment, Mr. Shun took the arm with the phone and extended it to the side. The Op tried to transfer the phone to his other hand, but Mr. Shun grabbed the device and held it up. "Speakah! Speakah!" He gave it back to the Op, who put it on speaker. Mr. Shun showed what he wanted. Both arms out. He complied. Mr. Shun continued measuring.

"Whassup?" said Sam.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm getting fitted for a suit."

"OK, don't tell me."

The Op asked his questions.

"Far's I know, Transcoastal be clean," said Sam, who was bilingual: sentence-diagrammed English at work, AAVE on the street. He would often switch-hit in mid-conversation to "signify" with his White friends. Now he switched back. "Their corporate firm is Crown and Alardyce. Bright and shiny. Business in the Pacific Rim and Eastern Europe. Not clear how they became so big, headquartered here instead of New York or L.A. Maybe they like the connections they have in place. Take what they offer, but don't waste time wondering

about it. Like you say, this guy could do them some damage, even if nothing criminal is involved."

"Thanks, Sam."

Mr. Shun indicated "arms down."

"How's Monica these days?" Sam asked.

"Can't talk now," said the Op. "I'll call you back."

He took the "Hungry Man" (tonight it was meat loaf) out of the microwave and sat down to eat it in front of a book lying on the table. On the floor, to one side, stood a plastic-lined wastebasket filled with discarded cardboard trays and dirty plasticware and paper cups and napkins. The linoleum floor was unswept and unvacuumed and littered with tiny bits of debris: a stray crumb or two, dust balls, a paper clip. The book, a hard-cover, was lying open under the ceiling light with a heavy, sand-filled bookmark on the seam. The left page was blank. The right was headed, "Chapter XVIII: A Settler in Cloisterham."

He disliked reading on screens because there was no sense of moving through something, through the story, from front to back. You were always in the same place, a glowing rectangle. He missed the feeling that the story was all there in front of him, all at once, "in the flesh." You could see it and touch it. All of it. If you could read it all at once (but you couldn't, and didn't want to), it would be like seeing everything in a flash of lightning. Complete. Inevitable. Beginning, middle, and end.

Reading on screen had only one advantage: it freed your hands to eat. This advantage disappeared, however, if you read a hard cover edition and used a heavy bookmark.

Ordinarily, he'd be finished with his "Hungry Man" by the time he turned the first page, matching bites with periods. But he couldn't concentrate. It wasn't the rush-hour congestion

outside his kitchen window, where Route 1 narrowed to two lanes between Everett and Saugus. He got used to that the first week he moved to Malden.

It was that he'd told Sam he'd call back and hadn't.

Sam Tull and Monica Spinoso were his oldest friends, even though he hadn't met either one until his sophomore year at St. Francis Xavier Academy, a Catholic prep school so college-competitive it had no football team. By that time, all three were ostracized: Monica for her smart mouth, Sam for his race, the Op for his size (mostly—there was that matter of his complexion, and it took too long to explain that *vítíligo* wasn't contagious). During the next three years they learned to look out for each other. Now, eight years after their high school graduation—Monica got into the Berklee College of Music, the Op and Sam matriculated at Harvard—the bond remained unbreakable. Of the three, only Sam had achieved his goal in life. Monica went straight to singing at neighborhood bars and restaurants (her last gig was at The Leaning Tower of Pizza, in Saugus), and then tried her hand at a failed stint as a music agent. She'd applied for a job at Continental on the strength of having completed Berklee's "management" track. (She knew enough about a singing career to hedge her bets.) The Op never really had a goal. He "left" Harvard and moved in to take care of his grandmother in East Boston when his father died. At least, that was his excuse when asked.

In all that time, sex had never threatened their solidarity. Until last February, when Sam started dating Monica. You'd think he'd have known better. Sooner date the Medusa. The Blonde Mon went through boyfriends like termites through rotten wood. "Bed them and shed them," was her motto. She was gorgeous, witty, and amusing, a descendent of Venetian nobility on her father's side and Venetian Jews on her mother's. Also very intelligent, too much so for a certain kind

of man, and sarcastic to the point of driving away any kind of man. She did not suffer fools. She made them suffer.

This side of her personality had held her back as an agent, alienating clients and contacts alike. As an assistant operations manager at Continental she'd had little opportunity to offend anyone except co-workers, and the Old Man liked her candor. (No surprise there.) After two years, her hard edges had worn down a bit and she'd replaced her supervisor, who'd joined the Covid exodus. She was now overworked, and not happy about it.

Monica and Sam had been seeing each other for two months when Monica broke it off. She didn't explain why, and Sam gave up asking. The Op couldn't tell him why either. Eventually Sam switched to asking how and what: "How's she doing?" "What's she up to these days?" It was always the same answer: "She's fine." "Can't tell."

Lately, the Op had become more evasive: "You know how she is." He had run out of replies and hated the awkward silences that followed.

They reminded him of the awkward silences that followed questions directed at him in class, when he was at SFX. (Yes, the students had started punning on the acronym from the day it was invented.) There he did know the answers because he'd read the assignment the night before. And that was the problem. It left his mind free to think about food. When he was called on to explain, say, the equation for angular momentum written on the chalkboard, the next question after the silence after "How do you solve for m ?" was, inevitably, "What *are* you thinking about?" "Food" was unacceptable. So, more silence.

"Food" was not only unacceptable. It was stored ammunition. All day the fat jokes would accumulate like thunderheads and rain down on him as he left for home. Being a head taller than any of his schoolmates, even the

seniors, he was easy to spot. He was never attacked physically, though. Might as well attack Mauna Loa.

Mr. Clark's sophomore English class was the only one that kept him engaged in the four years he attended SFX. It was where he first met Sam and Monica. He had no trouble paying attention there. Or speaking up.

Jim Clark was a grad student at Brandeis subbing that year for their regular teacher, who was on pregnancy leave. He ignored the syllabus she'd prepared for him and taught from his dissertation, which was on John Updike and Cold War America. Assigned readings included, for a start, Updike's *Poorhouse Fair*, then "Howl," *Peyton Place*, and *Catch 22*. Clark brought an ancient portable stereo to class and played "The Sound of Silence," on vinyl. They read from Betty Friedan and listened to Janis Joplin. They read from *The Fire Next Time* and watched footage of Baldwin on the *Dick Cavett Show* putting a Yale philosophy professor in his place. Then they read Mailer's "The White Negro." Clark would email them five-page, single-spaced documents explaining things like "free indirect discourse."

Where *Poorhouse Fair* fit in he never learned.

Clark was short and thin and pale as a moth. He wore a brown corduroy coat with elbow patches, and black, horned-rim glasses too big for his face. He drank coffee from a thermos and reeked of cigarettes. He seemed to vibrate, like a tuning fork. He gave no writing assignments and had no lesson plan. He was Dick Cavett and you were his next guest.

That's when all three of them realized they had something in common besides being outcasts. They began calling themselves "The Tripod." (It was the Op's idea. It embarrassed him now to think about it, but he still liked it.)

Clark didn't last a month. No one heard of or from him again. No dissertation on Updike and Cold War America was ever defended at Brandeis. It was as though Jim Clark had spontaneously combusted.

Chapter 4

The house was a postwar Colonial standing next-to-last at the end of an unimproved *cul de sac*, not far from Route 20. Getting out of the car, he could hear the sound of traffic through the rain. Weston's version of a working-class neighborhood. It wasn't what he'd imagined. Maybe chief accountants weren't as well-off as he thought.

The lot was sparsely landscaped. It felt exposed and dreary, especially today. It featured an abstract sculpture of aluminum cubes centered on a rise in the front lawn. The cubes made a kind of pyramid, like the nipple of a breast.

Brit Patterson answered the door wearing the same outfit she'd worn to her appointment, minus the Red Sox cap. "Taking my lunch break," she said. "Are you hungry?" How did she manage to talk like a riveting gun, yet sound so warm and welcoming?

Over chicken salad sandwiches (he'd eaten before leaving the office, but what the hell) she told him about her work. Her dad fixed auto bodies in the small town where she grew up (she wouldn't say where) and did some spot welding. From when she was a toddler she was captivated by the fireworks—the sparks, the heat. The violence. And the shiny scar the fireworks left behind. Brit's mom began working at the diner next door to the shop when the last of her five kids started school. She and her husband had no patience for their oldest daughter's ambitions. Brit left home after high school and didn't look back.

He had the feeling there was a lot left out besides the name of her hometown.

"When you're done in Fletch's office, I'll show you the studio. It's out back."

The interior of the house had been completely remodeled and a sunny annex attached. The kitchen they were eating in looked like a spread from *Dwell* magazine. The rest of the place was white, sleek, and what the real estate ads called "spacious." Shiny hardwood floors and skylights. A floating stairway led to the second floor.

Brit opened the door to Fletcher Kraft's office.

"We don't lock doors in this house," she said.

"How about computers?"

"We have two daughters—two nosy daughters—and their friends."

He squeezed into the office chair and turned on the desktop.

"Password?"

"Like I said, Fletch and I respect each other's privacy. I have no idea."

"How did the police get into it without a password?"

"I guess they figured it out."

"And they never told you?"

"Nope."

That was odd.

"Did you ask?"

She shrugged. "I guess I should have."

The Op pulled out his phone and called Brady. Brady put him on hold while he called tech. Tech didn't have the password.

"It's not something they'd keep a record of," said Brady, "if they didn't find anything useful."

The Op hung up and turned to Brit.

"Sometimes people have so many different passwords for different things that they write them down and hide them nearby. Have you looked around in here?"

He knew a paper list was a long shot, but with just Cal left to handle all of Continental's IT demands, he also knew he'd have to show need before bringing in the desktop.

"I did, but not with a list of passwords in mind. Just more obvious stuff—strange bills, personal letters"

She stopped in mid-sentence.

"Something's wrong."

She went over to the desk and pointed to a manila folder.

"I didn't leave this here."

"Perhaps one of your daughters?"

"I can't imagine why either one would be interested in 'COGS.' I don't even know what it means."

He didn't either.

He picked it up and thumbed through it. Columns of figures, entered by hand. Something to ask Monica the management major.

"Have you had any strangers in the house since you visited my office yesterday, or did you see anyone, or any vehicles in the neighborhood that looked suspicious?"

"No, no one."

"Do you have an alarm system?"

"Yes, and I check it every morning. It was on when I woke up. I always leave it on."

"Who else knows the combination?"

"Just Fletch. And the girls. Oh, and my agent."

"You're sure you didn't leave the folder out?"

She gave him the same look of annoyance as yesterday, when he asked about ransom notes, and replied with the same note of impatience.

She agreed to let him look around the house and yard, as well as the studio, after he was through. She'd ask her daughters about the folder when she picked them up at soccer camp.

* * * * *

It didn't take long to find the list. One page, single spaced, it was lying under a pile of warranties in the upper left drawer of the desk. "Dell—golden spiral." It looked too simple to be a password for anything, and he was right. But perhaps it was a reminder, a trigger phrase that meant nothing to anyone except Kraft. The Op remembered the Golden Spiral from an art history class. It was a graphic rendering of the "Golden Ratio," a sequence of numbers where each is the sum of the two preceding sums, except for zero and one, which have no preceding sums. The sequence began with 1 (0+1), then (he started doing the math in his head) 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21. Unfortunately, it had no end. Kraft could have started anywhere.

He tried some sequences at random, extrapolating out to 89. Nope.

But why assume the curve spiraled outward? What if it spiraled inward? Down to zero?

Ok. But where to start?

He knew that password encryptors recommended combining letters with numbers and punctuation marks. He ignored their advice because it annoyed him to switch from one keyboard to another on his iPhone. What was the name of the guy who worked out the math of the Golden Ratio? He looked it up, tapping his fat thumbs against his iPhone screen with a practiced, delicate touch. Fibonacci. Unlikely Kraft would include the numbers randomly. Otherwise, what would be the point of the mnemonic? Might as well write down the password itself. He counted off, tapping fingers to thumbs. Nine letters. Start at 55 and count down? He'd already tried enough failed sequences to justify calling IT, but couldn't resist testing his hunch. It worked on the first try. Dumb luck? Or too easy? Why couldn't he just accept the idea that he'd been smart enough to crack it?

Brit had gone downstairs to sort through her mail. Later on he heard her leave to pick up the girls. By the time he finished with Kraft's digital files and the bookshelves and drawers in the room, she was back. At least, he assumed it was Brit pulling into the driveway.

With the manilla folder in mind, the first thing he did after coming downstairs was go to the front door to look for signs of forced entry. Seeing none, and hearing the back door open and close, he headed for the kitchen. There he found a woman fixing coffee.

"Hi. I'm Mitzi Leversohn, Brit's agent," she said. "You must be the detective."

This had to be the friend who'd recommended Continental. They shook hands.

"Find anything?"

"Not much. If you don't mind my asking, how did you get in?"

"I know the combination. It's the same as the studio's."

Not missing a beat, the Op replied, "I guess you come and go a lot?"

"I have to. Lately I've been supervising the move for an installation. Some of the pieces take a lot of prep. Disassembly, reassembly. Cranes, even. We've got a show starting at the ICA."

"So I heard."

She was dressed, like Brit, in jeans, but designer cut, and wore a light green blouse instead of a shirt. Black pumps. Her hair was salt-and-pepper gray, bristly, and cut very short. Older than Brit by maybe a decade or more. Her accent said she was from New York.

She seemed oblivious to his size.

"Coffee"? she asked.

"Yes, please. Black."

Mitzi told him a little more about the exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art and, in answer to his questions, about Brit's childhood. Her father had been a violent, abusive man. Not sexually or physically. Emotionally. Cold, distant, sharp-tongued. And then, suddenly, he'd explode. He never struck his kids, or his wife, but his rages were terrifying, and his children had grown up surrounded by the wreckage. The house was a museum of make-shift repairs and glued-together crockery. He seemed perpetually angry. Her mother retreated into silence, then into her job. Brit left for good the day after high school graduation.

"Her accent—that's Great Plains, isn't it?"

"I'm not going to say. She doesn't want people to know where she's from. Or her backstory. She's your client, so I'm counting on you to keep what I told you to yourself." There was a pause as Mitzi looked down at her coffee cup and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm just so proud of her!" She seemed genuinely moved. "After what she's been through. I wish I could tell everyone."

He asked to see the studio. On the way, he briefly examined the back door and the door leading to the garage. Like the front door, they had nothing to say.

"How did you two meet?" They were walking down the back porch steps.

"A mutual friend," she said, then added, almost as an afterthought, "I was Fletcher Kraft's first wife."

* * * * *

The studio was a converted barn where chaos was sorted and stacked in bins and assembled into geometrical forms. The preferred form was the triangle: scale models of tetrahedrons, four-sided pyramids (upright, inverted, skewed), and geodesic half-domes rested on tables. Most of the work-space was empty, except for some cubes piled step-wise in a corner. They resembled the ones on the lawn. Among the models was one made of irregularly shaped metal plates and another of curved bars and blades, like scythes. Illustrations lined the walls where scrap metal of every shape and size wasn't piled or standing in bins. The drawings were crowded with metallic objects—pens, screws, bits of chicken wire, paper clips, hex nuts, kitchen utensils. Scrunched together, they reminded him of a colony of barnacles he'd once seen clinging to a rock. Tanks of propane, hoses, a torch, a welder's mask. A huge skylight hovered above, like one of the "windows of Heaven" in *Genesis*. When God had opened them, water covered the earth.

Heaven was dark and gray this afternoon.

"There's not much left. The good stuff is at the exhibition," said Mitzi.

"Why pyramids?" he asked. He knew the answer, from the *Globe* article, but wondered what Mitzi thought.

"Because the pyramid is what connects earth to heaven, mortality to immortality—also re-birth. That's Brit's version. The Aztecs wanted to imitate the mountains where the gods lived."

She spotted a scuffed-up pamphlet on the floor and stooped to pick it up. Handing it to him, she recited from memory as he read.

"At the summit, priests cut out human hearts to appease whimsical gods they couldn't control, so the rain would fall and

spring would come again." She continued in her own words. "The ancient Egyptians had no mountains to imitate, only a divine ruler to commemorate. They built tombstones reaching to heaven, rooted in burial chambers below. The point was to ensure the Pharaoh's rebirth into the afterlife. It's all there."

He glanced at the illustrations: stock photos of Chichén Itzá, kingfishers. The pyramids at Giza and an ankh sketched in gold against a blue background, and oddly blurred.

"That's Brit's version, you said. What's yours?"

Mitzi thought for a moment.

"Putting the pieces back together," she said, finally. "The Humpty-Dumpty Hypothesis."

He let the silence linger and then said, "You were the friend we helped get a divorce, weren't you? The one who recommended us to Brit."

She nodded.

"What's he like?" He was careful to use the present tense.

"Kind, conscientious. Polite. But distant." She stopped to think. "A loner. That's why we broke up, eventually. I thought I loved him. Maybe I did. But I couldn't live with him. There was no 'with' in there."

"Does he seem like the kind of man to leave his wife and family?"

She hesitated. "I was going to say I don't know. But I think the answer is no. He loved the idea of family. We never had kids, so it stayed just an idea. With Brit, he has the real thing. He seems to be a changed man from the husband I knew. Not in any fundamental way, just more 'at home' in his . . . his home."

"You've had a long time to watch him change."

"No, not a bit. When we divorced—that was, maybe, fifteen, twenty years ago—Fletch and I went our separate ways. I settled in New York, he headed west, then came back here, with Brit. Not having kids to complicate things, there was no reason to keep in touch. We never shared anything except a house."

"Was Kraft the 'mutual friend' who introduced you and Brit?"

"No. A friend of mine, an art collector, moved to Boston a few years back and got wind of Brit, bought a few pieces. She wrote me, sent photos. I recognized the talent immediately. I was amazed to learn Brit was married to my ex."

They heard a car in the driveway and headed back to the house.

By the time they got there the car was in the garage and Brit was in the kitchen, hanging up her rain jacket. The girls had run upstairs to change out of their muddy uniforms. They knew nothing about the folder, Brit said. Were offended that their mom would ask.

Mitzi poured more coffee as the Op gave his report.

It didn't amount to much. Most of what he'd found was work-related. No signs of secret bank accounts or credit cards. Kraft had a separate gmail account for personal use. Maybe Brit could recognize some of the names? He handed her a list he'd jotted down, including names in the message fields.

"Nope." She paused. "'Huff' rings a bell, but I don't know where from. I don't know anybody by that name—I mean, personally."

"How about the sender, 'G. Yardley'?"

Brit shook her head.

Mitzi came over and put an arm around her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. Brit held up the list.

"Anyone familiar?"

Mitzi peered at it but nothing jumped out at her.

"Do you mind my asking," said the Op, "how you and your husband first met?"

Brit turned away from Mitzi and handed the list back.

"He was passing a construction site where I was working, as a structural welder, and I nearly clobbered him when I took off my helmet and dropped it."

"Was this here in Boston?"

"No. We moved here after we were married."

"From . . . ?"

She paused before asking, "How's that relevant?"

He heard a stampede of footsteps pounding down the floating stairs and, in another second, two teenage girls appeared.

"What's to eat?" asked the short one.

Brit took the cellophane off a plate of cookies and set it down on the counter as she introduced them. Mitzi got a carton of milk out of the fridge and two glasses from the cupboard. She held them up in one hand and pointed a finger at him.

"And you?"

They were ginger cookies, his favorite. Surprising himself, he shook his head. He wasn't hungry.

Flo, the younger one (an entering freshman, he guessed, if she was graduating in four years), looked like her mother—tall for her age, slim, red-haired, freckled. An obvious striker, but ungainly. The older one, Xenie, bore no resemblance to her sister or her mother. She was short, her hair black and straight and hanging in a single braid down her back. Kraft's passport didn't give his height. Was he this dark? Or buff? Not in the photo. Xenie was well-muscled—solid and, he imagined, fast. The kind of fullback that belonged on a gridiron, not a soccer field.

As soon as the girls entered, he noticed a gold key hanging around Xenie's neck.

"Can I ask what the key is for?" He nodded at it.

She told him it was a Scholastic Arts and Writing award.

"A national competition," Brit struck in. "Only five percent of high school seniors who enter get one!" She was beaming.

Flo reached for her second cookie.

The key reminded him of something.

"There's a drawer in your husband's office that's locked. It's in a skinny wooden cabinet. I couldn't find the key anywhere. Do you know where it is?"

Brit shook her head. "No idea. That *chiffonier* was a gift from Transcoastal, for his help in landing a big contract. He was very proud of it."

This didn't seem a likely household, but he asked anyway.

"Do you keep any keys around? Like, with odds and ends, in a junk drawer?"

"Not in the house," said Brit. "I have some in the studio. I collect all kinds of 'junk.' Never know when I'll need some, or what for. Haven't used any keys lately."

"She's thinking bigger these days," said Mitzi, and glanced at her, smiling.

The girls were headed to the Chestnut Hill Mall in Brit's car to meet their friends. Xenie was driving.

"Good luck with the treasure hunt," said Xenie. She took his hand in a firm grip and pumped it once, like she was jacking up a car.

He'd expected the girls to be more interested. But his experience with teenage girls was nil.

The keys were in a cardboard box on a workbench. He pawed through them but couldn't find what he was looking for.

Brit gave him permission to jimmy the lock on the drawer using a screwdriver. Inside it was a post office box key. He knew the number on it belonged to the key, not the box, which could be anywhere in the country. Brit shook her head when he held it up, but Mitzi reached out for it.

"See that scratch? That's from when it fell in the garbage disposal. When it was running."

They both looked at her.

"This is the key to a post office box in Cambridge, near Harvard Square. That's where Fletch and I were living when we filed for divorce. When it fell in the disposal, that's how I found out about it. He told me he used it for business."

She looked more closely, as if to be sure.

"I didn't know he still had it."

Chapter 5

The Op packed Kraft's desktop and monitor in a cardboard box provided by Brit and brought them back to the office before heading home. Bannon had agreed to sign off on having IT examine the machine on the strength of the post office box key and the private gmail account.

When he walked into the tech room, Cal (short for "Calib") Guillermos was wearing headphones and didn't hear him. Otherwise, IT was empty of life (unless you counted the AI software). The volume on the headphones was turned up high enough to reach the doorway, but the Op was used to Cal not hearing him. Cal was almost totally deaf. He had hearing aids, but preferred not to wear them when working. The silence helped him concentrate. When he had to use headphones, like now, for listening to audio files that might have been doctored, Cal just cranked up the output.

The Op set the cardboard box with the desktop and monitor on Cal's work table.

"A Dell Precision!" said Calib, turning his head to the side and peering in. He seemed impressed. He took his left hand off the keyboard and pointed to a long table of computers and peripherals wearing white tags. "The line starts over there," he said, and resumed listening.

The Op didn't move. These suckers were heavy and he needed to catch his breath. When he could talk, he tapped Cal on the shoulder. Cal removed his headphones, switched them off, and replaced his hearing aids. He swiveled up his round, brown face.

"See what you can find. Anything suspicious—locked doors, IP drivers on the gmail, especially 'W. Huff.' Look for any signs of surfacing the dark web."

Cal smiled and gave his head a little shake, like a bird. There was something animatronic about him that became more

pronounced as his mood improved. As though he were moved by springs.

"Do you know what anything you just said means?"

"No."

"For one thing, IPs have 'addresses,' not 'drivers.' And you look for locked doors in video games. Also, you don't 'surface' the dark web. You 'surf' it."

Calib took the time to explain these mysteries because he and the Op had a few things in common. They were both children of parents whose parents had fled from revolutions. Both were also heavy men—"plus-size," in fashion-speak—living in a world designed to favor the light and thin. The first similarity didn't matter anywhere near as much as the second. Nor did their differences. The Op's grandfather had been a diplomat, Cal's a factory worker—a labor organizer under the Pinochet regime. Calib Guillermos was short and basketball shaped. The Op was a giant pear. Cal, defying expectations, was a *bon vivant* and a ladies' man. The Op was a recluse. He didn't know the first thing about women. Cal had to push them out of the way.

Right now the Op needed advice about one particular woman, so he let himself be tutored. There was another reason, too. It flattered Calib and made him feel superior, and feeling superior made him feel generous—more inclined to do favors, like letting the Dell Precision jump the queue.

"Do you even know what the 'dark web' is?"

The Op shook his head. Truthfully.

"It's part of the regular internet and accessible to anyone. But you have to know what to look for." He explained how phony information sites would lead you to the real source, which was usually protected by a fake email address and virtually untraceable. He also explained how TOR software rerouted any communication between two dark web users so many times that it made tracing a site or message back to its point of origin nearly impossible.

By the time he finished, Calib had relaxed and was leaning back in his chair, looking up at him. This seemed like the right time.

"I need some advice."

He described the situation with Sam and Monica.

"I don't know your friend Sam," said Cal. "But I know Monica. Wish I knew her better." Cal popped his eyebrows up and down.

"I'm not describing an opportunity," said the Op.

"She *is* a babe," said Cal.

"I don't know what that means," said the Op. Cal knew he knew the meaning of the word but not the feeling someone like Cal attached to it.

"What I want to know is, should I ask Monica why?"

"And triangulate yourself?"

"Huh?"

"Become their go-between. Their Cyrano. You think you can solve this problem and make Sam stop asking you 'why' if you ask Monica 'why.' In my experience, that's a risky move. They could end up wishing you'd minded your own business and leave you more shut out than ever."

The Op stood there thinking about what Cal had said.

"Tell Sam what you told me. How you feel. But don't ask Monica anything." Cal took out his hearing aids and put the earphones back on.

The Op picked up the Dell and put it on the long table with the other machines, at the head of the line.

* * *

When he got home from work, he phoned Mr. Nevis to report what he'd found in Weston and what he hadn't. In column A: a key, a private gmail account, a name that looked vaguely familiar to Ms. Patterson, and a mysteriously levitating manila folder. (He saw no reason, at this point, to mention Mitzi Leversohn's access to the house.) In column B: no secret bank accounts or credit cards, no indication (as far as he could tell based on Cal's information) of dark web activity, no odd purchases. He told Mr. Nevis that he and

Brit were meeting tomorrow morning in Cambridge to open the post office box.

Mr. Nevis ignored the folder. "Huff,' did you say?" There was a pause. "I'll look for it in our employee database, along with the other names, and get back to you. Any suspicious messages?"

Like what? he wondered. Your *plastique* has left the warehouse?

"The Huff email said, 'Hi, Fletcher—W. Huff will join us for lunch, but at 1 pm, not 2. Let me know if this is ok. G.' The address of the sender was 'gyardley@sublimate.com.' It was dated two months ago. There were only a dozen or so messages in the inbox," he added. "Junk' looked like junk. 'Trash' was empty."

"That is suspicious in itself. Please have the machine delivered to me as soon as possible." He gave the address.

"Our team is working on it at the moment." ("Team" meaning Calib.) "I'll email you the list of names. Or I can read you the names right now."

"That won't do, and I'm sure we're much better positioned to notice anything of significance on Mr. Kraft's hard drive. Also, it may contain proprietary information."

"Does it belong to Transcoastal? Is it company property?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Because if it isn't, it belongs to Mr. Kraft. You'll have to get Ms. Patterson's permission, won't you?"

"I'll find out," said Mr. Nevis. "If need be, I'll ask her and call you back."

He knew from Brit it was Kraft's machine and had told her to expect a call. Also, what to say.

He still wasn't sure how far to trust Mr. Nevis. So far, there'd been no second requests to examine the desktop from the Boston police or from the police in Weston. The case had sunk to the bottom of their pile.

"You will let me know immediately if you find anything in the post office box." Mr. Nevis hung up.

It was a command, not a question.

The Op fed his tetras, then himself. Then he called Sam. After an apology for the delay and the usual evasions, the silence began to accumulate, like snow.

Before it could smother him, he said, "You keep assuming I'd like to see you back together."

He didn't anticipate being this upset. Following Cal's advice didn't give him the relief he expected.

The silence continued to pile up. "But why would I?"

"Why . . .?"

"Why would I want to see you and Monica an item again?"

"What's that now?"

He wouldn't humiliate himself by explaining what he knew Sam already knew. He loved Monica as much as any man—or woman, for that matter—could. But not in the same way as Sam. And never would.

"I don't know why Monica broke up with you!" said the Op. He tried to find the words to continue. "And it hurts me to even think about asking her."

"Hurts *you*?"

How to explain?

"You be jealous? *You*?"

"Sam, you remember the Tripod."

"Da fuck. When you gonna quit dis lame-ass schoolyard shit? What next? Pinky-swears?"

"You didn't call it that when I saved your lame ass on MLK's birthday."

Sam paused. Then he laughed. The laughter was good to hear.

"The Great White Whale." More laughter. "Scattering the little boats. You were wearing your track suit that day."

Men's XXL. All white. That's how he got the name.

"We stood up for each other," he told Sam. "All of us."

They'd just come out the front door of his three-decker, wearing their black armbands, when they were surrounded. The captain of the scrum got Sam in a headlock and gave him a hard nuggie. Nearly broke his neck.

"Whassa mattah, Nappy?" the kid said after letting go. "Neck hurt?"

His three friends joined in. "Neckhurt?" "Awww, neckurt?" "Negurt!" "Hey, his neggerz!" Until they reached their goal.

"Niggers? Niggers?" they yelled, rubbing their necks and hooting.

It took him more time than he now liked to think about. Also, less effort. He pinned the leader to a chain-link fence by backing him into it and the rest fled. He was crushing the life out of the boy when Sam tapped him on the shoulder. The kid staggered away.

The memory put him in mind of another day, in Roxbury, when Sam's jive dozens got them past a street corner full of gang-bangers, with no perforations or missing body parts.

"And Monica was better at it than either of us," he told Sam.

Mouthy Monica. (She'd gone by many soubriquets back then, few as flattering.) Who could stand the heat? At SFX you had to fight with both hands tied behind your back. Fisticuffs were demeaning for the college-bound leaders of tomorrow. Your lips were your fists and there were no Marquis of Queensbury Rules to protect you. One time, Monica went too far and got a crack on the jaw that left her with blood dripping down her chin. The other girl, unable to survive the cutting contest, had lowered herself to the level of the unwashed. Pale with horror, she stared at the offending hand, where a bleeding knuckle bore the imprint of Monica's bicuspid.

"Ah haf AIDS," said Monica.

Her reputation made it believable.

"Like a Tripod, is what I'm trying to say. You two going out together makes two of the legs like one. Stronger that way, maybe. But it puts me . . ." He didn't know how to finish. "A tripod can't stand on two legs."

He didn't want to spell it out. Explaining metaphors was bad enough.

"It's got *no* legs, man! She won't even speak to me."

The Op had no reply.

"But hey, ok. I won't ask anymore."

"Thanks."

"I'll wait 'til she tells me. Which may be never."

For a moment, the Op was at a loss. He thought about Cal's warning. Then he decided.

"Just be patient."

He'd do the asking.

Chapter 6

The Op met Brit at the Cambridge post office the next morning. He got there early enough to resume, for the fourth time, his attempt to beat Morphy in *Morphy vs. Allies*, 1858. (He preferred counterfactual challenges to puzzles.) This morning, he started with Black's questionable third move, Bg4?! It would earn more *kudos* if he could start later in the game, after the damage was done, and still win, but today he decided to make it easier on himself.

He'd hardly begun when Brit arrived. The two of them scanned the wall of boxes. Mitzi remembered it was at the end of a top row. She'd insisted that Kraft open it in her presence, in case it held evidence of unreported assets. Kraft knew it was empty, so he had no reason to object.

It wasn't empty now.

Inside was a credit card statement from Chase addressed to Kraft for the month ending just days before he'd left for San Francisco.

He and Brit examined the statement over coffee and croissants at Peet's, on Mt. Auburn Street. In front of them, Winthrop Park was empty. The cold and wet had settled in. A rare Nor'easter in June.

"You can get your statements sent to a PO box as long as you provide your residential address," the Op said, in answer to Brit's question. The stools at the plate glass windows were too small for him, so he stood, looking over her shoulder.

She resumed reading, but saw nothing unusual. He told her to keep an eye on the box. Check it every day and call him if anything appeared.

"Can't I have his mail forwarded?" she said. "It's a long drive from Weston."

"Not unless you're the owner."

"I'll give the key to Mitzi. She's in Somerville, just across the line."

Before they parted, Brit invited him to the press opening of her exhibition at the ICA that evening. Members-only, but he'd be her special guest. The ticket was a plus-one. Did he have any friends?

"Why should I?" said Monica.

Because, he thought, I have something I need to ask you and I want to catch you by surprise.

"Because she gave me a plus-one and I think you'll like her work," he said. "And the drinks are free."

Monica could toss it back like a pirate. She never seemed to get drunk, though. Just sentimental. Which was perfect for what he had in mind.

An added bonus was that, with Monica on his arm, or even giving him the time of day, he'd seem less out of place. He wanted to learn more about Brit's world because, as far as he was concerned, Brit was not above suspicion in her husband's disappearance. The first rule of vanishing husbands or wives or partners, as anyone who ever watched a cop show knew, was *chercher le conjoint*—"look for the spouse." Brit hadn't hired him until Transcoastal got involved. It would look suspicious if she'd refused their help.

Monica was the perfect blind. He understood enough about sexual magnetism to recognize what made her hot—sexy to men, enviable to women. Even in office clothes, she looked like a runway model who'd just stepped off the pages of *Vogue*. Her body movements were the same, but not as exaggerated—one foot in front of the other, legs, hips, shoulders, and arms rotating gently. Even when she was still, she made you think her movements were catching up to her. And no matter what she wore, she seemed nude, unselfconsciously so. No tight sweaters or high skirts or low necklines. Just something about the way she carried herself conveyed an impression of serene, invulnerable nakedness. It was

what made her sarcasm so stinging by contrast. And her intelligence so surprising. They were her sword and shield against lust and envy.

She never let her guard down without meaning to. You could say she was selective, like a praying mantis.

If Monica agreed to go, all eyes would be on her, not him, despite his size. No one would notice the incongruity. They would only notice Monica.

"I'll need to go home and change."

"Meet me there at six, then."

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, he got a text message from Cal.

"Come see what I found."

"Sublimate.com" was a dark web site disguised as a self-help outfit offering "re-invention kits": "Out of step with life? Jump the groove with a new outlook, and in-look, on your future self."

"It's selling fake identities," said Cal.

Unfortunately, you couldn't get past the "new account" portal without paying a massive sign-up fee: \$5,000 just to let you in the door.

"Why 'sublimate?' he asked. "Sounds like artists re-purposing their libido."

"It's a chemical term," said Cal. "Going from a solid to a gaseous state without becoming liquid along the way—without leaving a trace or a trail to show you ever existed. Imagine dry ice."

"Kraft was planning to evaporate."

"Looks that way. Outfits like this offer fake passports for the US and maybe a dozen other countries, including those without extradition treaties. 'Real ID's, social security cards, birth certificates, adoption papers."

"But how? It's all biometrics these days, isn't it? Fingerprints and irises. And if you already have a passport, won't they match the real identity you have in the database?" He'd been reading up on the

subject since arriving at Continental. He especially liked using the words "biometrics" and "database."

"Sure," said Cal. "That's why sites like this start from scratch. They hack county records to create fake birth certificates, forge notary seals. You can ambiguate fingerprints and use contact lenses to create fake irises to match your new identity, in case the old 'you' is still in the system. It takes a long time and costs money. You've got to rent or buy a place under your fake name to have a legit address for receiving official documents, and to establish residency."

"I guess it would take some long-range planning."

"On their end, it's a creative process. Talk about 'artists,' these guys are the Michaelangelos of fake identities. Line up the hammer and chisel, take off a chip at a time. Once everything's in place, you apply via USPS or FedEx with all the necessary fake documentation. The photo is a photo of you. The fingerprints are yours. The iris they scan is yours, too."

"How much are we talking about?"

Cal thought for a moment. "Fifty grand, maybe? Just a guesstimate."

The Op whistled, or tried to. "So that's why he set up the secret credit card?"

Cal shook his head. "Sublimate would probably demand payment in Bitcoin or some other digital currency. I'll bet he's got a crypto account. Not sure what the credit card is all about, but if he was planning to disappear, a credit card no one knew he had might come in handy, be impossible to trace.

"Why not get one using his new name?"

"He could, but 'Mr. Huff' or whoever he's pretending to be wouldn't have much of a credit history. Could limit the possibilities."

"Where's he's getting the money for all this?"

"Embezzlement? That would explain the long-range plan to 'evaporate.' Time to start drawing down that off-shore account Mr. Huff set up in the Bahamas or Switzerland."

"And who is 'G. Yardley'?"

"Can't tell. They're using DEA—'disposable email addressing'—to hide their real email address."

* * * * *

Kraft had left his passport behind. Back at his cubicle in the Locker Room, the Op called the Boston office of the State Department to report what he and Cal suspected and to see if State had issued a passport in the last year to a "W. Huff." If so, could they share the date it was issued and the address it was sent to? They said they'd call back (he doubted it) and thank you for the information. No point in examining passenger lists for upcoming flights abroad, or assigning personnel to gateway airports. If Kraft was leaving the country he'd be gone by now.

He called Brady again to get him up to speed, and then Mr. Nevis. He wouldn't have the time after work if he was going straight to the ICA. He'd have to eat on the way, too.

Mr. Nevis seemed unimpressed when the Op told him about "Sublimate."

"Sounds touchy-feely to me. Did your team get in?"

"No. The entry fee was exorbitant."

"Well, perhaps it is just what it says it is—change your life by changing your outlook. Higher consciousness, meditation, breathing exercises. High-income housewives looking for transcendence, I imagine. In any case, we didn't find 'W. Huff' in our company records. No one with that name works for us, or has. Nor is there anyone named 'Huff' with whom we do business."

"Our tech department says 'Sublimate' looks like a fake identity workshop, and Kraft could be a customer. Have you checked your books lately?"

"The minute Fletcher Kraft was officially declared missing we conducted a complete internal audit. Everything is in order."

Before they hung up, Mr. Nevis asked if he had plans for this evening. "In case anything turns up requiring immediate attention."

"I'll be at the ICA until nine or ten. Catch me after that if you need to."

Before he left the office, he called Bannon to get approval for a round-trip ticket to Des Moines. He would have to fly business class to fit in his seat and there were no business class seats on flights to Fort Dodge. He'd rent a car (full size) on landing and drive there.

Based on the evidence suggesting Kraft was on the run, Bannon didn't hesitate to say "yes," though money was tight. Ordinarily, the company would just chalk up the added cost to "expenses" and put it on the client's tab. But with the pandemic slump, they were trying to attract and hold onto customers by keeping costs down. That didn't apply to a mega-corporation like Transcoastal. Bannon even sprang for a six-hour flight with one stop-over at La Guardia, leaving at a reasonable hour in the morning, when a 12-hour two-stop leaving at 5:45 am was available for a hundred bucks less.

Finally, the Op called Mrs. Siskowski, who lived in the apartment across from his, to ask if she'd feed the tetras while he was at the ICA. She also agreed to take care of them while he was in Iowa.

On his way to the exhibition, he stopped at Shake Shack for a double burger and fries. As he waited for his order, he considered again how and when to ask Monica the question. It couldn't be while they stood at the entrance or once they were inside. He needed to pay attention to the crowd, and the conversation could get personal. He'd never been good at talking about sex. Or even understanding it.

From pre-puberty on, the Op knew that he (not "they"—he wasn't trans or gender-fluid, as far as he could tell) was different. How, exactly, he wasn't sure. Since then, much had happened in America's popular and medical views of human sexuality. Lately,

with Gen Z rejecting "heteronormative hegemony" (which letter did he belong to? Was there a "Y"?) the term "asexual" had caught on as a way to describe a general lack of interest in sex, and not just among the LGBTQ+ crowd (speaking of alphabetized demographics). He was attracted to women and he'd learned that "asexual" people sometimes had sex or at least, like him, knew what it felt like to experience an orgasm. They just weren't obsessed with it, or even very interested, as a rule.

For him, it came down to one thing. He knew the pleasure—well, the self-pleasure—of sex. But curiosity was not the same thing as being in love.

It was in Jim Clark's class, while reading *Peyton Place*, that he first realized something he'd suspected since sixth grade: he didn't know, in his gut (or was it his "loins"?), what the hell anyone was talking about. And hearing other boys (especially) go on and on about it was no help. It was like learning the rules of a new board game you couldn't bring yourself to care about. The ultimate goal was perpetuating the species. But each piece on the board (chess naturally came to mind) had its own special moves and immediate, tactical aims, regardless of the Grand Scheme of Things. The come-on, the seduction, and the consummation were, to the Op, the equivalent of opening move, feint, and capture on a chess board. He understood, in the abstract, the reason why the pieces were moving as they were and how each was constrained in its own particular way. But he couldn't personally identify with any of them.

Ambling toward the ICA with his burger in one hand and a large fries in the other (no third hand for a drink), he decided to ask Monica "the question" afterwards, on their way to the Silver Line stop.

The Pallotta Gallery on the 4th floor was crammed with members and patrons but sparse in *objects d'art*—perhaps a half dozen sculptures in all. But they were huge, sprawling. Some of them he'd seen as models or illustrations in Brit's studio. He and Monica stood next to each other in one of the quieter corners.

Monica wore a turquoise T-shirt dress, cut short, with black stockings and boots. Her straw-colored curls were becomingly disheveled. She held a glass of white wine, the Op a tiny paper plate of stuffed mushrooms. His suitcoat was buttoned tightly over his stomach, where a drop of grease from his Double Bacon Jam Burger had fallen on his tie.

"You need a new suit," she said as they looked over the room.

"So I've been told." He briefly described his meeting with Mr. Shun as they watched Brit talking animatedly to two reporters. Mitzi stood just behind her and to the side. The celebrity and her beaming handler. Then Mitzi moved next to Brit and gave her arm a hug as she began talking to one of the reporters.

"They seem close," said Monica. "I mean more than physically proximate."

The Op thought of the moment, yesterday afternoon, when Mitzi came over to put an arm around Brit's shoulder and squeezed it. How she'd made herself at home. Brewing the coffee, pouring milk for the girls.

Letting herself in.

A moment later, something the reporter said got a visible start from Mitzi. She crossed her arms and shook her head. The reporter, who was middle-aged with a receding hairline, went on for a bit, then turned again to Brit. Mitzi excused herself to work the room.

The Op and Monica stayed another half hour, exchanging opinions about copper pipe pyramids, blade fountains, floor spaces crowded with metallic debris. Monica even thanked him for asking her along.

"It's bracing. All these sharp, pointy things. Makes me feel like a toreador on tiptoe, half an inch away from the horns of a mad bull. Nothing between me and death or serious injury but distraction—a limp piece of cloth."

She tugged down her T-shirt dress and took a runway walk in the direction of the reporter, who was standing next to the drinks

table. He was talking too loud, laughing with his head tossed back, but he quieted instantly as Monica came near.

When she returned she said, "Let's go."

At the top of the stairs they heard footsteps behind them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a masculine hand tap Monica on the shoulder. She stopped and turned around.

It was the reporter.

"You."

"Yeah!" he said with a broad smile, proud to be exactly who he was.

"I've changed my mind."

The reporter looked at the Op—or rather, up at him—and wrinkled his brow in disbelief. His upraised head made him literally tipsy and it took him a moment to right himself. Then he laughed out loud.

"You're leaving with Super Size? Gonna get a Coke with that?"

She had a dreamy expression on her face. The Op had seen it many times before. A Botticelli Venus with a Mona Lisa smile. She placed her hands behind the reporter's head and locked eyes with him.

"What's on offer?" she asked, and glanced down. His eyes took their cue.

She was waiting for him when he surfaced.

"Thanks. I've had enough cocktail wienies for tonight."

"What was that all about?" He decided to delay asking the other question.

He'd talked her into walking the twenty minutes to Downtown Crossing, where the Red and Orange Lines intersected. The rain had stopped and the evening was mild. She could catch a train from there straight to Cambridge, he to Malden. He had the feeling she agreed to the proposal for another reason: she had something she wanted to talk about, too.

"That reporter. His name's McFadden. Writes about music and theater for the *Mercury*. Must not have much of a readership, unless he's reviewing Noise Rock and pole-dancers. Doesn't know shit about art." Coming from Monica's lips the vulgarity hung in the air like a bad odor before floating away. It was like watching Dante's Beatrice giving someone the *gesto dell'ombrello*.

"Anyway," she continued, stopping to light a cigarette, "I noticed he got a start out of Mitzi. She left the conversation almost immediately, started circulating. I went over to him, introduced myself. Not difficult to get him to open up. He'd already had too many beers."

They resumed walking. The Op remained silent.

"McFadden said he knew Mitzi from somewhere, but couldn't place her. He'd worked in New York. Mitzi said he must be mistaken. She was born there, but didn't remember ever bumping into him. Couldn't imagine why she would."

Monica took another drag on her cigarette. She didn't used to smoke, not when she was singing. Now her voice had become throaty, even slightly hoarse.

"Well, so what?" he said. "People make that mistake all the time."

"Not reporters."

They were nearing Downtown Crossing and he was running out of time. Monica picked up the pace. He decided in an instant.

"Why did you break up with Sam?"

He thought it would stop her in her tracks, but she kept striding toward the station entrance. She didn't ignore him, though. Through curling trails of smoke she muttered, "Mel King."

PART II: FORT DODGE

Saturday, June 3—Monday, June 5, 2023

Chapter 7

"Mel King?"

Sitting in Business Class, he had to smile when he recalled Sam's look of astonishment.

They'd stopped for breakfast at the Dunkin' Donuts next to the cell phone parking lot at Logan. It was a Saturday, and Sam was working 60-hour weeks, but he was eager to serve as chauffeur in exchange for the answer to his all-consuming question. His BMW was idling outside the foyer of the Op's apartment building at 5:30 am, early enough to make the flight and get Sam to the office on time. It was the only Beamer in town with a "Black Lives Matter" bumper sticker. The Op could hear Jay-Z cranked up and Sam's sub-woofers pounding the tinted glass before he opened the door to stow his roll-aboard in the back seat. Sam was in his *"I'm cool, who are you?"* jivin' groove, which meant he needed to pretend not to care about what he cared about most. The answer would have to wait until they got to the airport.

They were early. Thus, the Dunkin', where the parking was free.

"You mean the Black state rep who ran for mayor and lost? That Mel King?"

"The same."

"So?" Sam twisted his narrow face into a vague approximation of a question mark.

"She read in the *Globe* that Aspirate Group has decided to name its new development in Roxbury 'Mel King Towers.' That's the one your firm is helping acquire property for, and finance."

"And?" The approximation was getting better by the second.

"And she considers that . . . let's see." He'd just taken another bite of his apple fritter, so his mouth was full. He swallowed and raised his eyes as if reading from the ceiling. "Appropriation, exploitation, gentrification, reification, . . ." He hesitated. "And other 'ations' too numerous for," he took another bite, "enumeration." After chewing for a few seconds, he added, "Oh, and 'obscene.'"

Monica had told him that King was the activist who once organized a sit-in at the BRA to protest knocking down homes for a parking lot in the South End. Occupied the building site for days. Got national attention. "Tent City" it was called—now the name of a mixed-income housing development in Back Bay.

"And Aspirate Group helped fund King's opponent for Mayor," said the Op.

"But Aspirate's not my client. I'm in a whole 'nother division. And the 'Towers' will have low-income units, too, just like Tent City."

"I didn't know that," said the Op. "But I don't think it would make any difference. You are now working for the Fat Cats. You're the Man with the Bulldozer, turning Roxbury into another soul-less West End for white commuters. Just a loyal plastic robot for a world that doesn't care."

"I hate that line. Zappa had no rhythm. And no voice."

"Neither does Dylan. The voice, I mean."

"But Monica does. Or had." Sam tapped his slender fingers on the orange Formica table-top. "So what can I do?"

"Quit your job."

"That's what she wants?"

"She didn't say what she wants. That's me, speculating."

The rain was pounding on the roof of the car as they left the parking area, but stopped abruptly the second they drove into the oval roundabout under Terminal B. Pulling up to the curb, Sam asked, "And what about you?"

"Huh?"

"Why hasn't Monica dropped you?"

The Op tipped himself out of the car and reached for the back door to get his bag. Sam got out on the driver's side.

"I'm talking to you," he shouted over the Beamer. The Terminal B drop-off was always noisy and Sam's short height made it look like the car had grown a shouting head.

The Op made for the sliding doors.

"Who do *you* work for?" yelled Sam. "What's Transcoastal? Corporates shipping clothes made from the sweat of Bangladeshi *ten-year-olds!*"

The Op turned to face Sam.

"I'm working for Brit Patterson," he yelled, "trying to find her missing husband."

"And who's paying you?"

He had no reply.

"And who's Monica to talk? Who's cutting her paycheck? I bet Continental's into all kinds of bad shit—union busting, domestic surveillance." He raised his voice as the Op turned away. "Who does she think she is? Glenda the Good Witch? 'S I been sayin'. Time to grow up. We *all* part of The Problem now!"

"Thanks for the ride," the Op called back.

The doors closed behind him on Sam's angry voice: "Do you love it? Do you hate it? There it is the way you . . ."

Replaying the scene in his mind, the Op found his smile fading.

"There it is the way you" . . . *made it*. He and Sam were wrong. Zappa did have a sense of rhythm.

At the moment, however, there was nothing you could do but try and make what "you made" better, at least for Brit.

Waiting for his eggs benedict, tapping at the iPad resting precariously in front of him (his belly kept the tray table tilted up, even in roomy Business Class), he made some notes on what he had.

Fletcher "Fletch" Kraft, head CPA for a major shipping company, had vanished on his way to San Francisco for a business conference when his plane made an emergency landing in Fort Dodge, Iowa.

His text messages to Brit and Transcoastal raised the possibility that someone had stolen his identity. His literal silence

and invisibility for the next three weeks suggested he was either being held captive or had been killed. Probably the latter, since there'd been no ransom demands and if the idea was to use his identity in some kind of long-range scam, it was too risky (and difficult, as a practical matter) to keep him alive more than a few days without his being discovered and providing information about his abductors. . . .

A male flight attendant appeared with his breakfast.

Could they bring it later? he asked. No place to put it—he shrugged and raised his hands—and this wouldn't wait.

So much for the abduction/murder scenario. As for the others?

Kraft's voyages on the dark web, and the passport he'd left behind, suggested he had secured a fake identity, perhaps as "W. Huff," before disappearing, and had planned, carefully, to do so. It was an expensive re-invention, which implied that Kraft had acquired a large amount of money by some means, probably illegal, and probably embezzlement. Mr. Nevis hadn't raised a virtual eyebrow on hearing about sublimite.com, but if that's what Kraft was up to, the emergency landing would have posed an unforeseen obstacle requiring improvisation. Had Kraft been planning to leave the country? If so, was it from San Francisco? If it was, why not just get back on the plane? Had something happened to scare him off? Had he seen someone he needed to avoid?

Was he headed to San Francisco right now? Was he already there?

Snooping around Fort Dodge, getting the lay of the land, talking in person to Detective Sergeant Cowper, who was in charge of the investigation, and getting details about the people she interviewed, talking to them himself—all that could help answer these questions. It might also answer questions that hadn't occurred to him yet.

And then there was Mitzi Leversohn, Kraft's ex-wife. Having free access to the house, Mitzi also had access to Kraft's unlocked home office and the "COGS" folder. No point in dusting for

fingerprints like they do on TV—anyone up to no good would wear latex gloves and anyone else would have a good excuse.

Last night, while he waited with her on the Red Line platform, Monica told him about "COGS."

"Cost of Goods Sold" meant the basic costs of doing business—raw materials, wages, upkeep. For a shipping company like Transcoastal, which was providing a service rather than a product, "COGS" (in this case "COS" or "Cost of Services") would include fuel and upkeep for transportation, purchase or rental of equipment (e.g., ships, trucks), and wages of people directly involved in moving goods, among other things. Sales and marketing weren't included in COGS. They were part of Operating Expenses.

"If you subtract COGS from Gross Sales—that is, total revenue—you get a company's profit margin," explained Monica. Lower COGS relative to GS meant bigger profits, which meant higher stock prices and better credit for business loans. "It shows a high level of efficiency in making what you sell. That's why *under-reporting* your COGS amounts to fraud."

"How would anyone know?"

"A tax audit, or a corporate audit pending sale of the company or a merger. A company as big as Transcoastal would also do internal audits at least yearly. Internal or external, most auditors are told not to look for fraud unless there's something pointing to it—a cold search is too time consuming. So it might pass unnoticed."

And Kraft would oversee any internal audits.

He asked how COGS might be relevant to an embezzlement scheme.

"Well, *over-reporting* it could help hide what you're doing from your bosses. Your embezzled funds would be ratified by fake receipts and sifted into the inflated cost of doing business. You could do it with Operating Expenses, too.

"But there's another criminal upside to over-reporting COGS besides embezzlement. It's a good way to launder money without running the risk of showing the IRS a big discrepancy between reported profit and total receipts for goods and services. Again, the

laundered money would be disguised as phony purchases, with phony receipts to complete the disguise."

He nodded sagely, although he understood almost nothing.

"So, 'COGS' might be relevant to Kraft embezzling funds or to Transcoastal laundering money?"

"Bingo."

"How about both at once?"

"No reason why not, as far as I can see." She hesitated. "In fact, an individual could skim money from the corporate kickback on the laundered cash and hide that in COGS, too."

They heard the train for Alewife approaching. He had a few seconds for one last question.

"But why keep COGS information in a manila folder? Isn't that pretty old school for the chief auditor of a major corporation? Why not digitize it?"

Wind from the oncoming train made her curls float up, as if charged with static electricity.

"Ever hear of 'off the books'? What's the best way to keep someone from hacking into your files?"

Her last few words were lost in the roar.

* * * * *

For some time he'd been trying to ignore the short, heavy-set woman standing in the aisle next to him with her arms up. She had opened the bin above his head and kept raising herself on tiptoe. Now, putting his iPad away, he realized he no longer had an excuse to be inattentive. But he wanted to eat, not talk. Feigning interest in the entertainment choices on the screen in front of him, he waited for her to get what she wanted and take her seat. She didn't, or couldn't. Losing patience, he reached up for the button to summon breakfast, and saw her looking down at him. She was pretty. And young.

"I am *so* sorry," the woman said, with an agonized look. "But do you think you could help me? Please?"

She was too short to reach, or even see, the handle of her carry-on.

"It's in the middle, I think."

Never one to ignore a lady in distress, he struggled into the aisle and began to pull the middle suitcase forward.

"Oh. No, that's not it." She looked bewildered. "It's, like, a pink plaid."

There was no pink plaid in the bin.

"Oh! Now I remember!"

She turned to the bin across the aisle.

"I think it's here."

She was obviously not too bright. But as he couldn't help noticing, again, she was pretty. Short and stout, a little teapot, she wore a purple business suit that made her brown skin glow. She had a heart-shaped face, with dark eyes the color of night. The bindi on her forehead matched the red of her lips, but she had no trace of a South Asian accent. Strictly Corn Belt.

Once they'd located her bag, she asked if he would hold it open while she retrieved her book. The book was Capablanca's *Chess Fundamentals*, the 100th anniversary edition.

"You play chess," he said. The most she seemed capable of was Parchesi.

"I'm, like, just starting," she said. "My cousin plays. He recommended this book."

"It's a classic."

"So he said."

"But maybe not the best one for beginners. Or not all beginners."

At this point, a young man wearing gym shorts and an "Imagine Dragons" T-shirt appeared behind them, in obvious need.

The Op leaned down and asked the woman in the window seat next to his if she'd mind trading places with "my friend." He knew from experience that people sitting next to big people on any flight lasting more than an hour will usually jump at the chance to sit somewhere else.

"Where is it?" she asked.

After a series of maneuvers that resembled tiles sliding in a tessellated puzzle, the young man disappeared and the Op's new friend was sitting next to him. He was silent a moment, not knowing what to say. Then he introduced himself. First name only.

"I'm Louisa," she said, smiling, and extended her hand. It was warm and soft, but not tentative. "Louisa Montrose. What did you mean about 'not the best book'?"

"Capablanca begins with the endgame. He goes backward from there to middle game, and then openings."

"I noticed that. In, like, the first chapter."

"But then he does it again. And again. It was confusing to me." He paused before adding, "When I was just starting out." He didn't want her to think he was still confused. About chess, at least. Emotionally? Yes, he was confused. He was eager to talk, but the words were hard to find.

"But it makes sense," she said. "Like, if you want to write a story, you need to know how to end it, right? Before you begin?"

"Are you a writer?" he asked.

She laughed. It was delightful.

She worked for a high-tech start-up whose name he didn't recognize. Virtual reality software. Lots of applications—like, in medicine? No, she didn't know anything about computers.

"I'm in sales and marketing."

She was on her way home to visit her father.

After half an hour the tray-tables-up announcement came over the PA. They were landing in Des Moines in 15 minutes. Louisa closed the book and held it on her lap. Looking past her, he saw a sunlit checkerboard of green and brown stretching to the horizon without a cloud in sight.

As they touched down, Louisa's phone beeped.

"Excuse me," she said, looking at it. "I have to call my dad."

He couldn't help overhearing.

"Again? Ok. I understand. . . . No, no! Not a problem! . . . Yes, Appa, I'll be fine. I'll take the bus and be there in no time." A

different accent had emerged as she talked to her father. The clipped lilt of the Indian subcontinent.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"The car. Like, why won't it stay fixed!" The accent was receding. "I think the dealer is taking advantage of him."

"I have a car." Bannon had booked him a Malibu—mid-sized and a tight fit, but he thought he could make it work. "I can drop you off. Des Moines can't be that big." He regretted saying it as soon as the words left his lips. East Coast Gen Z ("Y"?) asshole smacks your fly-over hometown upside the head between sips of his latte.

"I live in Fort Dodge," she said.

The drive took more than an hour and a half through some of the flattest land he'd ever seen. But the time passed in an instant and the land seemed enchanted, all in technicolor green and gold, with trees caravanning slowly on the horizon and the Malibu gliding steadily along, like a flying carpet.

They had much in common. She was an only child and so was he. Both of them had gone to Catholic schools but weren't Catholic. Her parents were refugees. So were his grandparents. He and Louisa both loved tropical fish. Hers had died, unfortunately, after she left for college—her Appa had other things on his mind. (The Op wondered how Mrs. Siskowski was getting on with the tetras. He had something else to ask her, too. Time to check in.)

"We even look alike!" she said. "Tweedledum and Tweedledee!"

"Well, except for height."

Louisa's Tamil parents and her father's older sister had fled Sri Lanka during the Civil War and ended up in Fort Dodge on the strength of her father's degree in electrical engineering, which had helped him land an adjunct position at Iowa Central Community College. Louisa had been born soon afterward. Her mother, who worked as a librarian at the college, died of cancer four years later,

the aunt more recently. That left only her father, herself, and her cousin's family, now living in Boston.

"Did you know chess was invented by the Queen of Sri Lanka?" he asked.

"You mean 'Ceylon'? That's, like, a myth, isn't it?"

He admitted it was. He'd only been trying to impress her.

After the first half hour, conversation became intermittent. He was no longer uncomfortable or tongue-tied, though. Anyone in the back seat would assume they'd known each other since kindergarten.

It wasn't until they crossed the city limits of Fort Dodge that she asked what he did.

"I'm a detective," he said.

"I suppose you must be here on a case. Except for, like, business or family, there's no other reason to come here." But she didn't pursue the subject further.

As they neared the center of town, they encountered crowds of people on the sidewalks or jaywalking, and heard what sounded like a brass band.

"Oh! I forgot!" she said. "It's Frontier Days this weekend! The traffic will be horrible. You can drop me here. Fort Dodge isn't very big, and I can call an Uber. I don't want you to get stuck."

"Not a problem. If it's that small, I don't expect you live far from where I'm staying."

"Where's that?"

"Days Inn."

"We just passed it! Oh, really, I don't want to be a nuisance!"

But he insisted.

They pulled up to a modest bungalow in a neighborhood northwest of downtown, with treeless front yards and cracked concrete driveways. A tall, dark man came up to the aluminum storm door and looked out.

"Please stay for lunch," she said.

They'd stopped at a Burger King just outside the airport before taking I-35 north. (This was for his benefit. She'd eaten her

eggs benedict.) But he was hungry again and would have accepted the offer if he wasn't meeting with Detective Sergeant Cowper in less than an hour. He wanted to check in and reread the case notes first. And Louisa was right. Traffic was bad. He'd grab something on the way to the Days Inn.

"Well, at least meet Appa! I'm sure he wants to thank you."

Appa looked to be about forty, at most, but his hair was entirely gray. He must have married young. He hugged Louisa before turning to thank the Op and ask him in for a bite to eat.

The Op made his excuses and Mr. Montrose immediately invited him to join them for dinner. Would 6 o'clock do? The three of them shared phone numbers before he drove off. The prospect of seeing Louisa again, even with her father chaperoning, made him happy.

Still, he was pretty sure nothing would come of it. Or could be allowed to.

Chapter 8

Fort Dodge, the seat of Webster County, turned out to be a tidy, sunny, unprepossessing town of about 25,000. Arriving on the weekend of the annual Frontier Days celebration, he had to use his GPS to maneuver around the parade route again on his way to the Days Inn, so he got a fair idea of the layout.

He'd done his homework. The original Fort Dodge was a US cavalry fort, now long gone. It had been recreated as a frontier village, complete with stockade, which was the heart of these festivities.

Fort Dodge's most impressive feature, however, was invisible except as shimmering waves on the pavement. Northwest Iowa in June looked paradisaical from the air-conditioned comfort of a passenger jet or car. But it became downright infernal once you stepped outside. For a big man, ten minutes under the mid-day sun could be as deadly as ten minutes under water. Just the short walk from the car to the Days Inn lobby left him with sweat streaming down his neck.

He found the place full of guests, some with kids, coming, going, or checking in.

The demographic, he noticed immediately, was more diverse than Boston's. (Which wasn't saying much.) Unlike Boston, however, hardly anyone was wearing a surgical mask—just the check-in clerk and one person in line. At the desk, signing his registration form, stood an elderly Black man in a seersucker sport coat. The two guests next in line were a Latinx woman, professionally dressed, and a young Asian-looking man (the one wearing a mask). They had just preceded the Op from the parking lot.

As he came to a stop, another couple fell in behind him that looked more like what he expected. The man was white, middle-aged, and slightly overweight, with a box-shaped head and a dark bristly beard. He was wearing cargo shorts, an Astros T-shirt, and a MAGA hat. He and the woman next to him were discussing

activities for the weekend. She was in tight slacks and had tied her shirt tails around her bulging midriff. "Yeah," said the man. "Take a look. I'll save your place." She left his side to browse through the travel literature at the desk.

The twenty-something Asian-looking man in the NK-95 mask wasn't here for the "Days," to judge from his window-pane suit and classic tapered haircut. He looked composed and efficient in his white ear buds, standing in line and texting furiously. At the desk he paused to adjust a contact lens that was giving him trouble. When he was finished checking in, he replaced his ear buds and turned aside. The contact lens promptly fell to the floor. He stooped down to look for it as the Op walked forward, carefully. He was always wary of encroaching on other people's personal (or physical) space. It was second nature for him to keep track of where they were and what they were doing.

Check-in went smoothly. He was a bit early, but management had a room already cleaned and Covid-sanitized. He found himself there with just enough time to review his notes before leaving for the Webster County Law Enforcement Center at 1st Avenue South and S 7th Street.

He'd forgotten to pick up anything to eat, but for some reason he'd lost his appetite again.

* * * * *

Detective Sergeant Gale Cowper looked barely old enough to drive. "It's pronounced 'Cooper,' were the first words out of her mouth.

Her black business suit and tortoise shell glasses made you wonder if she'd just come from a Career Fair at the local high school. She reminded him of Talbot, but twenty years younger and, with her hair tied back in a severe bun, twenty degrees colder. It occurred to him that she had to look this way if she wanted to be taken seriously. Her voice was deliberately low-pitched, almost

devoid of inflection, and assertive enough to reach the wall several feet behind him.

"Your news about Kraft's new identity. . ." She corrected herself. "About his activities online, along with the possibility of fraudulent intent, changed the focus of our investigation. We stopped wondering whether he might have been abducted and started wondering how he might have gone underground."

Cowper explained that in addition to contacting the local hospital and nearby clinics for news of walk-ins showing signs of disorientation or trauma, "we" (she kept implying she was in charge of a team) put out an APB for a man of his description.

"Of course, we can't arrest him, since we have no evidence of wrong-doing and no one's accused him of anything."

"We" had also released a story about Kraft's disappearance to the Fort Dodge *Messenger*, along with his photo. There were the usual false leads, but also a call from Goodwill saying a man looking like Kraft had bought some shirts and pants, a baseball cap, and a wind-breaker a few weeks ago. Also, a backpack. The clerk remembered him because he came in wearing a tailored suit, which he donated. This was after changing into one of his newly purchased shirts and a pair of jeans in a corner of the store.

Canvassing Fort Dodge's homeless shelters yielded nothing, even with the Goodwill clerk's detailed description of Kraft's clothing purchases.

"We also called or visited every hotel and motel in the area to see if a Fletcher Kraft or a 'W. Huff' had checked in during those four days. Local cab companies were a dead end. He could have called a Lyft or Uber. No way for us to tell without hacking into his account."

He felt his phone vibrating and ignored it.

"Could he still be wandering the streets?" he asked. "Foraging in dumpsters, sleeping in abandoned buildings?"

"We recently passed an ordinance to address homeless loitering—sleeping on benches, aggressive begging, that kind of thing. Downtown businesses were complaining. The Mayor got a call one

morning saying someone had defecated at the entrance to their establishment." Cowper's face began to flush pink. Was she embarrassed to be talking about human feces, or about rounding up homeless people like stray dogs? He pictured them carrying plastic bags to clean up after themselves.

"It's not as though there's no place for them to go," she said quietly, as if in answer to his unspoken question.

After a second or two she charged ahead. "I mention it only because we've been particularly vigilant in recent weeks. It's very unlikely Mr. Kraft could have been hiding in plain sight as a homeless person without our knowing it." She avoided saying "arresting him."

He asked if she had a list of the people she'd talked to. She slid forward the sheet of paper she'd been resting her hands on since he entered. It had three names, with contact information and notes after each.

"These are the only witnesses who provided useful information."

He reached down to pick it up. He'd been standing since he arrived, the wooden armchair in front of her desk being too small to accommodate him.

Just before he turned to leave, it occurred to him to ask about Kraft's luggage. Was it transferred to the ongoing flight? Or did United leave it with lost luggage here in Fort Dodge when he didn't show?

"No check-through was registered," said Cowper, and turned to her desktop.

He held out a pudgy hand.

Cowper ignored it. "Good luck," she said to the screen.

* * * * *

As soon as he was free, he looked at his phone. The text was from Monica. "Call." No voicemail. He'd wait to answer it in the car.

On his way out he talked to the desk sergeant to see if any homeless people had been arrested for loitering since the new ordinance was passed. He got four names. All men.

"No known addresses," said the desk sergeant, scratching his five o'clock shadow two hours early. He was tall and tanned and bulging with muscles, not the Op's idea of a deskie. "We sent them to Light of the World. That's the men's shelter over on North 7th Street. A Christian outfit."

In the car he turned on the AC and called Monica. He leaned close to the vent as he put the phone to his ear.

"I did some digging in our files, on Mitzi's divorce," said Monica. Before he could ask on whose authority, she added, "I knew something was wrong."

"Can you speak up? I've got the AC on high."

"Then shut it the fuck off," she said.

He did as he was told.

"They split in 2005. The operative, Hillyard, is deceased, but I looked at his case file. They were already separated when Continental got involved. Mitzi hired us to dig for assets. She was going by 'Meriam' back then, and she'd already dropped her married name for 'Leversohn,' her maiden name. Nothing interesting except that she had still another last name when she married Kraft in 2001. Aaberg."

"The heroine of a thousand faces."

"Well, three that we know of. I'd already Googled 'New York City' and 'Leversohn.' So I tried 'Aaberg.'"

In 1999, Meriam Aaberg and her husband, Markus, a Norwegian art dealer with a gallery on the Upper East Side, were arrested and tried at the Supreme Court of the County of New York on 46 counts of art fraud involving forgeries and items looted from archaeological sites in Egypt and the Sudan. Markus was convicted. Meriam swore she knew nothing about it. The jury decided that the evidence against her was not solid enough to warrant conviction. She was found not guilty and released.

"And now she's working for Brit Patterson," he said.

"Part of the decor," said Monica.

He wanted to ask her if Sam had gotten in touch, but the heat was getting unbearable. Either he had and she didn't want to talk about it, or he hadn't and there was nothing to say.

"Gotta go," he told her.

Light of the World was a block or two away from the Law Enforcement Center, back across Central Avenue, which was still crowded with strollers and street performers. A stilt walker in buckskins and a ten-gallon hat posed an unexpected hazard. Half a block away, a woman dressed as Uncle Sam exhaled a plume of fire.

He discovered that two of the four men sent to Light of the World were still in residence. Or at least, their personal items were. The other two had left weeks before. The two in residence were expected back for dinner at 5:30. "You're welcome to help us serve, if you're free," said the shift supervisor, whose name badge said "Jorge" but who introduced himself as "Jay. "This is Saturday. Day we open our doors to the community, let them volunteer, see what we're about."

"I've got to be someplace at six. Is it ok if I skip that part?"

"Suit yourself," said Jay. He showed no sign of disappointment. In fact, he seemed cheerful, even jovial.

Before leaving, the Op pulled out his photo of Kraft. Jay smiled and shook his head. "They already asked me."

The Op left a photocopy to display at the food table, just in case. "I'll be back at 5:30, then."

"Go in peace."

In the car he looked at the list Cowper had given him. At the top was Amy Briscoe, who lived in the Bay Area. He could call her later tonight, after eating with the Montroses. The two-hour time difference would give him a window to catch her between dinner and bedtime. But it was Saturday. She might be out. If so, it could wait until tomorrow.

The other two names were Georgia Johnson, the airport custodian who'd seen Kraft heading for the exit, and Tucker Millsap, at Goodwill.

If Georgia had seen Kraft, it would be on the daytime shift and she might be at work now. It being Saturday, though, she might have the day off. He wanted to meet with her in person so she could pinpoint on a terminal map exactly where she'd seen Kraft walking and where she was when she did. No harm in calling to find out and setting a time and place to meet.

The call went to voicemail. He left a brief message and his number.

Millsap answered on the first ring. He was at Goodwill and would be glad to meet if the Op could come to the store. It was near the Days Inn, an easy stop on the way back to his room.

* * *

Tucker Millsap was a tall, gangly young man with a shock of bright blonde hair that he must have cut by himself using a mixing bowl. He seemed flattered to be asked to help in an official police investigation.

"Yes, sir. It was the darndest thing. He come in here dressed like James Bond—well, except no tie—and asked if he could make a donation. Well, yeah, 'course, I said. And he said could he buy some clothes first? And I said, well, yeah, 'course. So he picked out some shirts and jeans and a windbreaker. Oh, and a hat."

"And this was when?"

"Don't remember the exact date, but around when they're sayin' he disappeared."

The Op glanced at Cowper's notes.

"Baseball cap? Minnesota Twins?"

"Yep."

"Yellow T-shirt? Red and blue flannel shirt? Jeans?"

"Yep. Remembered the T-shirt because of the color, and the flannel shirt 'cause, heck, in this weather? What would he want with a flannel shirt?"

"And the windbreaker?"

"Dark blue, I think. Hard to tell. And a tan backpack."

"And then what?"

"And then he bought 'em . . ."

"Cash or credit?"

"Cash. And then, after he bought 'em, he took 'em back there, behind that rack. Just then, a lady come in with a little girl and started askin' about kids' clothes, so I couldn't pay attention to him, and when I looked again, he weren't there. I went over to see for sure, and would you believe it? There he was lyin' on the floor in his skivvies, pullin' a pair of jeans up his naked legs. 'Thout so much as a by your leave! And that lady and her little girl just a coupla feet away!"

"Did you kick him out?"

"Not before I made him give us his suit. And a nice cotton-blend white shirt. And that pair of wing-tips he was wearin'. All top shelf." He beamed.

"Color of the suit, and the shoes?"

"Dark grey, and black, I think."

"Any of those items still here?"

"Sold 'em before closing time."

"Did he buy any footwear? He didn't leave barefoot, I take it?"

Tucker thought for a moment.

"Hiking boots."

"Hiking boots."

"Yep. I'm sure it was hiking boots. Leather. Like new. I do recall thinkin' it was kinda odd, like, 'cause they ain't a lot of places to go hiking 'round here. Not real hiking. Lots of fishin' spots. Wouldn't need more 'n a pair of sneakers to walk to 'em, I 'magine."

As the Op finished entering the information, Tucker glanced up at the ceiling where a huge pair of Levis, "Size 56!" hung above the counter. Not one to miss an opportunity, he said, "Before you go, mister, maybe we could fit you into somethin' more your size? That suit's lookin' a little baggy, if you don't mind my sayin'."

The Op glanced up. "Jeans? In this weather? Don't think so. But thanks for your help."

Reluctantly, he abandoned the cool comfort of Goodwill for the mean streets of Fort Dodge.

* * * * *

When he opened the door to his room he was reminded by the paper clip he found behind his door to call Mrs. Siskowski.

He'd learned the paper clip "tell" (and a few others) from Talbot on his first day as a junior operative. Pry up the inside of a paper clip so it looks like an alligator head with its jaws open and unwind the lower spiral to a 45 degree angle. Squeeze it under your door when you leave your room or apartment and use something stiff and flat—a pocket ruler or a nail file (Talbot's choice)—to slide it to the other side. It will spring open and catch on the door if anyone comes in when you're gone. When you return, slide your ruler or nail file under the door and flick it toward the latch side. You should find it lying clear of the door, or nearly so, when you walk in. If it's not, you'll find it lying toward the hinge side, where anyone opening the door would have swept it.

The paper clip tell was less conspicuous than movie tricks like a piece of paper or lint in the jamb or a hair spanning the door and jamb, which any experienced burglar will be looking for and can replace from the outside. The clip will look like debris once the door is opened, if it's noticed at all. This was one reason he rarely vacuumed his apartment.

The paper clip behind his door at the Days Inn was lying on the hinge side when he walked in—the same side as when he walked into his apartment the previous night after returning from the ICA. Bedroom and bathroom, also. It'd been too late by then to knock at Mrs. S's door, and he hadn't had the chance to call her until this moment.

He stepped into the hallway and walked down the stairs and out through a side exit.

"*Nie*," said Mrs. S. "Why would I use your bathroom? I got one, right next door. And *tak*, ta fish all look good—very hungry! All

of tem. All very happy, so tont worry. You saw that yourself, yes? I will call if I see any sad ones. Ton't worry at all. And yes, I will remember to check the temperature and ta otter ting"—she was thinking of the salinity. "And *tak, tak*"—she was beginning to sound like a harassed parent sending her kid off to camp—"I got your compuder in a safe place—not even you would find it. So tont you worry."

Whenever she said, "Don't worry," Mrs. S. reminded him of his grandmother. It was the first thing she would say when his parents started shouting at each other and he fled to her room. Who was this "man" they were fighting about? he wanted to ask her. He had asked, once, but was told "nobody." It was nothing. It would soon be over.

So he learned to stop asking.

He would sit next to her (by the age of three he was already too big to sit on her lap) and listen to her read from "My Book House," a collection of children's books that her mother had read to her, when she was a girl. They contained children's versions of all the great stories and myths and folktales of the world. His favorites were in the volume called "From the Tower Window"—stories of valor and prowess, of Beowulf, Aeneas, and Ulysses, of Roland and (his favorite) of Gareth, kitchen-knave to the foul-tempered steward, Sir Kay. Gareth was destined to prove himself worthy of Arthur's trust as the king's "secret knight" by bringing glory to the name that Sir Kay had bestowed on him in mockery, "Sir Beaumains," "Sir Fair-Hands."

While they read, his parents' voices would come creeping up the stairs. The fights were always about a man. A man his mother wouldn't "stop seeing."

Only much later did he learn that his mother's mother was fluent in four languages besides her own and could read another two tolerably well. A useful skill for a diplomat's wife. Balzac, Goethe, Mickiewicz, Cervantes, and dozens of other voices of the dead—she could summon any of them, like a sorceress, just by opening a book.

The first thing Talbot had taught him after showing him the paper clip "tell" was what to do if someone did break into his room. (The first thing she told him beforehand was not to trust keyless entry locks.) Don't panic, and don't look for bugs or hidden cameras. You'll just tip off whoever planted them. Assume they're there and figure out how to take advantage. Make phone calls and carry on conversations using false or misleading information. Keep the rest outside the room, and never leave electronic devices behind when you leave.

That's why he was now standing outside in the hundred-degree heat, next to a chain-link fence surrounding the hotel pool, sweating, hatless, holding his phone in one hand and his iPad in the other.

Who had entered his apartment last night besides Mrs. S? Who knew he'd be out? For that matter, who knew he was in Fort Dodge right now? Bannon, for one (duh). Sam knew where he was headed, but not where he was staying. Mr. Nevis. He'd called Mr. Nevis last night to tell him where he was going the next morning, and why.

"Where are you staying?" asked Mr. Nevis.

"Days Inn," he said. "Should get there early afternoon."

He'd also told Mr. Nevis that he was no longer going to check in with him as a routine matter. It was a waste of time unless he had something to tell him that was useful.

He stood outside the pool enclosure another minute or two after he was finished with Mrs. S., thinking things through. Then he re-entered through the lobby and went up to his room to change for dinner with the Montroses. Also, to tell them he might be late.

He didn't tell them why.

Chapter 9

"Together, they make a whole man."

Mr. Montrose laughed. Louisa smiled. She was wearing a floral print dress. Lotus blossoms, he thought.

They were sitting in the Montroses' tiny dining room with the red remains of spaghetti and meatballs on the plates in front of them. They'd arrived at the topic of detectives, and detective fiction. And, inevitably, Holmes and Watson.

Louisa got up to clear the table. "Coffee? Tea?" she asked. She looked directly at the Op. "Dessert?"

"No, thank you," he said. He would have offered to help, but his size made it impossible. He was a bigger help seated in the wide, sturdy armchair that "Appa" had moved from the living room. "But perhaps, more water, please?" He held up his glass.

"I'll finish my wine," Louisa's father replied. He turned back to the Op.

"I came of age reading Sherlock Holmes, you know," he said. "All the stories. Many times. Independence never liberated this region of the Empire." He tapped his head. "Shakespeare, of course, but also Austen, Dickens—he was my favorite. Even Kipling. But Doyle never won you over, you say?"

"Sir Arthur was a genius, the Shakespeare of modern detective fiction. He practically invented it. But like Shakespeare, he plagiarized right and left. Especially from Poe. What's *A Study in Scarlet* or "A Scandal in Bohemia" but badly disguised versions of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter"?

Mr. Montrose nodded, smiling. "Exactly," he said.

"But why Watson?" asked Louisa, re-entering with a pitcher of ice water. "Why prefer him?"

"The idea of the genius detective and his dim-witted sidekick was one of the things Doyle stole from Poe. But he reworked it for his modern, scientifically minded audience. Holmes is Poe's Chevalier, his 'knight,' August Dupin, but updated into a pure

reasoning machine, a human computer. He hasn't a particle of Dupin's attraction to the arcane or the bizarre or the supernatural for its own sake. Take metempsychosis"

"Metem . . .?" asked Louisa.

"Transmigration of souls," he replied. "For psychics, it helps explain telepathy. Your soul 'migrates' to someone else's body." He immediately regretted his abruptness, but felt impelled to push ahead. "For Holmes, it's just one more mystery waiting to be solved using the latest scientific techniques. You read the criminal's mind by studying previous cases showing how criminals like this one think. For Dupin, it's a parlor game, a conjuror's trick you can learn to do yourself, as he demonstrates with his bosom buddy, the narrator. You don't have to be a detective and it's not what needs figuring out. It's a *jeu d'esprit* that helps him solve the murders of the L'Espanayes. Or take Dupin's fealty to his Queen, the classic 'damsel locked in the tower.'"

"What Queen?" asked Mr. Montrose.

"The Queen of France—she's the unnamed party Minister D. is blackmailing in 'The Purloined Letter.'"

Mr. Montrose and Louisa were silent. Time to wrap it up.

"Well, what Doyle did was give all the reasoning power to the superman detective and all the concern for helpless damsels to Watson. That's why Holmes solves the case in *The Sign of Four* and Watson ends up marrying the damsel, Mary Moreston."

End it!

"And that's why I prefer Watson to Holmes"—he looked at Louisa—"because he's closer to Poe's original Chevalier, and"—he looked at Mr. Montrose—"that's why I say together they make a whole man."

Louisa smiled graciously, ready to move on. But Mr. Montrose took another sip of wine and re-entered the lists.

"What about Irene Adler? The only adversary who ever defeated Holmes. Was she just a better 'reasoning machine'?"

"Actually, yes. But she defeated him mainly because she was a woman, with feelings. He put her in a box with other women

criminals he'd only read about. And she behaves predictably, up to a point, revealing the place she hid the scandalous photograph because, according to Holmes, women will keep what they care most about close at hand. So, she *behaves* like the emotional woman he expects her to be, but she eludes capture, in the end, by *thinking* like the man—the 'reasoning machine'—he's unprepared for."

Louisa opened her mouth, presumably to change the subject, but her father interrupted her.

"So maybe Irene Adler is your ideal detective? A female Watson, but smarter?"

"Perhaps." He was surprised that Montrose had guessed.

"This is most revealing. I'd have thought that a modern, 'scientific' detective like you would prefer Holmes, or even rough-housers like Sam Spade, to Watson."

"At least Spade has feelings he has to fight. Holmes compares himself to a microscope that might get a crack in its lens if he's not careful around women. A microscope has no feelings."

"So, in the end, it's the old story: it's lust that makes the reasoning machine human, vulnerable to the *femme fatale*."

"Not lust," he found himself saying, and he glanced at Louisa. She looked down and took a sip of her tea.

"Dupin has no more lust than Holmes. He doesn't want to bed the Queen, like Lancelot with Guinevere. That was the end of Camelot. But he is devoted to her, would do anything for her. That's fealty. You endure everything with no expectation—except, perhaps, gratitude. Holmes can't understand it because he's never felt it. It's love unsullied by any desire to possess. Now that I think of it, it's what Adler feels for her new husband, Godfrey Norton. He's the one she's most anxious to protect from Holmes. She's his warrior queen."

Louisa was now looking at him attentively.

"You seem to have been born too late," said Mr. Montrose. "A knight with no queen to defend. And no dragon to slay. These are

perilous times, but the peril never condenses into a single, identifiable foe, does it?"

"I am an anachronism," he admitted, and smiled.

Over dessert he complimented Louisa for the splendid meal, even though he'd only picked at it. For some reason, his appetite had abandoned him the minute they sat down. He'd agreed to dessert only to be polite, after first refusing it.

"Not me!" she said. "It was all Appa. I can't cook worth a darn."

"I wish I'd asked my wife for some of her recipes before she died," said Mr. Montrose. "You can see how assimilated we've become since coming here." He was right. There was practically no reference to Sri Lanka anywhere in the house, at least downstairs.

"I was sorry to hear of your recent loss," said the Op, thinking of Mr. Montrose's sister.

Louisa's father made a small, dismissive wave. "It was quick, merciful, really. No less hard to endure than my wife's death, but not drawn out."

Later, on their way to the front door, Mr. Montrose paused.

"I've been thinking about what you've said. About endurance?"

"Yes," said the Op. "The Victorians got a lot of things wrong, but that one thing right. Love unrequited. You say you've read Dickens?"

"Of course."

"*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*?"

"Never heard of it."

"Last book he ever wrote. Died writing it. No ending. You never find out what happened to the title character."

"Why read it then?"

"The characters. And the writing of course, but especially the characters. The villain is a sex-crazed, opium-eating choirmaster in a cathedral town. The most fascinating character is a beautiful young woman—from Sri Lanka, now that I think of it—named Helena Landless. Sex is never mentioned, but it clings to John Jasper, the choirmaster, like musk. The helpless damsel Jasper is trying to seduce is a typical, brainless Dickens ingenue, named Rosa. Helena

is on to Jasper almost from the moment she sees him. She is clearly meant to be Rosa's knight in shining armor, a warrior queen, like Britomart, or Camilla."

Mr. Montrose nodded to indicate he recognized the names. "Or Irene Adler," he said.

"But Rosa is betrothed to Edwin Drood," said the Op. "Helena can save her, but never have her."

Mr. Montrose nodded again to say goodbye and opened the door. They shook hands.

Louisa beamed goodbye.

It was almost 9:00 pm but still sultry, and the June sun had just gone down as he walked to his car.

A young woman was passing the house with an Airedale on a leash. He nodded and was about to open the driver's side door when something occurred to him.

"Excuse me? Ma'am?" He tried not to raise his voice. He didn't want to startle her.

But she had the self-possession that a dog gives a woman. When she turned, the Airedale kept moving, straining at the leash, sniffing the grass.

"Do you live around here?"

"I do."

"Do you know the Montroses?" He moved his head in the direction of the house.

"So that's their name." The Airedale had found something delectable.

"Have they lived here long?" he said.

"Not long. Maybe a couple of weeks."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Driving back to the hotel, he went over the afternoon and evening in detail, beginning with his stop at Light of the World.

No, said Jay, no one in the food line recognized the photo. But the two who'd been arrested and released were there, and he introduced them, sitting together at a corner table hunched over their Bakelite plates of hammed mac 'n cheese.

The Op hadn't expected the photo display to get any results, but it was a box that had to be ticked. Light of the World was the only homeless shelter in Fort Dodge. The next two nearest were 40 miles away, in Ames. The clientele at Light of the World were more likely than its staff to have run into Kraft if he was trying to avoid attention by the authorities. The Op also thought that anyone arrested for vagrancy probably preferred the outdoor life to a cot in a dorm, and would be more likely to encounter or hear of a newcomer appearing in town.

Bob and Chipper shared the look of dispossession that was common to their way of life: uncut hair, untrimmed beards, faces wrinkled and darkened by outdoor life, and a wary expression, like a dog beaten regularly for no good reason. But their frayed shirts were clean and they smelled of soap. Bob was the skinnier of the two, Chipper, with his beefy red face, the more belligerent-looking. His nickname, the Op assumed, came from the imaginary object he carried everywhere on his shoulder. His Santa-Claus nose came from too much gin.

The Op began by praising their street-smarts and toughness. It was why he'd singled them out from the rest of the men.

"What's in it for us?" asked Chipper.

"Twenty dollars each for any useful information—ten now, and you'll have to trust me to get back to you with the rest if it pans out. I take it I can reach you here?"

They nodded.

"I want the ten up front," said Chipper.

The Op took it out and slid it over, along with Kraft's photo.

"I know you saw this when you were in line," said the Op. "But I'd like you to take another look."

Chipper studied Kraft's face.

"What was he wearin'?"

"Last reported wearing a fire-engine red T-shirt and cut-offs."

"Yeah, I seen him," said Bob.

The Op handed Bob a ten-dollar bill.

"Can you recall what was on his feet?"

Bob shook his head. "Din't take no notice."

"Maybe sandals?"

"Yeaaaah," said Bob, pulling on his lower lip. "Yeah—that's right!"

"Sandals, you say?" asked Chipper.

The Op nodded.

Chipper gave a snort.

"Wasn't wearin' no sandals. This looks like someone I seen in a T-shirt and hiking boots on Highway 7. That's the road leadin' west out of town. Saw him where 7 meets US 169. I just got dropped off from a day job at Lawton Farm. Was on my way here to wash up and get some dinner. Long walk, but I never mind walking." He grinned. "But I bet you do."

The Op gave the remark a dead pan.

"But he weren't wearin' sandals or cut-offs. And the T-shirt was bright yellow." Chipper's sneering tone of voice said, "Nice try, asshole."

Bob returned to his mac 'n cheese.

"How long ago was this?"

"Few weeks."

"Quite a while back. You sure?"

Chipper snorted again.

"I talked to him, mister. He was on his way out of town, tryin' to hitch a ride, and walkin' like his feet were on fire. Makin' little grunts, like a piglet."

"Was he wearing a backpack?"

"Yeah. An' a Twins baseball cap. He stopped me and asked what size shoes I wore. I tole him eleven and a half. He offered to swap me his fancy boots for my beat up sneakers. I said if they're

too small for you they sure as fuck are too small for me. He said they ain't too small. They too big. Pulled up his cuffs. No socks. In this heat. 'Too hot for socks,' he says. 'Now I got blisters.' Damn fool."

Chipper's disgust with humanity made his face turn red, but he didn't pause for breath.

"Well, I said, you are down in a shit-hole, ain't you? Long story short, we traded footwear. I asked if he still had his socks. He did. In his backpack. Boots fit me perfectly. Then he asked if I knew any place nearby he could camp out, let his feet get better? I tole him I'm on my way to a shelter. Free dinner included. How far? he asked. 'Bout 4 miles, I said. He said no, too far, and he'd as soon not mingle. That tole me he was on the lam. I asked him, 'What can you give me, 'sides these boots?' He pulled out a twenty. So I took him to Loomis Park, next to the river.

"What's at Loomis Park?"

"They's a squat in some bushes between Loomis Park Drive and the river. Hidden from both sides. Cops roust it every once in a while. It was empty that evening. That's where I left him."

"Can you show me? Maybe tomorrow morning?"

They left it that the Op would pick Chipper up at 8:00 and they'd have breakfast at Perkins Restaurant and Bakery, on South 32nd. About the only decent place open that early on a Sunday, said Chipper.

Then Chipper would show him the squat.

Pulling into the Days Inn parking lot, his thoughts returned to his dinner with the Montroses.

He'd arrived at their door a bit late from his stop at Light of the World, wearing his only polo shirt and slacks. (He knew enough from books not to wear a suit on an informal occasion like this.) Mr. Montrose came to the door in slacks and a blue Oxford button-down shirt. He never gave his first name, but did say, without being

asked, that "Montrose" was the name he'd adopted on arriving in the US as a refugee, since Sri Lankans had no last names, just clan names. Louisa had never known any name but "Montrose."

No talk about chess, except that Mr. Montrose didn't play.

It had taken them a while to get around to what the Op was doing here in Fort Dodge, just as it had during his drive from Des Moines with Louisa. Why wouldn't it be one of the first things Mr. Montrose would want to know more about, especially if he was so keen on Sherlock Holmes? It occurred to him that Louisa's father had said nothing about his own favorite stories, and next to Holmes and Watson themselves, Irene Adler was probably the character best-known to non-fans. Was he feigning interest, just to be polite?

Maybe. But the Op had been winging it, too.

Sam Spade? What did he know about Sam Spade or any of those other "rough-housers" that Montrose was talking about? He happened to know who Spade was only because he'd once let Monica talk him into going to see *The Maltese Falcon* with her, at the Brattle. (She was a fan of *noir*, which was why she appreciated the Old Man's schtick.) Bogart was too tough to be believed, but he did make you believe the last thing he wanted to do was send Brigit O'Shaughnessy to the hangman. Just before he did. At least that movie was better than *Double Indemnity*, the second and last *noir* film that Monica had talked him into seeing with her. You want your no redeeming qualities? No knights. No detectives for that matter, except Edward G. Robinson, the insurance investigator. Now the Op knew where the Old Man got his snarl.

They were a charming pair, this watchful, protective father and his quiet, scatter-brained, and, yes, very attractive little fire-plug of a daughter. Scatter-brained, but intelligent when you got her attention. And let her talk.

At one point, taking his cue from the *bindi* on Louisa's forehead, he said, "It must be difficult for Hindus to practice their faith here in Iowa. Is there a church in Fort Dodge where you can worship?"

"Hindus visit temples, not churches," she said. "And they don't gather there to worship. And no, there are no temples in Fort Dodge. The nearest one is more than an hour away, in Madrid." She pronounced it "MAD-rid."

She started to say more about the Hindu pantheon and her worship practices, but her father interrupted.

"Louisa has chosen to carry on the faith of her mother here in the wilderness. I lost mine with my wife's death." He paused, then reached for his wine and took a sip. "I wander in a different wilderness."

Mother, wife, sister, thought the Op. All but one of the women in his life were dead.

"I have a shrine to her memory upstairs," added Louisa. "That's where I pray."

After a few seconds Mr. Montrose said, "Louisa tells me you are a detective."

Before leaving he helped her rinse dishes for the dishwasher. The kitchen was just big enough for the two of them and the pull-out dishwasher rack. Louisa said, in a low voice, "I'll be going back to Boston soon. Perhaps we can see each other?"

"I'd like that," he said, surprising himself. "I should be there in a few days. I'll call you."

At that moment, Mr. Montrose appeared in the doorway.

"Don't make our guest help with the cleaning up, Louisa." She began to apologize, but the Op told her father it was his idea. Montrose stood in the doorway until it was time to leave.

When he got to his room he found the bright spiral of the tell lying behind the door, on the hinge side. Maybe they had to reposition a micro cam? Or replace it? Or was it someone else altogether?

He shrugged. He was tired and not inclined to flee this time. It was too late to try Georgia Johnson, but there was still time to reach

Amy Briscoe. Before she could pick up, he reminded himself of what not to say. "The walls have ears" was now more than a figure of speech.

Amy didn't pick up. Not hard to understand. He didn't answer calls from unrecognized numbers either. Or she was out having a good time. He left a message.

He dialed Mr. Nevis to check in, since he did have news to report: his interview with Detective Sergeant Cowper and plans for tomorrow with Chipper. He didn't say anything about his room being (presumably) bugged. He couldn't be sure without a thorough search, which he wasn't about to undertake. As he hit the hang-up button, Amy Briscoe called.

At first, she had nothing to add to what she'd told Cowper.

"Did he talk to you on the plane?"

"No. Silent the whole way, except for 'excuse me,' that kind of thing."

"Are you sure?"

"He was asleep a lot of the time."

"Take a moment."

She took a moment.

"Well, this can't be helpful," she said, "but when we got our bags from the overhead bin he asked me which bag was mine and reached it down for me."

"Did he take his?"

"I don't know. I went ahead of him. He didn't have it when he came up to me in the waiting area."

"That's good to know. Do you remember what he was wearing?"

"When he approached me later? White shirt, dark gray pants. No jacket. Now that you ask, I remember he was wearing a suit jacket to match the pants when we were on the plane."

"Tie?"

"No tie. On the plane or at the gate."

He was glad, after he hung up, that nothing he'd said gave a hint of Amy's replies.

No checked luggage, United said. And Amy never saw him with a roll-aboard or carry-on. How could Fletcher Kraft have attended a three-day business conference—or have fled the country, for that matter—with nothing but a shoulder bag or backpack, at most, for personal items? Or a briefcase? If he had a carry-on, where was it? If he left it on the plane, United would surely have tried to return it. Did they have it now? Kraft bought himself a backpack at Goodwill. Millsap didn't say anything about a suitcase or roll-aboard. And where was his tie? He had to have one, if he was wearing a suit. (Didn't he?) What did it look like? Maybe Brit knew. He'd have to ask her tomorrow.

He hadn't exchanged moves with LSR 36 in four days. No surprise that no one was there when he logged on. He fell asleep over Morphy vs. Allies.

Chapter 10

He arrived at Light of the World early and was talking to Jay while they waited for Chipper to show up.

"He'll want his breakfast first," said Jay.

"I'm taking him to breakfast."

"He's used to never passing on a free meal."

"Or bottle."

Jay's smile got broader.

"Chester's in AA. He's got a job—day to day, but he's showing up regularly. You don't get shed of that nose by climbing back on the wagon. It's permanent."

"Does Chester have a last name?"

"Delamere. I'd stick to 'Chipper' if I were you, unless he says otherwise."

At Perkins, Chipper "Built a Breakfast" of eggs and sausage, crispy hash browns, a tall stack of blueberry buttermilk pancakes powdered with sugar, and bottomless coffee. (The Op settled for coffee and a Mammoth Muffin—once again, for some reason, he wasn't all that hungry.) In answer to the question, Chipper told him how he got his name.

"My ol' man called me that. Started when I was 8 or 9, and he caught me drinkin' his Jim Beam in the basement."

Chipper stopped to search his memory.

"Beat the hell out of me. Angry? You know it. The Wrath of God." He sipped his coffee before resuming. "And the whole time, he's laughin' like a crazy man. 'Chip off the ole blockhead, eh?' And he'd smack me in the head, and laugh. It was like roarin', though, not laughin'. Like if a lion could laugh. That's how he got when he was drunk. 'Chip off the ole fuckin' blockhead!'"

Chipper was almost roaring himself, laughing and swinging his arm back and forth. Nearby customers turned to stare.

"Scared the shit out of me."

He raised the coffee cup to his lips.

"Not enough to keep me from drinkin', though. As you can see." He gestured to his nose with his coffee hand.

"Then on, I was 'Chipper.' 'Chipper this' and 'Chipper that.' 'Chipper, take out the garbage.' 'Chipper, get me a beer.' And it stuck. Friends heard it, used it. Fact, I preferred it to 'Chester.' A sissy name. Or so I thought at the time." He resumed eating.

"Anyone ever call you 'Chester'?"

"Just my ma. Or used to."

"Tell me about her."

"Not much to tell. She run off before I started school."

"So did mine," said the Op. "After."

Chipper continued eating, silently.

"Brothers? Sisters?"

Chipper looked up from his plate.

"What business is it of yours?"

"None of my business," he said. "Just curious. I'm an only child myself."

"Enough of you for two or three." Chipper was back in his shell.

After breakfast, they drove to the squat in Loomis Park. Chipper rolled down the window and leaned his head into the breeze. It was early enough to dispense with the air conditioning. The morning had a fresh smell.

The squat was a clearing in the middle of some tall shrubs and scrub trees, between the road and the Des Moines River.

"Here's where I left 'im," said Chipper.

"You remember about what time?"

"I'd say 'round 6 pm."

"Anyone else here?"

"Nope."

The Op handed him a tenner.

The place was deserted, but showed signs of long occupancy: paper wrappers, cans and bottles, a torn, filthy blanket hanging from a twig, some bits of plastic sheeting. Chipper was right. The squat was invisible from the road and its entrance hard to spot. It was

screened from the river side, too. There was just space enough below the leaves, said Chipper, to see to the river if you were lying down. Like, when you needed to sleep.

They could hear voices coming from that direction, carrying over the sound of rapids.

"What's out there?" asked the Op.

"Hydro-Electric Park. Dam was torn down a couple of years ago. Playground. Boat landing. Families picnickin'. Folks paddlin' around, havin' a good time."

After a few seconds, Chipper said, "That's one reason I left here and ended up at Light of the World. Was like livin' in a prison cell next to Disney World. Every day and into the evenin', and first thing when the sun come up, the sound of ord'nary, happy families. Folks livin' their ord'nary, happy lives. Couldn't stand it. Imagine a man dyin' o' thirst next to this river, but never allowed to taste a drop of it."

They listened.

Suddenly, the Op felt a powerful urge to embrace the man. He settled for telling him, "I know, Chipper. I've been there." It was risky, but honest.

Recognizing something in the Op's voice, Chester replied, "Call me 'Chester.'"

* * * * *

Before they left, the Op went through the motions of looking for any sign of Fletcher Kraft. After more than three weeks, he had no expectations. He even lay flat on the flattened grass and peered under the shrubs. He saw only a few recreationists enjoying the lingering coolness of a Sunday morning on the water as the sun rose higher over Fort Dodge.

Instead of dropping Chester at the intersection of 7 and 169, he insisted on driving him out to the farm where he worked, about 6 miles further down the road. On the drive, Chester told him how he'd come to a reckoning with his wasted life.

"It was the shelter, the folks there. But really—you want to know? I'm almost embarrassed to say it. It was a video they showed us, 'Toppling Goliath' it was called, made by one of the pastors there." His voice grew capital letters. "How to Slay the Giant on the Bridge to Salvation." He looked over at the Op and grinned. "That giant's your own reflection, is what I learned—like in a fun-house mirror?"

The Op nodded, keeping his eyes on the road.

"I don't believe in salvation. Leastways, not the saved-by-Jesus 'Everlasting Life' kind, although the pastor does." Chipper had become a torrent of words. "I'm hopin' to get resurrected in this life."

"I'm with you."

"But for now, it's workin'. Just doin' what they say." He tapped the dashboard. "Like this car. You can drive it without knowin' how it does what it does. Still got a long road ahead."

* * * * *

It was somewhere around ten o'clock when he dropped Chester off at the farm. On his drive back, he called Georgia Johnson.

Georgia picked up just as he was about to leave another message.

She apologized. "I'm so sorry not to return your call. It sounds important." He heard a male voice in the background. "I'm getting dressed for church right now," she said, "and I'm a bit late."

"Maybe we could meet after?"

There was a muffled conversation. Then Georgia came back on the line.

"You can meet us in front of the church. My husband will be with me. He's wearing a brown suit." She gave the address of the Coppin Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, on 1st Avenue South, and the time. "How will we know you?" she asked.

"You can't miss me. Just come up and introduce yourselves."

He had some time to kill, so he called Brit.

Yes, she said, Fletcher always took his roll-aboard on business trips. No, it wasn't monogrammed, but it did have a metal name tag.

"Color? Brand? Type? Size?"

"I'm not sure of the brand. But lime-green, to help him spot it on luggage carousels. Standard size, hard-sided."

"You said you went to pick him up at Logan and he didn't show. Did you drop him off, too?"

"Yes."

"Did you see it then?"

"Yes. I'm sure he took it with him."

He took it with him. It wasn't checked. And now it was missing. And the airline had no record of it being left on board.

"Did he take a bag for personal items?"

"Just his briefcase. Black. That was monogrammed."

Millsap hadn't mentioned a briefcase. He made a note to call.

"Was he wearing a tie when you dropped him off?"

"Yes. A hand-painted custom silk, in purple, yellow, and green. Abstract design. Attention-getting, but classy. I bought it for him to replace his 'lucky tie.'"

"Lucky tie?"

"That's what he called it. He wasn't superstitious or anything. He said he just liked what it reminded him of."

"What was that?"

"He got it when he helped close that big deal for Transcoastal—the one they gave him the *chiffonier* for? I had a hard time selling him on the idea of wearing it only to company meetings or events. "

"Why did you try?"

"Because it's so ugly. I told him I was embarrassed for him to be seen wearing it. It's like a souvenir tie? The kind you'd buy from a street vendor in Cairo. Royal blue, very wide, with a picture of . . . well, every kitschy thing you'd associate with Egypt. Camel, palm tree, pyramids, sphinx, King Tut . . . an ankh, I think." She made a sound like "ugh," and he could picture her shuddering. "Hideous. I assumed it was some kind of joke."

"Has he ever been to Egypt?"

"Not that I know. Maybe before we were married."

"When did he close this deal?"

"Definitely before."

Brit wanted to know how the search was going. He told her he had some leads, but wanted to see where they went before bringing her up to speed. Some of them might go nowhere, and there was no point in wasting her time.

"What time of day was it when he sent you his first text message?"

"Late. But before the girls went to bed. Maybe 9? 10?"

"Where did he say he was texting from?"

"He didn't say, but I thought it had to be San Francisco. The Fairmont Hotel, where he was staying."

"How many messages did you get, in all?"

"Wait, let me see."

There was silence as she checked her log.

"Four. One that night, then three more, one each day after."

"He disappeared on Wednesday, May 31st. When did he tell you he had to stay longer and give you the new flight information?"

There was silence while she checked the messages again.

"That would be Saturday morning. The day he was originally supposed to come home."

"And you went to pick him up on Monday?"

"Yes."

After talking to Brit, he still had about an hour before meeting with the Johnsons and there was some research he wanted to do. He was now wary of using the WiFi at the hotel—too easily hacked. The public library, where he'd have some anonymity, was closed on Sunday, so he found a Starbucks, ordered a *vente* triple-cap and a croissant, and logged on. He was interested in places for rent in Fort Dodge, including vacation homes on AirB&B and VRBO. (Not many, he discovered.) He logged on to the Iowa County Treasurer's website and then Googled for the web address of a Boston-based

software company. The croissant was still in its paper bag when he left.

He drove past Coppin Chapel, looking for a place to park, just as the doors were opening to let the congregants out. Built of ancient orange brick, Coppin was a squat, spireless pile in need of maintenance, with tall, narrow windows—a few boarded up—and a white pediment. The lawn, however, was lush and well-kept. One towering fir tree to the left of the entrance dominated an otherwise treeless commercial neighborhood of car parts dealers and auto body shops. He parked down the street next to the Budget Travelers Inn and across from the Fort Dodge Corrections Community Center.

He could hear an organ inside the sanctuary still rumbling the recessional as he came near. He stopped at the curb end of the front walk, looking down at the Black faces approaching and turning to right and left like the Red Sea parting. The faces stared up at him. He was glad Mrs. Johnson hadn't asked him to join her and her husband for the service.

A well-dressed, dignified couple that looked to be in their 40s or 50s walked up to him and stopped. The man had a neatly clipped mustache and wore a brown suit with a Trilby to match. He shook hands without smiling and introduced them both, but kept Mrs. Johnson's right hand firmly wedged against his side, so the Op could only nod in her direction.

"I understand you have some questions for my wife," said Mr. Johnson. He had a Caribbean accent. "The police already talked to her about this missing person."

The Op explained, as he had in his voicemail, that he'd been hired by Mr. Kraft's wife to look at all the details the police didn't have time for.

"It's all right," said Georgia. "Think if it was me, Stanley, and you had disappeared." Her voice was musical but firm, and entirely midwestern. She had a long, horse-like face with large brown eyes—not unattractive, but not beautiful according to conventional

standards. You had the feeling it was her voice, not her looks, that had won the heart of the dapper Stanley Johnson.

"This will just take a minute," said the Op. From the inside pocket of his coat he pulled a photocopy of an airport map.

Georgia took a pair of glasses out of her purse. A few lingering worshippers stopped talking and turned heads in their direction.

Pointing to the map, Georgia indicated where she was pushing her mop bucket after cleaning the ladies' restroom. That's when Fletcher Kraft bumped into her, banging his shins on the bucket and almost tipping it over. She saw him coming too late to get out of his way. He was practically running, looking back over his shoulder, holding a briefcase in one hand and pulling a roll-aboard with the other—"green," she said in answer to the question, "lime green." And no, no tie. Water from the bucket sloshed over onto Kraft's pants and shoes. He apologized and asked where the men's room was.

"It was in the same direction as the exit through security. That only came to mind when that nice young police detective showed me his picture and asked me if I'd seen him."

"Did he go into the men's room?"

"I wasn't looking. I had work to do. I just assumed he wanted to change out of his wet pants."

The sun was now high overhead. He'd started sweating from the moment he left the car, and Mr. Johnson was looking at his watch. The front walk was deserted, except for the woman pastor, who was staring in their direction from the doorway. He thanked Georgia Johnson and headed back up the street toward the Budget Traveler Inn and his car.

* * * * *

Before punching the start button, he called Cal Guilleemos. Cal didn't pick up—it was his day off, after all. The Op left a message to call back. It wouldn't take long, and it was urgent.

Then he called Tucker Millsap. Yes, Kraft had a briefcase with him but no suitcase or roll-aboard. Yes, he donated the

briefcase, after transferring the contents to his newly purchased backpack. No, Tucker didn't notice what he put in it. No, the briefcase was long gone. And yes, as he said—no tie.

The streets at high noon were still crowded with Frontier Days visitors, but he managed to find a parking place not far from Perkins, the only eatery in Fort Dodge he knew anything about. He wanted to write up where the case stood so far, but not do it in his room. The Starbucks was a possibility, but it was lunch time and he needed something more substantial. He was feeling a little faint.

He was seated in a booth with a table he could push to the other side. When he slid himself in and glanced at the menu, however, he discovered he still wasn't very hungry. He ordered from the kids' list: a mini cheese burger and salad with ranch dressing. He didn't return the waitress's stare.

"That's for children," she said.

"Then make it coffee," he said, pretending to search the menu. "Black. And a Mammoth Muffin. With butter."

"Sugar? Cream?"

He became irritable. What part of "black" didn't she understand?

"I said 'black.' No sugar. No cream."

And no tip.

He assumed his car had a tracker attached by now. Maybe two? He hadn't noticed any tails, but that didn't mean whoever had entered his room wouldn't know when he was out of it, leaving it unprotected.

Well, let them do what they wanted.

If they were doing anything.

He opened his iPad, turned off the WiFi, and tried to reconstruct what he knew so far about the day Kraft disappeared, now exactly three weeks and five days ago.

Kraft was driven to the airport by his wife. He was wearing a dark gray suit, black wing-tips, a white shirt, and a "flashy" custom-made silk tie in purple, yellow, and green. He had his black briefcase and a lime-green roll-aboard with him.

He didn't wear his tie on the flight, which would make sense if he wanted to be more comfortable and take a nap. The tie had to be in his briefcase, then, or the roll-aboard. Or maybe he put it in his suitcoat pocket? Was it still there when he donated the jacket to Goodwill?

In the Fort Dodge airport, Kraft had talked to Amy Briscoe while they waited for United's replacement flight to pick them up with the other passengers from UA 1008. He wasn't wearing his jacket or his tie and didn't have any luggage, as far as she could see.

Kraft was next seen leaving the gate area. At this point, the briefcase and roll-aboard reappear. Also his suit jacket. Still no tie.

He bumped into Georgia Johnson's mop bucket and got water on his pants.

He asked where the men's room was.

Not seen entering the men's room.

Later that day, seen by Tucker Millsap at Goodwill, wearing the dark grey suit and carrying the briefcase, but not pulling the roll-aboard. Tie still missing.

Purchased at Goodwill, in cash, a yellow T-shirt, a red and blue flannel shirt, a pair of jeans, a Twins baseball cap, a dark colored wind-breaker, a backpack, and leather hiking boots.

Put on the cap, the T-shirt, the jeans, and the boots in the store.

(Q: If you want to be inconspicuous, why wear a bright yellow T-shirt? He wrote it down.)

Put contents of briefcase (and the flannel shirt and wind-breaker, presumably) in the backpack.

Donated the suit, wing-tips, white shirt, and briefcase to Goodwill and left wearing what he'd purchased, along with the contents of the briefcase. . . .

At this point the waitress strode by with a tray on her shoulder, pausing to bang his coffee mug down on the table. Coffee sloshed down the side. A butterless Mammoth Muffin on a plate banged down next to it.

Next seen by Chester "Chipper" Delamere at the intersection of Iowa Route 7 and US 169, trying to hitch a ride out of town. Complained of blisters on his feet from the hiking boots. Traded footwear with Delamere, who took him to a squat in Loomis Park where homeless people sometimes slept. Delamere left him there at about 6:00 pm. No sightings since then.

Later that evening, around 9 or 10 EDT, Brit received the first of five text messages from Fletcher Kraft's cell phone. That would be 8 or 9 pm Fort Dodge time. Also around then (allowing for the time difference), John Lorrimer, Transcoastal's regional manager in San Francisco, received a text from Kraft saying he had Covid and would be MIA for the next two weeks, in quarantine.

He stopped typing and looked at what he'd written. Something was missing.

He bumped into Georgia Johnson's mop bucket . . .

Why?

Because he was looking behind him.

Why? What—or who—was behind him?

Just then his phone rang. Or rather, it began to play *Die Moldau*. (Last week it was *The Ride of the Valkyries*.)

It was Cal returning his call. He was at a late Sunday brunch with a "lady friend" who was, at the moment, doing whatever ladies do in the room for "Ladies."

"If Brit brings you her phone first thing tomorrow morning, can you figure out where Kraft's text messages originated? By, like, triangulating cell towers or something?"

"Well, listen to you!" Cal said with a laugh. "In polysyllables no less! Have her stop by and I'll see what I can do."

Before leaving Perkins, he texted Brit with instructions to bring her cell phone to Continental first thing tomorrow morning, if possible.

Chapter 11

It was now 1 pm and he was, he realized, exhausted. People, even people he liked, wore him out. Louisa, her dad, Detective Sergeant Cowper, Tucker Millsap, Jay, Bob, Chipper, Georgia Johnson—the Frontier Day crowds, the patrons beginning to fill the tables around him. His rude waitress. He was born to be a solitary creature, and right now, like a bear overcome by the need to hibernate, he could think of nothing but his cave.

Adding to the fatigue was the fact that he was at a dead end. There seemed to be nothing more to be learned here in Fort Dodge.

He hadn't bothered to set the paper clip tell when he left his room that morning. No point to it now. As soon as he entered, he loosened his tie, pulled off his shoes and his jacket, and flung himself face down on the bed. Just as he was about to fall asleep, he heard a "ping."

It was Brit. She'd drop off her phone first thing tomorrow. She'd also get in touch with Mitzi to see if there were any PO box deliveries for her to pick up while she was in town.

Her message reminded him of something he'd meant to tell her. He texted back in a haze: "Buy burner phone bf u come to office. To replace. Text me and Mitzi new #."

In the cool darkness and the whir of the AC, he fell asleep instantly.

He dreamt he was at Wingaersheek Beach on a bright, hot day in July, the month his family usually summered in Gloucester when he was growing up.

That's where he'd first seen barnacles, clinging to the granite outcroppings at Farm Point. His father explained that they were tiny creatures, each confined to its shell, which opened only at high tide, under water, when it was time to eat.

The barnacles at Farm Point were always shut tight when the four of them would walk, at low tide, from their small, rented bungalow on Coffin Beach to Wingaersheek. There the shore was a little more slanted and you could reach deeper water without having to walk out a half mile into the ocean.

He was, maybe, nine or ten years old, standing in the water with his father, who was yelling instructions and showing him what to do. His mother and grandmother were sitting on a blanket under the red and white umbrella where they usually sat. More often than not, he would sit with them. They liked the beach for the view and the feeling of being "out in nature." Not for swimming. That was for men.

His grandmother would recite from Lord Byron's *Childe Harold*: "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!" And she and her daughter would exchange comments about his father as they watched him swimming out into Ipswich Bay and, from a point of invisibility, back into view with his powerful strokes. And his grandmother would again remind his mother of what her mother had told her. Don't marry outside your kind. By which his grandmother meant, don't marry a man so obviously outside your kind.

His father's skin was far darker than theirs. A sunny day at the beach made it impossible to miss him against the white sand. That was one reason his father liked to swim in the deeper, darker water. An attorney for the City of Boston, he was descended from fishermen and smelled of fish (to his in-laws), no matter how often he bathed. Or swam.

"Just sit down! Hold your nose and sit down!"

His father was giving him a swimming lesson. The two of them had waded out in previous summers, his father prying him away from the poisonous shade of the red and white umbrella. Here they would splash each other or play tag. Or his father would swing him by an arm and a leg along the surface of the water, round and round, like a hydroplane.

But they had grown apart as he had grown. Up and up, out and out. Fat, towering. Clumsy. A loner. An embarrassment.

He held his nose and shut his eyes, tight.

"Now sit down!"

He couldn't do it. He was terrified.

At that moment, a wave from a passing boat smacked into him. He stumbled and fell, letting go of his nose. Panicking, he thrashed to the surface, where another wave knocked him down before he could catch his breath.

Disoriented, his legs unable to find the bottom, he flapped his arms and found himself darting through the water—down, not up. It was only a second or two, and the distance he traveled couldn't have been more than a couple of feet, but the exhilaration was sudden and intense. He fought the desperate urge to inhale and reached above his head. Flapping his arms again, he swooped to the surface, where he turned on his back to face the sun, breathing hard. He had found his element.

He stood upright, eager to share his excitement. But his father was swimming away, his arms rising and falling like scythes.

That was the last year they summered in Gloucester. His father died the following spring.

In the dream, he took a deep breath and plunged back into the water.

There he spent the better part of an hour diving, hovering, sweeping along the bottom and then, like a breaching whale, coming up for air. He learned that by exhaling slowly, he could reduce his natural buoyancy and prolong his underwater flights, and that opening his eyes under water didn't hurt.

When he no longer needed to breathe, he headed toward the darker water, where he soon came to a vast, glimmering reef. It was inhabited by fish of every color, shape, and size. Towers of kelp rose from black depths where the reef suddenly fell off into a cliff. Gliding down, he felt like a bird passing the windows of a skyscraper, high above a city avenue. He swam deeper in a lazy spiral, and noticed the water warming around him. The skyscraper,

now a tall, narrow pyramid, was turning white. He dove still deeper, trying to escape the heat. The light from above faded to black and the water pressed against him on all sides until his ears began to ring. The ringing became words, spoken in his grandmother's voice: "And I have loved thee, Ocean! . . . for I was . . . a child of thee . . . "

The words were lost in a buzz of voices all speaking at once, like voices in a crowd.

He woke to the sound of *Die Moldau*.

* * * * *

It was Louisa.

"I'm going to be blunt. I want to see you again."

He paused to clear his head.

"You will. I promise. I'll get in touch as soon as I get back."

"No, like, before you leave. I may be detoured on my way back to Boston. It's a short-term reassignment, but it could take, like, a week, and that's too long." She stopped. "That's too long to go without seeing you again."

He felt his heart "flutter," as they say in books. Was this love? Or detective fever?

Maybe both.

Whatever it was, he agreed.

"When should I stop by?"

"I'll meet you. I don't want my father to know."

He didn't ask why.

"Where and when?"

"The Fort Museum, tomorrow morning. At 11:00. At the entrance to the Frontier Village."

She was about to say good-bye when he asked, "Where are they reassigning you?"

"I don't know yet. It's still tentative. It may not happen, but if it does, they'll tell me then."

"Sounds very cloak and dagger."

"Corporate plays the tune. Marketing and sales dance to it."

He'd no sooner hung up than he recalled how that July morning at the beach had, in fact, ended.

After wading to shore he met a balding man, fully dressed except for his bare feet and striding over the hot sand. The man stopped and stared and said, "You!"

The boy was used to people staring, but not to being addressed by strangers, unless it was to mock him.

"You look like someone I knew," said the man, "when he was a boy. From photographs." The man saw that he wasn't making sense. "I mean, you look like photographs of him when he was about your age. Maybe older. He's dead now."

The hot sand was starting to burn the boy's feet, but he remained fastened to the spot.

"How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

He was too shy to say.

"My name is Anastas. Peter Anastas."

Mr. Anastas held out his hand.

"What's yours?"

The boy looked at the hand.

The hand was retracted.

"His name was Charles Olson. He was a poet. He was big, too."

The sand was about to blister the boy's feet. He fled to the cool shadow of the beach umbrella.

Years later, waiting for class to begin, he thought to ask Mr. Clark about a poet named Charles Olson.

"He's" Clark hesitated. "I'll bring something to show you tomorrow. Remind me."

The next day Mr. Clark handed him photocopies of some pages from a "very, very long poem." It was written as a series of letters from someone called "Maximus." ("Mr. Big"?) Each letter was made up of fragments—irregular, unrhymed lines of poetry scattered over the page. Sometimes prose. Sometimes a single line.

He took the pages home and tried to make sense of them. He couldn't.

The next day he admitted as much.

"Hardly anyone can," said Mr. Clark. "I could tell you it's set in Gloucester, Massachusetts, on Cape Ann. But I'm not sure it would help, and I'm not sure Olson would think so either. Pretend it's a snowball rolling down a big hill and picking up meaning, like snow, as it goes. Just slide along next to it and watch what comes up."

He found himself still at a loss after reading as Mr. Clark suggested. But two passages stuck in his head.

One was a description of flowers cast into the sea as a memorial to drowned fishermen. Caught there in eddies, they turned into eyes:

	The drowned men are
undrowned	
in the eddies	
	of the eyes
	of the flowers
	opening
	the sea's eyes

The other fragment was this:

A fisherman is not a successful man
he is not a famous man he is not a man
of power, these are the damned by God

The buzz of voices speaking to him as he woke up had included these two fragments, spoken in a voice he didn't recognize.

* * * * *

After Louisa's call, he felt a desperate need to talk to Monica again. She and Sam had been weighing on his mind all weekend, but he'd been too busy to do anything about it.

When he talked to her yesterday afternoon Monica hadn't said anything about their conversation at Downtown Crossing, and he'd heard nothing from Sam since being dropped off at Logan. Alone and unsure of his feelings about Louisa, standing here in a cold, dark room halfway across the country, he felt an anxiety bordering on panic. Was Cal right? Would Monica and Sam come to hate each other and blame him for meddling? Or would they reconcile and shut him out, making him a distant satellite? Either way, the Tripod would collapse.

He also needed to talk about the case with someone he could trust. "The Fletch Kraft Affair" had reached a dead end, unless Cal could find out where Kraft's text messages had originated after he disappeared. But what then? How could that tell him whether Kraft had sent them, or someone else?

Monica didn't answer. Neither did Sam.

Suddenly, he was famished.

Chapter 12

Though he'd ordered no more than Mammoth Muffins and coffee there, the Op had studied the menu at Perkins and liked to stick with what he knew. It was only four o'clock but the place was packed. He had to sit in the same booth where he'd ordered lunch. He was dismayed to see his least favorite waitress heading towards him. Clearly, the feeling was mutual.

She opened the menu to the kids' page and said, "You want some crayons and a coloring book with that?"

"I know what I want," he said. "For starters, the country fried steak with cream gravy and . . .," he studied the list of side dishes. "And mashed potatoes, asparagus, and green beans with bacon."

"Starters?" She struck an incredulous pose.

"I'll let you know. And a large Coke. And a house salad."

She wrote down the order and dashed on. A skinny high-school kid with a buzz-cut brought the Coke just as his phone sounded.

Monica, said the home screen.

"Hi, Monica."

"This is Sam. Monica's in the kitchen, fixing us something to eat."

Something to eat? the Op asked himself. Monica can cook? Only then did he notice the discrepancy.

"Whose kitchen?"

"Her kitchen."

"But why are you calling me on her phone?"

A pause. Then Sam said, "Because you called us both."

The Op tried to make the pieces fit together.

"So where's your phone?"

"In my pants."

"Aren't you wearing your pants?"

Silence again. The voices in the restaurant became louder.

"I guess this must come as a surprise," said Sam.

Without going into details, he told the Op that he and Monica were back together. He was upstairs at her place and she was downstairs making them dinner. It seemed like a good time to return the Op's call, and Monica's phone was closer. On the night stand.

"Here's how it happened," said Sam, before he could ask.

The moment the Op disappeared through the sliding doors of Terminal B yesterday morning, Sam decided to call Monica. He punched in the number while sitting in the car, before he could reconsider. He didn't expect her to pick up once she saw his name. He only wanted to leave a message: "I'm quitting my job. I love you."

He was putting his phone away when the State cop on duty appeared at his window and tapped on the glass with a big knuckle. "You can't park here!" he yelled.

"My mind was still on Monica," said Sam, "so I didn't react. But he must have seen my hand inside my jacket, because he backed away like I was radioactive and went for his side-arm. I knew what that meant. I pulled my hand out, slowly, and pressed both of them to the glass, and then I stuck my face in between, grinnin' and noddin' like Urkel."

Sam's voice rose an octave to a pleading shout. "Sorry! Sorry, officer!"

The Op listened patiently, knowing that Sam had to finish before he could answer any questions about him and Monica.

"She didn't call back until late that afternoon, just as I was about to leave the office," said Sam. "I wasn't going to quit my job for no good reason."

"And?"

"And what? Here I am, in Cambridge, at Monica's, and she's fixing dinner."

"From scratch?"

"Some kind of fish with artichokes and capers." Sam paused. "What are 'capers'?"

"Don't try to skip a groove on me. I'm the reason you are there at all."

"Ok, ok. Yes. We had a long talk and when we were finished, I went to Houk's office, walked in and gave notice. Two weeks. He asked why. I said, 'Personal reasons.' He told me I wouldn't work in Boston again. I was leaving a half dozen clients high and dry. I'd regret it. Etta-cetta-ratta."

"And you won't regret it?"

Sam chuckled.

"I'm lying here 24 hours later staring at Monica's ceiling light, listening to the rain falling outside and smelling (is it?) capers coming from downstairs, and I'm thinking, 'no.'"

"So now what? Is she going to quit Continental?" He could feel The Blonde Mon slipping away, she and Sam waving from the stern of The Love Boat.

"TBD. She has to have a job while I'm looking for one. Especially if I'll be working with a non-profit. At a living wage, I mean. We have to think practically for now if we're going to get married."

"Married!" The Op tried to keep the exclamation point out of his voice.

"Eventually. Don't worry, though. You'll have her banging around the office for a while yet."

As if on cue, the Op heard the distant sound of cookware, then Monica's voice, muffled by distance.

"Oh—and we want you to be best man," said Sam. "Gotta go. Time to eat. B . . ."

"Wait, wait!"

"What?"

"Take me with you."

"Huh?"

"I mean, take the phone with you. Don't hang up. I need to pick your brains. The two of you."

"No need to take it anywhere. Here she is."

Monica had dished out the food and come upstairs to see what was holding things up.

"You!" she said when she came on the line. He felt a stab of pain. She'd never sounded so happy.

At that moment his waitress came to the booth carrying a scuffed aluminum tray on her shoulder.

"Wait a minute," he said into the phone. "I'm being served."

The pause created a fracture in time where, suddenly, nothing needed doing. It was so short it gave him no chance to listen for a demand coming from any direction, but just long enough to make him really see what was around him. The waitress, for example. As she swiveled back and forth unloading the tray, he noticed, for the first time, her plastic nametag: "Hi! My name is BRENDA!" He also noticed, for the first time, how skinny she was. And the crow's feet around her eyes.

"Push your way through that, Mr. 'For Starters.' I'll check back for the *SEcond-oh peeAH-doh*." She was scowling, but also having fun exaggerating her incompetent Italian.

Monica had not much to add to Sam's account of the last thirty-six hours. He wasn't surprised. Monica never liked to talk about her personal life, so she wasn't used to opening up. Boyfriends, like local gigs, came and went, meriting little more than a shrug. What she couldn't help saying at this moment, over and over again, was "Thank you!"

Finally she asked, "How's it going?"

He'd put the phone on speaker and set it next to his plate, but his mouth was full.

"Umph," he said to fill the void. He swallowed and took a pull on his 32 oz. Coke to wash it down. "Sorry. I've found out a lot, but I'm pretty much 'down a shit-hole' right now, as a recent acquaintance would say."

He asked Monica to put her phone on speaker, too, so Sam could listen in.

"Will this take long? I've got dinner on the table, and your lip-smacking isn't helping any."

"I'll stop the smacking. We'll fast together."

He described the situation in Fort Dodge, beginning with Kraft's movements the day of his disappearance and the mysteries that lingered.

"You're right about the roll-aboard," said Monica. "If he'd left it at the gate, it would have been reported within minutes. Security would be locking the place down just as he was trying to leave. Probably too big to fit in a trash bin. And how could he be sure no one would notice him trying? It's not like throwing away a paper towel or a coffee cup."

"That all occurred to me. But what happened to it? United doesn't have it. He must have ditched it between bumping into Georgia Johnson's mop bucket and arriving at Goodwill. That means it could be anywhere. Maybe he literally 'ditched it' by the side of a highway on his way to downtown Fort Dodge.

"Or an Uber or a Lyft driver has it?" asked Sam. "You said the cab companies had nothing."

"If he has an account, we don't know how to access it. And he could have opened a new account for 'Mr. Huff.'"

"Who's Mr. Huff?" asked Monica.

"Didn't I tell you? That's the fake identity Kraft was trying to buy on the Dark Web."

"Huff," said Monica. "What an odd name. Where do I know it from?"

"Probably the same place as Brit Patterson," said the Op, "who also can't recall."

"Unlikely."

"In any case, even if we could cross off the Uber/Lyft option, that leaves several square miles of Iowa for disposing of it."

"Wait," said Monica. "Let me think."

He and Sam let Monica think.

"What if he left it on a luggage carousel in 'Arrivals'?"

They thought about it.

"Wouldn't United try his address when his phone number didn't pick up?" asked the Op. "And wouldn't Brit have gotten something in the mail by now?"

"Not if he removed any identification. Then it would look like something checked through on an arriving flight but never claimed. It wouldn't have any check-in tag attached, with a point of origin or destination, so it would probably go straight to 'Lost Luggage' and wait for its rightful owner to show up, someone with personal knowledge of what's inside."

"If he was trying to disappear, Kraft would have emptied it of anything with his name on it," said Sam.

There was murmuring on the line. Then Monica's voice: "Let's keep thinking while Sam and I head downstairs to eat. You should eat, too."

"Make sure Sam doesn't forget his pants."

"If he does, he'll be in good company."

He had not the least desire to ask what she meant. He took the opportunity to pick at his asparagus and green beans. They were lukewarm.

After a minute or two of stair clumping and a few indistinct sounds, he heard Monica's voice.

"It occurs to me to wonder 'why'?" she said. "Why get rid of the tie and the roll-aboard? Why make all that trouble for yourself?"

He finished chewing and said, "I think he was being followed by someone he recognized—maybe feared, for reasons unknown. Without his roll-aboard or his tie, Kraft is less conspicuous: just another businessman in a dark gray suit, white shirt, black briefcase."

"Maybe less noticeable, but not less conspicuous," replied Monica, "A man in a tailored suit without a tie will always be more conspicuous than a man in a suit wearing one. Which could also mean the tie would have stood out, called attention to itself—a unique identifier."

"He had two, according to his wife, both eye-catchers." He described them.

"It's a safe bet they're in the roll-aboard, wherever that is."

"I'll test your theory tomorrow, at the airport. Now here's something else that has me puzzled. Maybe worried. Don't know yet."

He described the evidence he'd discovered of being tailed or anticipated in his moves: the misplaced COGS folder in Kraft's home office, which Brit discovered within 24 hours of his getting the case. Mitzi's access to the house. Then the trail of paper clip "tells," beginning with his apartment Friday night, after Brit's exhibition, and now here in Fort Dodge, yesterday afternoon and evening.

In the middle of this narration, Ms. Brenda passed his booth carrying four orders, one in each hand and one balanced, miraculously, in the crook of each elbow. She glanced at the uneaten food on his table and gave him a baleful look, then hurried on. He stopped in midsentence, grabbed his fork, and took a bite of the mashed potatoes. They were cold, and the cream gravy had congealed. His appetite was gone.

He swallowed quickly and resumed.

"Someone's following me, or getting in ahead of me, at every step. Not only do I not know 'who,' I can't even begin to imagine 'why'? It would have to be someone who knows I'm on the case and also knows where I am, literally, as I try to solve it. I mean, almost to the minute—knows exactly when I won't be home or in my room, which is probably bugged top, down, and sideways by now. That doesn't leave a very wide field: Brit Patterson, Mr. Nevis, and Bannon know I'm on the case. So does Mitzi Leversohn-slash-Miriam Aaberg. Nevis and Bannon know where I'm staying. None of them are here in Fort Dodge, as far as I can see, but they could be using agents."

"Mitzi? Unlikely," said Sam.

"Bannon?" said Monica. "You can't be serious."

"In the immortal words of Auguste Dupin, 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however unlikely, must be the truth.'"

"I thought Sherlock Holmes said that." It was Sam.

"He stole it," said the Op.

"How can you know if you've eliminated all the impossibilities? Or when?" said Monica. "There are the known 'impossibilities' and

there are the 'unknowns.' And 'what remains' may include a lot of 'unknown possibilities,' besides the 'known' ones."

"I never realized Dick Cheney could sound so intelligent."

"I'll ignore that remark and just remind you that you're much better at free association than reasoning by syllogism."

Monica would know. It's how she sold the Old Man on hiring him. No experience. College drop-out. Majored in English. Fat. Lives alone, except for his fish. Reads, eats, sleeps. Can recite poetry by heart, reams of it, but can't remember where he left his keys. Reasoning abilities acute, but better at free association: the unexpected opening. "He plays chess. Online, but mostly with himself. He's not good with relationships."

She was merciless, but she knew the Old Man: a recluse and an atavism. The OM had lived too long and, as Mr. Montrose observed, the Op was born too late. The outcome, however, was the same.

"We have to leave Bannon off the table for now," she said to the Op. "He's not only improbable, but we're also far from eliminating other possibilities."

It was time to talk about Louisa.

Sam broke in.

"But why would Nevis or Brit Patterson want you tailed and surveilled at all? They hired you to find Kraft. Transcoastal is paying you to find him. Why hire you to do the job and then watch your every move?"

"That's an excellent question. And it stares me in the face whatever rabbit hole I dive into. But there's one other 'possibility' among the 'known possibles.' Her name is Louisa Montrose, and she hasn't hired me to do anything."

He explained, beginning with the "cute meet" on the flight to Des Moines.

"Sounds sweet," said Monica, with uncharacteristic sweetness.

"And too neat," said the Op. "C'mon. She happens to live in Fort Dodge? And she's reading Capablanca?"

"Back up. Too many 'eets' there," said Monica, sounding like her old self.

"Make it complete: I told her where I was staying in Fort Dodge before I checked in, and I'm pretty sure I told her I had an appointment that same afternoon."

"You sound like this is a problem," said Sam. "Cut her off."

"She wants to see me tomorrow, before I head back. And then in Boston. She sounds like a woman in love."

"And you would know?" asked Sam.

"And this is a problem, I take it, because the feeling is mutual." It was the old Monica, hitting the nail on the head. "Otherwise, you'd never have agreed to see her again. . . ."

"Who said I agreed?"

". . . or accepted that dinner invitation from 'Appa' in the first place."

". . . who must be in on it, if she is," Sam chimed in.

"But is there anything to be 'in on?'" asked the Op.

There were munching sounds, and then Sam asked, with his mouth full, "You tell us."

He told them what he'd discovered. The Montroses had lived at that address only a couple of weeks, according to the dog-walker he met outside their house, taking occupancy after Kraft had disappeared. According to the online site of the Iowa County Treasurer's office, the house was owned by an Ambrose Shattuck, not "Montrose." It wasn't listed as a rental property

"But why would it?" asked Monica. "If the Montroses are renting it, it's off the market."

. . . but it did appear on both AirB&B and VRBO—or at least, a house in that neighborhood did, and from the interior photos, it seemed to be a match.

"The next available rental date is two weeks away. Contact 'host' is someone named 'Larry.'"

"Could be a hired manager," said Sam. "But if they're conning you, wouldn't they have said their name was 'Shattuck' and be done with it?"

"Maybe. But let's say Larry is managing the property for Shattuck. As renters rather than owners, the Montroses would have a good reason to be the new kids on the block. Montrose's sister died not long ago, which would explain the recent move, presumably to a smaller, cheaper home. And they might want to rent short-term, like through AirB&B, while they look around for something permanent and affordable. As for the start-up that Louisa said she worked for, good luck finding it on the internet. Not a good reflection on her 'marketing' abilities. But then, . . ."

"Speaking of unknown unknowns," said Monica, interrupting him.

"But the start-up is just that, a start-up," he continued, "so low-profile. And maybe I've got the spelling wrong, or mis-heard."

"You seem to have an explanation for every anomaly," said Monica.

"You could call the college where the dad says he teaches," said Sam.

"Taught. He's emeritus."

"A good excuse to be MIA," said Monica.

"Someone there must know him, or of him," said Sam.

"Not conclusive if no one does," said Monica. She paused. "You can't bring yourself to ask her, can you?" Yes, she knew him better than he knew himself. Better than Sam did, anyway.

"No. It would tell her I don't trust her. Which would make her not trust me. We could never put the trust back together without the cracks showing."

"Then you are in love! Welcome, and congratulations!" She spoke without sarcasm.

"Or maybe I just want her to trust me to make her easier to deal with."

"You trying to persuade me? Or yourself?"

"Trust, but verify," said Sam.

"Cynic," said Monica.

"It brought down the Soviet Union," said Sam.

"And look where we are now," said Monica.

"Speaking of broken pieces, Sam," said the Op. "There's a piece missing here that might help us eliminate one known unknown. Do you have any friends over at Crown and Alardyce who've dealt with the Transcoastal brass in person? Might have formed the kind of impression that doesn't make it into quarterly reports?"

"I do. Carla Mattingly. She graduated from Law a year before me. We shared editing duties for *HLR*. From the 'hood, like me, so we have that in common, but West Coast. Oakland. Crown and Allardyce snapped her up. She might know something, or know someone who knows something."

"Could you contact her, discreetly . . ."

"--goes without question—"

"and describe what I'm looking for?"

"Without violating attorney-client."

"Exactly. Just impressions, not topics, decisions, disclosures, or protected information—nothing that would get her in trouble."

"Which won't happen anyway. I can keep a secret. And I'm sure you can."

It was a vote of confidence the Op hoped he could live up to.

Ms. Brenda appeared out of nowhere and scanned the table. Her squint puckered the crow's feet around her eyes and mouth.

"Thanks," he said hurriedly. "Call if anything else occurs to you, ok?"

He tapped the red button and braced himself.

"Can I take this back to the kitchen and get them to warm it up for you?"

Her eyes showed real concern.

He felt ashamed.

"I guess I'm not very hungry," he said.

She squeezed into the seat across from him, pushing the table back a little in his direction, and put her hands together.

"You're looking peaked, Mr. 'For Starters,'" she said. "That suit's hanging off your shoulders and you're pale as a ghost. Not that you couldn't lose a few pounds without damage." Her eyes took him

in. "But there's a right way and a wrong way to go about it. Starving yourself ain't the right way. That's how I lost my youngest daughter. Binge and purge. Esophageal cancer. Have you had anything to eat since you woke up besides two muffins and a bite of country fried steak with cream gravy?"

"Some vegetables."

She looked at him scornfully.

The dinner crowd had thinned and the clatter of bused dishes now dominated the room.

"Before you get too weak and skinny to say 'no,' I want you to promise me that when I come back with this food all warmed up and *moochoh goostoh*, I'll find you sitting here, fork and knife in your fists, ready to dig in. Just nod."

He nodded.

"And I want to see you pushing this table away from you before you stand up." She pushed it further into his tummy as she got to her feet.

While Ms. Brenda was in the kitchen, he called the United lost luggage office at the airport. The voice message said they were closed. He'd try again tomorrow, before his date with Louisa.

Chapter 13

By the time Ms. Brenda came back with his reheated meal, he'd lost his appetite entirely. Nevertheless, he did his best.

He took another hour to finish, picking at his meal as he pondered every aspect of the case. He couldn't let it go. Ms. Brenda didn't hurry him. Nor did she say a word when she came to clear the dishes and saw the food nearly untouched. She did pause, however, to watch him push the table away before he stood up.

He left a big tip.

It was almost 7 pm when he stepped outside. The sun was nowhere near setting yet. Sitting in the Malibu, he discovered he didn't want to go back to his room. He wasn't interested in being monitored and the dream he'd had was still too vivid in his memory to make the idea of lying in bed attractive. He'd call Bannon to say he was coming home tomorrow. There was nothing more to find out here on the ground. He'd visit the Fort Dodge airport before checking out, meet Louisa at the Frontier Museum at 11:00 am, and then head for Des Moines. Using his phone, he saw that Delta had a first-class five-hour one-stop, via La Guardia, leaving at 2:26 pm—a bit tight if he wanted to keep his date with Louisa. He'd have to cut it short. He booked the flight and then, giving up on Morphy, opened his Lichess app and logged in.

He'd just received a challenge on What'sapp from someone calling themselves "turingm." ("Turing machine"? Must be a joke—you had to promise Lichess not to use computers before you could register). He clicked on the URL and found himself battling "from position," in the middle of a game already underway.

Playing Black, turingm had set up a pawn chain—a diagonal row of pawns—pointing toward the Queen's side. Alone, the pawn was the weakest piece on the board, readily sacrificed for larger gains. It could only move a square at a time, straight forward, and only capture opposing pieces diagonally. For this very reason, however, pawns gained strength disproportionate to their numbers when arranged in diagonal phalanxes. The standard reply to a pawn

chain was to attack the lead pawn first, if possible, to regain control of the central squares. Otherwise, go for the last pawn.

Fortuitously, the Op had been working on a different offensive strategy of late: using his knights to leap over the chain and wreak havoc behind the lines.

He was fond of the knight, the only piece that hopped in two directions on a single move and could jump over any piece on the board, friend or foe. Its "L" shaped moves seemed to match the Op's associative patterns of thinking. Starting in one direction, then suddenly turning down a side-path, the knight's career seemed punctuated by leaps of intuition.

turingm was a blabbermouth. Nearly every move was followed by a snide or gloating remark in the chat box. Two moves in, a message appeared in the chat box.

welcm 2 my parlor sd the spider.

One of his knights had just leaped over Black's pawn chain.

Within minutes it was all he could do to keep up, and he realized he couldn't monopolize a parking spot just to avoid going to his room. He put down his phone (wasting precious seconds) and drove to the nearest quiet spot he could think of: the squat.

Here in the early evening light, he sat leaning against one of the scrub locusts as quiet descended around him.

turingm soon had him tied up and the game was over ten minutes later. Another match ended the same way. And another. turingm had decided to stick with the pawn chain until it failed. It was something he ("it"? "they"?) had also been working at, apparently.

Well into his fourth match the Op decided to penetrate chain with his bishop on the opposite color diagonal, using the piece as a decoy to set up a knight fork, where the knight could attack two pieces at once. turingm was on it immediately.

jst waitg 4 u to push thru!

As soon as the Op saw the word "push" in the "Comments" field, he heard Ms. Brenda's voice: "Push your way through that, Mr. 'For Starters.'"

He looked up from his phone and found himself facing the river—or rather, the shrubbery between him and the river, whose surface he could see glimmering through the gap between the foliage and the ground, just as before. It occurred to him, this time, to wonder why he could see the river at all. Was there a clearing on the other side? The shrubbery looked impenetrable.

He logged off, leaving turingm licking his ("its"? "their"?) chops in anticipation.

He struggled to his feet and walked up to the wall of green leaves. Up close, he could see the dead, gray tips of a few broken twigs and, pushing the new growth aside, larger broken stems behind, similarly grayed with age. Something had passed through here—not recently, but not that long ago, either.

He thrust his hands forward, spread them to each side as far as he could, and stepped into the vicious tangle of twigs and branches.

They tore at his skin and clothes, forcing him back. But he persisted, plunging his hands forward again and out to the side. His massive size prevailed, and he instantly found himself atop a low rock ledge facing a clearing. The clearing extended downhill, to the river ahead of him, and uphill to his right, back toward Loomis Park Drive.

Now that he could see the river more fully, he felt the urge to move nearer.

The tall grass and weeds gave out where pebbles and scree marked the river bank, about thirty yards downhill. He stopped there and looked around. Just to his left, downriver, he could see some white ripples and, jutting out across from him, the remnant of the demolished dam Chester had told him about. Upriver, beyond and on the same side as the dam, there was a boat ramp. Turning around to climb back up the slope he caught sight of what looked like a brownish stone, half hidden by weeds and too perfectly rectangular to be natural. It was lying almost at his feet, obscured by the vegetation and the waning light. He bent down to look closer and saw that it was a leather wallet, covered with a thin layer of fine, dried silt.

Leaving it where it lay, he returned to the squat via the clearing and Loomis Park Drive. There he picked up a discarded plastic shopping bag, turned it inside-out, and went back the long way he'd come, to the river bank. He slipped his hand into the inside-out plastic bag and picked up the wallet. Holding it firmly, he walked to his car.

By now, the sun had set. Before he climbed back inside the Malibu, he reached up under the roof and turned on the overhead light. Then, sitting in the passenger seat and with both hands in the plastic bag, he opened the wallet. Out through a clear plastic window stared the face of Fletcher Kraft. The plastic window was smeared with dark brown streaks. They extended around the edges of the wallet, to the outside. There were several other items in the wallet other than Kraft's Real ID. Without taking them out, he could see that none were credit cards. There was no cash, either.

The Op closed the plastic bag around the wallet and placed it and its contents in the glove box. He turned off the roof light and locked the car. Then, using his flashlight app, he headed back to the river for the third time.

There he examined the pebbles and coarse gravel along the shore, inch by inch, for some ten feet on either side of him. He moved slowly, traversing back and forth, like a massive combine mowing wheat, through the new weeds sprouting along the flood line and then continuing, back and forth, down through the scree to the water eddying sluggishly past. A dead willow leaf and a maple seed helicopter floated by, rotating slowly in the black vortices like the hands of a clock.

Two more verses from Olson's *Maximus* came to him.

When a man's coffin is the sea
the whole of creation shall come to his funeral.

I set out now in a box upon the sea.

* * * * *

"You can give it to her yourself. She's upstairs."

On a Sunday night?

He knew something was up the minute he turned onto S. 7th Street. Every window in the Law Enforcement Center was lit up and a patrol car was idling near the entrance, its light bar flashing blue. Behind it was the county sheriff's SUV.

Following the desk sergeant's thumb, he took the elevator to the second floor. Two uniforms rushed out as the doors opened, followed by the sheriff himself.

Detective Sergeant Cowper was gazing intently at her screen as he approached her desk, holding his plastic bag in front of him.

"Gotta minute?"

She didn't look up.

"I found something near the river," he added, and gave the bag a shake. It had a Target bull's-eye on it.

"We found something, too," she muttered.

"It's a wallet," he said.

She looked up.

Earlier that afternoon, while the Op was asleep in his room, a body had been discovered downriver from the Kenyon Road bridge. It had come to rest on a sand bar. It had no identification, but seemed to be that of an Asian male. His neck was apparently broken, according to the first officers on the scene. The body was now with the Webster County Medical Examiner, who was conducting the autopsy as they spoke.

"Rigor had set in," said Cowper, "so he wasn't dead more than a day, day and half at most. Could have jumped or been thrown in from any number of spots. Let's see the wallet." She reached for it.

"The wallet isn't his," he said, handing her the bag. "It's Fletcher Kraft's."

She set it on a corner of her desk without opening it and returned to her screen.

"It seems to have blood stains on it."

No reaction.

He waited.

She looked up again.

"Listen. I have a real dead body, identity unknown and nothing in IAFIS, and what do you have? The wallet of a man who might be dead but is probably pulling a sick prank. The real dead body has a broken neck. Need I go on?"

In her slacks and shirtwaist and with her hair tied in a hasty ponytail, she looked more than ever like a teenager.

"What was your John Doe wearing?" he asked.

"What do you care?" She turned back to the desktop.

"Could help with time of death."

"He was dressed in black, head to foot," she said quietly, as if to herself. "Pullover, black Dockers, black sneakers."

"Sounds like he was up to no good. Was he wearing contacts?"

"He was face down in the river," she muttered. "If he was, they'd have washed out."

Then she looked up again, for the last time.

"Why do you ask?"

He had to think fast.

"That might screw up the biometrics."

"And we wouldn't think of that? The answer is 'no.'"

He headed for the stairs.

"Even if it is blood," she said, raising her voice, "we need Kraft's DNA to confirm a match. Contact the wife."

After another two steps he heard her shout, "If they threw him in, his body would have washed up long ago. It wouldn't be missing."

* * * * *

That was close. The question was out of his mouth before he knew it. He'd seen only one Asian or Asian-American—aside from the Montroses—since he arrived in Fort Dodge. If the victim was the young man who dropped his contact lens at the check-in desk yesterday, the last thing he wanted was law enforcement swarming over the place, watching security video, wondering about the

coincidence of a PI working a missing person case and their possible murder victim staying in the same hotel. It could keep him pinned in Fort Dodge for days.

He wished he could have confirmed his hunch by viewing the corpse, but asking would have led to awkward questions. And for what? The man in line had been wearing an NK-95 mask.

He went over the possibilities in his head as he drove to the Days Inn. The man had had trouble with his contact lens. Apparently. He'd dropped it. Apparently. Right next to where the Op was checking in. Had the desk clerk mentioned his room number? Yes, he had, when he gave directions. So perhaps the young man didn't wear contact lenses at all and the "lost lens" routine was to give him an excuse to hang back while the Op checked in. He now recalled that the young man had been wearing ear buds. To magnify sound?

If the dead man had been surveilling him, he wasn't now. And had he been the only one? The paper clip tells suggested he hadn't. So, who else? And why? And why kill the young man at all? The Op sighed. No answers, and no matter. He'd be checked out and on his way to Des Moines by noon tomorrow.

Just before lying down, he called Mr. Nevis. This was a call he wanted to make from his room, along with the next.

"So, Fletcher. Kraft might be dead?"

"Looks that way. I'm waiting to have the stains confirmed as blood, and the blood confirmed as Kraft's. That will have to wait until the police here can get a personal item from his wife, for a DNA match. Even then, it wouldn't be definitive proof of death. But I think it would give Ms. Patterson enough evidence to apply for a declaration and a certificate. Meanwhile, I've got our team checking her phone to see where Kraft's text messages originated. That won't provide a final answer, since they might have been sent by someone impersonating him, but it could help round out the picture. In any case, I don't see any reason to stay here. I'll be flying home tomorrow afternoon."

"Inform me if anything new develops before you leave," said Mr. Nevis. "Or after you get back, for that matter. We will be glad to pay a retainer. Dead or alive, this case isn't closed until we're absolutely sure. The family deserves that much."

He called Bannon next.

"Good work," said Bannon. "Great work, in fact. But we haven't found the body."

"We have enough for Brit Patterson to get him declared dead."

"Doubtful. Maybe. But she won't really know, will she? Or her daughters. They may never get closure."

Bannon was showing an uncharacteristic concern for a client's feelings. It made a blip appear on the Op's mental radar.

"It's close on four weeks since Fletcher Kraft disappeared," he replied. "Whatever he was trying to pull with his Dark Web hijinks, they were thrown into a cocked hat by that interrupted flight. His behavior for the twenty-four hours afterwards suggests he was trying to escape from a pursuer. The evidence I found—if the blood is his, and I think it will turn out to be—suggests he failed."

Or, he told himself, it suggests someone wanted to *suggest* that he failed.

There was a pause as the Op waited for what he now suspected would come next.

"It's really up to Transcoastal, isn't it?" asked Bannon at last. "If they're not satisfied, they'll continue to foot the bill until they know one way or the other."

"There it is," said the Op. "Good for you, good for me, good for Continental. They're the biggest client keeping us afloat right now, aren't they? That's what's on your mind."

"Listen," said Bannon, "you should see the Locker Room this morning. Looks like the dance floor of the Titanic right after they yelled 'Abandon Ship!'"

"What I'm wondering is, why did Transcoastal offer to foot the bill in the first place?"

"And I'm wondering why anyone working here would want them to stop."

"Not to worry," said the Op. "When I talked to Nevis a few minutes ago, putting 'paid' to the case seemed to be the furthest thing from his mind. Apparently, Transcoastal cares about its employees and their families just as much as you do, and it won't rest until Brit Patterson knows exactly what happened to her husband."

More silence from Bannon. He was good at picking up on sarcasm. Then, "We'll know exactly how much they care once you get back and submit your report, won't we?"

* * * * *

Before turning out the light, he logged on to Lichess. turingm was gone. The Op had lost another game by default. He fell asleep wondering exactly how much he would tell Brit Patterson about her missing husband the next time they talked.

He had no dreams.

Chapter 14

He gave his real name and address and showed the woman his driver's license. Why not? If the roll-aboard still had Kraft's ID tag attached, or anything indicating his identity, there was no way he could pass for the rightful owner anyway. At least he might be able to verify that it was here. Get Cowper involved, if necessary. He hoped he wouldn't have to, though. She'd seemed less than cooperative last night.

"It's lime green," he said.

"And you arrived when?" Her name clip said "E. Warren," but she spoke with a Spanish accent. Slight, but noticeable.

He gave the day and date. Also, the number of a morning flight arriving a few hours before UA 1008.

"I picked up my other bag, but completely forgot this one until I reached my destination. That was days later." He rolled his eyes in self-mockery. "I was too far away to come back for it, but now that I'm back in town, I thought I'd try in person."

"I wish you'd called," said Ms. Warren. "That suitcase has been sitting here for weeks."

"It has?" He tried to sound annoyed without putting her off. "Why wasn't I contacted?"

"There's no identification, or destination tag. Someone may have taken it by mistake and torn off the tag before they realized it. Happens all the time. But wait here, please" said Ms. Warren, "and we'll see if it's yours."

She emerged from a back room rolling a small, green, hard-sided suitcase on four casters.

"Is this it?" she asked.

"Yes!" he said, with real enthusiasm. Perhaps because the feeling was genuine, Ms. Warren smiled. She seemed glad to be appreciated, glad to have been useful for once. He imagined she was often on the receiving end of verbal abuse.

"Good thing they put it back. Good thing for you."

"Thanks so much," he said, reaching for the handle.

She didn't release it, and he had to retreat.

"Since there's nothing to show it's yours, I'm afraid I must ask you to identify the contents." She was all business now.

"It's been quite a while," he said, "but I do remember one item for sure."

He described the Egyptian tie based on what he could remember of Brit's account. He'd leave the painted one alone for now. If the Egyptian tie wasn't there, he'd ask about the other one, as if he'd just thought of it. (The Egyptian tie wasn't something you'd forget!) If neither was there, he'd shrug and say, "I guess I was wrong. This isn't my suitcase after all. Sorry to bother you."

Ms. Warren pushed down the handle, placed the lime-green suitcase on the counter, and opened it so he couldn't see the contents.

"Is this it?"

It was. Very, very much so. Six inches wide and more hideous than he'd imagined from Brit's description.

Ms. Warren replaced the tie, put the suitcase down next to her, raised the handle, and wheeled it out from behind the counter as if she were taking it for a walk.

As he took possession, she leaned forward and asked, in a conspiratorial tone, "When . . . I am sorry, but I just have to know. . . when do you wear that tie?"

"At business meetings," he said.

In the parking lot, he placed the suitcase in the trunk next to his and began examining the contents. Besides the two ties, there were several pairs of socks and underwear, an extra white cotton shirt, a pullover cotton sweater, an extra pair of slacks (tan), and a toiletries kit. Nothing with Kraft's name on it. No phone.

He opened the toiletries kit and found, along with the usual items of personal hygiene, a hairbrush. Leaving it undisturbed, he unrolled the Egyptian tie and examined it up close to confirm a

hunch. Though he'd never before laid eyes on it, he now recognized where he'd seen it before. It was identical to one of the illustrations for the ICA exhibition brochure that Mitzi had shown him. Someone had photographed the portion of the tie with the Pyramids of Giza and included the photo with the text. Was it Brit? Or Mitzi/Meriam, who seemed to know "Brit's version" of her pyramid motif by heart? Mitzi had been married to Aaberg when he was convicted of smuggling Egyptian artifacts many years ago. And Kraft had received the tie for his handling of a transaction with Egyptian contacts. That was before he married Brit. Was it while he was married to Meriam Aaberg, neé Mitzi Leversohn? Could it have been even earlier? What better way to smuggle goods than via a shipping company?

"Stay tuned," he told himself.

Rolling up the tie, he placed it in his own roll-aboard, then closed both suitcases and the trunk of the Malibu.

It was only 10:30 am. Just enough time to stop by the Law Enforcement Center on his way to the Frontier Museum.

He'd checked out before leaving for the Fort Dodge airport. That was when he saw, lying on the front desk, copies of the *Messenger* with a morgue photo of the dead man next to the headline, "Body Found Near Kenyon Road Bridge." Police were asking for anyone who knew the man, or had seen him in the last two days, to contact them. He tried to imagine the face wearing an NK-95 mask. The eyes, brow, and haircut looked like a match, but he couldn't be sure. He'd never seen the young man's face full on.

When he walked up to Detective Sergeant Cowper's desk rolling the green suitcase ahead of him, he found her looking pale but as fresh and business-like in her black power suit and tortoise shell glasses as when he'd first met her two days ago.

"There's a hairbrush in here, along with some other personal items belonging to Fletcher Kraft," he said. "No need to contact Ms. Patterson. I'll let her know."

He explained how he'd obtained the suitcase, expecting her to tear into him for not letting the police do it. Instead, she smiled

graciously and said, "Thank you." She'd send the hairbrush and any other relevant items to forensics before lunch. No telling when they'd report back, what with the other case sucking up all the air in the room. She'd see what she could do to speed things along.

"Saw the photo in the *Messenger* this morning," he said. "A bit much, isn't it? I mean, a morgue photo on the front page of your standard family newspaper, especially when you haven't notified next of kin."

"We're pretty sure he's not local." She didn't say why. "Broken neck was the cause of death."

"Any leads?"

"Not yet. We'll start calling around soon. Must be checked in somewhere."

He thanked her and told her he'd be heading back to Boston that afternoon.

"Glad to be of help." She seemed to mean it. Then she added, "I'm sorry I was so rude last night. You're a good detective and deserve better." She raised her left forearm and wiggled her ring finger. A diamond caught the light. "My girlfriend proposed to me yesterday, over lunch. Just before I got the call. We'd planned to make a day of it. I guess I wasn't at my best."

He wasn't embarrassed that he'd missed the ring when he walked in. And last night, too. It wasn't the kind of thing he thought about.

He arrived early at the Frontier Museum. Outside the entrance stood four Native Americans, three men and one woman, holding signs that said "Blackbird Bend," "Remember Sidominadota," and "Henry Lott Slept Here." The men were dressed in jeans and cowboy boots. The two younger ones had braids and the oldest of the three wore a bolo tie cinched with a large turquoise. The woman was draped in a simple T-dress. Her single braid was a dull gray and as thick as the tail of an alligator.

As he looked for a place to park, Sam called.

He'd talked with his friend at Crown and Allardyce, Carla Mattingly, this morning. About two weeks ago she'd been asked to sit in on a meeting to discuss the disappearance. Transcoastal wanted to know if they'd be liable for any criminal acts Kraft may have committed—should any turn up. They were also concerned about Kraft selling what they called "trade secrets."

"Sounds like she really does trust you, Sam. This is way more than I expected her to share with anyone outside the firm. Dangerously more."

"We don't go way back, but we have a lot in common—a lot that counts."

The Op said nothing. Sam could waste minutes at a time on tangents if given the nod.

"Carla had a weird feeling about it," Sam continued. "For instance, you've got the head of security sitting right there, at the table, but contributing nothing. It was like the higher-ups were talking around something they didn't want to name."

"Head of security? You mean Mr. Nevis?"

"Nevis, and a guy named Yosef Marcovic, his gofer or whatever. Carla was especially interested in him. Big man, even sitting down. Shaved head. Older, maybe in his 50s, but ripped. Wore a tight Armani suit that showed what he had. Good-looking, she said, but cold. 'Radiated menace' were her words. And she should know."

Sam didn't elaborate.

"What was he there for, I wonder?" asked the Op. "Why did Nevis bring him along? From what you're saying, I wouldn't take him out of his cage, let alone to work."

"To intimidate?"

"Who was the target?"

"Not Crown and Allardyce, I'm guessing. And there was something else that underlined the whole . . .," he paused to find the word, "that whole impression, you know? of threat. For Carla, anyway. He was wearing a black turtle-neck."

"I don't get it," said the Op.

"It was unrolled," said Sam. "Up to his jaw, almost."

"You're talking about tats?"

"That's the first thing she thought of. Me, too, when she mentioned it. We both grew up with gangbangers—cons and ex-cons. The neck and face tats made going straight a bitch."

"I thought laser technology . . ."

"Yeah, nowadays. But back when this big cat was a kitten, removal almost always left scars."

"Could be a fashion choice?"

"Maybe. But remember that heat wave we had two weeks ago? Hundred in the shade? That's when this meeting took place. And he comes to work wearing a black turtle-neck. Rolled up. He's no slave to fashion, my man. He's got tats, or he's got scars."

"Markovic—Eastern European?"

"Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian—one of those. I looked it up."

"You're thinking gang, ex-gang?"

"Or ex-military."

"Sounds like Kraft has Transcoastal worried about more than Brit Patterson's peace of mind," he said. "Or her financial situation."

At that moment, he saw Louisa approaching the entrance to the museum. He thanked Sam and said good-bye.

As he got out of the car, he saw the older man with the bolo tie lean over to the woman standing next to him and say something, then smile. She nodded, keeping her eyes on the Op. But he was used to that kind of thing.

* * * * *

He'd never been on a date before, unless you counted the time he and Marianne Kalman went to see a movie together without their parents. They were in third grade and their moms were going shopping at the mall. It was a Saturday so they were dropped off at the multiplex to see *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

Unfortunately, they wandered into the wrong theater. Marianne lasted through five seconds of *King Kong* before fleeing in search of

Harry, Hermione, and Professor Dumbledore. The Op was transfixed. They'd entered about halfway through the film, at the part where Kong grabs Ann in his huge, hairy fist and, instead of eating her for dinner, takes her with him as he runs off into the jungle, where she juggles and dances him into docility. A giant, reclusive, tender-hearted ape, the woman who loves him, and a world that cannot understand either one. Abduction, seduction, capture, destruction. Samson and Delilah meets the Stockholm Syndrome.

In the museum's outdoor Frontier Village, he could see himself and Louisa reflected in the plate glass window of a vintage General Store, her hand on his arm. She was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, a light blue sundress, and white pumps. He was dressed in his polo shirt and slacks. The height disparity reminded him of his almost-date with Marianne. Just like then, he towered over his female companion. Louisa, however, made a more plausible match.

They'd toured the stockade, the jailhouse, and several shops displaying artifacts of Old Fort Dodge. They'd viewed the "punishment horse" and something called "The Cardiff Giant," a ten-foot statue of a nude man carved out of Fort Dodge gypsum (private parts covered by a monstera leaf), that was once billed by P. T. Barnum as a "petrified man" unearthed in Cardiff, New York. The sun was turning the street into a baking pan, but he didn't want to go back inside where other people could hear them. It was time to leave and he had to know.

"So you meant all those things you said, about Watson?" Louisa asked, "and about—what was her name? Helena . . .?"

"Landless. Yes. Every word."

She gave his arm a squeeze. "I've never met a man who, like, thought about women that way."

"Well, I've never thought much about women, frankly. Until I met you."

She took it as a compliment.

"So you're not getting detoured after all?" he asked.

"No, heading straight back to Boston. You will call me, won't you?"

"As soon as I arrive. When are you leaving?"

"Not until tomorrow morning. United only has one flight to Boston from Fort Dodge. It leaves around 10:00 am."

"Won't you be flying from Des Moines?"

She looked blank.

"Oh! No, that was only because it happened to be more affordable. At the time, I mean. The time I was leaving. Appa doesn't mind the drive. When the car works, that is." She smiled up at him, tight-lipped.

They continued their stroll along Main Street, past Ole Fjetland's Cabinet Shop.

"So your aunt died just recently?"

"Yes. A month or so ago. Appa's had a hard time recovering. He really enjoyed your visit. That's one reason I enjoyed it, too. It cheered him up." She paused and gave his arm another squeeze.

"That's not the only reason, though."

"Your house is so small, I was wondering where your aunt slept."

"We're just renting it for now. After Attai died, we decided we didn't need the extra room. We needed the extra money."

"Your father taught at the community college?"

"Yes."

"How long ago did he retire?"

She looked up at him.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious."

"About when he retired?"

"Yes."

They resumed their stroll.

"An odd thing to be curious about," she said, and fell silent.
"But I'll tell you."

Mr. Montrose, it turned out, had never taught engineering at Iowa State Community College. He was a building super who

helped to keep the HVAC system running. His adjunct professorship was a collaborative family fiction that outsiders, along with his sister, were encouraged to accept as fact. His engineering degree, however, was real.

"He mustn't ever know I told you any of this. He'd be mortified."

"Did you have to sign a 12-month lease?"

She looked at him quizzically.

"For the house. That would have tied you down, I'm guessing, if you're looking for someplace permanent."

She stopped and let go of his arm.

"And what Catholic school did you attend, again?"

"The only one in town—St. Edmond."

"And you graduated—which year?"

"Is this an interrogation?" She laughed as she said it, but warily.

"And don't tell me you're 'just curious.'"

"But I am," he said. "I'm curious about a lot of things. Like how someone as intelligent as you can't remember where she left her suitcase. Like Capablanca in hard-cover, 10 by 7 inches, 287 pages—for a weekend trip. Like 'Freedical,' a start-up that Google can't find. Like"

"*3Dical*," she said, with withering enunciation.

". . . your dead tropical fish. Not to mention your coming on so hard and fast to a big, fat"

Her eyes flashed and her *bindi* turned a shade darker.

"Who—or what—do you think I am?" she demanded.

He was surprised by her anger. He'd crossed the line. Worse, he hadn't known he was doing so.

"I'm sorry," he said, not sure if he meant it. "I can't help it. I'm a detective on a case, and there are just too many convenient coincidences here to take at face value." He tried to keep his tone professional, but wasn't sure he succeeded. "Not to mention your wanting to see me again." He spread his arms out. "C'mon. I mean, just look at me."

After a few seconds she calmed down.

"Apology accepted," she said. "But I can't help the coincidences. That's all they are, really." She was looking up at him. Were those tears? "Everything I've told you is the truth. And I meant everything I said. About my feelings for you."

He expected the "three words" to come next. But they didn't.

"Look," he said. "We've known each other less than forty-eight hours. It will take a while to reach a level of trust. I was raised to be suspicious and then trained to be an expert at it. And I'm way behind the starting line when it comes to women."

"On the contrary," she said quietly, taking his arm again. "I think you've got a big head start."

* * * * *

He offered to drive her home, but she said no. She'd call a Lyft. She didn't want her father to know about their relationship—if that's what it was. At least not yet. *Appa* was still hurting and needy after his sister's death. It would take a little more time for him to heal, to get back to accepting that his daughter had a life separate from his.

"He likes you," she told the Op. "That's a start."

When the Lyft appeared at the corner, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. *Call me*, she mouthed, silently, then got into the car and waved goodbye.

Now that the case was at a standstill, he noticed he again had an appetite. He'd packed away a good deal of what was on offer at the Days Inn complimentary breakfast, including four hard boiled eggs, a pile of bacon, a bowl of oatmeal, and three of those flip-over do-it-yourself waffles, with butter and syrup. His thoughts turned to lunch and he wondered if he'd have time for a drive-through at a Wendy's or McDonald's on the way to Des Moines.

He'd been aware, from the moment he exited the museum grounds with Louisa on his arm, that they were being watched. A fifth man had joined the four protestors at the entrance. As the Lyft pulled away, the man started following him to his car.

"Can I help you?" the Op asked, turning to confront him.

He was dark-skinned, in his late 30s, early 40s, short, stocky, and strikingly handsome, with high, broad cheekbones and jet-black hair combed straight back. The noonday sun cast his face in bold relief and made his hair glisten. Unlike his friends, however, he wore nothing to connect him to tribal culture. Quite the opposite. His short-sleeved shirt, micro-fiber shorts, and gray suede Pumas made him look like a tourist.

"Maybe," replied the man. "And maybe I can help you."

The Op looked at him, waiting.

"My name is Tommy Littlejohn." He held out his hand. "I'm Xenie Patterson's father."

Chapter 15

"Get in the car," said the Op. "I've got a plane to catch."

It was an enlightening hour and a half.

Tommy Littlejohn and Brit Patterson had grown up together in Atoka, Oklahoma. By the time they were in high school, they were sweethearts.

"I was a hell-raiser. A 'bad boy,'" said Tommy. "I think that's what attracted her to me. She wasn't violent herself. Short-tempered, maybe, or, well, impatient. Impatient with life. Did she tell you about her dad?"

The Op nodded because his mouth was full. He was driving with a Wendy's Big Bacon Classic on his lap, his drink resting in the cup-holder. Tommy held the French fries within reach and a box of spicy chicken nuggets between his knees. He put one in his mouth with his free hand, chewing as he spoke.

"Well, I think I was her way of fighting back."

Tommy was illegitimate. His father was an enrolled Choctaw, but married, so he wouldn't acknowledge Tommy as his son. That made it impossible to satisfy the Bureau of Indian Affairs' requirements for a Choctaw CDIB—"Certificate Degree of Indian Blood."

"It left me adrift, living with my mom, who was white and unmarried. The difference in our appearance made her ashamed of me. It was pretty dramatic. I suspect she had some Choctaw blood of her own, from way back, though it didn't show. My existence made it hard for her to find a husband. I got used to seeing her 'boyfriends' at the breakfast table. Some stuck around for a few weeks, or months. None of them wanted a red bastard for a stepson."

He spoke with no anger or sadness, as if this were someone else's story.

"Given how I looked, it was impossible to keep my dad's tribal identity a secret from anyone, including me. But she never revealed

his name. I think he might have been paying support for her silence. It couldn't have been much. We were trailer trash."

Eventually, she found a man who agreed to marry her. He was well-meaning and kind, but shiftless. Worked odd jobs, but mostly sat in the trailer watching TV or picking at his guitar. The money from Tommy's father was their only steady source of income, so the boy's stepfather wasn't about to tell Tommy the man's name either. He tried to fill his place, but the damage was done, and Tommy only resented his attempts.

Then, the mom started using. His step-dad, to his credit, didn't abandon them, but he had his hands full with his wife. Tommy got into trouble. Drinking, weed, truancy, petty theft. "Fights. Lots of fights." He dropped out of school and began hanging out with trouble makers, some of them mixed race, like him. Only Brit saw anything in him worth saving, and managed to reach it. He sobered up for her, got his GED. By their senior year, she was pregnant with their child.

As soon as Brit graduated, they left Atoka for California—the Bay Area, where a friend of Brit's, a year ahead of her in school, had moved and agreed to help her get settled.

The baby was born in Oakland. Brit named her "Xenia." Tommy had no objections because he had no preferences.

"She told me it meant 'hospitality'—welcoming the stranger. I never got it. Not sure I do now. My name's on the birth certificate. That's how Xenie made sure I was her dad when I got in touch with her."

He'd never intended to. When he and Brit split up (which was, in retrospect, inevitable) she made him swear never to contact her or Xenie again.

"When was this?" asked the Op as they passed the exit for Ellsworth. The outside temperature read 101 degrees.

"Less than a year after we moved to California."

"No, I mean, when did you get in touch with Xenie?"

"Three, four months ago."

The Op gathered his thoughts, then asked, "What happened in California?"

"I fell apart. We were supposed to get married there. We pictured a beach ceremony—just us, and Xenie, and the minister, and Brit's friend as witness. You know: seagulls, sun going down over the ocean. We'd never seen the ocean. Or any body of water you couldn't skip a stone to the other side.

"But I kept putting it off, making excuses. I was in a panic every time I looked at Xenie. All I could see was a burden I couldn't bear. I didn't know how to be a father, or a husband. It made me ashamed, and my shame made me lash out, pull away."

He stopped and stared at the fields of corn and alfalfa rushing past.

"That's how I understand it now. It wasn't clear to me then."

Adding to the shame was the fact that Brit had a marketable skill, her welding. She soon landed a job at a local body shop and a few months later, after getting certified, a higher paying gig in construction, in the Mission.

"Her dad was a walking time bomb, but he trained her well between explosions. Meanwhile, she was experimenting with scrap metal assemblages. 'My fancies,' she called them.

"I had nothing. Not even a real high school diploma. Brit's job paid for our apartment, our meals, our occasional night out. I was home babysitting . . . more like passed out in front of the TV. That just added to my feelings of inadequacy. As a father, a husband. I went back to drinking. Then weed, then . . . well, use your imagination.

"The apartment went to hell. Brit would come home to dishes piled in the sink, dirty laundry on the floor, the baby crying in dirty diapers. Sometimes I wouldn't even be there."

He sighed.

"So, we split. She made me sign a waiver of parental rights. I was totally wasted by then, but I had enough brain cells left to know what was best for my little girl. I hated the idea of doing to her what

my father did to me, but I wasn't fit to be a dad. I just wanted to crawl in a hole and die."

"But here you are," said the Op.

"Yes. Here I am."

"How and why?"

"Are you asking how I found my way out, or how I found my way here?"

"Let's start with the first."

Not long after Tommy and Brit left Atoka, his mother got clean. She and his step-dad started looking for them. Brit's parents were no help. Didn't know and didn't want to. But before he left, Tommy had confided their plans to an Indian friend of his—not Choctaw, but Omaha—and Tommy's parents contacted him. The friend had been a peripheral member of the gang Tommy ran with, but had grown out of it, graduated from high school, and now identified strongly with his Indian heritage. He'd stayed in touch with Tommy for a while, until he lost track of him. He gave Tommy's parents their son's last known address and eventually his step-dad managed to find him and get him into treatment. Tommy's friend flew to San Francisco and helped him complete it.

"Cold turkey. Can't get around it. Methadone just prolongs the dependency. It doesn't do anything, in the long run."

From there, Tommy got a steady job helping to install home entertainment centers. He began to move up in the firm, which was expanding operations in the Bay Area. He became a fleet supervisor, then assistant head and finally head of operations for the East Bay. Along the way he earned his BA in night school, with a major in computer programming. Now he'd saved enough, and attracted enough investors, to start his own company, "Home Suite Home," specializing in integrated home security, WIFI, and entertainment systems.

"AI—the tsunami of the future," he said expansively. "Need to get out your big board to ride that wave." A subtle transformation had come over Tommy as he said these words. He sounded, just then, like a corporate shill beguiled by his own sales pitch.

"So that's the 'how,'" said the Op. "Now the 'why'—why are you sitting here telling me all this?"

"I understand you're looking for Fletcher Kraft."

"And you know where he is?"

"I'm hoping you do, or will. And I want to help."

Just then *Die Moldau* interrupted the conversation. He didn't recognize the number and let it go to voicemail.

"Before I decide to let you, I want to know more."

There was a pause while Tommy put his thoughts together.

"I told you I swore never to contact Brit or Xenie after we split. But I did keep track of them. It wasn't hard. Google "Brittany Patterson" or "Xenia Patterson"—you're sure to get a few hits. I learned that Brit married Fletcher Kraft in 2009, in San Francisco, where he was living at the time. So his name joined my search list. I learned that they moved to Weston, Massachusetts, a year later, and that another daughter, Florence, was born there a year after that. For a long time, I found nothing about Brit being a sculptor. I assumed she'd put her 'fancies' aside to be a full-time mom. Then little by little, stuff appeared on the internet. I'd see something she made, like a lamp or a bronze vase, on a home furnishings site, maybe. Then, in galleries.

"Finally, a couple months ago, I saw a profile in the *Boston Globe*. She'd really made it. The article said her older daughter was about to graduate from high school. I Googled Xenie and found a recent photograph—she'd won some kind of writing award!

"I felt so proud. I looked at her and knew I had to talk to her. Before she left home for the big, wide world, she deserved to know who her real father was, that he wasn't the flaming disaster her mom had left years ago. He was someone she could be proud of, too. I found her on Facebook and took a chance."

For the last several weeks Xenie had kept Tommy up to date on domestic developments, including Kraft's mysterious disappearance.

"A minute after she saw you," he told the Op, "she was filling me in."

While the girls were upstairs, thought the Op, changing out of their uniforms.

"Xenie's how I knew you were headed to Fort Dodge. And from her description of you," he looked over at him, "I thought you wouldn't be hard to find."

Tommy was in San Francisco, tied up in business meetings, when the Op landed in Des Moines. So he asked his Indian friend for help. The friend had connections to the Omaha reservation in Monona County, about two hours away from Fort Dodge, and they had connections with neighboring tribes. Frontier Days was coming up and the Meskwaki and Sauk wanted to call people's attention to the First Nations who'd been dispossessed to make way for white settlers, like the ones who'd founded Fort Dodge.

"The man in the bolo tie, back there at the entrance to the museum? That was a friend of the friend I'm talking about," said Tommy.

The man who'd said something to the old woman and smiled.

"For a man your size, you sure know how to keep out of sight. They've been looking for you since you got here."

"Who's 'Henry Lott'?"

"White settler who murdered Chief Sidominadota and his family, which led to the Spirit Lake Massacre, which led to . . . well, it's a long story."

"Blackbird Bend'? Another massacre?"

"Law suit. Another long story. Same story, really."

"Ok. So let's get back to you. I still don't see how you can help me find Fletcher Kraft, or why you'd want to. And I sure don't see how I can help you one way or the other."

"I'm going to marry Brit Patterson," said Tommy.

The Op continued staring at the highway.

"All the more reason for me not to trust you," he said, finally.

"Why?"

"Because it's one of the best reasons I can think of for you wanting him dead. If he isn't dead already."

"And if he's not," replied Tommy, "it's one of the best reasons for me wanting to find him. Xenie told me Brit's considering filing for a no-fault divorce. Has been for a long time, long before Kraft disappeared."

"Couldn't that just be wishful thinking on her part? Her biological father pops up and suddenly she's fantasizing about him and her mom getting back together."

"Could be, but I'm betting on it being a reality. According to Xenie, Kraft never took much interest in any of them. He was there 'in body,' you know? but not 'in spirit.' Her words. I picture a TV dad going through the motions. Considerate, polite. But no real warmth. Like he'd bought himself a family when he married Brit and was watching to see if it worked."

What Tommy said brought to mind his first interview with Brit, at Continental. All about money, wasn't it? Kraft's estate, his life insurance. If there was any urgency or real concern, it was saved for Xenie and Flo, for their futures. And Brit's career. How did she put it? "I haven't found an affordable place with a studio." In Weston, one of Boston's most expensive suburbs. She'd said their two professional lives were separate. And the rest of their lives, too? How much "real warmth" had there been on either side? And the day he visited the house—the kids so indifferent, and their father missing for more than three weeks.

Mitzi seemed to have nailed it: "He loved the idea of family." The *idea*. But with that kind of expectation, the real thing could have been a disappointment. Mitzi may have been wrong about how much her ex had changed.

"Did Xenie have anything to say about Mitzi Leversohn, Brit's agent?"

"She's a snake," said Tommy. "According to Xenie, anyway."

Mitzi appeared a couple of years ago. Cold-called Brit from New York. All praise and admiration.

"It went to her head. And she was unhappy with her agent at the time, thought the woman wasn't doing enough. 'In no time' is too long for Brit. She felt she was stagnating. Along comes Mitzi and her

New York connections. Top-tier gallery exhibitions, and now this ICA show."

"Sounds like Mitzi knows her job."

"Yeah. And she knows Fletcher Kraft, too."

"She told me they were married."

"Quite a while ago."

"Also, how surprised she was to find he was Brit's husband."

"Not as surprised as Kraft when he found out she was Brit's new agent. There's still something between them. Xenie doesn't know what, but Kraft was definitely not happy to see her again."

"Could it have to do with Egypt?"

Tommy gave the Op a quizzical look.

"Why do you ask?"

He repeated what Brit had told him about the Egyptian tie and the photo in the ICA brochure. He added what he'd learned from Monica about the Aaberg conviction.

"I was wondering," said Tommy. "This Egypt thing, where it came from. No hint of it when we were going together. Back then, Brit was interested in Native American art—our culture, our traditions."

The word "our" struck the Op as incongruous, coming from a man wearing a short-sleeved polyester shirt, micro-fiber shorts, and Pumas.

"Maybe it helps explain why she was interested in me. Or maybe it was the other way around. I couldn't have cared less about my people until I met Brit. She was really into pre-Columbian civilizations, like the Aztecs. Zeroed in on their pyramids, and their human sacrifices. Nothing to do with Egypt."

"Until Mitzi came along."

"Right." He paused. "Now I've told you all I know. It's your turn."

Just then they heard the Op's mellifluous ring tone.

"I've gotta stop and take this," said the Op. If it had to do with the case, he couldn't let Tommy hear any of it. Not yet, anyway.

He pulled over and got out of the car. The sun was blistering. Heat rose in big, shimmering waves from the corn field next to him, all the way out to the horizon.

It was Bannon.

"Change of plans. You're headed to San Francisco."

Chapter 16

Several things had happened that morning, while he was touring the Frontier Museum. The most important was this: Mitzi had stopped by Kraft's P.O. Box to see if anything had come in over the weekend. She found a VISA credit card statement addressed to Kraft. Brit opened it with Mitzi present. It was a private account, unknown to Brit, showing purchases for the previous month, up to about a week ago. Among them were some items that made sense and several that didn't. The items that made sense included a Lyft ride, presumably from the airport, on the day Kraft landed in Fort Dodge, and a cash advance of \$500 later that afternoon. The items that didn't included a room reservation at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco for the dates of the business meeting Kraft was going to attend.

"Wouldn't Transcoastal have reserved the room for him?" asked Bannon. "Why use his own credit card—a secret one—and book it himself? Unless he's not going there for business meetings, but for some other reason?"

Even more puzzling were several recent, big-ticket online purchases from stores like Best Buy and Apple. Tens of thousands of dollars' worth of computer and high-end entertainment equipment. The purchase dates matched the four days following the date of Kraft's disappearance.

Where had this stuff been delivered? None of it had arrived in Weston, and Kraft must have used his regular home address to rent the box where the statement was sent, as well as to establish credit for the new card. Brit immediately returned to Continental, where Cal was already trying to determine where Kraft's text messages had been sent from. He finished just as she walked in the door. The dates of the text messages and the purchases overlapped. The overlap began the day after Chester Delamere had left Kraft, with dusk descending, alone in the squat.

"I'll text you the coordinates," said Bannon. "There's something odd about them. I think you'll see what I mean."

Because Brit was not a co-signer on the account, Bannon had to enlist the police for help. He contacted Brady, who contacted the BPD fraud unit, who managed to persuade VISA and the online retailers involved to provide more detailed information. It was an amazing feat of coordination, speed, and efficiency among bureaucratic behemoths, tantamount to three elephants pulling off a double-play at Fenway Park.

"The items were billed to Kraft, but sent to an address in Daly City, south of San Francisco. Take this down."

The Op opened his "Notebook" app. The addressee was someone named "Theodore Downing."

"Not 'Huff'?"

"Downing. Theodore."

Downing lived on Seacliff Avenue, in the Westlake district. Daly City police had already been notified. By the time the Op arrived, they expected to have Mr. Downing in Interrogation.

"Cancel your Boston flight and book a seat on the next one to Frisco. Phone the Daly City police the minute you have a chance. I told them you're coming."

"Business Class?"

"Or First, if necessary. Carte blanche for the rest of the case. Oh! And Shun called. Your suit is ready. Call him for a final fitting. Here's the number."

The Op was about to say goodbye when it occurred to him to ask if they'd obtained any video from the security camera at the ATM where Kraft had gotten his cash advance.

"It was Kraft," said Bannon.

Hanging up, the Op noticed he had voicemail. The unknown number that had interrupted his conversation with Tommy on the way to Des Moines turned out to be Brit's burner. She was just passing the number along after leaving her cell phone with Cal.

* * * * *

The AC in the car came as a blessed relief. He cranked it up full blast and eased back onto the highway.

"Developments?" asked Tommy.

"Sort of." He didn't know how much he could trust Xenie's father. If Tommy had already killed Kraft, he'd have left the body in plain sight and Brit an unmistakably eligible widow. There'd be no need to introduce himself like this. If murder was the goal, keeping Tommy close was better than driving him away. And if the new playing field was San Francisco, the man could be an asset.

The Op filled Tommy in, leaving out details like the bloody wallet and the murder of the Asian man in black. No need to bring in the Montroses either.

"The trail went cold in Fort Dodge, but the evidence I found suggests Kraft is dead. Until a second ago, I was on my way to Boston to break the news in person. Brit can apply for a declaration of death based on the evidence I found." He didn't give Tommy the odds of success. "But there's been a change of plans."

Again, he sketched the situation for Tommy's benefit, leaving out details like Theodore Downing's name and address.

"We don't know if it's Kraft sending this stuff or someone going by that name who's gotten hold of his card, or why it's being sent to this address in particular. The evidence I've found for Kraft's death is circumstantial, not conclusive. We have to follow out every lead, however slim. 'When you have eliminated . . . '"

"Where's the address?"

The Op didn't see any reason to keep the name of the town to himself, but he withheld the street and number.

"Daly City."

"I used to live there. I know my way around. Not just there, but the whole Bay Area. Let me be your chauffeur."

"Don't you have a start-up to get off the ground? Won't that tie you up?"

"It can wait. This is more important. If the case isn't wrapped up in another day or two, I'll give you a driver and a car until it is."

"Let me think about it," said the Op. Keep him close? How about within arm's reach?

"Full size, SUV, Hummer, I've got what you need, bro" added Tommy. He was back in sales mode.

They passed the exit for Ankeny, a suburb of Des Moines.

"Let me ask you something," said the Op. "You ever hear of someone named 'Huff'? First initial 'W'?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just answer the question, please."

Tommy answered without hesitation. "There was a Bay Area sculptor named 'Huff' that Brit was obsessed with when we were living together. William Huff. He died years ago, before we got there, but he was very active, even famous—locally, at least. He specialized in Native American subjects, and drawings of prehistoric animals—you know, mammoths, saber-toothed tigers."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

"Sure, being who I am." Again, the incongruity pushed itself forward. "But I was introduced to him—I mean, his work—by Brit. I remember her getting me to come with her on a trip to Fairfield, in Solano County, with Xenie in one of those baby backpacks? to see something of his. Chief Solano. Big, monumental bronze statue right in front of the County Events Center. She was always making trips to see Huff's work. Berkeley had his drawings and sculptures on display in the Paleontology Department. Or maybe it was Anthropology."

"Sounds like it could be both," said the Op. "Brit told me the name was familiar, but she couldn't recall from where."

"That's funny," said Tommy. "It was practically all she talked about."

Yeah? And so what? the Op asked himself. What could Kraft know about William Huff? Nothing. But Brit? Could she have forgotten that much, even with almost twenty years to do it in?

"'Course," Tommy continued, "Sem-Yeto—that was Solano's real name—is controversial these days. He was famous for helping

the Spanish 'subdue' the indigenous population." Tommy put air-quotes around "subdue."

They found a gas station near the airport and the Op got out to fill the tank. By the time he slid back into the driver's seat, he'd made his decision.

"Let's exchange phone numbers. I assume you're headed back to San Francisco?"

Tommy nodded. "I'll take a Lyft or Uber back to Fort Dodge, pick up my things, and leave from there."

"I'll call you tomorrow. You're on probation."

"And so are you."

The Op paused before shifting into Drive. Tommy continued.

"I took a big risk sharing all this information. Brit doesn't know I plan to marry her, or even that I've been in touch with Xenie. I'm counting on you to keep it that way."

The Op thought about it. "Ok. Unless and until I think it's in her interest to know."

"And your secrets are safe with me unless and until that time comes," said Tommy.

After dropping off the Malibu, the Op used his phone to cancel his flight to Boston and re-book for San Francisco, business or first class. The soonest and quickest he could manage, given the time and class constraints, was a United flight arriving at 8:49 that night via Denver. He called the Daly City Police Department to make sure they would have Downing in custody by then, and that it would be all right to drop in that evening. They said they'd keep a light on.

He booked the United flight and went through security. Once past the conveyor belt, he checked "Departures" for the flight he'd just cancelled and headed in that direction.

The flight was delayed, leaving now at 3:30. Plenty of time. He scanned the area for familiar faces and found one. It was the MAGA man who'd stood behind him in the check-in line at Days

Inn. His female companion wasn't with him, but she could be in the rest room or somewhere else nearby. No time to look. Best to assume.

MAGA Man wasn't planning to storm the Capitol today. He stood leaning against the wall at the back of the early boarding scrum wearing pressed tan slacks and a mint-green sport shirt that seemed to take several pounds off his midriff. His beard and hair were still the right shade of brown. His fashion choices gave no indication of his political affiliation.

He was wearing ear buds, staring into space and gently nodding in time to the beat in his head. Ten seconds passed before he glanced around the gate area, trying not to let his eyes linger on the Op. He almost succeeded.

In the next instant, the Op caught sight of a priest sitting at the end of a row, near the windows. He was bald and wore a high clerical collar, and looked like the nearest thing to Mr. Olympia in the history of the Apostolic Succession. He had drawn the Op's attention by re-opening his breviary (the several different-colored place-keeper ribbons gave it away--SFO's Catholic curriculum had been good for something after all) just as the Op's gaze turned in his direction.

The Op dragged his roll-aboard in the direction of the MAGA Man, ostensibly heading for a drinking fountain. As he drew within hearing range he looked down at his suit jacket, reached in, pulled out his phone and peered at it, as though it had just vibrated. He began punching at it with his thumb and then held it up to his ear. MAGA man took out his ear buds. After a second or two, the Op's Voicemail robot came online.

"Hi," said the Op, and paused. The ensuing one-sided conversation went like this:

"Can you hear me?"

He raised his voice almost to a shout.

"How about now?"

Pause.

"I'm about to board."

Pause.

"San Francisco?"

Pause.

"Yeah."

Pause.

"Yeah. I guess it could be him."

Pause.

"Ok. Do you have one in mind?"

Pause.

"Wait. United 2644 . . ."

Short pause.

"Oh, right, text it."

Pause.

"The Fairmont. Got it."

Pause.

"Ok. I'll let you know."

He hung up on Ms. Voicemail ("Sorry, I didn't get that. Please enter your passcode . . .") and called Mr. Nevis. He told him about the change of itinerary and gave him the flight and hotel information.

The Op resumed his walk to the drinking fountain, took a drink, then turned and waited. When he saw the priest pull out his cell phone, he entered the men's room next door.

There he spent five minutes examining the sinks and toilet bowls and filling in the online customer satisfaction form. No one else entered. When he returned to the gate area boarding had yet to commence, but the priest and the MAGA man were gone.

PART III: SAN FRANCISCO

Monday, June 5--Saturday June 10, 2023

Chapter 17

On the leg to Denver he dutifully ate the chicken marsala that was set in front of him, but without enthusiasm, skipping the sides and the desert. He didn't crave more. The man next to him was asleep with his face to the window when the food came. The Op let him sleep and reviewed the afternoon's developments between bites.

Back in Des Moines, waiting to board UA 2644, he had entered Bannon's cell tower coordinates on a Google map. The first two text messages had come from Fort Dodge, one on the evening of the day Kraft disappeared and the other on the evening of the next. The last three, spread over the following three days, were sent from Lehigh, Fraser, and Madrid. ("MA-drid," he said out loud.) After that, nothing. Whoever sent them seemed to be traveling in the direction of Des Moines.

He saw what was odd about the pattern, whether the sender was driving or, improbable as it seemed ("when you have eliminated . . ."), walking. Anyone driving directly to Des Moines, or anyone hitching a ride with someone driving there, would have taken the same route the Op had back to Des Moines: the south-bound Interstate east of Fort Dodge, running straight as an arrow down to the state capital. The thick blue line on the map touching the three intermediate towns was a zig-zag on surface roads that began by heading in the opposite direction, west out of Fort Dodge, and then south and southeast. He clicked the icon of the walking man in the map's legend field, which made the route look even crazier, although it was still possible to complete it in the time required to make the last call from Madrid. He eliminated the three towns from the route and found himself looking at a beeline heading south, starting from west of Fort Dodge along what was called the Racoon River Valley Trail—a paved bike-trail cutting through cornfields.

Delamere had said that Kraft was on foot when he met him, heading west out of town and hobbled by blisters from his new boots. Had Delamere seen him actually sticking his thumb out, or just assumed he was hitch-hiking? No matter. Hitch-hiking or on

foot, or riding a stolen bike, stopping in Lehigh, Fraser, and Madrid made no sense if the destination was Des Moines. And would the blisters have healed enough in just two days to make it feasible to try either of the first two options again?

He zoomed in on Lehigh and noticed something that told him whoever had texted those messages hadn't walked and they hadn't hitched a ride out of Fort Dodge. If Kraft had been killed and his body thrown in the river, said Cowper, it would have been found by now. "Stolen . . . ?" he asked himself, aloud. Examining the route further south, he felt more certain than ever. He texted Cowper, presuming on her good mood: "Stolen prop rpts for day K disap + 2 nxt?"

By now the gate area had filled up. So far, there was no sign of Mr. MAGA or "Father" Markovic and he hadn't expected there to be. They now knew where he'd be staying and they'd want to keep out of sight as much as possible. They'd take a later flight.

He called Brit.

He told her he was on his way to San Francisco and why, although he assumed she could guess. He told her everything he knew, leaving out his speculations and hunches but including his expectation that, if the blood on the wallet turned out to be Kraft's, she could apply for a declaration of death with some chance of success. Unless, that is, Theodore Downing gave any reason to believe her husband was alive.

The Op left Tommy Littlejohn and Xenie out of his account, at least for now. He felt bad about aiding and abetting what amounted to domestic espionage, with Brit's oldest daughter enlisted as mole, but he'd given Tommy his word and the information coming in could prove useful. Brit was not off the hook as a possible suspect in her husband's disappearance, and there was still Meriam Aaberg to be reckoned with.

Boarding was announced. Before getting to his feet, he dialed the number Bannon had given him for Mr. Shun. No answer.

The flight attendant came to take his tray. The man next to him was snoring now, face to the window, the inadequacy of his comb-over painfully obvious. It occurred to the Op that this might be a good time to listen to the voice message Cowper had left just after he'd scanned his boarding pass. Seeing who the call was from, he had let it go to voicemail. He suspected the reason for the call. It was too soon for her to have completed a check on stolen property records or received a DNA report on the bloody wallet. Best to call back when he changed flights in Denver. Maybe even wait until San Francisco. Tell her his phone was switched to airplane mode when she called.

The Op hit the Voicemail icon. What he heard was as cold and sharp and quiet as an ice cream headache.

"I hope you're listening to this before you leave Fort Dodge. Our vic checked into the Days Inn the same day you did. Security cams show he left his room, dressed in black, that night. The night he was killed. And guess where he went? To your room. I want you to call me as soon as you hear this." There was silence for a second or two. "Understand? Call. Me. The details get a shitload more interesting."

"Shitload" meant she was angry, if you couldn't guess from her tone of voice.

Well, who could blame her? He'd make it right. From a safe distance. He could picture the Fort Dodge forensics team swarming over his room, finding the bugs. He was a person of interest in a homicide, and Cowper was going to grant him the cold courtesy of showing up at the Law Enforcement Center unaccompanied by police officers.

Now he could add the Asian man to the two others he knew had been tailing him. Or were there three? Where was Mrs. MAGA? He wondered if the Asian man would be replaced, and if so, how soon. And for that matter, how? How would the guy's handlers know where the Op was headed?

Wait and see, he told himself. Wait and see.

A half-hour later, they were landing in Denver. The snoring man sat up and smiled at the Op. He had a Charlie Chaplain mustache that looked painted on.

In the waiting area for his connecting flight, he suddenly thought to call Louisa. He was shocked and a little concerned by his forgetfulness, on several levels.

First, remembering was almost as important in his line of work as observing and making inferences. Maybe more important, since without the ability to remember neither of the other two had any traction.

Second, Louisa was someone to keep an eye on. He couldn't quite bring himself to chalk up the similarities between them to mere chance. He was dining with the Montroses when his room at the Days Inn was broken into, for the second time. (According to Cowper, by the Asian man.) What better way to ensure the Op's absence?

The third reason for his shock and concern at forgetting to call was that he cared for Louisa. She was the perfect combination of beauty (for her weight class), intelligence, and helplessness that anyone trying to slip past his defenses would concoct. He was self-aware enough to know that her deference to her father's neediness, to the man's fear of being left alone, played a part in what made her attractive. Louisa was the princess locked in the tower of her own filial affection, waiting to be rescued from the jealous king by the valiant son he never had. Nothing in his experience with girls or women had prepared him for what he was feeling now. Having only read about being in love, he had to assess his own emotions vicariously, as though he were a character in a book.

Well, if she *was* playing him for a sucker, he might as well make sure she knew where to find him, like everyone else.

She picked up on the first ring.

"You're here!" she said, sounding as though he'd been lost at sea.

"Denver. On my way to San Francisco. I've been re-routed to follow a new lead."

"You won't believe this—I mean, I'm afraid you won't believe that it's just a coincidence—but so have I. Not San Francisco, but, like, close enough--San Jose."

The detour she'd told him about hadn't been cancelled, just delayed. She'd be leaving Boston first thing in the morning.

"I was hoping you'd be home in time for us to meet before I left," she said. "But this is almost as good!"

"Call me when you arrive," he said. "I'll be at the Fairmont." Keep them close.

He recognized Snoring Man ahead of him in the business class queue but thought nothing of it until, approaching his row, he found the man sitting, again, in the window seat. He was dismayed, and a little suspicious. Snoring Man raised his eyebrows in recognition. The Op ignored him. After stowing his bag in the overhead, he eased into the aisle seat.

"You were sitting next to me on the flight from Des Moines, weren't you?" Snoring Man asked. Not waiting for the Op's reply, he continued. "My name is Slocum, Harry Slocum. Pleased to meet you." Mr. Slocum nodded as he spoke, without extending his hand. His Chaplainesque mustache twitched as he smiled.

The Op nodded back, reluctantly, and then realized that the likelihood this man could have known who would be sitting next to him in seat 2B was slim. Even so, Mr. Slocum was clearly chatty when awake, and the Op wanted to relax for a few minutes with Lichess.

He'd reviewed The Fletch Kraft Affair up, down, and sideways on the first leg of the flight and, with the call to Louisa, had finished contacting everyone who needed to be contacted before he moved

on to the West Coast phase. He'd had his dinner (and a snack in the Denver airport) and was now in waiting mode. He opened his iPad and set the app for solitary play. Mr. Slocum took the hint and dug a Penguin edition of some big fat novel out of the carry-on in front of his feet. (The Op recognized the broad, orange spine.) It was a reassuring sight.

When the announcement came to put away all electronic devices, the Op dutifully complied. Mr. Slocum lowered his book.

"Excuse me," he said, leaning over as the plane taxied to the runway. "I couldn't help but notice that you were working on a pawn chain just now."

In no time, they were discussing strategies. The Op confessed to his humiliating engagements with turingm.

"I see why turingm is giving you problems," said Mr. Slocum. "He—or is it 'she'? 'they'? Sorry, I'm not up to speed on gender nomenclature these days."

"Me, neither."

Mr. Slocum looked surprised.

"Well," he continued, "let's go with 'he,' then. I'd say turingm has you figured out, doesn't he?"

"How is that possible?" asked the Op. "I never played him before and I was on the ropes from the first game."

"These days, you can never be sure how much, or just what, someone knows about you. turingm could have hacked into your Lichess game history before ever taking you on. Is there one?"

He shrugged. "I guess."

"For that matter, how do you know he's not a ChessBot, or using one?"

"When you register, you have to agree . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Slocum. "Honor codes. *Flos Duellatorum* and all that. How well have they ever worked? In eighteenth century Italy they had an honor code, too. For the *duello*. Oh, my!" He laughed as he spoke. "Choice of weapons, time and place, dropping the hankie. All proper and above board. Unless you were *déclassé* or base born. In that case, if you happened to rub *il Conte* the

wrong way—say, by gazing a bit too long at the lovely *Contessa*—it would demean His Eminence to challenge you. He would never stoop so low, never dirty his hands. Hired assassins would handle it, discreetly."

And the Contessa as well? The Op thought of Robert Browning's Ferrara: "I choose never to stoop."

By now they were cruising at 20,000 feet. Behind Mr. Slocum's head he could see nothing but blue sky.

"I never play online anymore," said Mr. Slocum. "Not just because of AI or the hacking threat. You can learn a lot from faces."

He reached down and drew a slim, polished wooden box from his carry-on.

"I'm good at reading tells," he continued. "Spent a lot of time at it."

The box had two silver hinges and was about the size and thickness of a laptop or a quarto. Light and dark squares of what looked like oak and cherry covered both sides. Inside was a complete set of chess pieces and a miniature timer of polished silver.

"Let's work on those pawn chains," said Mr. Slocum, as he began removing the pieces and placing them in a mint-condition barf bag he drew from the mesh pocket in front of him. ("Keeps them from rolling away while I set up," he explained.) Plugging each piece into its allotted square, he reviewed the Op's tactics.

"You've got an interesting idea, using your knights' leaping abilities, your bishop's penetration, to exploit your opponent's lack of development. But that sort of flanking maneuver can easily turn into a death spiral. Here, try it with me."

Because the configuration of the drop-down tables would allow only one player to assume a natural orientation to the field of combat, they agreed to share a spectatorial position "on the sidelines," with the board's hinges perpendicular to their line of sight.

"This will handicap us both to the same extent," said Mr. Slocum. "And it might reveal some unexpected opportunities."

Mr. Slocum took Black.

After two of three rapid starts that left the Op in jeopardy, Mr. Slocum asked, "Why do you want to castle so soon?"

"Shouldn't it be as early as possible, while I have a move to spare?"

"And toss one of your most dangerous pieces into his own dungeon? You're White, so you have the move advantage. Why waste it on such a cowardly maneuver—making your king scurry away like a mouse to his hole and hide behind a big, burly elephant—when you can keep the momentum going forward?"

Mr. Slocum took White to demonstrate.

In no time, the Op had to concede.

In the next pause between play, as Mr. Slocum set up the board after defeating the Op still again, he began quoting Steinitz, then stopped. "You know Wilhelm Stienitz?"

Did he know Steinitz! First world champion. "Eight years running," said the Op, just to maintain his dignity.

"Steinitz once said he played the king 'all over the board.' Made him fight, not twiddle his thumbs. He even criticized Morphy—Morphy!—for castling too soon."

Snoring Man's mustache twitched repeatedly. He was showing extraordinary animation.

When the board was set, Mr. Slocum said, "Now you play White. I'll castle once my pawn chain is set, to lose my move advantage. I want you to hold off castling as long as possible. Move your king forward when you get the chance."

It worked, up to a point. After two more attempts the Op was getting the hang of it, but he chose to concede before play was far advanced. He wanted to practice what he'd learned before the flight ended.

For the next game, he asked for Black. Mr. Slocum beamed. Was he proud of the Op? Or just cocksure?

They played to a draw.

"Congratulations!" said Mr. Slocum, and held out his hand. The Op shook it, with a deep feeling of gratitude and pride he'd rarely experienced.

The PA came on to announce their approach to San Francisco.

As he put the board away, Mr. Slocum thanked him. "I saw things I'd never seen before, watching the action sideways."

"Did you notice any tells?" asked the Op

"Only one. Sometimes you glanced over at me just before you reached for a piece. It was no more than an eyelid flicker, but it said you were up to something."

"That's what I meant it to say."

"And that's the tell. It never amounted to anything."

The Op knew better than to try standing up when the docking beep sounded. As they waited for a space to clear, Mr. Slocum said, "Remember to let your king help his queen, unless he's about to get surrounded with no place to go. She's the most powerful piece on the board, but still vulnerable. With him beside her, or even lurking, she's all but invincible. Don't lock him up in the tower."

Chapter 18

Once off the plane, he stepped aside to get Mr. Slocum's phone number. He was eager to stay in touch. Mr. Slocum never emerged from the security door. Puzzled and disappointed, he headed for the Hertz desk, where Bannon had already reserved his Cadillac XTS. It was waiting for him in the parking lot, keys on the driver's seat.

Transcoastal was paying large.

On his way to the station, he put his phone on speaker and called the Daly City Police to let them know he was on his way. Then he dialed Cowper, bracing himself. When she came on the line, however, she seemed as friendly and accommodating as when they'd last met. Talk about hot and cold! He explained what had taken him so abruptly to San Francisco. She told him there was no need to rush back. He could stop over on his return to Boston.

Then she filled him in.

"The vic was registered under the name of Isaac Park, American citizen, living in the Boston area. His business cards told us he was a dealership scout for KIA, presumably visiting Fort Dodge for that purpose. He entered your room Saturday night, and when he came out it wasn't under his own power."

After watching Park leave his room and enter the Op's on the security cameras, Cowper had asked to see all the footage of the hallway where the Op had been staying.

"Busy as a Super Bowl urinal at halftime."

Three people other than the Op had entered his room before the dead man's final visit. A man dressed like janitorial staff and pushing a cart of supplies had let himself in while the Op was talking with Cowper the afternoon he arrived. The man emerged a half hour later. The second entry occurred about an hour after that—perhaps during the visit to Light of the World. This was Park himself.

The Op flushed with embarrassment. The first break-in had moved the paper clip tell, but he hadn't been able to reset it before the second. He wasn't surprised that security hadn't caught his visitors in the act. Monitors were often left unattended or unwatched, and the tapes were consulted only if some crime or disaster—a reported burglary, a killing, a fire—warranted it. Besides, security didn't know who was staying where, and a pass card lock could be jimmied in seconds without drawing attention to the perp.

"Did you get a good look at the janitor?"

"He was white, wearing a long-billed cap. Average height, weight. A little paunchy."

MAGA Man?

The third entry occurred that evening, while the Op was eating with the Montroses.

"This was a Schwarzenegger. Built for fighting. All in black. Baseball cap, turtleneck."

Father Marcovic, defrocked.

"He wasn't in there more than a couple of minutes when Park shows up. This is where we started. The vic lets himself in. Next thing, out come the two of them, Turtleneck holding Park's arm around his shoulders, propping him up, roaring drunk—or pretending to be. Park was passed out and his head was at a funny angle."

The Op's room was now a crime scene behind an "X" of yellow tape.

"Did you *know* your room was bugged? Like cockroaches." Cowper's emphasis on the word "know" instead of "bugged" suggested she thought he did. It also suggested she knew more about what the Op was up to than he knew himself. That might explain why she was being so nicey-nicey and not demanding he turn around and hop the next flight to Fort Dodge.

"I appreciate your patience," he said.

"I trust you. Besides, a subpoena under the Uniform Act would be paperwork hell. I'll give you forty-eight hours."

"I'll call you as soon as I know I'm done here. I'll explain everything when we see each other."

"Yes, you will," said Detective Sergeant Cowper in the pleasantest tone imaginable.

Before getting out of his car at the Daly City Police station, the Op thought to try Mr. Shun again. Get this bit of housekeeping out of the way.

"Shun!" said Mr. Shun. He sounded like a drill sergeant barking at a platoon of new recruits.

The Op explained his situation. "And the suit might need more taking in than expected," he added, reflecting on his recent loss of appetite. He pulled tentatively at his sagging waistband.

"You say you *wey-ah*?" asked Mr. Shun, as if the Op were calling from the moon.

"San Francisco."

"Nee-ah Chinatown? Have fambly in Chinatown."

The Op hesitated. He didn't see the point of the question. Was he supposed to get in touch with Mr. Shun's relatives? Then it occurred to him.

"The Fairmont. Is that nearby?"

"No. Too fah."

Mr. Shun didn't explain too far for what.

Theodore Downing was a small, wiry, and at the moment very nervous young man, perhaps in his late 20s. He had curly brown hair and blue eyes that would have been guileless except for the expression of wariness on his freckled face. He wore a Burning Man T-shirt and blue jeans. A pair of Keds peeked out from under the table.

The Op assumed that Downing would have called his lawyer by now, but charges hadn't been brought. Instead, he'd called his

fiancée. She was in Bakersfield visiting her mom and dad. She'd be there any minute.

It was four hours since Downing had been picked up. The cops had gone by the book: obtained a warrant, staked out the house, waited for the owner to show, and searched the premises. Then they politely asked Downing to accompany them to the station for questioning. "We found his work address easily enough," said Lieutenant Stratton, a tall Black man with the physique of a Kenyan long-distance runner. "He's an IT research assistant at Stanford Labs. We didn't want to embarrass him in front of his co-workers if this didn't pan out."

But it had. The garage of Downing's Seacliff home was stacked with boxes of brand new computers, peripherals, and home entertainment equipment, all with shipping labels addressed to "Theodore Downing." Several were open. The police checked the items against the list they received from the BPD fraud unit. Everything matched.

The Daly City Police hadn't yet mentioned Fletcher Kraft. They were moving cautiously, not bearing down, putting Downing at ease, or trying to. They didn't want him lawyering up too soon. Or going home before his fiancée arrived. She could be involved—or why call her?

They introduced the Op as "a person who might help us shed some light on this situation," and asked Downing to tell his story again, from the beginning. It went like this:

About three weeks ago boxes addressed to "Theodore Downing" began to appear at his home. They seemed to be legitimate shipments, but just to be sure he opened a few. He saw that they contained expensive electronics worth, in his estimation, tens of thousands of dollars. A few days before they started arriving, he'd received a text message from someone calling themselves "Walter Neff."

"Not 'Huff'?" asked the Op.

"No. 'Neff,'" said Downing. "Walter Neff."

Neff said he'd just realized he'd sent the shipments to the wrong address and asked Downing to hold onto them until he could pick them up. Said he'd pay him, make it worth the trouble.

"How much?" asked the Op.

"A thousand dollars. In cash," said Downing. Neff would text him again with the instructions. "Since then, I haven't heard a thing."

"The message is there," Stratton interjected. "On his phone."

"Date?" asked the Op.

It was the morning after Delamere had left Kraft in the squat.

The Op asked for the phone number of origin. It was Kraft's.

"Have you tried calling back?"

Downing shook his head.

"That's a long time to leave valuable items in a stranger's garage," said the Op, "even with a thousand dollar insurance policy. It never occurred to you that these might be stolen goods? That you might be aiding and abetting Mr. Neff in a felony if you did what he asked?"

Downing opened his eyes wide and shook his head again.

"Do you know a man named Fletcher Kraft?"

Downing seemed to recognize the name. "Isn't he . . . ?"

Just then Stratton's phone buzzed. He listened and said, "Send her in."

The door opened and a young woman appeared.

"Amy," said Downing. "Thank God!"

"Todd!" said Amy. She rushed forward, then stopped and looked around the room. "What have you told them?"

Her voice was familiar.

"Good evening, Ms. Briscoe," said the Op.

Amy Briscoe was not only Todd Downing's fiancée. She was also a lawyer—a lawyer who was very surprised to see the Op standing next to her.

"Who are you?" she asked, taking him in from top to toe and side to side. His clothing added to her perplexity. He was still dressed in the voluminous slacks and sport shirt he'd worn to the Frontier Museum.

"We talked on the phone," said the Op. "I'm the detective who called to ask about your conversation with Fletcher Kraft at the Fort Dodge airport."

She turned to Stratton and demanded to be left alone with her client.

"Are you representing him?" asked Stratton.

"Yes," said Amy.

"Wait a second," said the Op. "This woman is one of the last people to lay eyes on Fletcher Kraft the day he disappeared."

Amy took a heartbeat or two to respond. The Op imagined a maze of gears whirring rapidly inside her head while the tight coil of a mainspring began, slowly, to unwind. He could tell she was weighing, among other things, the legal jeopardy in which she'd be placing both Downing and herself if she insisted on being his lawyer in a case where she had connections to a major player.

"No," she said to Stratton, "I'm not representing him. He doesn't need any representation. He hasn't committed any crime."

Then she turned to her fiancé. "Let me handle this."

She told them how the Op had called to ask about her encounter with Kraft, whose name she hadn't known up to that point. She was with her fiancé at the time and told him what the call was about, mentioning Kraft's name.

"Kraft must have gotten Todd's address when he was scrolling through my contacts," she concluded. "I thought he was confused, looking for his wife's number."

"Do you have Todd listed as 'Theodore'?" asked the Op.

"Both," said Amy. "But why? Why would Mr. Kraft want to send this stuff to Todd? And how could he memorize the address so fast?"

"Photographic memory?" said the Op.

"But he must have had a purpose in mind."

"So you advised your fiancé to sit tight and give this Walter Neff a chance to make good on his offer," said Stratton, "not knowing it was Kraft?"

"We can't be sure, absolutely, that it is Kraft," said the Op.

"Who else could it be?" demanded Stratton. "Who else would know Downing's name and address *and* have access to Kraft's account?"

"If Kraft added them to his contacts, anyone who got into his phone." The Op saw the improbabilities of its being anyone other than Kraft multiplying asymptotically toward the impossible.

"And what are the chances this Walter Neff, or whoever it was that got into Kraft's phone, would just land on Theodore Downing as the fall guy for their scheme?" asked Stratton. "'Theodore (Todd) Downing,' the only name with any connection to Amy Briscoe, who sat next to Kraft on the plane as it was going down?"

Stratton was losing patience with the Op and wanted to get back to interrogating their witnesses, not each other. "I see two people," he continued, "who know Theodore Downing's name and address perfectly well."

The room was silent. Downing looked panic-stricken. He glanced at Amy.

"You have not a shred of concrete evidence to back up that insinuation," she said. Her voice was as low and featureless as a salt flat.

Stratton shrugged. "Maybe not. But I have to consider it." He changed the subject to lower the temperature. He didn't want Todd and Amy to bolt before he was through. "How long were you going to wait to hear from Neff?"

"I thought a month would be long enough, and only fair," said Amy. "Half Todd's garage is unusable, after all. If Neff didn't show, we'd try to sell the equipment ourselves, on eBay, and get what we could. Maybe a lot more than a thousand dollars. We have a wedding coming up."

Weddings, thought the Op. Everywhere.

"You weren't afraid of this 'Mr. Neff' coming after you when he discovered you'd sold his high-end purchases?" asked Stratton. "He might have links to organized crime, dope smugglers trying to launder money, that kind of thing."

"Please." Amy looked offended. "Laundering money through a nickel and dime operation like this? I work for a non-profit that specializes in immigration and human trafficking. I know what a cartel smells like."

"Was that also why you didn't worry about the possibility of aiding and abetting a criminal enterprise?" asked the Op, repeating the question he'd asked Downing.

"No. I wasn't worried because keeping unsolicited merchandise is not a crime. As I'm sure you know."

The Op didn't know, and was now sorry he'd asked.

"I didn't have a clue what Neff was up to," said Amy, "or even if he was up to anything at all. But I didn't care. Here was money, and all we had to do was wait." She looked at the Op. "And I sure didn't know the shipments came from Fletcher Kraft."

"Again," said the Op, "we don't know for certain if Kraft sent them. He's still missing. But if you're telling us the truth, it's looking more and more as if he did, for some reason. We should wait at least a few more days to see if he shows up, whether it's under his own name or as Walter Neff."

"The stuff goes on eBay first thing tomorrow," said Amy.

"I wouldn't post it if I were you," said Stratton. "It's evidence in an ongoing missing person investigation. We'll be at Mr. Downing's home bright and early to pick it up."

"It's late," said Amy. "We're leaving. Charge us or wish us a good night." She took Downing's hand and together they left the room.

"We'll see you in the morning," Stratton called after them. "And stay in town. We might have more questions."

Chapter 19

He wasn't surprised to see Ms. Wong having breakfast across from him at the Laurel Court Restaurant, just off the lobby. He'd been expecting her.

He hadn't been surprised last night, either, when an attractive woman with Asian features, perhaps in her 30s, followed him into the elevator just as he was about to ascend to his room on the eighth floor of the Fairmont Hotel. It was close to midnight and the high-ceilinged reception area was almost deserted. She was wearing the same beige business suit then, and had been sitting in an armchair not far from the desk, just beyond two enormous Corinthian columns, reading a newspaper as he checked in.

She watched him press button number eight and said, "Thank you," as though it were her floor, too. His gigantic frame made it all but impossible for her to reach it for herself, even if she'd wanted to.

He introduced himself.

The woman smiled and nodded slightly. "I'm Ms. Wong, Ms. Sandra Wong," she said. "Pleased to meet you." Her American accent was flawless—so flawless it was hard to place.

The Op let two more floors go by before saying, "Perhaps you could help me, Ms. Wong." He held up the tiny envelope holding his key card. "I'm dyslexic so I sometimes make mistakes. I forgot to ask the desk clerk to tell me my room number. Does this say '814'?"

"Yes," she said. "Would you like me to show you where it is?"

"Oh, I couldn't . . . "

"To match it?"

He hesitated.

"I insist."

Ms. Wong accompanied him out of the elevator and down the hall to the right. He heard the doors slide shut behind them.

She stopped at his room and they nodded to each other in synchrony.

"Thank you."

"Not at all." She smiled.

Before unlocking his door, he watched her walk away in the direction of the elevator. He listened and heard the "ding," then the doors opening.

Eight wasn't her floor after all.

And here she was again, at breakfast. Despite his late bedtime, the two-hour time difference had him up early—it was now just after 7 am—and the restaurant was still sparsely populated. The window panes were gray blanks of fog. She caught sight of him over the top of her newspaper and gave a little smile and a wave. He smiled and waved back. She returned to her reading.

Over his omelet, sausage, home fries, fruit salad, pancakes, and coffee, the Op planned his day. (He was glad he'd opted for the buffet. Otherwise Ms. Wong might have noticed him reading the menu without difficulty.)

After a few bites, he put down his fork to read the notifications on his home screen. They told him he'd received three text messages that morning. Swiping up the screen to unlock it, he saw that he'd left his Lichess app open and thought of Mr. Slocum, the Snoring Man. His face was a dim memory except for the mustache that lingered there, like the smile of the Cheshire Cat. He closed the chess app and opened "Messages." There were two and they'd arrived about an hour ago, within 15 minutes of each other.

The first was from Brit Patterson—4:24 am EDT: "wtf? Call me!"

Seeing that the next one was from Tommy Littlejohn, he thought it best to open it before following Brit's orders.

"Brit found out. Call me."

Just as he was about to return Tommy's call, a third text appeared. It was from Bannon. "Help is on the way. Call me."

He started with Bannon.

The "help" was in the form of an operative from Continental's Los Angeles branch named Raoul Gutiérrez.

"I don't need any help," said the Op.

"That's what I told the Old Man," said Bannon. "He said it wasn't his call. Maybe Transcoastal went over his head. Or HQ may be losing faith in him. There are rumors that the Boston branch is closing. At any rate, he hasn't lost faith in you."

"I guess I can find the guy something to do. But just to be clear—I'm in charge. He reports only to me, absolutely no one else, and I report to you and Nevis."

"That's my understanding. And the Old Man's. What Gutierrez thinks, you'll soon find out. He'll call you when he gets there. Probably this afternoon."

He phoned Tommy next. More bad news.

Brit had gotten up earlier than usual this morning—just before 4 am, Xenie's usual check-in time with Tommy—and had overheard her talking in her room. It took only minutes to figure out what was going on. She entered and confronted her daughter. Then she and Tommy had a "chat."

"Come to my house and we'll discuss what to do next," said Tommy. His voice was calm, but peremptory. "I'll send my driver."

"Did you tell her about us?"

"Yes. It seemed best."

For you, thought the Op.

"She was furious, of course. But I talked her down."

"She texted me," replied the Op. "Her exact words were, 'What the fuck?'"

"I'm sorry," said Tommy, unapologetically. "I guess you've got your work cut out for you."

"You've broken your word and compromised my client's trust in me. Which means you've made my work harder—made it harder to help you both."

"My driver will be there in fifteen minutes."

"I'll drive myself. Give me the address." He might still have a use for Tommy, but would have to keep him at arm's length after all.

Last, he called Brit.

"What the fuck?"

The voice on the other end sounded speculative, not angry. Maybe Tommy Littlejohn was as good a salesman as he pretended to be.

She'd been angry, yes, at first—with Xenie, with Tommy—but also curious. She'd often wondered what had happened to her old boyfriend, how things might have turned out if she'd stayed with him. She wanted to know, but didn't want to know. She'd closed that door and moved on, and Xenie had never expressed much interest in opening it. Now everything was changed. Since hiring the Op, Brit had begun to look at her current situation as an opportunity, full of possibilities, and less as a problem. Tommy was now among the possibilities.

The Op's duplicity was another matter.

"How could you have kept this from me?" she demanded.

"I've known it less than twenty-four hours."

"We've talked since then."

Having no rejoinder that Brit would find acceptable, he apologized.

"But there are things you've kept from me, too, things I learned from Tommy. Things that might be relevant to solving this case."

"Like what? My shit-ass life in Atoka? Scraping by with my daughter and her stoner dad in Frisco?"

"Is that where you met your husband?"

"How is that relevant?"

"It's where I am now. It's where someone using your husband's credit card sent a truckload of expensive electronics a couple of weeks ago. Is it also where Fletcher Kraft grew up?"

She stopped to consider the question. "I don't know for sure," she said. "We never talked about his childhood, his family, where he was from. He told me he was an only child, and that his parents were dead. No near relations."

"The original Nowhere Man."

"I had a hunch, though, once we moved to Boston. That's when I recognized his accent."

"It was a Boston accent?"

"Faint, but distinct. You know, just a whiff of "I pahked the cah
.. "?

"I remember you telling me you two met by accident, when you were working on a building site. Was that in the Mission District, by any chance?"

"Yes. I was getting steady work by then. We married in San Francisco, and then moved to Boston."

"This was when?"

"Two thousand nine. We met and got engaged and got married and moved, all in one year."

"And when you married, your husband was already working at Transcoastal?"

"That's right. In the West Coast office."

"And before that, when he was married to Mitzi, he was working in the Boston office. He'd been divorced from her for, what, three years by the time you met?"

"I guess. I didn't find out she was his ex-wife until she told me. That was after she became my agent."

"How did your husband feel about that, when he found out?"

"Well, how would you feel? He wasn't pleased, and there were some awkward moments, but they passed and we all got along fine."

He mentioned the souvenir tie. "It struck me that I've seen that exact design in the illustrations for your ICA Exhibition brochure."

"Oh, that!" She chuckled. "Yes, you did. That was Mitzi's idea. She had a photo of the tie and wanted something eye-catching, unusual. It looks good, cropped like that, don't you think? We could have used a public domain photo, but she said she wanted to give a little shout-out to her ex, he was so proud of closing that deal."

"Did he say anything when he saw it?"

"He was too stunned to speak, at first. Thanked her, though. I think he appreciated it."

"Is the description of your Egyptian theme—in the brochure, I mean--hers, too?"

"Oh, yeah. She's a born publicist. Saw the value in reaching beyond pre-Columbian cultures. Egypt never goes out of fashion."

"Speaking of pre-Columbian, how could you forget William Huff?"

"Huff?"

"The sculptor who . . ."

It took her a second or two.

"Oh! Chief Solano!" She laughed.

"Tommy said he was all you could talk about when you were living together."

"Maybe for a couple of weeks. I do remember that trip to Fairfield. One of the few days we all spent together that didn't end in shouting and tears."

"He said you were obsessed with Huff, with his work."

"I wouldn't go that far. And it was a long time ago. Is it any wonder I forgot where I heard the name?"

"Did you ever mention Huff to your husband?"

"Honestly? I don't know. I could have. But what difference does it make where he got it from?"

"I'll tell you when I find out."

* * * * *

The dense morning fog was thinning as he began his drive to Tommy's condo, located oceanside in the Sunset district south of Golden Gate Park. Just blocks from the Fairmont some street work detoured him through the Tenderloin, where men and women sat next to tents, battered camping equipment, and trash bags full of clothes and personal belongings. Hazy sunlight illuminated a man defecating in the gutter behind a refrigerator box covered with plastic sheeting. A young woman in a filthy down jacket patched with duct tape rocked back and forth on a camp stool and hugged herself, muttering her way through what looked like a psychotic episode.

He soon reached the park and headed west on Lincoln Way via Kezar Drive.

He'd done some online research about Tommy's neighborhood as soon as he'd been texted the address. He wanted to get an idea of the man's current net worth. (What's your annual salary if you can afford a driver? he wondered.)

Sunset had been pretty much a sandy wasteland until the interwar years, when FHA loans became available. By the end of the Second World War, the area was covered by modest, two-story, three- or four-bedroom stucco homes, lined up shoulder to shoulder with garaging on the street and tiny-to-no front yards—often nothing more than concrete parking aprons. Affordable at the time they were built—at least, if you were white and middle-class, or aspiring to be—they now sold for upwards of \$2,000,000.

Tommy lived in one of four condos in an unostentatious, newly-built two-story facing the Great Highway and, just beyond it, the Pacific Ocean. His second-floor location provided an unimpeded view over a high berm of sand running along the highway. Zillow told the Op the place was worth more than most one-families in the Sunset, and now he saw why.

"Coffee? Something to eat? Something to drink? I make a mean Bloody Mary."

"I don't drink, and I just ate, but coffee would be fine, thanks. Black, please."

"Espresso? Cap? Latte?"

He thought of Ms. Brenda. Why was it so hard to get a cup of plain black coffee? Had he missed something? He thought longingly of his cramped little bar-stool at Alan's. "Just coffee. Black."

They made small talk while Tommy boiled water for the French press and waited for the grounds to steep. Then they went outside onto a deck facing the ocean and sat where the bright, late-morning sun could reach them easily from behind. The surf was up, a mild breeze was blowing, and the patio chairs were ample, sturdy, and comfortable. A dingy orange hiking tent peeked from behind a dune, but otherwise the overflow of homeless people from the heart of the city had yet to wash up on Ocean Beach. The wall of fog had

retreated to the sea's horizon, where it would remain until the time came for it to reclaim the city that afternoon.

Looking out, he was reminded of his tetras and felt a brief stab of homesickness.

Despite what the Op had told him, Tommy brought out a tray of warm croissants, with butter and jam, along with a pitcher of coffee and a latte for himself. The Op prepared himself for a sales pitch.

"Please, help yourself," said Tommy, setting down the tray. The Op poured himself some brew but ignored the croissants.

After taking a sip of his latte, Tommy continued.

"I owe you an apology. You're right. I shouldn't have told Brit anything about contacting you, or our conversation in Iowa. I'm really sorry. Can we start over?"

"I don't know," said the Op. "Can we? Why do you deserve a second chance?"

Tommy began his pitch. There were extenuating circumstances. Xenie, under Brit's third-degree, confessed to passing along the Op's name and description to her dad. When Brit took the phone, Tommy couldn't help the rest of it coming out like a strand of loose yarn. Holding back would have just made Brit more suspicious. And angrier.

"And I think you could still use my help."

Tommy had a plan. He'd get in touch with the man in Daly City—he still didn't know Downing's name, so the Op would have to reveal it—and make him an offer he couldn't refuse. He'd pay the man double the \$1,000 he was expecting from Neff if he'd call once Neff texted with the pickup date and time. Tommy would arrange to intercept Neff when he showed and find out whether or not he was, in fact, Fletcher Kraft. If he wasn't, Tommy would force or pay him to reveal Kraft's whereabouts. If Neff refused to cooperate, Tommy would turn him over to the authorities.

"Lots of 'ifs' there, but the most important one is missing," said the Op. "Neff hasn't texted so far, and it's been weeks."

"I have the feeling that he will."

"I'm pretty sure he won't."

"Why not?"

"The delay, for one thing. Neff sent those goods using Kraft's credit card and texted using Kraft's iPhone. If he is Fletcher Kraft, why bother with any of it? Only one reason occurs to me: to throw us off the track, get us looking for him where he isn't and won't be. In short, a diversion. A time-waster. His trail ended with a blood-stained wallet on the banks of the Des Moines River. We're still waiting to see if the blood is his. Even if it is, he could have bloodied it himself and left it there to make anyone pursuing him believe he's dead. Without his corpse, we can't know for sure. Still, as I keep saying, that may be all the evidence we need to let us petition for a declaration of death, with some chance of success. That's all Brit really needs to draw on his assets, and all you really need to make your play to marry her. Legally, she'll be a widow."

"And what if he eventually shows up?"

"If he is alive, he's on the run—from what or who, I don't know. In any case, he might as well be dead for your purposes, because he'll have no motive to reappear and spoil the party. If he's declared dead and you marry and he does show up alive, that may affect the distribution of his assets, but not your marriage to Brit." The Op wasn't sure about all this, but he wanted to discourage Tommy from doing anything drastic to guarantee Kraft would never show his face again. Like finding and killing him.

"Sending the goods to the man in Daly City means it has to be Kraft posing as 'Neff,' doesn't it?" asked Tommy. "No third party could know about their connection through Amy Briscoe's contact list."

"Looks that way," said the Op. "But someone could have gotten access to Kraft's phone"

"And chosen the name at random? Steal something and then have it sent to a perfect stranger for pick-up? Come on. If it's not Kraft, then it's not a diversion, right? So why would 'Neff' do it?"

"What if 'Neff' is Amy and her fiancée's invention? As insurance? Just in case they were caught red-handed in an online scam—as appears to be the case?"

"Ok, so how did they manage it?" asked Tommy. "Amy saw Kraft's wallet on his seat as they got off the plane and snatched it?"

"You've got more questions than I know the answers to, and I've got more questions than you could ever guess."

"There's another reason I think this 'Walter Neff' is really Fletcher Kraft," said Tommy, "and that he'll eventually show up here. You're here. And you wouldn't be here if you didn't agree with me. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"I'm here because Transcoastal International is paying me to be here. God knows why. If Brit Patterson was footing the bill, I'd be in Boston right now helping her petition for a declaration."

It occurred to the Op as soon as he said it that he'd actually be in Fort Dodge, on his way to Boston.

"And I'll admit, I'm curious," he added. He sipped his coffee. "Let me think about your plan a little more. It's got possibilities, but a lot of problems, too."

"Like?"

"Like interfering in a police investigation, for one thing. Like unlawful detention, for another. Whether Neff is Kraft or not, you can't legally make him tell you anything, and you can't legally hold him until he does."

"Ok. I'll just ask him. Or I'll pay him. And why do the police have to know?"

Is this man made of money? the Op wondered, or just desperate?

"And what are you going to use for bait?" he asked. "By now the police have picked up those boxes in the Daly City garage to use as evidence in case Amy and her boyfriend are involved in some kind of criminal conspiracy. What if Neff isn't Kraft? He'll know in seconds it's a set-up and won't be leading you anywhere."

"I can take care of that. I'll use dummy boxes."

"And you don't think Neff will open each one?"

Tommy thought about it. "I'll buy replacements."

The Op's eyes widened. "You'll *buy* them?"

"And then return them afterwards."

"And print your own fake shipping labels? And what if Neff sends someone else?"

"They'll lead us to Neff, or tell us . . . "

". . . where Neff is so he'll tell us where Kraft is? And when we find out Kraft's not there?"

Tommy sighed.

"But like I say, let me think about it. About those possibilities. For now, the best way you can help me is to let me do my job. And keep your mouth shut."

Chapter 20

He drove back to his room by a round-about way, heading north up the Great Highway along Ocean Beach. Expansive with the glittering promise of Manifest Destiny and the limitless horizon of America's Pacific Lake, it had little in common with New England's cramped, parochial shores. He had yet to see a single barnacle, or anywhere you'd be likely to find one.

Clusters of them began to appear where the beach gave way to a low rocky shoreline near the Cliff House Restaurant, next to the ruins of the old Sutro Baths. The white clusters reminded him of the houses in the Sunset—identical, insular, and crowded together. Here the road turned slightly inland and began to rise, following the shoreline, toward the Golden Gate. The fog was staying off-shore and the day was mild. He still wasn't hungry and had yet to decide on a course of action, so he took stock while enjoying the scenery along El Camino Del Mar and then, on entering the Presidio, Lincoln Boulevard, high above Baker Beach. At the Golden Gate overlook he got out and stretched his legs.

He wasn't tired of driving. Just tired. Bone tired. If he hadn't stopped, he might have dozed off at the wheel. He felt the pointlessness of what he was doing: going through the motions, ticking off tasks, gathering information. Wasting time and, apparently, wasting away. He noticed, as he walked to the viewpoint, that his suit was flapping in the onshore breeze. By the time he got back to Boston, Mr. Shun would have to start over.

Whether Kraft was alive or dead, he was gone and, the Op was all but certain, not coming back.

The Bridge, a rich sunset orange, rose to the north and fell away in dramatic foreshortened perspective, as if beckoning him to cross the treacherous mouth of the bay. He knew the Golden Gate was notorious for its tidal currents, which had swept desperate escapees from Alcatraz out to sea, and oblivion. Malignant creatures lived under bridges and malevolent waters passed beneath them. Or

so the legends said. Was that why the people who were forced to live there were more feared and despised than pitied?

He'd done his best to keep the malignant creatures following him at bay. But he wanted them to know, at all times, where he was.

For one thing, he was curious to learn who they were and what they were up to, and as long as Transcoastal was paying the bill he might as well satisfy his curiosity. At least the task was interesting and took him to interesting places. For another, The Fletch Kraft Affair was now a murder investigation, and the Op had a good idea which one of its major players was the murderer, a man skilled at his profession and with many hours of practice behind him.

Markovic was the easiest of his hangers-on to connect to the case, working as he was for the man who'd hired the Op to find Kraft, the man to whom the Op was feeding information almost daily. But for that very reason, Markovic was also the hardest to figure out. The others—Park and Wong (he assumed those were aliases, and not even indicative of their owners' real nationalities), the Maga Man and Woman, maybe even Louisa and her *Appa*—had to be keeping tabs on him for the same reason as Nevis and Marcovic: because he would lead them to Kraft. There were several possibilities as to why they wanted to find him. But along with the *Why?* there was the *How?* How had they gotten wind of the Op's assignment? How did they know he was looking for Fletcher Kraft? And how had they known where he'd be staying in Fort Dodge?

He now knew the answers. It occurred to him in the middle of his call to Mr. Shun yesterday afternoon. "You *wey-ah?*" And just hours later, there's Sandra Wong joining him in the up elevator. What had Bannon told him about Mr. Shun? "Hong Kong is China, now, and this guy's new. . . No relatives. That raises suspicions."

Have fambly in Chinatown.

The Op recalled the moment during his fitting when Mr. Shun insisted he turn his iPhone on speaker. He was discussing the Transcoastal case with Sam. Shun heard every word. The Op had probably been tailed to his apartment that very evening. Was it Park who'd broken in while he was at the ICA with Monica? Or was it

Markovic? Nevis had asked if the Op had plans for that evening. He knew the place would be empty.

But Park and Wong, Maga Man and Woman, the Montroses—none of them were working for organizations paying the Op to find Kraft. Markovic was. Why hire someone to do something and then follow their every move while they do it? It was like looking over your plumber's shoulder while they were fixing your toilet. Annoying as hell for the plumber, yes, but what are you going to learn that you won't learn by pushing down the handle when he asks for your check? The job's been done or it hasn't. Nevis would know where Kraft was or he wouldn't.

He set the question aside and considered who the other six might be working for.

If Park and Wong were being fed information by Shun, they were probably working for the Chinese government. Transcoastal's overseas connections added to the plausibility of that assumption, and suggested, in addition, some kind of illegal arrangement with the Chinese authorities, or with Chinese companies doing business in the US.

"Excuse me? Could you move a bit to the right?"

It was a diminutive Black man trying to take a picture of his wife and daughter with the Bridge behind them. The daughter was wearing a red graduation gown. The Op headed back to his car. Before getting in, he took a quick survey of the parking area, to see if he recognized any vehicles he'd seen in his rear-view mirror. None leaped out.

The other four agents keeping tabs on the Op were more difficult to figure out, but he could make an educated guess.

Cowper not asking the Op if he had any suspicions regarding who might have killed Park meant she'd probably been told the answer and it was just a matter of time before Markovic was arrested. Or else, she'd been told not to try to find out. Her overnight personality transplant suggested the people telling her the one or the other were either higher-ups in the Fort Dodge Police Department or the Feds. The former made no sense, since

Transcoastal had no connection to the town, or to Iowa, for that matter, as far as he knew, and certainly not one that would require them to bribe government officials, local or state, to hush anything up. Moreover, the case had been dropped in their laps by the Boston PD no more than a week ago.

That left the Feds. And if they were involved, four agents seemed like overkill. Even two seemed a bit much, although a partner could come in handy. If he were forced to choose, he'd pick the MAGA couple over the Montroses. MAGA Man's transformation between the Days Inn and the Des Moines airport, from drawling Astros Fan Boy to Calvin Klein fashion model, had given him away, along with his sudden disappearance from the Boston departure gate after overhearing the Op's change of plans. But MAGA Man had yet to appear in San Francisco and his female companion had been MIA for three days. Neither they nor Markovic were, he was pretty sure, tailing him at this point. He'd taken this long detour back to the Fairmont, in part, to make sure of that, keeping one eye on the rear-view mirror throughout. Louisa Montrose, meanwhile, was on her way to the Bay Area and eager to set up a date. She might even be here by now. No telling where her *Appa* might be.

None of these scenarios told him anything for sure, least of all why anyone would want to tail him in the first place other than, like Markovic, to find Kraft.

Ok, but for what purpose? To help put Brit Patterson's mind completely at ease? Highly unlikely.

By now, Presidio Parkway eastbound had landed him in a low-rise neighborhood of apartment buildings and small businesses several blocks south of the Golden Gate. He caught a glimpse of blue to his left halfway through the Lombard and Fillmore Street intersection and made a belated left turn through oncoming traffic in that direction, igniting an explosion of honking horns.

The view expanded as he drove. Where Fillmore ended at Marina Boulevard, he pulled into an angled parking spot and got out.

Before him stretched a green expanse of sunny lawn and beyond it, blue water. He walked forward across the grass.

To his right he could see Alcatraz, squat and ugly. Straight ahead lay Angel Island, once the customs station for immigrants from the Pacific and beyond who were seeking a better life. To his left, now far in the distance, the Bridge completed its delicate flight over the Gate, landing among the green mountains of Marin County. In the distance was Mount Tamalpais—the Sleeping Maiden of local Miwok legend. He could almost see the resemblance. Or was that just another White, Disney-fied Sleeping Beauty fairy tale about Native Americans, with as much truth to it as Pochahontas and John Smith? Tommy would probably know. Either way, the Op found himself drawn to the analogy.

He was suddenly overwhelmed with a longing to be there, to know what lay hidden there, across the treacherous water. To disappear. And it came to him: Kraft knew something. Something about Transcoastal.

That's why the Feds were after him. To persuade him to turn State's evidence, maybe offer a plea bargain.

And that's why Transcoastal was after him. To prevent it from happening. "Dead or alive," Nevis had said, "this case isn't closed until we're absolutely sure." Nevis had sent Markovic to make sure.

Was that also why the Chinese government was chasing Fletcher Kraft? To shut him up? If so, why not leave the dirty work to Nevis and Markovic? Maybe that wasn't what they had in mind. The murder of Isaac Park suggested that Transcoastal and the People's Republic (if they were indeed who sent him) were working at cross purposes. Perhaps, like the Feds, what China wanted was information. Murdering Park delayed their getting it. Murdering Kraft would keep them from ever getting it.

The only loose end would be the Op himself.
Easily taken care of.

* * * * *

Back in the car, continuing his sightseer's route to the Fairmont by way of the Embarcadero, Market Street, Union Square, and Powell Street, the Op felt invigorated. He planned his next moves.

First, he'd contact the Los Angeles office and find out when to expect Gutiérrez. Bannon told him the LA operative would call when he arrived. The Op wanted to make sure that when he did, it would be from the airport and not from the lobby of the Fairmont. He now had a glimmer of an idea of how the man could be useful, but it would require meeting him someplace other than where the Op was staying.

Second, he wanted to call John Lorrimer, head of Transcoastal's West Coast division, and set up an appointment. Lorrimer had received a text message from Kraft's phone late on the day he disappeared. There might be nothing more to learn, but as long as he was in town he might as well dot his "i"s and cross his "t"s.

Third, Louisa would be arriving this afternoon. It was time to make dinner arrangements.

The paper clip tell was lying against the hinge-side wall when he opened his door. It was just after 1 pm. He called the Laurel Court to ask about the lunch menu. As usual, he wasn't very hungry, but listening to the entrees, he thought he could manage a few bites of the Fairmont Cheeseburger.

"Be right down," he said.

In the hallway, heading for the elevator, he called the LA office and made arrangements for Guttierrez's arrival.

The restaurant was not very busy and he was seated immediately. He'd just finished ordering when his phone started crooning *Die Modldau*. It was John Lorrimer. He'd heard the Op was in town. Could he stop by Transcoastal headquarters this afternoon? Just name the time.

They settled on 2 o'clock. Apparently, Mr. Lorrimer was more eager to see the Op than vice versa.

His cheeseburger appeared as Sandra Wong walked in. She saw him, flashed her little smile, and gave a wave of the hand. He

smiled and waved back. Ms. Wong followed the maître d' across the room.

He ate half his burger, wrote down his room number on the check, then rose and approached Ms. Wong's booth.

"You and I both seem to be visiting here alone, don't we?" he asked.

Ms. Wong's smile grew. "Yes. And we both seem to like the same restaurant."

The Op returned her smile.

"Must be the *haute cuisine*."

"Or the clientele?"

"I was wondering," he said. "You were so kind to me yesterday night, and I've been trying to figure out how to thank you . . ."

"Oh, there's no need, not at all. I was glad to help."

"Well, perhaps you'd let me buy you a drink before dinner, here at the bar? I'm sorry I can't do more—I'm meeting someone afterward."

Ms. Wong's eyes lit up. "I'd be delighted!" she said. "Thank you so much. I'm here by myself and would enjoy the company. What time?"

"How about five?"

"Perfect," said Ms. Wong.

As he left, the Op considered whether his recent weight loss might have made him more attractive to women.

He doubted it.

Transcoastal's western headquarters were just a few blocks from the Fairmont, on the other side of Chinatown. The uncertainty of street parking in the business district made walking seem more feasible. Despite his light lunch, or perhaps because of it, he was still feeling energetic.

Crossing Grant Street, Chinatown's main drag, the Op was reminded of another portly, underestimated detective, less fluent in English than he, whose adventures also took him to places far from

home, including San Francisco's Chinese ghetto. He'd always felt an affinity to Charlie Chan, and not just because they were both endomorphs. He was aware of the disfavor Chan had fallen into, beginning decades ago, among those, especially in the Chinese-American community, who were repulsed by White appropriations of non-White cultures. To them, Chan was nothing more than a Chinese Uncle Tom. But he'd been introduced to the detective through books, not movies, and was shocked at the difference between the print and screen versions of his hero when he was first exposed to the Hollywood product. Chan's modest demeanor, strong attachment to his family, and persistent nostalgia for his Honolulu home when roaming on assignment became, for the Op, a peg on which to hang his own sense of alienation, especially when both family and home had ceased to exist.

As these thoughts ran through his mind, he heard his phone *ping*. It was Louisa. "Just arrived. Give me a call. Can't wait!"

He called immediately.

She had checked into her hotel and was meeting with a potential client in a few minutes.

"Are you available for dinner tonight?" he asked.

"I made sure I would be." She sounded excited.

"I can't come down to San Jose. The case has me tied up here. Can you meet me at the Fairmont Hotel at 5:30? I'll be sitting at the bar in the Laurel Court restaurant. You'll see me almost as soon as you walk in."

"Not a problem!"

He hit the red button and strode on.

As he reached the corner of Sacramento and Kearny, his phone *pinged* again. It was Gutiérrez. *Arrived*, followed by a phone number. He tapped the number and listened as the *Walk* sign started flashing *Wait*. Dutifully, he waited.

"Gutiérrez." It was a tenor voice, quiet and uninflected.

"Thanks for texting. Where are you?"

"In a Lyft, headed for the Fairmont. HQ just called, said contact you first. What's up?"

"Don't go to the Fairmont. Don't even head in that direction. Call the higher-ups and say there's been a change of plans. Stop where you are, then Google map the neighborhood and choose a place nearby."

"Not until you say what's up."

There was nothing belligerent in his tone of voice, but the Op could tell Gutiérrez wouldn't budge without a good explanation.

"I don't have time right now. I'm on my way to talk to the head of Transcoastal's western division, about a text message he received from Kraft. I'll call right after. I'm under surveillance and it's important that you aren't seen with me. Or anywhere near the Fairmont."

Gutiérrez took a second or two before replying. "OK. A coffee shop for now. How long?"

"A half-hour? An hour?"

"You asking?"

"An hour at most."

The call went dead.

The *Wait* sign switched to *Walk*.

Pocketing his phone, he stepped off the curb and, out of habit, looked to his left.

Unfortunately, Kearny was a one-way street and that was the wrong direction.

He heard the screech of tires and saw, as he turned toward it, a car coming from the right.

It was not slowing down.

It was speeding up.

A bike messenger just a foot or two in advance of him put an arm back to keep him from being flattened, but the car hit the front wheel of the bike. It sent the rider flying. He landed on the pavement six feet away. The Op rushed over. A crowd gathered around. Two pedestrians began calling 911.

"Are you alright?" The Op found his voice was shaking.

The man was lying on his back. His long red hair flowed from under his visored helmet and spread out on the street like drying

blood. The Op raised the visor to get a better look and help him breathe.

He was a she.

"Miss?"

She didn't respond at first, but the helmet, along with her other protective gear, had apparently done its job. In a few seconds she groaned, then opened her eyes and moved her head slowly back and forth.

Had he seen this face before? If so, where?

In another half minute she was standing up.

"Let me call an ambulance."

She shook her head, slowly. "*No. No hagas eso, por favor.*"

The bike was totaled. She dragged it to the sidewalk, leaned it against a lamp post, and began to unfasten the bundle strapped on the back. Then she lowered her visor and turned back to him, nodding. "*Gracias.* Thank you, sir." She placed the bundle under her arm, pushed through the onlookers, and staggered in the direction of the bay.

The police arrived just then, but she had vanished. The crowd began to disperse. Traffic resumed. No one had caught the license number. A gray SUV with tinted glass was all. The cops took everything down, but with no victim in sight, they had no reason to linger.

"Somebody was in a fucking hurry," the man next to him muttered. At first, the Op thought he meant the bike messenger. "Did you see that? Flew out from the curb *just* as the light turned red. Like he was waiting for it." He shook his head. "Close one."

"Yeah," said the Op. "Should have been me. I was harder to miss."

Mr. Lorrimer's office occupied the corner of a suite on the 10th floor of a modern high-rise that sat atop the Montgomery Plaza. "Retail for Lease" was inscribed in a dignified typeface on the granite directory next to the entrance, just above "Turkenich, DDS."

John Lorrimer was on his feet when his secretary ushered the Op into his office. Darkly tanned and wearing white Dockers and an open-necked blue shirt, he looked as though he'd just stepped off a yacht. All that was needed to complete the impression was a windbreaker and a captain's cap. In the window behind him, looming over the intervening office buildings, stood the TransAmerica Pyramid. Fog was beginning to flow around it.

Lorrimer extended his hand and, with the other, gestured toward a roomy upholstered armchair in an alcove to his left. It was part of an ensemble of chairs arranged around a coffee table.

"Welcome," he said. "Please, have a seat. I heard you were in town and wanted to see if there's anything I can do to help. Would you like something to drink? Coffee? Tea?"

The Op thought he'd pass on the coffee. "Nothing, thanks."

Lorrimer sat down on a sofa and crossed his knees. He was wearing top-siders, no socks.

"How's your stay in San Francisco so far? Manage to see anything of the city?"

"I only arrived late last night," said the Op. "But yes, a fair amount, considering." He described his spiraling itinerary that morning and his pedestrian route since leaving the Fairmont, omitting the Tenderloin and Tommy Littlejohn, along with his close encounter with the gray SUV.

"Excellent! Excellent!" said Mr. Lorrimer with exaggerated heartiness. Or was he genuinely this ebullient?

After a brief silence, the Op said, "You wanted to help . . . ?"

"Ah! Yes. Well. We're all concerned about Mr. Kraft's disappearance, and especially about how this is affecting his family. Mrs. Patterson must be worried sick. And his daughters. How are they all holding up, by the way?"

"Remarkably well." He left it at that.

"Good, good."

Again, Lorrimer fell silent, looking at the Op as though waiting for a prompt to remind him of his lines.

"Were you and Mr. Kraft close?"

"No, no. Just business associates." After another pause, Lorrimer asked, "So, any leads?"

"Nothing beyond what I imagine you've learned from Mr. Nevis."

"Of course, yes. Anything new since you arrived here?"

"That I haven't told Mr. Nevis?"

"Yes—not that he won't tell me eventually, of course."

"No, nothing new. I understand that Mr. Kraft sent you a text message on the day he disappeared, the day his flight was delayed in Fort Dodge."

"Yes. He said he'd tested positive for Covid and couldn't attend the meeting."

"And what was the purpose of the meeting?"

"It was to discuss the financing of a major expansion of operations. That's all I'm at liberty to say."

"And Transcoastal's chief accountant would be an important person to have at that discussion?"

"Absolutely!"

"I understand you and Mr. Kraft were going to have drinks together beforehand?"

"That's correct. In the Tonga Room at the Fairmont."

"Any particular reason?"

"Oh, no, not really. We're old f. . ." He stopped in mid-sentence. "We're old farts. We're surrounded by boy-geniuses—and girl geniuses . . . and, of course. . . ." Again he paused, as if wondering whether to add LGBTQ+ geniuses. "Well . . . young people who don't have time for us dodderers. So we like to reminisce about the days when ancient wisdom held sway around the water cooler—days when we aspired to be ancient and wise." He sighed and shook his head in a determined effort to look nostalgic. "How times have changed."

"So you like to reminisce on these occasions, but you're not 'close'?"

"Well, what I meant was, we don't talk about our private lives. But we've both been with the company for long time. We do have that in common."

"His wife tells me Mr. Kraft liked to wear a particular tie to business meetings. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

For the first time, the Op thought he saw Mr. Lorrimer taken by surprise, even alarm, but the man disguised it by prolonging it, as if searching his memory.

"Oh, that!" He laughed. "Yes. The Egyptian tie." He shook his head. "How a man as fastidious as Fletcher Kraft could wear such a monstrosity around his neck—even as a joke—is beyond me. How do you know about it?"

"His wife described it to me. She said he packed it when he left Boston."

"But how is it relevant?"

The Op ignored the question and asked, "What was the joke?"

"That his contacts in Egypt . . . did Mrs. Patterson tell you about the deal he made possible?"

"Vaguely."

"His accounting wizardry enabled Transcoastal to land one of its most lucrative accounts in a decade, shipping Egyptian cotton overseas and trans-shipping . . . well, again, I'm not at liberty to" He took a deep breath. "Suffice it to say, it was a triangulated arrangement involving two other sovereign governments. You understand," he added hastily, "by 'wizardry' I don't mean anything illegal. Kraft really *was* the boy-genius of book-keeping back in the day. World Champion, if I may say so. Still is."

"So, the tie?"

"The number crunchers in the Egyptian Ministry of Finance were so in awe of his abilities they presented it to him at the signing, which he was asked to attend. I do think they meant it as a joke, but all in fun. He was pleased, in any case, and said he felt honored. Transcoastal thought a Louis XVI *chiffonier* would be more suitable, given the size of the contract."

"So, he would wear this tie to business meetings as a joke?"

"Yes. But lately the joke's been wearing thin. Not many of those at the big table have any memory of the deal, so they don't get it. Fletch just looks silly to them. Jokes that need explanations are like balloons losing gas. They don't go 'bang.' They just shrivel up and float gently to earth."

Mr. Lorrimer illustrated by waving his hands gently back and forth, palms down. The Op was impressed that he could think in similes, and revised his opinion of the man's intelligence.

As he rose to leave, he asked if Kraft was supposed to speak at the meeting.

"No, I don't think so," said Mr. Lorrimer.

"Could I have a copy of the agenda?"

"That would be confidential. It was an executive session."

"A list of attendees?"

Lorrimer shook his head. "Also confidential. But do let me know if there's anything else you might need."

"Thanks," said the Op.

"My door is always open," said Mr. Lorrimer, before closing the door.

Chapter 21

The drifting fog was thick by the time he emerged from the Montgomery Plaza. Checking his browser, the Op saw there was a 7-Eleven a couple of blocks down and around the corner, on Sansome. He put his phone away in his back pocket and accompanied the fog in that direction.

At the 7-Eleven he bought two burner phones, paying in cash. He unwrapped them both, handed over the packaging for disposal, then put one in his inside jacket pocket and used the other to call Gutiérrez as he climbed Nob Hill to the Fairmont.

Gutiérrez didn't answer—no surprise, since he wouldn't recognize the number—so the Op left a message.

Two minutes later, the burner rang. He was panting by now. He'd reached the steep part.

"Gutiérrez."

"Where are you?" He stopped to catch his breath.

"Peet's. Van Ness and . . . Turk."

"Is there someplace close you can check in for the night?"

"Hold on."

The Op held on.

"A Marriott up the street."

"Good. Spend the night there and meet me back at Peet's tomorrow, 10 am. I'll explain everything then. I have a plan that just might lead us to Kraft, but it's a long shot. Are you up to speed on this guy 'Neff' and the online purchases he sent to Todd Downing?"

"Check."

"Well, everything depends on Neff following through. I have my doubts, but even if my plan fails, it might stir things up, throw a monkey wrench into the works. At least we can see what comes flying out."

"Not enough. C'mon. Give it up."

"I'll know more tomorrow. There are pieces to put in place and I have to see where they fit. Or even if. Meanwhile, you need to stay out of sight."

The silence went on so long he thought the line might be dead.

"Ok. Tomorrow, 10 am. No more delays. Getting antsy down south."

"Text me at this number when you check in, not my personal phone."

It struck him that Gutiérrez's speech patterns resembled Charlie Chan's. No personal pronouns. Sentence fragments. Was English his native language? He had an accent the Op couldn't place.

Four blocks on, the burner *pinged*. It was Gutiérrez. He'd checked into the Marriott and had more questions. The Op thumb-tapped his replies and hit "Send" before it occurred to him to text again.

Now Gutiérrez wouldn't need to contact him before they met. It was safe to get rid of the burner. He put it in the same pocket as its twin and kept walking past the Fairmont to the Powell-Mason cable car stop. He waited until the car rang its bell before stepping up and grabbing an outside pole. The running board was crowded, and his size made it difficult to hang on. No one boarded after him as far as he could tell. If they had, it was from the opposite side, where they couldn't see him.

He rode to the end of the line and walked a block north. As he walked, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the unused burner, the one lying to the outside of the pocket. He texted two random numbers and then looked at the phone as though expecting a reply. As he began to cross the street, he placed it inside his jacket again, where he let it slip down past his pocket and into the gutter. After looking both ways, he changed his mind and returned to the sidewalk, gently kicking the burner into a storm drain as he stepped up onto the curb.

Two blocks further on he reached Jefferson and Jones, where a pedestrian walkway abutted a small inlet of the marina next to Aquatic Cove. There he leaned on the railing and stared at the boats before dropping the burner he'd used to call Gutiérrez into the

water. He spent five minutes there, looking around and checking his watch. Then he headed back to the hotel.

The fog had settled in.

Sandra Wong was waiting for him when he walked up to the Laurel Court bar at 5:15. She was dressed for a night out, in a tight green sheathe skirt and a white silk blouse with the top two buttons undone. Her green jacket was draped over the back of her stool. She had what looked like a Manhattan in front of her. He was late, but her smile hadn't faded.

He'd spent the last hour and half at a DXL Big and Tall Men's store in San Bruno, nine miles south. There he purchased a cobalt blue sport coat and a pair of gray slacks that, the mirror told him, were a better fit for his current frame than the ever-expanding suit that the Old Man had told him to jettison a week ago. He'd never be offered a modeling contract and he knew mirrors lie like salespeople ("No, bro, snug is *drip!*"), but at least he now looked like a slightly more plausible companion for an attractive woman. He was seeing himself through Louisa's eyes, but thinking with Sandra's brain. While he was there, he also bought a couple of polo shirts and a cashmere quarter-zip. ("Makes rich men look approachable and approachable men look rich," said the sales assistant.) He used his business credit card. Disguises were a professional expense, weren't they?

Ms. Wong's eyebrows rose and her smile broadened as if to say, "Look at you!"

"So this is how you dress when you're not working?"

"I'm always working," said the Op.

"Dapper."

"'Drip' is what I was told."

"By?"

"A skinny kid dressed like Pee Wee Herman."

"Too tight, too short?"

The Op nodded and took a seat on one haunch, placing his elbow on the bar.

"May I call you Sandra?"

"Please. And may I . . . ?"

"Of course." He gave her his first name.

The bartender came over.

"Tonic with lime, please."

"That's hardly a drink for unwinding," said Sandra, taking a sip of her Manhattan.

"As I say, I'm always working."

"Like now?"

"Right now I'm *re*-winding."

"And what is it you do?"

"I'm a detective."

She leaned forward, showing the tops of her breasts. "Really?"

"Really." Ignoring what was on offer, he took out his wallet and flipped it open. "There's my license." She looked at it closely. Putting it away, he asked, "And how about you? What brings you to these parts?"

The bartender returned with his drink. The Op asked for a straw and looked again at Sandra.

Sandra was head of project management for a Chinese car manufacturer that was bringing a revolutionary new electric vehicle to market that fall. She'd been born here, in San Francisco, but grew up in China, where her parents, both marketing economists, had returned to accept lucrative positions in a newly corporatized state industry. She was here now to scout dealership locations and plan a grid for charging stations. In a few minutes she'd be going to dinner with a group of local car dealers interested in adding the marque to their current line-up.

"Revolutionary'? I thought the Revolution was embalmed and currently on public display, along with Mao."

She laughed. "You are funny," she said, smiling and shaking her head. She took another sip of her Manhattan and looked at him. "Are you in town to work on a case?"

"Yes."

The bartender brought a straw. The Op began to unwrap it.

Sandra continued. "I suppose you can't talk about it."

"Oh, I can talk about it. I just have to be careful." He sipped his drink, then smiled as bashfully as he could manage. "And, to be honest, I'm not used to talking to beautiful women."

Sandra leaned back and waved her hand in disbelief. "A handsome man like you? With a line like that?" She laughed again, a bit too loud. Was she getting tipsy? Unlikely.

"I can tell you a little."

Sandra became attentive. He leaned toward her.

"I'm being paid to track someone down and I have reason to believe they're here in San Francisco, or soon will be. I've set a trap that I aim to spring two days from now."

Sandra's eyes grew wide. "Are they dangerous?"

"I won't answer that. But I think there may be danger involved, because I'm being followed."

Sandra looked around the room.

"Not here," he said. "But it doesn't matter. Whoever's following me always knows where I am, even if they're not in sight."

"Am I in danger?" She lowered her voice and leaned forward again.

"No, or I wouldn't have asked to have a drink with you. But there's a woman involved who's been trying to get close to me for days, and I've been stringing her along to see where it leads me." He looked at his watch. "She should be here in about five minutes."

Sandra gave the Op a quizzical look, then said, "Is that why you asked me to join you? To size her up for you?"

"No. Although, now that you mention it, that might be useful. I wanted to see her reaction when she finds me sitting at a bar and flirting with a gorgeous female like you."

He was waiting to see if she'd stand up, grab her jacket, and walk away, indignant at being made his cat's paw. Instead, she again leaned in closer—her breasts were now inches from his face—and whispered, "What reaction are you hoping for?"

"Anything that can tip me off."

"Like?"

"I'll know it when I see it."

Her eyes shifted slightly. "Here's your chance," she said.

He turned his head and saw Louisa standing in the lobby, staring at the two of them. Her face was expressionless.

In the next instant, she turned and walked away.

"I guess you have your answer," said Sandra. "Wish I knew what it was."

* * * * *

He left Sandra at the bar and walked rapidly to the lobby and through the revolving door just in time to see Louisa climbing into a cab. She glanced up briefly when he called her name, then wiped away a tear with the heel of her hand and got in. Pulling out his phone, he searched his contacts for her number. After five rings, it went to voicemail.

"Louisa—please call me. I don't know what you think you saw, but whatever you think, it's wrong. At least give me a chance to explain. It's all about the case." He hoped that would do it.

Five minutes later she called and apologized. She was so ashamed. She didn't know why she reacted that way. She wasn't used to this feeling. "I'm in love with you," she said. "I wasn't sure, and then I saw you with that . . . woman" Her voice was trembling. "I couldn't bear it. I had to leave."

He was taken aback.

"*You* are in love with *me*?"

"Yes!" She was laughing and crying at the same time, as if to say, "You idiot." Maybe she meant herself.

They made up in seconds and agreed to meet at Bix, the restaurant where the Op had booked their reservation. He called ahead to say they'd be late.

Bix was a retro 1930s supper club with live jazz and contemporary American cuisine. They were seated on the upper

level, with—at least for him—good sight lines to the tables below and the bar against the wall beyond, which ran the length of the room. He was glad he'd visited DXL. Nearly all the men in the room were wearing blazers or suit jackets. The women were aiming a notch higher. In her black satin dress, wearing a single strand of pearls and with her hair twisted up in a tight chignon, Louisa fit right in. She'd refreshed her blood-red *bindi*, making her look even more alluring.

A jazz trio on the left side of the room was gently massaging "Quiet Nights" below a gigantic portrait of a man who was half turned away from view and seemed to be inspecting a wine glass. He had black, slicked-back hair and wore a black frock coat and white gloves.

"Who do you suppose that is?" asked Louisa after deciding on her order. She was seated nearer the railing, but her short height prevented her from seeing anything more of the scene downstairs.

"Don't know," he replied. "Looks like Hercule Poirot inspecting the poisoned goblet for fingerprints."

"Always the detective," she said. "I think he's a butler. But you're half-right: he *is* looking for fingerprints. To wipe off."

"Who would waste time, and paint, on a monumental portrait of a butler?"

"Maybe he's famous. A notorious criminal. You know, 'The butler did it!'"

Her mood was playful, her delight contagious.

"Then why hide his face?"

"It's a mystery, silly!"

Just then a white-jacketed waiter appeared at his elbow and introduced himself. After placing their order, the Op asked the title of the painting.

"*The Butler is in Love—Absinthe*," replied the waiter, before walking away.

The Op turned to Louisa and grinned.

"You were right—the anonymous factotem. Suspiciously above suspicion. But we were both wrong, too. He's not looking for fingerprints. He's looking for the absinthe."

"To forget?" she asked. "Doesn't absinthe destroy your brain?"

"Yes. He's in love, after all."

They dropped the small talk—how's *appah*? is your firm losing employees, too?—once the food arrived. She'd arranged her schedule to leave the evening free, she told him. Tomorrow morning, too.

"Don't you like your cheeseburger?" she asked.

"Not sure I like black truffles, after all."

"Never had them?"

He shook his head. In fact, he wasn't hungry. "How's the halibut?"

"Here, try some." She held out her plate. The Op took a bite. He rolled his eyes back and nodded.

"Let's trade, if you don't like the cheeseburger."

He protested. She insisted. He agreed, but was embarrassed to find his appetite still feeble. In its place he felt a different appetite gaining strength.

"You know," she said, as though reading his mind, "the food is good here, but a picnic on the grass is more my style." She looked up at him. "Where you can stretch out."

He explained the scene at the Laurel Court bar.

"She was sitting there when I came down to wait for you. I couldn't pretend not to know her—we'd already met. I tried to be polite, but you saw where it got me."

"And you really think she's a secret agent?"

"Not so secret, if she's that easy to spot."

"That was inspired—about the dyslexia and then listening to see if she got back on the elevator." She lowered her burger and shook her head in wonder. "How do you do it?"

"Not by inspiration, for sure. More like improvisation." He glanced down at the man at the keyboard, who was pouring cascades of arpeggios into the middle of "Take Five." "It doesn't come out of nowhere. You have to learn it over time and let it out when the moment's right." He knew he was on thin ice, his PI "experience" amounting to near-zilch. But that was how it felt. As though he could

see the choices lining up in front of him, but some other intelligent being was making the selection, with a better idea of where it would lead.

Louisa devoured the burger as daintily as could be expected of a wide, short woman in a black satin dress and a chignon. As she stopped to suck lingeringly on her fingers, she looked straight at him. He felt his face turn red. This was going too fast. They were drinking tap water, but it might as well have been vodka.

By the time the desert menu came, her frankness and flattery had opened the door to his heart. And his mind. And his sacral parasympathetic pathways. He was getting an erection.

He didn't want to close the first door. He was trying to close the second. The third was jammed open.

He decided to leave the first one alone and see what stepped across the threshold. The third he had no inclination, or ability, to do anything about. That left the second. He decided to stop struggling and see what would happen if he left it open. After all, a door that could let something in could just as easily be used to send something out.

He waited for Louisa to bring up the case again.

Over a shared dish of chocolate bread pudding (he picked at it), she said, with a hint of exasperation, "That Ms. Wrong . . .," then caught herself and laughed. "I mean, 'Wong'! I was the 'wrong' one." She laughed again. "I mean, *she* was the 'wrong' one—the 'wrong Wong.'" She smiled. Her teeth were as white as her pearls.

"Why did you let her get to you like that?"

"I don't know. I trust you." She hesitated. "It's women like her I don't trust."

"You don't have to trust them if you trust me." He set his glass down and asked, "Do you want to know what she was angling for?"

"Wouldn't that go against your 'detective code,' or whatever it is?"

"She thinks I'll lead her to the man who disappeared."

"Why is she interested?"

"That's what I'd like to find out. So I strung her along. I said I was setting a trap for him, two days from now."

"What kind of 'trap'?"

"Doesn't matter. I was lying."

She half closed her eyes and smiled again.

"And are you lying now?"

He smiled back. "Guess."

"I think you're telling me the truth."

"About not telling her the truth?"

"Yes. I mean, you are setting a trap. Just not for him."

"You'd make a good Junior Operative."

"It's for her, isn't it?"

He took another nibble at the bread pudding and didn't answer.

Chapter 22

He woke up the next morning to the sound of pinging. There were tears on his face. He wiped them away and reached for his phone.

Three notifications. One in particular caught his attention. It was a text from Sam.

"Guess who's coming to SF?"

There was a selfie of Sam and Monica attached. They were standing in front of a check-in desk at Logan. The blue screen behind them said, "DL 977 Boston-San Francisco 7:55 am."

The text ended with "eta noon."

Yesterday evening, before going down to the Laurel Court bar, he'd set his notifications to "Do Not Disturb" until 7:00 am. It was 10:00 am right now in Boston. Sam and Monica would be in the air with their cells switched to airplane mode. Maybe somewhere over Fort Dodge.

He texted back: "Call when you read this." That would be when they landed.

Then he looked at the others. A voicemail from Cowper. And a text from Stratton:

Neff contacted Downing. Arranged pickup. Call for details.

It ended with Stratton's private number.

It was happening.

He listened to his voicemail next. Cowper had news. The blood was human, DNA match pending. "Check your email for the stolen property list."

He took his iPad off the nightstand, went to "Mail," and opened Cowper's attachment. Three cars, 2 bikes, a Rolex, 2 laptops, a kayak paddle, 8 Amazon deliveries (one containing 6 four-packs of toilet paper), a diamond ring, a library book, and stereo equipment from a B & E.

He hit "Reply": "I've heard of up the creek without a paddle. Never without something to paddle. Details?" He didn't ask about the 48 hour deadline for coming back to Fort Dodge to be questioned about Park's death, because Cowper didn't mention it. Also, he was pretty sure she'd been told not to insist on it. Whoever was in charge of the investigation would want the Op to stay in San Francisco and see it through.

He would call Stratton next, but first he had to sort out the events of last night and figure out what to tell Gutiérrez when they met later this morning. He lay back down and stared at the ceiling.

He began at the near end, with the dream about seeing his mother.

As his dreams went, this one was lacking in detail. He was standing next to a long, white wall. There was nothing to tell him if it was indoors or outdoors. Ahead, at a distance, he saw his mother walking away from him. He knew it was his mother from her gait and hair color, and because she was wearing the same polka-dot dress and straw sun-hat she wore the day she walked out the front door and never returned. In the dream she had no purse.

He called, but she didn't hear him. Before he could close the distance between them she turned the corner and disappeared. He hurried to the end of the wall and around the corner. There she was, at the same distance as before, nearing the end of another long, white wall. Again he called out and began walking, and again she turned the corner and disappeared. The same thing happened a third time. Watching her vanish, he realized that they were tracing a square. He was certain she was now waiting for him at the point where he'd started—just around the corner ahead.

Eagerly, he ran to the end of the wall.

But when he turned the corner, he found only another long expanse of white. His mother had vanished.

It was a game. Hide and seek. She was hiding just ahead, around the corner. Soon he would see her peeking out. He decided to wait.

At that moment, he felt a wave of terror. The hair stood up on the back of his head. He turned and there she was. At the sight of her, grief supplanted terror. He began to weep and reached to embrace her, but she showed no sign of recognition. His arms passed through her motionless form.

"It's a spiral," said a still, small voice, not hers. "A pyramid."

He woke up hugging himself, with tears streaming down his cheeks and the desolate realization that the still, small voice had been the pinging of his cell phone.

The vision was unexpected. He hadn't dreamt of his mother, not once, since the day of her disappearance. And the events of the evening gave him no reason to expect he would.

After dinner, he'd driven with Louise around the city, visiting viewpoints and famous sites of shared interest. They circled their way up Telegraph Hill to park next to Coit Tower and enjoy the graceful arcs of light festooning the Bay Bridge, the breaching whaleback of Yerba Buena Island, and the diamond-studded black velvet hills of the East Bay, lying far across the dark water. At the City Lights Bookstore they managed to block two aisles while browsing for Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, then drove to Fisherman's Wharf, where they strolled hand in hand to the end of the jetty at Aquatic Park. Louisa was making no secret of counting on spending the night with the Op. He braced himself for the moment he'd have to disappoint her. He was, after all, on a case.

When the time came, however, she took it well. The idea of making love under surveillance helped dissuade her. She settled for an hour of heavy petting at Ocean Beach, where they managed to achieve mutual satisfaction before driving back to the Fairmont. Louisa Ubered for the long ride to San Jose. She'd accomplished what she set out to do. So had the Op.

They agreed to meet again tomorrow, late afternoon. She had a dinner date with clients, and would be leaving early the following morning.

He now knew what it felt like to be in love.

Before going to bed, he made his obligatory call to Mr. Nevis. After all, there were developments. It was already too late to call Brit, but he imagined Nevis would be up and waiting, whatever the hour.

Downing and Amy Briscoe were affianced, he told the head of security at Transcoastal, and neither admitted to knowing a thing about the shipments from "Walter Neff." The Op added that he still wasn't sure whether Neff was Kraft under an assumed name or had stolen Kraft's identity and used his credit card to make the purchases. Neither possibility made much sense.

"Sending the stuff to Downing would be easy to do if Neff is Kraft," he told Mr. Nevis. "It was paid for using his own credit card and, according to Briscoe, he could have come across Downing's name and number while scrolling through her contacts. In that case, this looks like a distraction, something to throw us off his trail. The bloody wallet, too. That means he's on the run and trying hard not to be found. Which also means he won't show up. And the fact that it's now going on four weeks since Downing received the stuff, with no word from Neff so far, makes the possibility he'll show up remoter than ever."

"But we can't rule it out."

"We can't rule it out."

"Well," said Mr. Nevis, "the trail's gone cold in Fort Dodge, and we can't pay you to stay in San Francisco forever. This is as far as we go for now. You can head home. If anything surfaces at a later date to indicate Mr. Kraft is still alive, we'll get in touch. Or I hope you'll get back in touch with us."

"For a retainer, of course," said the Op.

"Of course," said Mr. Nevis.

That was last night. Stratton's text message this morning had changed everything.

Before calling Mr. Nevis again, though, he had to talk to Stratton, and he owed a call to Brit. By the time he'd finished talking to Nevis last night it was past 1:30 am, EDT. Too late to ring the Patterson household, and talking to Brit would require him to

prepare a different set of maneuvers focused on repairing the trust Tommy had almost destroyed.

He reached for his phone.

"*Ping!*"

Never mind. It was a text from Brit.

"We're coming to San Francisco!" he read. Tommy had apparently been hard at work. She and the girls would arrive tonight. "Mitzi will be with us. We'll be in touch."

The Op rose, shaved, showered, brushed his teeth and hair, and put on his suit, leaving his new sport coat and slacks hanging in the closet. They were for play. The suit was for work. He'd left it to be cleaned before meeting with Wong at the Laurel Court bar and found it lying on the bed, pressed and waiting, when he returned to his room after kissing Louisa good-night. He could now fasten his belt two notches beyond the crease, easily. He stopped on his way out when he caught sight of himself in the hallway mirror. Soon he'd be looking like a Bedouin. At least the fedora still fit, and the maroon tie.

He'd get back to Mr. Nevis as soon as possible. But first things first. On his way to breakfast he called Stratton. He thought it best to avoid the Laurel Court for now. A chicken and waffles sandwich when he got to Peet's was the best bet. He might be hungry by then.

According to Stratton, Downing had received the text from Neff yesterday afternoon but hadn't read it until late last night. That's when he called the DCPD. It'd been sent from a throw-away. No way to trace it, and replies went undelivered.

"What's it say?" asked the Op.

"I'll read it to you. 'Friday, 2 am. Don't call the police, or you won't get paid, and you might get hurt.' It's signed, W. Neff."

"But he did call you. Regardless. Upright citizen."

"Citizen under surveillance, who doesn't have the goods, and knows we've got him by the short hairs," said Stratton. Now it was

just a matter of waiting for Neff, or his delegate, to show up Friday morning. If it wasn't Neff, whoever it was might lead them to Neff, who might lead them to Kraft, or tell them what had happened to him. Of course, the police would have to stay well out of sight. Neff would be looking for them.

"In any case, we may nab a major scammer, maybe even 'turn' him, if he's part of a larger criminal operation."

"Can't wait to see it."

Stratton paused, as if trying to figure out if the Op was being facetious.

"What makes you think you'll be there? This is just a courtesy call."

"Oh. So, are you returning the merchandise to Downing's garage?"

"Weighted boxes."

"You don't think Neff—or whoever he sends, since I doubt he'll do this in person—will want those boxes opened and examined?"

Stratton was silent.

"We'll return the stuff to Downing's garage. We'll just have to keep it under close watch."

"Do you have the personnel to do that?"

"We'll manage."

Stratton hung up and the Op dialed Tommy's number.

"I hear you'll be having visitors."

"Isn't it great, how things are turning out? I get to see Xenie. I get to hold her in my arms. Brit's not ready to commit to marrying. Yet. There's too much unresolved business with Kraft. But if what you say is true, that shouldn't be a problem." He paused. "You really think a judge will accept the wallet as sufficient evidence?"

"I just got a confirmation that it's human blood, and I expect another confirmation, soon, that the blood is Kraft's. But that's not why I called."

He explained what he needed.

"There's a Honda Dealer on Van Ness, corner of Bush Street," said Tommy. He gave the address. "Drive there, park on the street,

go in the front entrance and ask for Bobby Doran. I'll call to let him know. As for the rest, leave it to me."

The Op drove to San Francisco Honda and parked at the curb nearby, avoiding the customer parking structure behind the dealership that opened on Bush Street. He walked in and asked for Bobby Doran. Doran was easy to spot. Freckles, reddish curly hair, Irish brogue. Beguiling as the leprechaun on a Lucky Charms box.

Doran was with a customer on the showroom floor, but took a second to walk the Op to Parts.

"Where did you leave your car?" he asked on the way. "We'll keep an eye on it, make sure nobody tinkers with it."

Doran passed him on to the guy behind the counter. Mr. Parts took him to Mr. Maintenance and Repairs, who took him to the employees' entrance in the parking structure in back. He exited through the front doors of the Acura dealer on Fern Street after navigating a circuitous route of stairways and hallways, then made his way west on Fern to Franklin, south on Franklin several blocks to Turk, east on Turk one block to Van Ness and around the corner to Peet's—a 15-minute walk.

Raoul Gutiérrez was sitting at a small round table staring at his iPhone and munching on a breakfast fritter. He was the only customer dressed in a gray tailored suit. His trench coat was draped over the chair across from him. His flat nose, almond-shaped eyes, wide face, brown complexion, and black hair, combined with his name, pointed to his Filipino ancestry.

Gutiérrez didn't look up, but the Op knew he'd been noticed. Even if he kept losing weight, his height would make him impossible to miss.

The place was crowded. After giving his order and name to the cashier, the Op came over and asked if he could share the table. This was just for appearance's sake: he'd been careful enough coming here to make the pantomime pointless.

As soon as the Op sat down, Gutiérrez hit pause, set down his phone, and asked, "What's the play?"

The Op saw he was playing Lichess. Pawn diagonals.

"turingm?" he asked.
"How'd you know?"
"He had me spinning my wheels, too."
"Getting traction." Gutiérrez took a bite of his breakfast fritter.
"Is he challenging anyone within reach, or just Continental
Ops, I wonder?"
Gutiérrez shrugged.
The Op described his encounter with Mr. Slocum.
"Don't castle," said Gutiérrez. "Already there."
"And send him in. Don't leave him sitting on his throne."
"And if he gets in the way?"
"Use him as a decoy?"
"Or her?"
"Have to keep track every second. All the escape routes."
"Or sacrifice?"
They paused, looking at each other. Gutteriez gave a half-smile.
The barrista called the Op's name.
When he returned, Gutiérrez had finished his fritter and was staring at nothing.
"Got it figured out?" asked the Op.
"turingm? Or W. Neff?"
Between bites of his chicken and waffle sandwich, the Op described what he had in mind.
Gutiérrez scowled.
"Pop cleaned toilets, Mom made beds. Now their son's an Indio coolie?"
"Coolie'? You're Chinese, too?"
"Way back."
"Sorry. But will it work?"
Gutiérrez considered, shrugged.
"Ok, then," said the Op.
They hammered out the details.

Chapter 23^

After Gutiérrez left, the Op lingered over his chicken and waffles sandwich, then walked up Van Ness to get his car. As he walked, he rang up Mr. Nevis.

"Neff got in touch with Downing last night. The pickup is scheduled for Friday morning at 2 am. The Daly City Police will be handling it. I'm not invited."

"You think it's him?"

"Again, we can't rule it out. But also again, even if it's not him, Neff might lead us to Kraft."

"If he shows up."

"I have a theory about that."

"I'm listening."

"That computer gear and other high-tech stuff?" He paused. "Let me back up. Ever since I arrived in Fort Dodge I've been followed. A man going by the name of Park was killed in my room by someone who followed him there while I was out, and here in San Francisco a woman calling herself Sandra Wong was waiting for me to check in last Saturday night so she could tail me to my room. She's been trying to get close to me ever since. I've been playing along to get an angle on what she's up to."

A long silence.

"Go on," said Mr. Nevis.

"Park' and 'Wong' aren't their real names, of course. They could have been born 'Nguyen' and 'Nakamoto' for all I know. But I don't think the Vietnamese or the Japanese are trying very hard to undermine US interests here or abroad through corporate or industrial espionage. China and North Korea are. All that high-tech equipment—not just the computers, but the TVs, the cell phones, anything with a chip—could have been loaded with spyware or malware, couldn't it? at the point of manufacture. In China, or Taiwan, which is swarming with mainland loyalists—or so I've heard. Tracking shipments and serial numbers would be a snap for a

sophisticated hacker these days, right down to the distribution warehouses serving particular regions of the country."

"Like Daly City?" suggested Mr. Nevis.

"That's my line of thinking."

More silence.

"But what connection could this possibly have to Fletcher Kraft?" asked Mr. Nevis. "And if the aim is to infiltrate our computer networks, why buy the machines and take them off the market? And why have them sent to a name on someone else's cell phone? For that matter, why not just smuggle the malware in on a thumb drive?"

"I don't have all the answers. But I suspect that Neff does, and he's connected to Kraft not only because he used Kraft's credit card to purchase the machines, but also because they both know—or in Kraft's case, had the means to know—the man who received them, Todd Downing. And there's always the chance that Neff is Kraft, after all. I still think it's unlikely, but shouldn't we at least let this play out?"

"All right," said Mr. Nevis after another pause. "Stay there until Saturday and see if Neff shows. Meanwhile, keep me apprised."

"So what's with the bird?"

The Op had noticed the display case at the top of the stairs as they climbed to the second-floor dining room. They were sitting at a table covered with a pristine white table-cloth and had just gotten their food.

"Didn't you read the sign?" asked Monica.

"*The Maltese Falcon*, my man," said Sam. "Even I knew that."

"I can read," said the Op. "But what's it doing here?"

All the way from the airport, Monica had kept silent about John's Grill, the place she'd chosen for lunch. It had a big, vintage-era neon sign out front that said it dated from 1908, just after the Earthquake, and the dark paneled walls were covered with

photographs of celebrities, local and world-famous, who'd eaten there.

"John's Grill is where Sam Spade had dinner while waiting for a hired car to take him to Burlingame," said Monica. "In *The Maltese Falcon*," she added. "The book."

"What was in Burlingame? Wherever that is."

"Nothing, as it turned out. It was a wild-goose chase, to get him out of the city while the bad guys got their act together."

"Wait, that was also in the movie, wasn't it? What sent him there, again?"

"Not what. Who. In the movie, it's Brigid O'Shaughnessey, remember? But in the book, it's Rhea Gutman, the teenage daughter of Casper Gutman, the Criminal Mastermind, aka, 'The Fat Man.' Rhea plays the helpless Damsel in Distress, pretending to be near death from a drug overdose, who sends Spade to Burlingame with a story about Brigid O'Shaughnessey . . ."

"Ok, ok," said the Op. He was losing track of the damsels. "I get it." He took another bite of his Deluxe Burger. "The wedding. You say you don't want me to be best man. You want me to officiate. I can do that? Legally?"

Sam replied. "Here in California you can. Massachusetts, too. But we decided during the flight to get married here, not there."

"What's the hurry?"

Sam nodded to Monica, as if deferring to her.

"I'm pregnant," she said, spearing an escargot.

The Op was surprised. "Congratulations. But isn't it a little too early to tell?"

"Yes, it is," said Sam.

"I can tell," said Monica, chewing.

"Hasn't affected your appetite."

"Yet. Alan says 'hi,' by the way. Misses you. Has a gallon of Russian dressing going bad."

"Are snails good for babies?"

"I think so. At this point, they're pretty much the same thing, aren't they?"

"This wedding thing—it's ok with your families?"

"It will have to be," said Sam.

Monica elaborated.

"It's my mom."

"She doesn't like that you're pregnant?"

"That's not it."

"You don't want it to show?"

Monica stared at him with a "Really?" look on her face, then speared another escargot.

"Sam is Black?"

Monica shook her head. "She's not bigoted. And marrying Sam would make the pregnancy legit. But she won't attend if it's not a Catholic wedding. The whole Grand Opera—Mass, altar boys, incense, heavenly choir, pealing organ. In Latin, if she can get it."

Monica's family had a complicated religious history. Her mother's grandmother, Jessica, was born to a wealthy Jewish family in Venice just before World War I. At the age of 17, she fell in love with Monica's great grandfather, a young officer in the Italian army and the last scion of an impoverished noble family still living in a decaying palazzo just off the Grand Canal. When Jessica and *Il Conte* decided to marry, his parents were delighted. In Jessica's relations they saw a bright, shining opportunity to establish new financial ties, along with deep pockets for business loans. The Spinosos' only requirement: the girl must convert to Christianity. This posed no problem for Jessica, or her secularized parents. They saw the advantages of influence and class that would be opened up by an alliance with Venetian nobility, however decayed. As for their more conservative relatives, any hard feelings evaporated in the withering heat of the Holocaust. When, in 1943, the Nazi authorities began rounding up Jewish families for transportation to Auschwitz, the Count pulled some of his longest strings and managed to save most of Monica's relatives from the ovens.

Like many converts, Jessica became more devout than her Catholic in-laws, or her husband. Her piety lasted through three generations of female descendants. It died with the fourth.

Jessica's sharp wit and stubborn integrity, however, had survived. Both were fully on display at this moment, sitting right across the table, along with the Count's good looks. The Op knew better than to ask Monica why she couldn't just go through the motions.

"And I don't think Sam's parents would like it if their son had to promise to raise their grandchildren as Catholics," she added. That was the parish priest's requirement before he'd officiate.

"Are Ted and Ina coming out for the ceremony?"

Now Monica deferred to Sam. He seemed uncomfortable. This was a source of friction.

"We thought it wouldn't be fair. To have just one set of parents attend and not the other." He paused. Had he emphasized "we"? The Op wasn't sure.

Monica swallowed the last of the escargots. "So, we'll let everyone know as soon as it's done, and have a big reception when we get back. This will be our elopement and our honeymoon!"

Sam was quiet. Both of his parents were only children and only one of his grandparents was still alive. His only sibling, an older brother, had been killed in a gang crossfire on his first visit home from Yale, halfway through his freshman year. There wouldn't be many Black faces at the reception. Monica's three sisters, all married with kids, and numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins, near and distant, would make those faces all but invisible.

Monica changed the subject. "So how's The Fletch Kraft Affair going?"

The Op caught them up on the latest developments. Most of them, anyway.

"Neff?" asked Monica, looking up from her lamb chop. "Not Huff?"

"My question, too, when I heard it," said the Op.

Monica started raising her fork and stopped.

"So that's why I remembered the name. 'W. Huff.' Walter Huff. The insurance agent in *Double Indemnity*. The book."

"I never read the book," said the Op.

"Me neither," said Sam, trying to keep his leg of The Tripod upright.

"Well, you saw the movie," Monica said, looking at the Op.

"They changed the name to 'Neff.' 'Walter Neff.'"

Silence.

"Fred MacMurray's greatest performance?"

"I must have fallen asleep."

"But so what?" said Sam, as if to remind them he was there.

"Our missing man is a *noir* fan-boy. The question is: why go by 'Walter Huff' if you're going to use a different fake name instead?"

"'Huff' is how he was signing his emails with sublimite.com, the fake ID site," said the Op. "I just assumed it was the name he'd be buying from them." He thought a moment. "He's got a sense of humor, doesn't he?"

"Doesn't sit well. With me," said Sam. "Suppose I'm planning to disappear. (Which Kraft has.) I'm paying a lot of money for a secret identity. I'm setting it up with a criminal organization, so I don't want to use my real name. Why would I choose a name with any connection at all to my secret ID? Is he arrogant, or stupid, or what? Why not 'x'? Or five asterisks?"

"Just careless, is my guess," said the Op. "Careless because he's been getting away with something for so long, without being found out, that he's lost sight of the dangers. Kept a sheet of passwords for his desktop and online accounts in his desk drawer, carefully labeled, so he'd have them handy if he forgot one. Of course, they're not the literal passwords, they're memory aids—prompts that he can connect in his mind with the password."

"What's wrong with that?"

"They're not personal. They don't depend on information only he could know, like his kindergarten teacher's name or his first car." The Op told them about the Golden Spiral. "It's like he doesn't have a 'person' inside he can depend on to make the connection

when he needs it." The Op hesitated. "But then, why 'Huff' and 'Neff'? *Double Indemnity* must mean something to him, right? I mean personally. If he's seen the movie *and* read the book?"

"He could have picked up that piece of information as randomly as any other," said Monica. "And it stuck because of the resemblance between the names."

"And the resemblance—something that's not personal—is what makes it work for him," said Sam. He leaned back and took a deep breath. "But none of this really matters, does it? What really matters is that the connection between 'Neff' and 'Huff' means 'Neff' has to be Fletcher Kraft, and not someone impersonating him. Only Kraft knows the name he used to communicate with *sublimate.com*."

"That's not all that matters," said the Op. "I told the State Department and Homeland Security to keep an eye out for anyone trying to leave the country under the name 'W. Huff.' I should have said 'W. Neff.'"

"Which means Kraft could be sunning himself on a beach in Tunisia right now," said Monica.

"Which also means this entire 'Neff' business is, in fact, a diversion, just as you suspected," said Sam.

"But why keep it up?" asked Monica, playing devil's advocate. "Mr. 'Neff' has had almost a month to leave the country since ordering that equipment and revealing himself to Todd Downing. Why would he hang around for even a minute of it?"

"For what it's worth, I think you're right to stay here and wait," said Sam, looking at the Op. "We don't have the answers, but that's no reason to quit. It's why you need to follow every lead to the end."

"Let's back up," said Monica. "This Mr. Lorrimer. You were going to call him because . . . why, again?"

"He'd received a text message from Kraft, just like Brit Patterson, and saying basically the same thing: can't make it, caught Covid, in quarantine."

"And Kraft's what, Chief Accountant?"

"That's right."

"Why would a Chief Accountant be expected to attend a high-level business meeting?"

"Why wouldn't he? He has for years."

"Says who?"

"That's what he told his wife. And Lorrimer confirmed it."

"Those are generally long-range planning sessions," said the Berklee management graduate, "like, say, coordinating operations between the east and west coasts. Or board meetings to vote on major hires or changes in governance. If anyone from the financing end has to be there, it should be the CFO, the Chief Financial Officer."

"That's interesting," said the Op. "Lorrimer wouldn't give me the agenda or the minutes of the meeting, or a list of who was there. Said it was all confidential."

"And he called you about getting together before you called him."

"Yeah. As though he had something on his mind."

"Or wanted to know what was on yours, maybe?"

"Which reminds me. That god-awful tie that Kraft got for closing the Egyptian deal. Lorrimer looked worried when I described it to him. You should have seen his face. Tried to pretend otherwise, but too late."

"So it meant something," said Sam. "Something besides what you know."

"Or in addition to," said Monica. "But anyway, something he didn't want to talk about."

They ordered coffee.

"Brit's flying here tonight, with her kids, and Mitzi."

"Meriam."

"Meriam."

"And why?"

He looked at his watch. "How much time do we have?"

"As much as you need," said Sam. "We don't have to be anywhere."

"I do. So I'll make it short." He told them about Tommy Littlejohn, without going into details.

"I think he's going to propose. After showing her how well he's done. Kind of 'This could all be yours!' you know?"

"Man, he *is* fast!" said Sam. "Find what it will take. Make the offer. *The Price is Right*. He sounds like an Indigenous Bob Barker."

"Bob Barker *was* Indigenous," said Monica. "Rosebud Sioux." Sam shot her a look.

"So could we meet her?" she asked.

"Meriam?"

"Brit. I really liked her work. And she may need a new agent soon."

"You handle musicians. Or did."

"Same skill set. And I think her work is quite musical."

The Op wasn't sure if she was kidding.

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

The waiter came with the check. Sam snatched it up. Nobody protested. This man owned a BMW.

"And here's something else." The Op told them his plan.

"So that's why Mr. Neff hasn't left the country," said Monica.

"But really?" She leaned forward to telegraph her skepticism.

"You're involving an innocent bystander?"

"No. Making sure he won't be involved."

"You hope."

"I told him not to be home."

"And you think he'll do what you say, do you?"

"No. I'm pretty sure he won't."

"Too much for this bear of little brain," said Sam.

"Oh," said Monica. "I get it." She leaned back. "I just hope you're not in jail, or dead, when you're supposed to be marrying us."

"When's the date?" asked the Op. He was happy to change the subject.

"How's Friday afternoon?"

Chapter 24

After leaving John's Grill, the Op took a BART train down the peninsula to Millbrae, at the end of the Red Line. It was one stop past the airport and the Op had to ask himself why he'd agreed to meet for lunch in San Francisco instead of somewhere closer to his next destination. Millbrae was where he was meeting Louisa for coffee, at a Starbucks. Millbrae was maybe half an hour closer to her than downtown San Francisco, thirty minutes she'd need if she wanted to get back in time for a farewell dinner with her potential clients.

The place was crowded, but she'd come early enough before he did to wait for a table to open up. She was sitting at it when he came in. He sat down, trying not to jostle the table next to them. The patrons on either side had to scoot over to make room.

"I ordered lattes," she said, smiling, "just to save time, but I don't know what you like. You'll have to tell me sometime, Mystery Man."

He told her. She said he was looking "like, slimmer." He admitted he was losing weight. The case must be getting to him. She looked concerned.

"You'll need more than a latte. I'll order you something to eat." She slid over on the bench and began to stand up.

"Please don't. I just ate. And we don't have a lot of time."

She sat down again, keeping her coat on. It was a long wait, but the Op didn't mind. He enjoyed looking at her. He enjoyed talking about last night with her, about the Bix, and City Lights. About Capablanca, for that matter. He enjoyed hearing more about what it was like growing up Sri Lankan in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Dating, for instance.

"The boys . . . well, I guess they're like boys everywhere. But they saw me as, like, exotic? And I let them. They found me attractive that way, even though I was as American as any of them. It was the only way to be accepted. Especially for a fat girl, like me."

"You're not fat," he said.

"Now I know you're in love!" She laughed, and her dark eyes sparkled.

"And the girls, too? They saw you as 'exotic'?"

"Absolutely. But instead of letting them use it to push me away, I embraced it, you know?—a stranger in a strange land? Even a prejudiced person finds it hard to resist doing a kindness to a stranger, once they ask for help. And I didn't fit any of their, like, racist stereotypes. With my *bindi* (the teachers let me wear it when I said it was part of my ethnic identity), and my head scarves, and my accent, which I put on and took off with my mascara, I was as exotic as Scheherazade. I wore my sari to the prom."

"I'm glad it worked for you, embracing the difference. But I think their acceptance had more to do with your personality than you give yourself credit for. It didn't work for me."

"Being exotic?"

"Being who I am." He wanted to change the subject. "How's *appah*?"

She sighed. "I told him about us. That we were seeing each other."

"And?"

"He took it well. He likes you. And so far we're not . . . well, he doesn't think it's serious."

"Is it?"

She looked coy. "We'll see. When we get back to Boston."

They moved on. She'd just begun to describe the first of the three guests at tonight's dinner when the barista called her name.

As she made her way to the counter, he got out his phone and logged onto Lichess to resume a game he'd started on the ride down. His old friend LSR 36 had reappeared, and they'd picked up where they left off nine days ago, in Alan's Diner. LSR 36 had made his last move just as the Op arrived in Millbrae. This would only take a second.

Before he knew it, ten minutes had passed.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?" It was a woman dressed for shopping, with a bag that said *Talbots*.

"Yes, sorry," said the Op, and gestured with his phone toward the purse lying on the table. That's when he noticed it was missing. He turned and looked at the pickup counter. She wasn't there.

"I mean, no," he said, rising. He grabbed his hat off the table and his coat off the back of his chair and headed for the counter.

He found the two lattes, with Louisa's name on them, waiting to be picked up. Maybe she'd ordered something for him to eat after all? He checked the line for "Orders." Bathroom? He went to the back of the store and described her to the people waiting there. Headshakes.

He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening on his cell, dialing and texting her number and leaving messages. He called her hotel. No, Ms. Montrose hadn't checked out. Her bio on the 3Dical website listed no contact information he didn't already have. He scoured the site for a live person to call, knowing it was hopeless. Around 6 pm, he stopped trying—she'd be at dinner with her clients by now, if all was going as she'd planned. Maybe her phone had run out of juice and she hadn't noticed. Maybe she'd turned off the ringer and forgot to turn it on. He'd try again at 10 pm. She'd have to be in her room by then. She had an early flight to catch. He skipped dinner and sat on the bed, trying to distract himself, going over the plan for tomorrow night again and again.

He couldn't wait until 10. At 9:30 he picked up his phone. He dialed and kept dialing for ten minutes with no result. He texted one last time before going to bed. He had to get some sleep. Tomorrow would be a big day and tomorrow night even bigger. He'd have to stay alert.

He'd no sooner closed his eyes than he heard *Die Moldau*. It was Brit. She and the girls had arrived and checked in at the Drisco, a five-star in Pacific Heights, near the Presidio.

"Tommy reserved us a suite because he's having work done on one of the bedrooms in his condo. You should see this place!" She sounded like the girl who'd left Atoka 17 years ago. "And the views!"

"Is Mitzi staying at the Drisco, too?"

"She made her own arrangements. But we'll all be getting together at Tommy's tomorrow for lunch, and then he'll show us around the city. I'd like you to be there."

"For lunch? Why?"

"Because I'd like to discuss the case with you and have everyone involved present—not just me, but the whole family—everyone it affects."

"Tommy included?"

She hesitated, but her voice was firm. "Tommy included."

Yes, indeed, thought the Op. Faster than a pinto chasing a buffalo.

"And Mitzi?"

"She *is* Fletch's ex-wife." As if nothing could be clearer.

"Speaking of getting together," he said, "I've got a couple of friends visiting here who'd love to meet you. Monica Spinoso—the receptionist you met at the office? She's here with her fiancé. She came to your show at the ICA and really loves your work. She was excited when she heard you were coming here."

"Bring her along."

"You don't mind discussing the case in front of her?"

"Nothing to hide. Besides, you've probably already discussed it with her."

"What makes you say that?"

"Don't all the private eyes talk about the case with their secretaries?"

He supposed they did.

"And her fiancé?" he asked.

"How could I keep them apart?"

After Brit's call it took him until midnight to doze off. He kept thinking about Louisa.

The phone woke him up from a dreamless sleep. The room phone. He tapped the face of his cell: 1:32 am. Then he reached for the handset.

It was the front desk.

"There's a police detective here. She—they . . . they want to talk to you. They told me to let you know."

He turned on the scone over the headboard, got out of bed, and grabbed his bathrobe. Then he sat back on the bed waiting for the knock at the door.

They flashed a badge and introduced themselves as Inspector Adelle Ventura, Homicide Division.

Ventura was two heads shorter than the Op, built like a tank, and wearing a dark grey jacket and wrinkled skirt. No make-up. Tiny holes where their ear-studs belonged. Their blonde hair was clipped short, but not too short to brush back. It looked finger-combed. They asked his name and could they come in. The Op gave his name standing in the doorway.

"A woman was killed tonight at Stockton and Bush Streets. Bartender downstairs says you knew her."

He stopped breathing. There was a roaring in his ears.

"Name of Wong, Sandra Wong."

He exhaled, then asked, "Am I a suspect?"

"Should you be?"

"Wait there." The Op went to the closet and took his wallet out of his suitcoat. He went back to the door and showed DS Ventura his license. "Wong's been keeping an eye on me since I checked in last Saturday night. Yesterday I thought I'd give myself a chance to find out why. I invited her to have a drink at the bar. The bartender has a good memory."

"You asked for a straw," said Venture, by way of explanation. Not a word about his size. "Why are you here in the City, and why would she be interested in you?"

"Do I need an alibi?"

"Do you have one?"

The Op stepped outside into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

"So here's what I'm guessing. I don't need one." He gave his reasons.

First, if the SFPD suspected he had anything to do with Wong's death, he wouldn't be standing in his bathrobe here outside his door. He'd be sitting in his bathrobe in an interrogation room. Second, the fact that he'd been rousted at 1:30 am indicated that Ventura had waited more than three hours before asking the front desk to call him, since the Laurel Court bar closed at 10. There was clearly no urgency. This conversation could have waited until the morning. Third, the Op and Sandra Wong had left the bar separately. The bartender was there when the Op rushed out, leaving Sandra, her Manhattan, and her cleavage to fend for themselves. The man would have told Ventura that.

"Four, you have no backup, so I'm not a threat. In fact, I bet your partner doesn't know you're here. Maybe no one does."

He saw a flicker of uncertainty in Ventura's eyes.

"Now let's go back to the second reason. Why are we having this conversation now and not tomorrow morning? You were going home to bed—no, your hair tells me you were asleep--when you got a call that sent you running over here. I'm assuming it wasn't from a witness who saw me with Sandra Wong later that night, because I was with another woman from the moment I left the bar. So why?"

"Insomnia. I need to tire myself out so I can sleep."

"Or you got a call from a higher up."

Ventura was about to speak but the Op continued.

"Let me keep guessing, since I seem to be on a roll. You weren't told to get your ass moving. You were told to lay off."

Ventura didn't respond.

"And now you're in trouble, aren't you? If I want you to be."

More silence.

"Wait in the lobby while I get dressed. It'll be a while. I want it to seem like you're gone. Then let's take a walk. I think we can help each other."

They were a block away from the Fairmont, headed for Chinatown, before Ventura said, "Bugged?"

The Op nodded. Then waited for Ventura to begin.

Yes, Ventura's boss had called. The two of them were not on the best of terms. "Trans people make his skin crawl," they said. But there was more to it than that.

"There's something going on at HQ that doesn't smell right," said Ventura. "This is the third murder of an Asian national we've had in the last year. I was assigned to two of them—the first, and now this one. In the first I was put on a leash. I'd get a lead and, 'Nothing there. Waste of time and money. Move on.' That case is still breathing, but not moving. In this one I was told, 'The fat man'—that's you—is off limits." They paused. "This is more than I should be saying. But."

"Don't worry. I'm not interested in getting you canned. In fact, I'm willing to trade some information."

"I'm listening."

"I need more first. How was she killed?"

"Gunshot wound to the chest, up close. Straight to the heart. At the Burritt Street intersection near the overpass, where Stockton enters the tunnel. She was on her way to the 'Boosshe.'" Ventura pursed their lips like a gasping carp as they said the word.

"Boosh'?"

"A French restaurant. Transatlantic humor. Bush Street crosses Stockton there."

"How do you know that's where she was headed?"

"Someone told her to meet there."

Ventura waited for the Op to say something, but what? "That was me," maybe? When he didn't, they continued.

"By the way, where do you keep your gun?"

"I don't own one."

Again, silence. They were between streetlights, so the Op couldn't see Ventura's face. Were they skeptical? Or just trying to put something together?

"We found a text message on her phone."

The Op knew it wasn't hard to use facial recognition if you had the right face, even a dead one.

"Said to meet there to find out 'where K is.' Exact words. Couldn't trace the number. A burner."

"When did it happen?"

"Around 9. A priest called it in."

"Bald? Built like Mike Tyson?"

Now Ventura glanced up at him. "According to people at the scene."

"He wasn't there when you arrived?"

"You know this guy?"

"I think so."

Now it was the Op's turn. He said he was in San Francisco working a missing persons case for a corporate client. The mp was being sought by two other organizations, identities unknown. Neither of them wanted anyone to get in his way.

"And one of them can make sure the cops don't," said Ventura, tracing a big "F" in the air.

"I think so."

"So who does the priest work for?"

"My client."

"You know you've told me enough to arrest you on suspicion of accessory to murder?"

"But you won't, will you?"

"Don't dare me."

"Wouldn't think of it. And I'll make it worth your while."

He let Ventura in on the plan.

"I'll call in the morning," said the Op, and the two went their separate ways.

He returned to his room around half past two. Tried to sleep. No dice.

Before he knew it, he was standing next to the bed, looking down at it. But it wasn't his bed. It was his grandmother's.

He was back in her room, in the flat in Eastie. She was dying of heart failure. She'd reached the point where she no longer wanted to take the medication. She didn't like how it made her feel. And she was tired. She made an announcement and went to bed. Refused to eat. The doctor said there was nothing more to do, and the hospice worker described how it would go.

When she'd taken to her bed, her eyes had been alert, defiant. He would bring her news of the outside world, and water to sip, and help her get to the bathroom. That lasted for a week. Then she became silent, and her eyes changed from defiant to pleading. The water became ice chips. The bathroom trips stopped. He would sit in her room, in the dark, and fall asleep listening to the clock, until the moment she would begin talking in her sleep, or wake into rambling delirium.

The night she died, she began to talk, but she wasn't asleep, or delirious. She called his name. He came over to the bed, where the night-light was reflected in her half-opened eyes.

"I told you she was dead," she told him in a low voice.

It took him a moment to realize she was wide awake.

"What?" he asked.

"I *told* you she was *dead*," she said clearly. But the struggle seemed to exhaust her. She closed her eyes.

"Who?" he asked.

She didn't answer. The next morning, he found her breathless and motionless.

In his dream, she was just a pair of eyes glimmering in the dark, and the sound of quick, shallow breathing. Her voice seemed to come from all directions at once. In it he heard fear, and remorse.

Again, he asked, "Who?"

He read the reply in her eyes. *She's alive.*

Chapter 25

He remembered the dream the next morning, but not until he was brushing his teeth. It was after 10. He'd managed to get some sleep after all.

He knew the "why?" of it: Louisa's disappearance, Ventura's announcement—"a woman was killed tonight." But he still didn't know what it meant.

He didn't believe that dreams could reveal anything you didn't already know. *She's alive*. It was a telegram from the mind to itself, sent from an outlying territory that belonged to it, nominally, but that it could never visit. Messages to the emperor borne by his own emissaries, but written in a code whose key the emperor had misplaced or discarded.

He set about the task of reconstructing that key.

"I *told* you she was *dead*."

He stopped brushing and looked in the mirror.

When? When had his grandmother told him?

His mother had walked out the door on a Friday, the year of their last summer in Gloucester. They'd returned from Cape Ann the week before, and his father had just gotten home from work. Ordinarily, his dad would be in a TGIF mood: buoyant, lighthearted. Instead, the boy heard the two of them arguing, with fragments of his father's voice—"see him again," "that man"—poking up sharply out of the fog of muffled shouting at the bottom of the stairs.

"That Man" had insinuated himself into their lives since as far back as the boy could remember. He would surface intermittently. Weeks might go by. Even months. Once he disappeared for three years. The boy's parents would reconcile, the family would fall back into its routines. And then, there he was—or wasn't. The boy never saw or heard him. The only sign of his presence was his parents yelling, and the words, "that man," coming up the stairs, like a bad smell. That's when he would look for his grandmother, and *My Book House*.

But he was ten now, too old for storybooks. This time he started down the stairs.

They were standing in the foyer and fell silent when they heard his footsteps. They looked up at him. His father's face was scowling, angry, his mother's pale, expressionless. She was dressed to go shopping and had her purse. His father turned back to her. "Think of your son!" he shouted, pointing up at him.

"I am thinking of him," said his mother quietly. Then she walked out the door.

Days passed. A week. As far as he knew, his father never called the police to report her missing. At least, no officers ever appeared at the door to gather information. When the boy asked if she was ever coming back, his father would only say, "I don't know."

Thanksgiving came and went, then Christmas. The three of them spent the holidays as they always did, with his father's relatives--his mother and grandmother had none to speak of. The following spring, his father died of pneumonia, drowning in his own fluids. That was the end of family holidays altogether. Soon afterwards, the boy and his grandmother moved from Brookline to the flat in Eastie.

He already suspected what "That Man" was. These suspicions were confirmed by his father's and grandmother's refusal to speak about what happened. Three years later, just days before he began high school, he found the courage to put his suspicions into words.

"It doesn't matter," said his grandmother, not answering his question. "She's not coming back. She's dead."

How? She shook her head, slowly. He knew that look. He would get nothing more.

Rubbing the electric razor around and around his double chins, he wondered now, "Did she mean, 'dead *to me*'?"

Testing the water under the shower head and stepping into the tub, he repeated to himself what his grandmother had said the night she died, as he'd heard it: "I *told* you she was *dead*." But had he heard right? The voice was so faint. Perhaps she'd muttered, "I told you she was *dead*."

There's a lot to be learned from where and when a syllable is stressed. That's something he learned from Mr. Clark. The first statement was impatient, dismissive. "Stop asking. It's pointless. Listen to what I'm saying." The other had an unspoken alternative dangling from the end of it, like someone hanging onto a ledge by their fingertips, invisible to passers-by.

But if his mother were alive, she would have contacted him, wouldn't she? Eventually? If it was an adulterous affair, why not get a divorce? If divorce was out of the question, what had changed on that day, to send her out the door forever?

What if That Man had never been her lover after all?

The thought sent other thoughts in all directions.

What was he, then? Her pusher?

Nonsense.

Her confessor?

"I am thinking of him"—of the boy.

She was protecting him.

From what? And how?

Before getting dressed, he went online to make sure Sandra Wong's death had been reported in the *Chronicle*. There it was. He dialed SFPD Headquarters.

"I have some information regarding the murder of Sandra Wong," said the Op. "May I speak to the officer in charge of the investigation?" In half a minute, he was talking to Ventura. He repeated what he'd said when questioned last night, and the two wished each other a good day.

He was tying his shoes when Louisa called. As he picked up the phone, he found himself panting and out of breath. Tying his shoes often did that. He waited a few seconds before hitting the green button. He didn't want her to think he was worried. Or angry.

She was sorry. So very, very sorry. Something had happened, like, at the pick-up counter? She couldn't explain now. He would have to trust her—could he do that? She'd have called or texted, but her phone was dead. Just like that! She felt horrible! Did he get her email?

He hadn't thought to look.

"I was, like, frantic when I got back to my room." She'd tried What'sAp, but the WIFI at the hotel was down just then, and the in-house phone didn't reach outside lines, except for emergencies.

"And I had to get ready for dinner. When I got back later, the WIFI was working, but you didn't pick up. So I emailed."

"I put everything in sleep mode when I go to bed." Her itemized list of excuses irritated him. "When did you call?"

"I thought that might be it. Hoped, actually."

She waited for him to continue.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm at the airport. I had to rebook my flight because the repair place didn't open until 8."

"What happened, Louisa? At Starbuck's?" He'd run out of patience.

There was a long pause.

"I had an accident."

Now he was alarmed. "Are you hurt?"

"No. Just" He let the silence find its own end. "Something I ate at lunch . . . like, came out wrong. While I was standing there." Her hesitations were excruciating. "I had to run to the bathroom, but it was too late. My skirt was I washed up the best I could . . . "

"It's ok, it's ok. I understand." He wanted her to stop.

". . . but I was in there a long time."

"No one saw you go in."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could take them back. It was something only a detective would say.

And that's how she took it.

"No one was there when I went in," she said, in a flat tone that reminded him of their conversation at Frontier Village and made him wince. "And when I came out, all I wanted to do was go back to my room. I looked at where we were sitting, to tell you, but you were gone." She could have stopped there and let the implication sink in: he'd run out on her, not the other way around. But in the

next second she was pleading. "Will you call me when you get to Boston? Please."

He said he would. He didn't know when that would be.

"I'm stopping in Fort Dodge on my way back," she continued. "It's time I had a talk with *Appah*. I'll let you know how it goes, ok?"

"Yes. Let me know."

"We're boarding. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Love you!"

He paused an instant too long before saying, "I love you, too."

She'd hung up.

* * * * *

"A beachcomber," said Tommy.

Brit had asked what that orange triangle was, poking up from behind a dune.

It was another bright and sunny day, with another cloud bank hovering over the sea and the sunlight slanting from the left, casting a deep De Chirico shadow-slash across the terrace and up the low blue stucco wall on the opposite side.

"It looks like a pyramid," said Mitzi. "From here. What do you think, Flo?"

The girl had been almost entirely silent since the Op and his friends arrived. Near to sullen.

"I think it looks like a tent," she said, without looking up. Slouched down in her Frontgate armchair, she was almost prone.

"Oh, c'mon, Sweetie," said Mitzi. "You've got your mom's eye. And her imagination."

Everyone looked at Flo. Except for Xenie. Her eyes were on her dad, sitting next to her. Her hand was under his, resting on the arm of his chair.

Flo remained silent and slouched.

"Actually, it is a tent, for a homeless person," said the Op. Tommy glared in his direction. "Sorry. I have no imagination."

Sam and Monica watched and listened attentively.

Tommy had spent most of the time since they'd arrived touting the amenities of his lovely home and the merits of San

Francisco in general: the weather, the food, the views. His business prospects. The homeless didn't figure in his rosy picture, any more than earthquakes or rush hour traffic on the Bay Bridge.

Observing Flo's behavior, the Op was reminded of what he'd said to Nevis that morning when he gave his update, including Walter Neff's latest communication. It had arrived just after Louisa's call and just before he'd left to pick up Sam and Monica at the citizenM on Union Square.

I said no cops. 1382 27th Ave. 2:30 am. Just you. You're being watched. WN.

He'd known this would happen, counted on it. How could Downing not call the cops? And how could Neff not know the Op's every move? Everyone else did. Almost.

"What is he up to?" asked Mr. Nevis. "And how does he know about the police? And how is he keeping track of you? For that matter, why would he even be *interested* in you, except as a threat to avoid?" Suspicion had crept into his voice, along with a hint of exasperation. If intonations were fine wines, a sommelier would describe Nevis's right now as high in tannin and rich in "notes": a vintage aged for many years in a cool dark place.

The Op said the first thing that came to his mind. "Maybe he's not interested in me. Maybe he's interested in Flo."

"Flo?" asked Nevis, sincerely mystified.

"If he is Fletcher Kraft, then she's his natural daughter, unlike Xenie."

"Go on."

"My first impression of the family, after I talked to them at their home, was that they were taking Kraft's disappearance almost in stride. Mitzi, who'd been married to him, described him as a kind of conjugal hologram, not really there. All talk but no action on the family front. His present family seems to fit his needs, as she described them. Ersatz, a kind of Potemkin family unit. Brit was mostly concerned about financial support and the two girls were

more interested in milk and cookies than Dad's whereabouts. Neither of them had a single question for me.

"But when I think back on it, Flo was the only one I didn't talk to directly. I took the others' indifference to be hers, too. That may have been a hasty conclusion. Not just about her, but about her father's feelings toward her."

"This is all assuming Neff is Kraft."

"It's the best I can do, right now."

"What, exactly, is your plan?"

"I'll go to the address early, around 2:00 am. I'm assuming the door will be unlocked when I get there. Then I'll wait and see what happens."

"Forward me the message from Neff. Go to the address at the appointed time. Wait for this 'Neff' fellow to show up. If he is Fletcher Kraft, and he seems of sound mind, persuade him to return to his wife and children. Tell him Transcoastal will hold his job open for him as long as he wants. If it's someone else, persuade him to take you to Kraft and make your pitch. If he asks for money, tell him you need to discuss the offer with us. Whatever you do, *don't* get the police involved, or anyone else. Clearly, that will only do more harm than good."

"Not calling the police might get me in a lot of hot water. What will you do to make it worth my while?"

The silence on the other end was deafening.

"Whatever it takes," said Nevis.

"Ten grand should cover it."

Mr. Nevis hung up.

The Op was under no illusions about what would "happen next" if Kraft did show up at the appointed time. Not just to Kraft, but to him. And if it wasn't Kraft who showed up, he didn't think whoever walked in the door of 1372 27th Avenue early tomorrow morning would lead him to Kraft, no matter how much money he was offered, and even if he wanted to.

* * * * *

When it was time for Brit and the girls to leave with Tommy on their tour of the city, Mitzi excused herself. She had a gallery owner to meet with, "and a curator at SF MOMA."

"How about if we drop you off?" said the Op. "I have a couple of questions, and you've been a big help. And, you might have questions for me."

"That'd be great, thanks." She took out her phone and read him the address. 456 Montgomery Plaza.

Mitzi rode shotgun, Monica and Sam in the back.

"You seem pretty close to Brit and her family," said the Op. "It must have been difficult."

"Difficult? What, exactly?"

"Your ex being married to your client. You must have run into each other on a regular basis."

"We had no hard feelings. It'd been years, after all. In fact, Fletch and I got along well from the start."

"I was told you used a photo of his tie, the one with the Giza pyramids, in the publicity brochure you showed me for Brit's exhibition. Wouldn't a professional photo be a better choice?"

"Don't you think it works?"

"Actually, I do. I like the texture. But what gave you the idea? And how did you get Mr. Kraft to agree?"

"I didn't have to. I had a photo of the tie, from when we were married."

"So you surprised him with it?"

Mitzi hesitated.

"Yes," she said at last. "I mean, he was surprised when he saw it. I didn't intend to surprise him. He appreciated the compliment, I think. He was very proud of that deal, and it was a way for me to say, 'Let's let bygones be bygones.'"

"I thought the two of you got along well from the start. No hard feelings."

"I mean, . . ." She paused to think of what she meant.

"Who else was involved, do you know?"

"In the brochure?"

"No, the deal."

Mitzi hesitated again.

"Why do you ask?"

"Brit tells me he had the tie when he left the house that morning. She says he never fails to wear it to his West Coast business meetings."

"And that's important?"

"It might be."

Mitzi was silent. The Op continued.

"So, do you know of anyone else in the company who was involved in that Egyptian deal, and would know about the tie?"

"Sorry, I can't help you."

They pulled up next to the Montgomery Plaza.

"Thanks," said Mitzi. She closed the door and started walking south on Montgomery, waving back as she went.

"Why is she walking away? Isn't this the address she gave you?" asked Sam.

"She must have changed her mind," said the Op. "Or maybe I changed it for her."

Chapter 26

On their way to the citizenM, the Op debriefed Sam and Monica.

When they'd all left John's Grill yesterday he'd warned them not to say or ask a word about the case, that is, supposing Brit said he could bring them to Tommy's. The less Brit and Tommy and Mitzi knew about what they'd discussed, which included a lot Brit and Tommy and Mitzi didn't know, the better for him.

"Ask about her work or her career, the creative process. Or get him to talk about his Indian heritage, or better, about his business. That will get him going until somebody changes the subject. Or ask the girls about school. Just nothing about the case. I want you there as another set of eyes and ears to help me read the surface talk. Just listen to the ripples in what they say, so I can tell where the deeper currents are running."

"Where do you come up with this stuff?" asked Sam. "Ripples, currents . . . What kind of detective talks that way?"

"Philip Marlowe," said Monica, "on lithium."

"Give me an example," said the Op. He'd heard of Chandler, but never read him.

She thought for a moment. "*He was about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a piece of angel cake.*"

"Litotes. Not bad. He sounds like me. I don't mean Marlowe. The guy he's talking about."

"His name's Moose Malloy, and yeah, now that you mention it. If you keep shedding pounds, you may eventually be in his weight class. Nice duds, by the way."

She was referring to the new slacks, polo shirt, and cable knit quarter-zip he was wearing.

"Thanks. I'll need a new suit, too, for the wedding."

"I thought you were waiting for one."

"Bannon says it's waiting for me. In Boston. Not helpful."

Now, as they sat idling in front of a red light after dropping Mitzi off, he asked about the ripples and currents.

"Whooo, boy!" said Monica.

"Give me a diagram."

She started with Flo and went down the list.

Flo missed her real dad, resented her aspiring step-dad, was pissed at Brit for giving him the time of day, and also pissed at Mitzi for coming on to Brit.

"That's not just sisterly admiration?"

"Flo can tell there's some kind of sex thing there. Mitzi is a threat to any chance of Brit reconnecting with her husband, just like Tommy. And there's more. Suppose Kraft is alive, like Flo is hoping. Not contacting them after all this time makes her doubt his love for her. That is, when she isn't feeling grief at the thought that he might have been killed."

"And Xenie?"

Just then his phone pinged. He ignored it.

"Head over heels at finding her real dad. All for him and Brit getting hitched. But here's the interesting part: I don't think Flo feels any envy or resentment towards her. I think, if anything, she's happy for her, even though what makes Xenie happy makes Flo sad."

"So there's a strong sibling bond there?"

"Definitely," said the woman with three sisters.

"And Tommy?"

"I'll take it from here," said Sam.

He began with the obvious: Tommy was a born salesman.

"Knows how to leverage his heritage to convey sincerity, integrity, dignity. That's appealing to White customers. Or for that matter, White investors."

"How so?" asked the Op. "I'd think it would work better on investors of color."

"You won't find the deep pockets there. But you'll notice he never expresses a single opinion on anything controversial. He'll just mention, whenever there's an opportunity, the benevolent non-

profits he likes to support. Nothing hostile or in-your-face or guilt-trippy. Nothing to threaten White Corporate or trouble White consciences. No talk about reverse discrimination or antiracism or reparations. College funds, targeted business loans, earmarked casino profits."

"He really got to you, didn't he?"

"Put it like this: he wants to come across as one of the 'Good Indians.' No White investor can resist that, the idea of an indigene who's come over to 'our side,' which is to say, capitalism. I hear all this White talk about conspiracies—Jews, Blacks, Hispanics, 'Ayrabs.'" Sam's voice had begun its transition. "Ain't nobody talkin' 'bout the biggest conspiracy OF . . . ALL."

Monica was nodding.

"And you saw all this in just a few minutes?" asked the Op.
"We hardly talked about his business."

"More than a few minutes, or felt that way," said Monica.

"Exactly twenty-three minutes," said Sam. "Uninterrupted. He was trying to impress Brit—his most important White investor ever. He needs her to believe he's a good bet for future growth."

"But how could you . . .?"

"It takes one to know one," said Sam matter-of-factly.

"One what?"

"Oreo. Twinkie. Red Velvet. Black, yellow, or red, the only difference between Tommy and me is I know what I am."

"Why is that significant?"

"*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" It was one of those weird moments (rare and for that reason always surprising) when Sam's Evangelical upbringing popped out of his mouth.

"Oh, yeah. Crucifixion."

"He can do a lot more damage than he thinks because he thinks he's sincere."

They moved on to less fraught observations.

"Looks like Tommy's remodeling one of the bedrooms," said Monica. "Must be why Brit and the girls can't stay there."

"Did you look in there, behind the sawhorse and the stepladder?" asked the Op. He'd pulled up in front of the citizenM and turned to face them.

They shook their heads.

"Think about it."

They thought about it.

"Oh," said Sam.

* * * * *

The "ping" had been a text from Cowper.

p was left in k ovrnite. gone am. k still there. blood def fm kraft. no other dna.

It occurred to him that not all thefts are reported the instant they occur. It might take the victim days to realize they've been robbed. Cowper had more important things to do than download Fort Dodge's crime reports for the last month and pass them along. And he had more important things to do than to read through them. After all, they were useful only if he found what he was looking for: a missing kayak. If he didn't, it wouldn't prove a thing. You can't prove a negative.

More important: the blood on the wallet was Kraft's, and no other person's DNA was found on it.

Sam and Monica were going to spend the rest of the day scoping out a likely spot for the marriage ceremony, maybe Baker Beach. ("It has a gorgeous view of the Golden Gate Bridge!") The weather forecast was for rain tonight, but clearing by tomorrow afternoon. On their way to Tommy's, the three of them had paid a visit to the county clerk's office to get the marriage license and register the Op as officiant. He'd logged onto the Universal Life Church website before breakfast to get his ordination certificate.

After dropping Sam and Monica off, he spent the rest of the afternoon at the DXL in San Bruno, looking to augment his wardrobe. Augment? More like replace. He couldn't marry his two

best friends in a suit he'd . . . what? "Outgrown?" (Can you "ingrow" a suit?)

Peewee Herman was again on duty. He lit up when the Op walked in. Not unexpected. The Op's size made him hard to forget, and it was only yesterday that Mr. Herman had sold him the clothes he was wearing.

"Wow! You really slap, dude!"

"Word, m' man!" said the Op, doing his best imitation of Sam in signifyin' mode. "And I got you to thank!" He extended his hand and the sales assistant gave it a slap. Not knowing what came next, the Op nipped the elaborate ritual in the bud by pretending to be distracted by a rack of new suits.

"Hey, hey, hey!—what's this?"

"New line from Ralph Lauren, bruh. Fire!"

Mr. Herman had the Op put on a Men's XL white Egyptian cotton shirt and try on two or three versions of a blue pinstripe until they found one that fit reasonably well. The stripes were a modest grey. As Mr. Herman tugged at the shoulders, the Op remembered that the drop of grease from the Double Bacon Jam Burger that had landed on his maroon tie still hadn't yielded to scrubbing with Ajax. He'd need a new tie. Some new ties.

Mr. Herman agreed. Looking at the reflection of the Op's big feet at the bottom of the full-length mirror, he said, "You'll also need some new shoes. And socks."

As they pawed through the store's display of silk neckwear, the Op asked, "What's a good tie for officiating at a wedding?"

Mr. Herman raised his eyebrows and straightened up.

"You a Man of the Cloth?"

Well, yes, he thought. Now that he had his official ordination certificate.

"Universal Life."

Mr. Herman looked dubious. He shook his head, more in bewilderment than mockery, as he returned a blue and cherry regimental to the table and picked up a sprightlier number with foggy pastels.

"Sounds like an insurance company."

The Op looked at the tie. "Isn't this a little too, uh, what's the word I'm looking . . ."

"Gay?" asked Mr. Herman, holding it up to the Op's chest.

"No." He blushed. "That is, I mean, I wasn't thinking . .

"Neither was I," said Mr. Herman, pressing the top of the folded tie against the Op's collar and briskly tucking the lower end into the buttoned lapels of the suitcoat.

"Informal' was the word," said the Op.

"I was thinking, 'celebratory.' And no, not at all. It's a wedding. You celebrate weddings." Mr. Herman whisked off the tie and had the Op knot it around his 20-inch neck.

As they studied the effect together in the mirror, Mr. Herman asked, "Where's the wedding? Indoors or out?"

"Out."

"Lawn? Beach? Rocks? Woods?"

"Not sure. Maybe Baker Beach?"

"When?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Be prepared for anything, then. And bring along a good pair of sneakers. Trail down there can get slippery in the rain."

"Rain's supposed to stop by . . ."

"This is San Francisco. The Weather Channel has no jurisdiction here. Oh, and bring a bag to carry them in. You can put your wing tips and socks or whatever in there, too, if you're in the water."

"The water?"

"In case they want to stand in the surf."

"In the surf?"

"Just be sure to roll your cuffs as high as they'll go. Above the knee if possible. You don't want to get salt water on this wool blend. And watch for any rogue waves."

"Is the water cold?"

"You'll probably need a towel."

The Op decided not to ask any more questions he didn't want the answers to.

He used his business credit card.

At 4:30 pm the traffic came to a standstill on US 101, giving him a chance to read the text message that had appeared a minute before. It was from Inspector Ventura: *at the fountain huntington park asap. time?*

He Googled "Huntington Park." It was a block away from the Fairmont. He managed to text 5:30 before the traffic resumed.

Ventura was sitting on a bench wearing men's jeans, sneakers, and a flannel shirt under a down parka. Also a watch cap. The sky was overcast and the temperature had plummeted to the low 40s, but Ventura had their sunglasses on. The park was deserted.

They were reading *The Chronicle*, elbows on knees, and eating something from a paper bag next to them. They didn't look up when the Op walked over and pointed to the rest of the newspaper lying next to the bag.

"Mind if I read that headline?"

Ventura shook their head and handed him the section he'd asked for, then took a handful of what was in the bag, popped it in their mouth, and went back to reading the Sports section.

Popcorn, it sounded like.

"Another hit. Same M.O," they said, staring at the paper.

The Op smiled and shook his head, then gestured toward the headline: "S.F. Job Market Strong, Despite 'Doom Loop.'"

"Who?" he asked.

"Woman. Name Meriam Leversohn. In her hotel room."

Still looking at the headline, the Op muttered, "The Priest?"

"Or his twin. Delivery guy, looks like."

"When?"

"Two hours ago. Officer on the scene guessing 9 millimeter. Like Wong."

"Thanks." He was folding up the newspaper to replace it on the bench when Ventura added, eyes still on the Sports section, "I can't string this out after tonight. He's gone to ground. APB's produced zilch." They turned the page, scanned it, laughed, and looked up, smiling broadly. They held the page up. "If he's not in cuffs by morning, I'm going to the chief. It's my ass either way."

As the Op walked away he heard Ventura mutter, through a mouth full of popcorn, "Nice overcoat."

It didn't make sense. Park, Wong—they made sense. But Mitzi Leversohn?

He was back in his room, lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling. It was past dinnertime, but he wasn't hungry. He knew he'd have to eat something, maybe take a nap, too, if he wanted to be on his game tonight. His new suit was hanging in the closet. He didn't plan to wear it until the wedding. His new wool overcoat was lying folded on the seat of the desk chair with his old fedora on top. The raw weather made him wish he'd also bought a pair of gloves to match.

He thought back to the moment he'd last seen Mitzi.

She got out of the car at Montgomery Plaza, but didn't go inside. Headed south instead, waving goodbye first. Leaned down to make sure they saw her and were waving back. As if to say, "Thanks! But look, I changed my mind. I'm not going inside Montgomery Plaza after all!"

Where John Lorrimer has his office.

It was already clear to the Op that "Captain" Lorrimer was anxious about Kraft's disappearance, and not because he gave a flying fart about Brit or her kids. Also, that he was not plugged into Mr. Nevis's inner circle of intelligence. Or

The Op turned it over in his mind.

Or he was, but had intelligence of his own that he wanted to keep to himself. His own agenda, his own reason to see the Op

privately and ask about the case. One thing was for sure: Lorrimer was as eager to know the whereabouts of Fletcher Kraft as anyone else working at Transcoastal.

If A, then B. Maybe the Op was bad at syllogisms, but even he knew they only worked for things whose definitions everyone could agree on. "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal." That was deduction. But *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*—"if B follows A, then A caused B"—that was inference, the fountainhead of every false assumption about how the world worked from the dawn of astrology to blaming the President for a bear market.

Sometimes, however, where there was smoke there really was fire.

Mitzi asked to be dropped off at Montgomery Plaza to see a gallery owner. It would be easy enough to find out if such a mythical beast rented a lair at that address. But why bother? And what would it prove? What mattered was that Mitzi changed her mind after the Op started asking about the Egyptian tie, a source of keen anxiety to Lorrimer.

And a couple of hours later, Mitzi was dead.

He could only assume she'd circled back to Lorrimer's office once the Op's XTS was out of sight. What had she and Lorrimer discussed? Something dangerous, not just to Mitzi, but to Lorrimer, too. Otherwise, she'd still be alive. Something, also, that had to be delivered, or depended on a delivery being made. Personally. Otherwise, why would Mitzi agree to let the delivery man (he was certain it was Marcovic) come up to her room?

His mind wandered down a side path. How had her body been discovered so fast? Ventura would know, and the Op couldn't call them now. Maybe Marcovic was slipping, and she'd managed to call 911 before bleeding out?

Maybe. No way to be certain. He didn't know anything about Yosef Marcovic, really—not his current whereabouts or state of mind, or any state of mind preceding it.

Marcovic. "Son of Mark." The Lion. The killing machine. Not for the first time in his brief career as an operative, he wished he had the telepathic power of Poe's Chevalier, the power to read his adversary's mind. But as he'd told Louisa and her dad the other night, August Dupin didn't believe in spiritualist hocus-pocus any more than Sherlock Holmes. Or the Op. Holmes had his voluminous paper database, Dupin nothing more than his keen powers of observation. And the "tell." His friend's behavior, random comments, direction of attention as the two of them walked, arm in arm, through the midnight streets of Paris, all of that coupled with Dupin's knowledge of his friend's personality and personal history, enabled the Chevalier to follow the narrator's train of thought without asking a single question.

The Op had only seen Marcovic once, reading a breviary. He'd never had a chance to study his behavior.

But Carla Mattingly had.

He picked up his phone and called Sam.

It was nine o'clock in Boston. There was still time.

Chapter 27

"I'm only doing this because Sam asked."

And it hadn't been easy to get Sam to ask.

"She's stuck her neck so far out her head's on a block. She's just waiting for someone to notice and grab an ax."

"All I'm asking is for you to ask. That's it. I don't want her phone number. You can give her mine. She can call anytime tonight."

"Anytime?"

He paused to think.

"Up to 3 am. Her time."

Sam was silent.

"Hey. You asked me a big ask the other day. Big. But I asked."

The silence continued.

"Nothing about Transcoastal," warned Sam. "Absolutely nothing."

"Call me if she says no, ok? I'll be here, next to my phone. Tell her it won't take more than five minutes. Well, maybe ten, or . . ."

"Five minutes, I'm telling her."

"Five minutes."

Before hanging up, the Op asked if they'd settled on a wedding site. Baker Beach, said Sam. North end. That had the best view of the bridge.

It was 7:27 pm—well past ten o'clock in Boston—when Mattingly called. He set his Stopwatch app before answering.

"I've got a stack of briefs on my desk," said Carla, "and I'm due in court first thing tomorrow." Her voice reminded him of Dawn-Lyon Gardner's, and he pictured a slim, gorgeous Black woman in a pearl gray business suit asking to "approach the bench."

"Thanks for making the time. Really. I appreciate it. Do you recall that meeting you told Sam about, to discuss Fletcher Kraft's disappearance, with Nevis and Marcovic in the room?"

"Yes. Vividly."

"You told Sam that Marcovic 'radiated menace.'"

"Yes."

"How? Anything he said?"

"No. He didn't say a word."

"Posture? Eye contact? Facial expression?"

"He stood the whole time, leaning against a wall. It was creepy, know what I'm saying? What is he doing here? Big, powerful. Standing in the shadows. Not talking."

"Standing? Sam said he was sitting down."

"No. I said he *would* be big, even sitting down. But he wasn't sitting. And that contributed to the whole effect. Stone face. No eye contact. Except with his phone."

"He was on the phone?"

"He was tapping the screen."

"Texting."

Carla didn't answer right away.

"No. Not texting. He was tapping the screen, but they were just, like, separate taps. They didn't sound like he was typing words or sentences."

"So, intermittent? Like, maybe, he was playing a video game?"

"Maybe. The screen lit up his face—that made the whole thing spookier. But the light was steady. If he was gaming, there wasn't much action going on."

The Op was well into his second minute.

"Why do you think Mr. Nevis brought Marcovic along? If he wasn't going to participate?"

"Oh, I think it was the other way around."

"Come again?"

"I had the impression Marcovic was in charge. Like I say, he never made eye contact with anyone, including Nevis. But Nevis

kept trying to make eye contact with him. He sat on the other side of the table—from where Marcovic was standing? And every once in a while, when he was asked a question, he'd glance up, as if he'd find the answer there, or to make sure he was answering correctly. But Marcovic just stared at his screen."

"About that. You said the tapping didn't sound like texting. Did the taps have a sound?"

"A 'tap' kind of sound."

"Like?"

"Like a finger tapping a board."

She demonstrated by tapping on a hard surface and holding the phone next to her fingertip. He could tell her nails were cut short.

"That's not quite it, but close. It was quiet, but audible."

"So he didn't mute his phone?"

"I think it was his way of saying, to all of us, but especially to Nevis, 'Fuck you.'"

"You think maybe he was there to keep an eye—or an ear—on Nevis?"

"Maybe. While pretending he wasn't interested in any of it."

Three minutes and counting.

"If he was playing a video game, and listening to the discussion, and 'radiating menace,' all at the same time, he's not the Neanderthal he appears to be. Or wants us to think he is."

"They came in pairs."

"Huh?"

"The taps. I remember he would tap the screen twice. I could see his thumb moving. But only the second one made a 'tap' sound. And between the pairs there'd be longer pauses."

"You have an amazing memory."

"It was so goddamned distracting!"

He was about to thank her and say goodbye when something occurred to him. "Can you hold on just a second or two?"

When he came back on the line 15 seconds later, Carla said,
"You've got less than a minute."

"Did the taps sound like this?"

She listened.

"Yes. Exactly like that."

Marcovic was playing Lichess.

As soon as he hung up, the Op called Bannon. Bannon
picked up on the first ring.

"Who else besides you and me and the LA bureau knows that
Gutiérrez is working the Kraft case with me?"

"Dunno. Only Nevis, I imagine. Like I said, he may have
asked HQ to get you some help. How's it going, by the way? I
understand you've got a lead on this 'Walter Neff' character."

"Meeting with him tonight. 2:30. Who told you?"

"Nevis. He called to say it's all over if Neff doesn't show."

"Or if he does."

Bannon misunderstood. "You mean if he's not Fletcher Kraft?"

"He won't be Fletcher Kraft."

After they hung up, the Op lay back down on the bed.

So Marcovic was turingm. He should have figured it out when
Gutiérrez said he'd been playing him, too. Pawn chains. Right. And
Mr. Nevis, Transcoastal's head of security? A figurehead,
apparently. The foot soldier was the field marshal, the point man at
the head of the phalanx that everyone else, including Mr. Nevis,
had to line up behind, like diagonal pawns.

But if Marcovic was the brains behind whatever Transcoastal
was trying to hush up by assassinating Fletcher Kraft, why was he
doing all the heavy lifting? If he was a higher-up in the Russian or
Serbian or some other Eastern European outfit, why not send a
low-level knuckle dragger to keep tabs on the Op and liquidate the
competition, and the target? Maybe he and Nevis had a little

arrangement of their own that his mob associates weren't supposed to know about.

At that moment, his phone pinged. It was a challenge-URL from turingm. Almost simultaneously, another text message appeared, sender unknown. "Special Delivery."

Instead of accepting the challenge, he set the alarm for 1:00 am, put the phone in sleep mode, and set it on the nightstand.

Outside it was starting to rain.

He was sitting in the dark.

Downstairs, a door opened and closed. Someone was climbing the stairs. From the sound of the footsteps, it was a man.

He had so many questions, but he couldn't remember what they were.

He stood, walked over to the window, and pulled the curtain aside.

The rain had become a torrent. Swirling eddies of foam glimmered in the street. Paper trash floated by, white as snow. The torrent grew in volume and speed as he watched.

A car floated by. He could smell the interior. Cigars.

A desk floated by.

A corpse, turning over. An arm flopping up, then down.

The man was in the room, now, standing behind him.

Downstairs, he heard the door open and close again.

Footsteps. A woman's this time. Coming up the stairs.

The rain fell harder, obliterating the street scene.

He dropped the curtain.

The sound of rain was deafening.

He opened his eyes and turned off the alarm.

It was 1:00 am.

Chapter 28

The house on 27th Avenue was as he expected: a two-car garage at street level with a paved parking area in front and two floors of living quarters above. A picture window faced the street.

He was glad he hadn't worn his new suit. Or his new shoes. The rain was flowing in sheets down the sidewalk.

He climbed the long flight of steps to the porch and opened the door.

Inside it was pitch dark, but he had no trouble making his way to the living room. He placed his wet windbreaker on the coffee table and sat down in an armchair facing the window. The faint glow of a streetlight three doors away filled up a dark gray rectangle in the deeper darkness of the wall in front of him. From where he sat, he also had a good view of the wide doorway to the foyer, where he'd just entered. That rectangle was darker still.

He assumed Marcovic was somewhere in the house, maybe in the dining room behind him. In any case, within earshot and close enough to make his play when the time was right. He would have made sure to arrive well before the Op did, to avoid being spotted. He wouldn't want to show himself before Neff, or Kraft, came through the front door. He and Nevis might still need the Op if neither man appeared, and Neff seemed to have some kind of personal connection to the Op that might prove useful. Finally, it was possible that Marcovic and Nevis suspected a trap. Best to see how reality unfolded before doing anything.

The sound of the rain was having a narcotic effect. To help himself stay awake, he took out his phone and re-checked the text message he'd prepared for Ventura:

now

All he had to do was push "Send."

As he was putting the phone away, the front door opened.

He froze. It was barely past 2:00 am. Way too early.
A shape appeared in the foyer.
A man. A short man.
He heard a click and the light above the man's head came on.
Tommy.

* * * * *

Tommy walked into the living room and sat on the sofa under the picture window, across from the Op. He rested his gun on his lap. The slanting light from the entryway illuminated his face.

"You can't be here!" mouthed the Op, leaning into the light.

Tommy leaned forward and whispered, "Is he here?"

"Of course, I'm here," said a high, quiet voice.

"Mr. Neff?" shouted Tommy, pointing his gun at the doorway.

"Come out where I can see you!" He stood and walked rapidly toward the foyer, holding the gun in front of him.

"Tommy!" said the Op.

It was over in a second.

A big hand pulled Tommy out of sight and the Op heard a loud smack. A shadow spread across the floor of the foyer. The Op reached for his phone, but stopped when Yosef Marcovic appeared. Dragging Tommy by the collar with one hand and pointing Tommy's gun at the Op with the other, he ducked his head to pass through the doorway.

"I understand you don't carry a weapon." His voice was hoarse and incongruously light and airy, with a faint but distinct accent. He sounded as though his larynx had been injured at some point.

"I don't own one. But my organization makes them available."

"Has it?"

The Op said nothing.

Marcovic dropped Tommy's unconscious form on the carpet.

"Stand up and let's see."

Patting the Op's huge frame, he discovered the cell phone.

"Let's leave this here," he said, placing it gently on the coffee table, "in case it's needed."

Satisfied that the Op was unarmed, Marcovic gestured for him to sit, then took the spot just vacated by Tommy. His bald, bullet-shaped head shone in the light from the foyer, which made dark shadows of his eye sockets under a prominent brow. He wore a white shirt with an open collar that revealed his tattoos. They were blurred beyond recognition by age and corrosives.

He waved Tommy's gun. "This is unloaded, by the way."

He waited for the Op to say something.

"Do you know how I can tell?"

No reply.

"The imbalance." He put the pistol down on the table, leaned back, and reached into his suit jacket.

"This is more appropriate, in the present circumstances."

The Op recognized the weapon: a Beretta M9A4. Nine millimeters, ten rounds. Cerakoted a dull light brown.

Marcovic reached under the opposite lapel and drew out a small cylinder. He screwed it into the muzzle of the Beretta. Holding the gun in one hand, he reached in a third time and brought out a handful of zip-tie handcuffs. He wagged them back and forth.

"You never know when you'll need these to keep someone in their seat and paying attention."

He placed them on the coffee table next to the cell phone and the Op's jacket.

"Now I must ask you to stand, turn around, and place your hands behind your back."

The Op did as he was told.

Close behind him, he heard Marcovic say, "Wrists together, please."

Soon he was sitting down again with his arms securely fastened behind him and his ankles cuffed.

Marcovic did the same to Tommy's supine form, keeping the man's face to the floor. Then he walked to the foyer and reached behind the wall. The light went off.

He returned to the sofa, leaned back, and said, "Now, we wait."

The Op let half a minute pass before he spoke.

"You knew Tommy wasn't Walter Neff before I said his name. Before he even asked if *you* were. Did someone tell you about him?"

"Yes. But that's not how I knew." There was a note of pride, even braggadocio, in the high, quiet voice.

The Op remained silent, to test his impression.

"Do you want to know how I knew?" asked Marcovic.

"How?"

"He asked you, *Is he here?*"

Marcovic smiled. He had a lovely smile, so bright it gleamed in the dark.

"I've seen you before," said the Op. "In the Des Moines airport."

"I was reading my breviary."

"You were tailing me. Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"The gun. You really think that will get Walter Neff to tell you where Kraft is?"

Marcovic smiled again. "We'll see, won't we?"

"Because I told Tommy it wouldn't work, and it won't. It will only get you in trouble with the law."

"Again, we'll just have to see."

The Op decided to take a chance.

"Who told you about Tommy?" He was careful not to use Marcovic's name. He wasn't supposed to know who he was, and he wanted to protect Carla. "Who do you work for? Is it George Nevis?"

The Op saw Marcovic's eyes widen in the gloom beneath his overhanging brow, then disappear.

"Who is George Nevis?"

"The man I work for."

"Why would *I* be working for him, then?" There was irritation in his voice. "I work for myself. No one else."

A minute went by. The Op decided to take another chance.

"You're turingm, aren't you?"

Marcovic didn't reply.

"Special Delivery'?"

He smiled again. "That was a mistake. I sometimes let my sense of humor get the better of my judgment." He spoke ironically, as if it were not true, or if it was, that it posed no serious threat to his mastery of any situation. "Where is Mr. Gutiérrez, by the way? Somewhere nearby, I assume?"

The Op said nothing.

"Because I haven't seen him lately."

Or at all, thought the Op. Even if he had, Marcovic probably wouldn't recognize him. Continental didn't post images of its operatives online and prohibited them from using social media.

"It may interest you to know," said the Op, "that I believe I've mastered the pawn chain."

"Congratulations. I guess we'll never have a chance to find out."

"We have a few minutes."

Marcovic took a moment to think it through.

"We'll leave your phone lying face up on the table," he said.

"I'll play Black."

Tommy groaned. Marcovic glanced down.

The groaning stopped.

"If you were thinking I was going to free your hands," he told the Op, "I'm sorry to disappoint you. You'll have to tell me your moves. I'll translate them to your screen, digitally. That is, with my 'digits.'" He wiggled the fingers on his free hand and smiled again.

Placing his gun on the table, next to Tommy's, he picked up the phone, swiped up the screen, and held it to the Op's face. It cast enough of a glow to activate facial recognition. Marcovic took the

phone back and swiped up and over the screen to see what apps had been left open. "Messages" was one of them.

"What's this?" said Marcovic. "'Now'? And who is 'AV'?" He shrugged. "No matter." He deleted the message, closed the app, and placed the phone back on the table where his opponent could see it. Within half a minute he had issued his challenge and accepted it on the Op's phone: another "from position," featuring pawn chains.

"Bullet. Five minutes. Ten seconds," said Marcovic, meaning each player would get ten seconds per move up to a limit of five minutes. Whoever used up their minutes first would lose. Whoever took more than ten seconds to make a move would automatically lose.

As the Op completed his third move, Tommy came to and began to yell.

"Hold on," said Marcovic, and left the room. The Op heard the sound of ripping. Marcovic came back with a dishtowel cut into two strips tied together, and a washrag. He bunched the washrag and stuffed it into Tommy's mouth, then tied the dish towel tightly around his jaws. Tommy fell silent, struggling to breathe.

Since Marcovic had exhausted his ten seconds during the interruption, he insisted they start over.

"Don't like distractions?" asked the Op.

"I can multitask." The Op knew it was true. "We're expecting a visitor, and I want him to feel welcome."

"Or you needed time to think."

"I *think* you should stop talking," said Marcovic as he reset the board. "There's another dishtowel in the kitchen."

"You'd have to free my hands."

Marcovic's play was rapid and precise, and he was soon winning on elapsed time. But the Op held his own. With a minute to go, they were almost even. The Op lost by three seconds.

"Again?" asked the Op.

"It's almost 2:30."

"I thought you could multitask."

"I can also tell when someone's stalling for time."

"Afraid?"

Through the noise of the rain came the sound of a truck. It squealed to a stop outside the house. Marcovic rose from the sofa and turned to look out the window. From where he sat, the Op could hear the beeping of a commercial vehicle backing up and see the red glow of taillights filling the window frame.

Marcovic moved around the end of the sofa and stood next to it. From this angle he could get a better view of what was happening down in the parking area and not be seen.

Through the sound of the rain, the Op heard a door open and close, then the tailgate of a truck sliding up. The garage door opener sprang to life beneath them.

"Special delivery"? he asked.

Marcovic watched silently.

In another five minutes, the garage door closed, the tailgate of the truck rumbled down, and the driver's side door slammed shut. The Op heard the truck roar to life and drive away.

As soon as the garage door began to close, Marcovic said, in a quiet voice, "Not a sound, or your friend is a dead man." Then he walked over to the foyer.

The Op had seen a door there, framed by the wide doorway to the living room, when Tommy switched on the light. No doubt it opened on the stairs leading down to the garage. Marcovic stationed himself next to the door and waited with his gun drawn.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually there came the sound of creaking from down below. After another minute or two, the

door to the stairway swung open and someone stepped into the foyer.

"Mr. Neff?"

The light in the foyer came on, revealing a man dressed in black. There was a gun pressed to the side of his head. Marcovic's wingspan was wide enough to let him reach the light switch with his other hand.

"Yes," said the man, "I'm Mr. Neff," and dropped his gun.

"You're half an hour late." Marcovic sounded like a teacher chiding a tardy third-grader.

"Sorry. The rain. It . . ."

Marcovic shot him through the head. The silencer, at least, was doing what it was supposed to do. The Op heard only the "whoosh" of compressed air.

Marcovic picked up the man's gun and strode back to the sofa.

"He wasn't late," he said, placing the gun next to Tommy's. "So much for Mr. Gutiérrez."

Marcovic studied the Op across the coffee table for a second or two. then said, "You seem unnaturally calm for a man whose partner's just been killed."

"He was no friend of mine. I didn't ask for him. In fact, he did more harm than good. Like just now."

Marcovic tilted his head to the side and frowned, as if to say, "Whatever." "If Walter Neff doesn't walk through the front door in the next fifteen minutes, we'll draw a line under this chapter and call the story finished."

And there would be no survivor to tell the tale. Or a Fortinbras or Kent to tell it for them. DS Cowper, or maybe Inspector Ventura, might piece together what happened, but there'd be no one to explain why.

"Another game?" asked the Op. "We've got fifteen minutes."

This time it was Marcovic who fell behind. With thirty seconds to go, he proposed a draw. "We don't have time for this."

The Op declined. Marcovic snatched up the phone.

Just then, the front door opened.
Marcovic put the phone back on the table.

Chapter 29

"Mr. Neff?"

"Yes."

"Please come in."

Marcovic turned on the floor lamp, revealing Tommy lying face down next to the coffee table and the Op sitting in the big armchair. The circulation to his hands had stopped. He knew he had maybe another hour before the muscles began to die. His feet were a little numb, but not a cause for alarm.

Mr. Neff stood in the foyer with his hands in the pockets of his trench coat, taking in the scene. He was soaking wet. Water dripped from the brim of his hat. He was, clearly, not Fletcher Kraft.

Marcovic raised the Beretta from his knee.

"Please put your hands up."

Mr. Neff did so. "Who they?" he asked, nodding.

"I believe you and the fat one know each other."

Mr. Neff shrugged.

Marcovic found Mr. Neff's pistol easily enough and stuck it in the back of his waistband. He pointed to the sofa with his gun. "Let's talk."

Mr. Neff took a seat.

Marcovic reached down to the coffee table, removed the magazine from the dead man's gun, and returned the gun to the table. He put the magazine in his jacket pocket.

"It's my understanding, Mr. Neff, that you can take me to Fletcher Kraft."

"Not you. Him." Neff nodded in the direction of the Op.

"I would make it worth your while."

Mr. Neff considered. "How much?"

"Ten million."

Mr. Neff said nothing.

"Twenty."

"First, you let this one go." Mr. Neff nodded at Tommy, who was awake now and trying to talk through his gag.

"And him?" Marcovic gestured toward the Op.

"Mr. Kraft will need him. For negotiations," said Neff, without moving.

"I don't see how that could work," said Marcovic. "The one on the floor, I mean."

"Leave him here. Call later, with the address."

"He knows too much." Marcovic shook his head. "No. It would never work." He pointed his gun at the pile of plastic handcuffs. "But these could. There's a chair in the kitchen that's about your size. A complete set of kitchen knives standing on the counter, including a serrated bread knife."

"Those only work if the threat of death is behind them. You can't afford to take that risk."

"You'd be surprised how much can be accomplished short of killing a man, given enough time."

Mr. Neff leaned his head against the back of the sofa and studied Marcovic through half-closed eyes. He looked as if he were about to go to sleep. "How much time do you think you have?"

"Or," said Marcovic, "I can start with someone else." He pointed his gun at Tommy's head.

"That won't help," said Neff.

Marcovic pulled the trigger.

The Op couldn't see Tommy from where was sitting. The coffee table was in the way. But he saw the gun recoil and heard the sound of compressed air, followed by muffled screams.

"How many ears does one man need?" asked Marcovic. "Or fingers? Or eyes?"

The room was silent.

Then, through the sound of rain and Tommy's muffled sobs, came the faint wail of sirens.

Marcovic raised his head to listen.

"You," he said to Mr. Neff, "Lie down, face down."

Within seconds, he'd fastened the plastic cuffs around Mr. Neff's wrists and ankles.

The sirens became louder. Marcovic stood up and turned toward the window.

"It appears you're in check, Mr. Turingm," said the Op.

Marcovic glanced back at him.

"But it might be more accurate to say, 'You are down in a shit-hole, ain't you?'"

The sirens reached a crescendo, like a chorus of hounds, and then fell silent.

The picture window throbbed blue and red.

Marcovic took three strides forward and cranked open the right casement, keeping his body out of sight. He leaned forward to reconnoiter, then ducked back.

"I have three men in here," he yelled, "bound and immobilized. If I hear a sound coming from anywhere in this house, I will kill them. Beginning with the fat one."

The picture window continued to throb with light, silently.

"I will kill them slowly. You will hear them."

Nothing.

Then, by way of reply, a spotlight lit up the room.

Marcovic rushed back to the coffee table, crouching to keep out of the light. He grabbed the back of Tommy's collar with one hand and dragged his limp body to the sofa, holding it up in front of him, like a shield, with its knees resting on the cushions. He pointed the Beretta at Tommy's head. The gun was at a perpendicular angle so anyone outside could see it easily.

"This man is already missing his left ear," he bellowed. "If that light is not turned off in ten seconds, he will lose his right one."

Tommy began to squirm, violently. He was sobbing.

The Op began counting to himself. At "seven," he heard his phone vibrating on the table. It was face down, and glowing.

"The phone!" he yelled.

Marcovic didn't move.

Two seconds later, the Beretta angled back and Tommy lost his other ear. The picture window shattered and flecks of blood sprayed the glass shards that remained. Tommy grunted and jerked in the blinding light, suspended from Marcovic's clenched fist like a landed trout.

"Ngh. Ngh. Ngh."

The light went off. Marcovic threw Tommy to the floor and dropped down on the sofa.

"Now we can talk," he yelled up at the jagged hole.

The phone stopped vibrating. In a few more seconds, it stopped glowing. The sound of falling rain filled the room.

"Yosef Marcovic. This is the FBI. You're surrounded. Pick up the phone."

The voice came from a bullhorn outside. It was a voice the Op recognized.

The phone began to vibrate again. This time Marcovic answered it.

He listened, switched the phone to "Speaker," and held it up to the Op's face.

"Say something."

At the top of screen was the name, "Louisa Montrose."

"Hello, Louisa," said the Op.

There was silence.

"Oh, right. Caller ID. How many of you are there?"

"Three living—well, four if you count the man with the gun—and one dead."

"I want to hear the other two."

"One's passed out. The one with no ears. His name's Tommy Littlejohn."

"And the other?"

"He says he's 'Walter Neff.'"

"I want to talk to him."

Marcovic walked the phone over to Mr. Neff.

"Here he is," he said.

"Is this Walter Neff?" asked Louisa.

"It is," said Gutiérrez.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"Not in need of medical attention?"

"No."

Marcovic turned the phone off "Speaker" and put it next to his head. From what the Op could tell from hearing the near side of the conversation, Marcovic wanted to walk out of 1382 27th Ave. unmolested and with safe passage to the non-extradition country of his choice. It was clearly just a starting position (the logistics were against it), but he did hold a good hand. Louisa, apparently, was making it hard for them to get to "yes." The Op could hear fragments of her voice, including the phrase, "one of ours."

"Regrettable," said Marcovic. "I thought he was working for them."

After another few minutes of negotiation, Marcovic said, "The one called 'Tommy,'" and shortly thereafter, "Ok. Show yourself, and I'll decide. But no jacket, no sweater. Sleeves rolled up, all the way. No shoes. And no skirt or pants."

The Op heard Louisa's voice raised in protest.

"And no lights on the house!" shouted Marcovic, before hanging up.

He replaced the phone on the table and strode rapidly toward the kitchen, returning almost immediately with a knife. He dropped to one knee and cut the plastic cuffs around Tommy's ankles, then pulled him to his feet. Putting the knife away and the gun to

Tommy's head, Marcovic walked him to the front door. The Op heard it open.

By now the Op's hands were entirely numb. It was as though he didn't have any. He leaned forward to stand up from the arm chair.

"You won't make it to the kitchen before he gets back," said Gutiérrez, who'd already turned himself over and was sitting up. With his ankles bound, however, he couldn't get to his feet.

"I've got a better chance than you do," said the Op, glancing over. Gutiérrez was scooting his butt toward the coffee table. "But I'm not hungry."

With that, he began to hop across the living room.

Each hop seemed to shake the house to its foundations, and after each one he stopped to catch his breath. At one point, he lost his balance and knocked against an open spinet, sending a cascade of sheet music to the floor. Immediately, he folded his belly over it to keep from falling. Loud, dissonant chords filled the room.

Two more hops brought him to the sofa. He knelt down on it, facing the window.

He felt a fresh breeze on his face. The sound of the rain was like the roar of a waterfall.

As he bent toward the jagged hole in the glass, balancing carefully to keep from tipping forward, he wondered if this was what it felt like to kneel at the guillotine, just before the slanted blade came down.

Below him, in the center of the parking area, he saw Louisa standing in the harsh light. She was wearing a white blouse with the sleeves rolled up and nothing else but a pair of white panties. The blouse clung to her body, letting her bra show through. Her chignon was coming undone and beginning to hang down like wet seaweed. Her dark skin glistened. Several feet behind her stood a woman in a blue FBI windbreaker.

Short and stout and perfectly still, her bare feet slightly apart, her arms at her sides, Louisa waited as Marcovic approached. He

was walking Tommy unsteadily in front of him, the Beretta pointed at the man's head. Blood and water were pouring down Tommy's neck. Marcovic was squinting to keep the rain out of his eyes. The two men looked like their clothes were painted on.

"Put your hands on your head," said Marcovic, yelling over the downpour.

Louisa did as she was told and stood up straight.

"Turn around."

Louisa turned and, as she did so, placed her palms together high above her head, making a perfect isosceles triangle.

"I said 'on your head!'"

Louisa didn't move.

Marcovic kept his gun pointed at her as he shoved Tommy in the direction of the FBI agent, who caught him as he fell. He took out a pair of plastic handcuffs with his free hand while keeping his gun trained on Louisa. She was so short and he so tall that he had to lower the Beretta to a 45 degree angle as he got nearer.

Marcovic said something the Op couldn't catch.

Louisa's shoulders rippled, as though a snake were sliding under her skin.

"I said put your hands behind your back!" Marcovic was shrieking.

Louisa didn't move.

The big man wiped the rain from his eyes with his free hand, then leaned forward and touched the muzzle of the gun to the back of the woman's head.

What happened next happened so fast the Op had trouble reconstructing it until he had a chance to talk to some of the other witnesses.

Louisa turned her shoulders slightly and the triangle suddenly snapped backwards, as if on a hinge, toward a spot just a few inches outside of Marcovic's extended arm. It reminded the Op of a mouse trap he'd once triggered with a stick, in the basement of the flat in Eastie.

As the triangle fell, Louisa wheeled rapidly from the waist up, taking her head out of the line of fire and bringing her hands into contact with the gunman's elbow. The blow landed with tremendous force. There was a cry of pain and the gun went flying as she spiraled down to grab the big man's ankle. With a full-body heave, she threw Marcovic onto his back. He reached behind him, but before he could retrieve Gutiérrez's pistol the Beretta was pointing at his nose.

"Hold still."

The voice came from the room behind him.

"This will hurt when the circulation comes back."

The Op heard a snip.

He began rubbing his wrists as Gutiérrez freed his ankles.

"Found these in the drawer."

It was a pair of kitchen shears.

"Devil to pick up when you can't see what you're doing. Devil to use."

The Op turned back to the window.

The parking area was swarming with troopers in black helmets and vests, carrying automatic weapons. It looked like a picnic blanket covered with ants. Several were running toward the front steps. Two more were leading Marcovic away. A cluster of figures in sodden blue windbreakers were crouched over Tommy. Two EMTs were wheeling a gurney toward them.

In the middle of it all, in the spotlight, stood Louisa. Someone had draped a Kevlar blanket over her shoulders. It glittered in the pouring rain like chain mail.

Or scales. He'd heard of storms so fierce they rained sea creatures from the sky.

She was clasping the blanket with one hand and holding the Beretta at her side with the other. He could see the silencer peeking out from under the hem.

His hands weren't all that was beginning to hurt.

Chapter 30

"Can you make sure not to get them . . . um . . . in the picture?"

Mr. Herman hadn't mentioned that Baker Beach was a nude beach. Well, at the north end. Last night's atmospheric river had dwindled to a trickle by mid-morning, gradually giving way to a mild, sunny afternoon. But it had caused a landslide at Baker's south end, closing it to the public.

"Don't worry," Guttierrez shouted. "No one's going near the water."

Who in their right mind would? It was freezing.

Sam and Monica had an excuse. They weren't in their right minds. (Monica had even taken Sam's last name. "I'm a romantic. Sue me.")

They were in love.

So what was the Op doing here, standing in water up to his knees?

He was in love with them.

A high wave broke against his legs, soaking his rolled-up trousers. ("I grow old, I grow old," he thought.) Sam's were beyond saving, and the hem of Monica's white satin gown was floating up and down next to the trailing end of her veil. As Gutiérrez raised the phone to his face, Monica started laughing ("I have heard the mermaids singing on the beach") and the two newlyweds began splashing each other. The Op moved quickly away. Too quickly. He almost fell over, clutching his iPad. ("I do not think they will sing to me.") He thrashed to a halt just in time for another wave to slop into him. He was prepared for it this time.

Guttierrez stood about forty feet away, wearing his black brogues and gray suit. Bone dry. ("What does it matter how far away it is, as long as the witness can see who's getting married?")

As Mr. and Ms. Tull climbed into the Op's XTS for the drive to the airport, the Op turned and asked Gutiérrez what he'd told the FBI they were doing at 1372 27th Avenue last night.

"What you said to tell them. Point man and backup, and about the rain." He left it at that. The Op was curious to know how the curt Filipino had gotten through the entire interrogation without using the first-person pronoun, but there wasn't time. The Tulls were already late for their flight to Boston.

Later, driving back from the airport after dropping the three of them off, he reflected on the previous twelve hours.

After a medic tended to his swollen hands, he and Gutiérrez were interrogated in separate rooms. Louisa, who introduced herself as Special Agent Gayatri Patel, was assigned to him, along with a young woman with long, henna-dyed hair, named Sonia Martinez. The Op immediately recognized her as the delivery "boy" whose bicycle had been sent flying by a speeding SUV three days ago. She'd also been standing behind him in line at the Fort Dodge Days Inn the week before that. She'd been with a man at that point. Where was he now? Maybe helping to "debrief" Gutiérrez.

Like Martinez, Patel wore jeans and an FBI windbreaker, which she removed on entering the room, revealing an empty black shoulder holster. A crisp, dry white blouse had replaced the one she'd been wearing when she disarmed Marcovic. Her hair, still damp, was tied back and her face, without makeup, had the appearance of unvarnished mahogany. The red *bindi* was gone, along with the mascara and eye liner. Nothing remained of the person he'd known as Louisa Montrose except her short, stout, and—as he now knew—powerful physique.

Patel and Martinez sat down and looked at him across the table.

"You nearly got us all killed," said Patel.

He opened his mouth to reply, but Patel wasn't through.

"Do you know how much trouble you and your Filipino pal are in? Obstruction of justice, to begin with. Interfering in a police investigation." She ticked them off, finger by finger.

When she put her hands down, he began, explaining only as much as needed explaining. No reason to make more trouble for himself, or Gutiérrez.

Reversing Quintillian, he began with *Refutatio*.

They had Marcovic in custody, didn't they? the murderer of FBI agent Isaac Park ("one of yours," Marcovic had said). And they had the weapon he used to kill Sandra Wong (the Chinese government's, he assumed, so not theirs), and Meriam Leversohn. The Son of Mark might slip the noose on the first count, but not the rest. And they can only hang you once.

They'd seen Marcovic on security footage entering the Op's room at the Days Inn a week ago and exiting with Park's dead arm draped over his shoulder. They could have arrested the killer then and there, in Fort Dodge. But they had their eye on a bigger prize, and so did he. They thought Marcovic would resurface sooner or later, and when he did, they'd have all the time in the world to put a case together for Murder One.

And what was the result? The murderer had killed again—not once, but twice. That blood was on their hands. Thanks to the Op and Gutiérrez, they had Marcovic in custody with the weapon he'd used to kill Wong and Leversohn. He was probably sitting in another room here at SFPD headquarters, singing like a canary this very moment. But he wouldn't sing sweetly enough to avoid a life sentence in Max, would he? Just the needle.

Refutatio finished, the Op moved on, or backwards, to *Narratio*. He began with the squat, and Kraft's bloodied wallet.

From the moment he found it he suspected the wallet was a plant, especially if the blood on it proved to be Kraft's, and it had. Why would a murderer leave something this incriminating, or anything at all related to Kraft's disappearance, lying around? Why get rid of the body and not the wallet? Chances were good that someone, a fisherman or a stroller or a kid skipping stones, would find it and bring it to the police. And that was the point, to announce to the world, "The trail ends here." The miracle wasn't that the Op found it, but that no one else had in the previous three weeks.

The lack of any other DNA being found on the wallet confirmed the Op's hunch. Either it had been wiped off by the killer, indicating the wallet had been planted there, or there wasn't a killer at all. The latter supposition made more sense, because the ploy was so transparent no experienced murderer or kidnapper would have tried it.

The location was meant to suggest that Kraft had been killed there and his body dumped in the river. Whoever had chosen the spot wasn't local or they'd have known the corpse would wash up on a sand bar in minutes. The zig-zagging coordinates of Kraft's text messages in the days after Chester Delamere left him at the squat made the Op wonder if, at some point, the missing man had gotten the idea of leaving town by canoe or kayak, rather than the more exposed highway routes he'd have to travel while hitch-hiking or riding a stolen bike. (His blisters made walking, which was time-consuming but otherwise feasible, out of the question.)

The coordinates suggested Kraft had drifted or paddled down the meandering course of the Des Moines River over the next few days, stopping to text home at Lehigh, Fraser, and Madrid, until he reached the capital, where vanishing into the homeless population would be easier.

What Cal had told him about sublimate.com and what he'd discovered about "Mr. Huff" strongly suggested that Kraft was already planning to disappear when he boarded UA 1008 in Boston, perhaps soon after his arrival in San Francisco. Mrs. Johnson's account of running into Kraft (or Kraft running into her) at the airport indicated that, while waiting for the replacement plane to continue his flight, Kraft had spotted someone he knew and wanted to avoid. He was fleeing. The lime green rollaboard abandoned at the luggage carousel and Tucker Millsap's description of Kraft's behavior at the Goodwill store confirmed that hunch: he was ditching anything that might identify him. The murder of Park in the Op's room at the Days Inn, as well as the bugs planted there, suggested not only that Kraft had good reason to flee, but that the

Op was being used as a stalking horse to locate him. By whom, he couldn't, at that point, make an educated guess.

What he did know as soon as he recognized Park's photo in the *Messenger*, was that continuing to look for Fletcher Kraft could very well lead to the man's being murdered, if he wasn't already. That was something the Op didn't want on his conscience.

He wasn't certain, but he had reason to hope the bloodied wallet would be enough evidence for Brit to get a magistrate to declare that the missing man was legally defunct. Declarations had been made based on less. That would provide her and her family with access to her husband's bank accounts and life insurance annuity. Peace of mind, "closure," those would have to wait, and could: he knew where to pick up Kraft's trail if Brit's application was denied.

With no good reason to continue his search and one very good reason to discontinue it, the Op decided to put the investigation on hold until he could get a better idea of who wanted to get their hands on Kraft, and why. He'd made up his mind to return to Boston and let Brit's application play itself out, when Bannon called with the news about the secret credit card statement that Mitzi had discovered in Kraft's safe deposit box. In Daly City, the Op learned that the man who'd received the merchandise was "Todd," the fiancé of Amy Briscoe, the last person to see Kraft before he left the gate area at the Fort Dodge airport. He also learned about the existence of the mysterious "W. Neff," a.k.a. "Not Huff."

Meanwhile, another player had surfaced in Fort Dodge: Tommy Littlejohn, Brit's former boyfriend and father of her older daughter, Xenie. Xenie had been keeping Tommy up to date on the Op's investigation almost from the start. Tommy wanted to take up with Brit where he left off, and Kraft's resurfacing would interfere with that. And there he was, in Fort Dodge, the scene of Kraft's disappearance, at the very moment the Op was conducting his investigation.

The list of persons of interest in The Fletch Kraft Affair ("The what?" asked Martinez) was growing by leaps and bounds. Amy Briscoe, Todd Downing, Tommy Littlejohn. Not to mention Brit herself, and Mitzi Leversohn, Kraft's ex.

And these were just the small fry. There remained Kraft's shadowy stalkers, predators at the top of the food chain who were using the Op as their pilot fish.

By the time he reached Daly City, he knew there were at least two of these predators. Returning Cowper's call after landing at the San Francisco Airport, he learned that the man found dead in the Des Moines River had been killed in the Op's room by another man lying in wait there. In other words, one of the persons following him had killed another person following him. There'd been a third unexpected visitor earlier in the day, impersonating a janitor. This person may have been working in conjunction with one of the other two, or may have represented a third interested party. In any case, the Op soon had reason to believe the killer was working with George Nevis, head of security at Transcoastal.

"What reason did you have to connect Marcovic with Nevis?" asked Patel.

"Let's just say that information about my whereabouts, minute by minute, was known by no one outside my organization except George Nevis."

And Louisa Montrose.

He continued the *Narratio*.

Park's ethnicity led the Op to believe there was some kind of connection between the man's murder, his pursuit of Kraft, and an Asian governmental agency, probably Chinese or North Korean. The hunch regarding Park turned out to be wrong, but then he found Sandra Wong waiting for him in the Fairmont reception area well toward midnight of the day he arrived in San Francisco.

"Who checks into a hotel and then reads the newspaper down in the lobby after folks have gone to bed, unless they're waiting for someone? And right after I check in, she decides not to wait?"

"When did you suspect we were involved?" asked Patel.

"When DS Cowper went from hard- to soft-boiled," said the Op. "The minute she saw security footage with Marcovic dragging Park from my room, she wanted my talking head on a platter. Next thing I know, she's all Miss Marple—No, no, take your time! No hurry about getting back to Fort Dodge! Oh, and here's that info you wanted about the blood on the wallet and stolen property! Someone had gotten to her, told her Park's death was none of her business. Just shut up and get out of the way. Give him information about Kraft if you need to. It'll keep him busy. But nothing about Park. Only the FBI has that kind of authority.

"Cowper was one clue. Louisa Montrose was another."

Patel resumed her calm, dead pan as the Op continued talking about her in the third person.

"Same flight, same ultimate destination. Chess newbie. Country of origin: Sri Lanka, birthplace of chess. Also, of Helena Landless, heroine of *Edwin Drood*, which I was the middle of reading when the two of us met. Dickens—one of Mr. Montrose's favorite authors. He made a point of telling me. Louisa's mother was dead, like Helena's, and like mine. Louisa kept tropical fish like me, but conveniently dead, unlike mine." He hoped. Mental note: call Mrs. Siskowski! "Louisa couldn't find her own rollaboard, but was entrusted with lining up corporate clients for a digital imaging startup. Her place of residence: an AirB&B.

"Of course, Louisa and her *Appah* would have prepared an excuse for every inconsistency and missing piece. I ran through the list myself, making up the excuses as I went along." He paused to look directly at Patel. "And as for coincidences, well, they happen, don't they?"

He took a sip from the water glass on the table. He had to use both hands. His fingers were still swollen and stiff.

"But why? Why use me to find Fletcher Kraft? Only one reason I can think of: to get him to testify.

"That had to be why you wanted to find him, right? You wanted him to testify for the same reason that Marcovic and Nevis

wanted him dead. He knew too much. About what, I had no idea and still don't. But I can guess: embezzlement? Money laundering? Smuggling?"

Martinez glanced at Patel, whose eyes remained on the Op.

"Maybe all three?"

"If you were that suspicious, why didn't you offer to help?" asked Martinez.

Patel scowled at her.

"Uh, uh." The Op wagged his finger as best he could. "First I want to know why you didn't ask me to."

"We had no reason to trust you," said Patel.

"Did you have any reason not to?"

Silence.

"I ask because you certainly knew a lot about me, about my reading habits, my mental habits."

Just then, Patel heard something on her earbud. She lowered her head for a moment to listen, then left the room.

Chapter 31

As the door clicked shut, the Op said to Martinez, "You were the bicycle messenger standing next to me at Sacramento and Kearny who got walloped by the SUV."

Martinez didn't say anything, just stared at him.

"It wasn't me they were after, was it?"

Still nothing.

"They were after you. They wanted to leave me unprotected for a while. For what? Not to kill me. They could have taken us both out at once, like bowling a spare, if they'd wanted to. But you wouldn't cooperate. Tough? Tough as any boy, or helicopter. Where did you hide after you abandoned the bike, waiting for me to continue walking, watching as I passed? Keeping an eye out while keeping your distance?"

Martinez finally cracked a tight smile. "You're good, I'll give you that. Good at making things up."

"I recognized you as the woman standing ahead of me in the line at Days Inn. And there you were, again. If you were sticking to me that close, you couldn't be working for Transcoastal, because they already had a secure pipeline to everything I said and did. You knew Nevis wanted me to stay alive as much as you did. So why were you sticking so close, unless you were protecting me from someone? Someone who didn't want me dead, but did want me unchaperoned for just enough time to attempt a curbside snatch? And why now, and here, in San Francisco? You were watching me in Fort Dodge, I get that. But not sticking to me like wet corn silk."

Martinez looked at the door, as if hoping Patel would step through it.

"I thought Park was working with the Chinese, but what I overheard a few hours ago in the living room on 27th Avenue told me Park was one of yours. How long did it take before the Chinese realized Kraft was a danger to them as much as to Transcoastal? They didn't want him dead. They wanted the information that

Nevis and Marcovic didn't want them, or you, to have. I'm guessing it was information about where their laundered money was stashed, and how to get it back. That, and how to protect themselves from a looming investigation."

He stared at Martinez.

"But the Chinese don't surface until I get to San Francisco, and meet Sandra Wong."

Martinez looked back at the Op, jaw set.

"Mr. Shun," he said.

Nothing.

"Double-agent?"

Just then, Patel stepped into the room.

"I just ask," said the Op, "because that would explain how the FBI got a jump on them, how you learned a few days before they did that Transcoastal had hired me to find Fletcher Kraft. How you got all your pieces set up in Fort Dodge before they could."

* * * * *

Patel was leaning against the wall and listening. She beckoned Martinez over to a corner of the room and whispered something. Martinez shook her head, vehemently. "Not a word," she blurted out. Patel gave her a look and the two of them took their seats at the metal table.

"You'll be relieved to know Mr. Littlejohn is recovering nicely from his wounds," said Patel. "We do have to print big words on a yellow pad to communicate with him. But he's not going to press charges."

"He'd have a hard time of it if he did," said the Op. "I deliberately told him the wrong address, so he wouldn't show up at the right one. He had other ideas."

"You told him about your plan?"

"It was his plan, originally, or some version of it. What I don't get is how he knew the right address."

"You mean, the right wrong address?"

"Yes."

"Tommy told us how," said Patel. "Just now." She glanced at Martinez and then proceeded.

"It happened at the Honda dealership. Tommy has a friend who works there, a Mr. Doran. He put a tracker on your car. Took ours off and put it on a car parked in front of yours. We didn't catch on until later that day, when we noticed it was parked someplace we knew it couldn't be. Guess you forgot Mr. Doran's firm installs security systems as well as home entertainment. Martinez overplayed her hand and went inside the dealership, posing as a potential customer. Doran was outside by then, tinkering. She found no sign of you, so she went back to her car and waited. That's the only time she lost you, at the dealership. Until you came walking up Van Ness. Where were you?"

"With Gutiérrez. At a Peet's. He'd just arrived from LA and I wanted to keep him under wraps."

"From . . . ?"

"Anyone who was following me—you, Marcovic, Wong, persons unknown."

"Gutierrez. That's who you were talking to on the burner? On your way back from Lorrimer's office?"

"Yes."

"We retrieved it from the storm drain."

Silence.

"It told us you' called a Pilates instructor in Alameda and some guy who raised rabbits."

Martinez caught the lateral. "What did you and Gutiérrez discuss at Peet's, after you left your car outside the dealership?"

"How we could set a trap for Marcovic."

"At the house on 27th Avenue?"

"No. At that point I hadn't received the message from Neff telling me to meet him there. We were going to piggy-back on Stratton's plan to catch Neff at Downing's address."

"Care to elaborate?"

"What's the point? Downing told the police that Neff had gotten in touch with him and Neff got wind of it, called it off. That's when he sent the text message to meet him at the house on 27th Avenue."

"How did Neff know about you?" asked Patel. "Why would he contact you? Why would he trust you?"

"I don't know, I don't know, and I don't know. Nevis asked me the same thing. But there was an opportunity there, and I wasn't going to mess it up by going to the cops with it. Gutiérrez and I would bring them into it when the time was right."

"And that was when, exactly? After you were both dead? And Tommy, too? You planned to 'bring us in' when we found your bodies on the living room floor? Or strapped to chairs with your balls cut off?"

Patel was containing her fury, but not hiding it very well. It seemed to be mixed with concern, but that could have been all in his head.

"What tipped you off?" asked the Op. "How did you know where to find us?"

"We replaced the tracker as soon as we discovered it'd been removed. We thought that was your doing, so we had no reason to look for Tommy's. When Neff didn't show at Downing's home, I knew he must have been tipped off and—can you believe it?—I thought of you." Her voice was dripping with sarcasm. "It was 2:00 am. Where were you, I wondered? Safe and sound and snug in bed? I roused our surveillance tech—that's your **MAGA Man**—who noticed your car was parked on 27th Avenue, in the Sunset."

"How did you know Marcovic was there with me?"

"We didn't when we arrived. But I recognized his voice—it's pretty distinctive, isn't it?—when he started yelling through the window. And we saw his face when he held Tommy up to the light."

She stopped talking and waited, as if for a reply. When it didn't materialize, she resumed.

"You may be wondering why I'm sharing all this information. We expect a little cooperation in return. We don't think you're telling us the whole story."

"Keep in mind," said Martinez. "We can still bring charges if we're not satisfied."

"Those empty boxes down in the garage, for instance," Patel resumed, "with Downing's name and address on them?"

"They were empty?" The Op raised his head with a look of surprise, stalling for time. "They were delivered while we were waiting for Neff. I thought he must have outsmarted the police stakeout after all. I thought maybe you let him pick them up, with the idea of tailing him to Kraft, and he'd given you the slip somehow."

Patel and Martinez exchanged looks.

"And Gutiérrez was there to back you up?" asked Martinez.

"Yes. Gutiérrez was armed, but I don't carry a gun. We thought once we'd disarmed Marcovic, I could use his weapon to help cover him while Gutiérrez got him in cuffs. But the rain messed us up. Flooded streets, detours. I got there around 2:00 am, the time I'd given Nevis, but a lot later than I'd planned. Marcovic was already there, but I'd counted on that. Gutiérrez arrived last.

"Rain held him up, too?" Patel raised an eyebrow.

The Op shrugged. "I guess. I assumed he was hanging back because he was late and didn't know who was in the house at this point. Then he saw Tommy walk in—a loose nut. Marcovic had to show himself in order to tighten it, and when he did, he had to deal with me. We waited for Neff and I wondered about Gutiérrez. When 2:30 came, Neff didn't. A delivery van did. It unloaded and drove away. Gutiérrez couldn't be sure what, or who, was in those boxes. So he had to improvise. When Neff still hadn't appeared after half an hour, Gutiérrez walked into the house and introduced himself as Walter Neff."

"Good thing the Chinese guy appeared when he did," said Patel.

"You mean, good thing Marcovic mistook him for Gutierrez," said the Op.

"I mean, good thing we 'all look alike," said Patel.

"To some people."

Patel crossed her arms and stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. "So, for the hour from two to three, *you* were going to deal with Marcovic all by yourself? Without a gun?"

"As I say, Gutiérrez had a gun." He paused. "It's kind of complicated. And Tommy didn't help."

"And what about Neff? What were you going to do with him when he showed up? What if he had a gun, too? You'd have had your hands full with Marcovic, even without your other guests."

"I was pretty sure that wouldn't happen. And I was absolutely certain it wouldn't if I notified the police. Neff was on to them. He may even have had a source of information there."

At this point Martinez jumped in.

"Adelle Ventura? Is that why her number is in your contacts?"

"*Their* number," said the Op. "No. It's because I read in the *Chronicle* Thursday morning that Sandra Wong had been murdered and called the SFPD to get more information and share what I knew. I was put in touch with Ventura. We exchanged phone numbers."

"You sure get around," said Patel.

"Not nearly enough, it seems," said the Op, looking directly at her.

"Let's get back to the Chinese guy," Martinez said. "How did he get into the house? One of the boxes in the garage?"

"That would mean the Chinese knew about, or even arranged the delivery, and even coordinated it to coincide with when Neff was going to arrive. How could they have known that? Neff was spooked by Downing getting the cops involved. Why would he want the Chinese involved?"

"We found another tracker on your car tonight that's not ours," said Patel. "I mean, besides Tommy's."

"Theirs?"

"No way to know."

Something occurred to him.

"If they tracked my car to the house, they must have had it under surveillance from the moment I got there. Marcovic was already inside, but they couldn't know that. They may have been looking for a way in, and then the delivery truck arrives and the garage door goes up. It's dark, it's pouring rain. The agent gets close to the door and rolls under without being seen."

"Quite a reach," said Martinez.

"You have a better idea?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around your so-called plan.," said Patel. "Neff contacts you and says to meet him at the house on 27th Avenue at 2:30. You tell Nevis on the assumption that he'll tell Marcovic, and that Marcovic will show up, and when he does, you and Gutiérrez will get the drop on him. That's your plan?"

"More or less."

"And then what?"

"We call the authorities, give them the address, and tell them we have the killer of Isaac Park and Meriam Leversohn, along with the weapon he used to kill them."

Patel gave it a beat.

"But it rained," she said.

It was a long night, and it'd only just begun.

PART IV: BOSTON

Friday, August 25, 2023

Chapter 32

A: No, I won't deny it. I said that to make Mr. Nevis think I could be bought.

Q: And can you?

A: No. By that time I had reason to believe he and Mr. Marcovic were responsible for the murders of Sandra Wong and Meriam Leversohn. If he suspected that I did have such a reason, I wanted to persuade him that it would make no difference anyway, that money was more important to me than doing what's right.

Q: Have you ever taken money from a client without telling your employer?

A: No.

Q: Do you recall handling a case you were assigned last year with your partner at the time, Gloria Talbot, for a client named Peter Bevilacqua?

A: I do.

Q: And didn't you, in the course of your investigation, make exactly the same offer to Mr. Bevilacqua's spouse, Harold Babcock, that you just admitted making to George Nevis? Telling Mr. Babcock you'd withhold information from the police in exchange for a bribe?

A: Yes, and for the same reason. I hope you're not naïve enough to think I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be, Ms. Trent. That sort of reputation can make it easier to deal with the enemy.

-- Transcript: United States of America vs. George Nevis

Leaving the courtroom, the Op saw someone he recognized waiting to go in.

"You're Agent Dobbs, right? the MAGA man?"

"Call me Alex."

They shook hands.

"I have a question, Alex. You were there. You saw it. Can you tell me how the hell she did that? I mean, Special Agent Patel. I was watching, but it happened so fast."

"I don't completely understand it myself, and I've seen her do it up close. It's called—the 'Urd-something.' Translates as The Upward Salute.' It's a yoga position."

"Yoga?"

"She's turned it into a defensive move, to disarm someone behind you. Works best if they're taller than you. It's all in the shoulders."

"Yoga is a martial art now?"

"You have to wait, though, until your opponent touches you, like with a gun. That's how you know where they're standing. You should see her in class."

"You take lessons together?"

"She teaches it. Now and then she gives a seminar at Quantico. I went when I was in training. She's pretty advanced. Can probably levitate, for all I . . . oops, sorry. Looks like I'm up next."

On his way from the courthouse to Alan's Diner he stopped at what used to be the office. Continental was defunct. At least the Boston branch. Bannon had broken the news when the Op called on his return from SF. He was too exhausted to pick up his things and two months slid by while he fed his tetras and wondered what to do next.

This morning he had two reasons to visit the office and fetch his belongings, if any remained, since the courthouse and Alan's were both close by. When he reached the big glass doors, however, he saw a paper sign taped inside the glass.

If you're reading this, you can see there's no one here. I left your suit at the desk in the lobby. Hope they still have it. If not, it may be with the building super. Had your cubby in the Locker Room emptied, too. Good luck!

Bannon

Crossing Fort Point Channel with the big, flat box under his arm, he heard his phone *ping*. Busy morning. It was a text message from Adelle Ventura.

Looks like there's nothing to the Asian nationals thing. All in my head. Thanks, again, for keeping mum. Glad it worked out. When you're back in town, look me up. I'll buy you a drink. We'll share a newspaper.

He and Adelle had stayed in touch over the summer. Ventura was the one who sent him the link to the *Chronicle* story about John Lorrimer's suicide aboard his yacht, *The Pot o' Gold*, two miles off Half Moon Bay. The San Mateo County Coroner determined the cause of death was a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

Gale Cowper had been in touch, too. At the Op's request she'd asked downriver police and sheriff's departments to keep an eye out for abandoned kayaks. One turned up near the Saylorville Dam.

"That's just north of Des Moines," she told him. "Had the owner's name and phone number on it, but when they called him, he didn't know it was gone."

"And the paddle?"

"Says the paddle must belong to someone else—presumably, the person who reported it stolen. His broke. That's why he hasn't been using the kayak. He thought it was still where he left it, at the boat landing."

He walked into Alan's at precisely 1:30 pm. The sky was overcast and the day unseasonably warm. That's how he would have described it, until he realized it didn't make sense nowadays to connect the weather with seasons. The seasons were deranged.

Two customers stood at the register. Otherwise the place was empty. Alan Finch looked up from the cash drawer and shook his head. Not here yet.

The Op took a seat at a corner table, at the far end of the room.

After the last customer left, Alan brought over a mug of coffee.

"It's fresh," he said. "I'll hold off on the food until she comes."

"Probably wise."

Alan started sweeping. Business had never really come back, even after the end of the mask mandate. The lunch rush lasted only a few minutes these days. Continental going bust, on the heels of two other firms with employees working at home, had shortened Alan's most profitable shift to the break point. Time to retire. The lease was up in a few days and hadn't been renewed.

The Op sipped his coffee and took out the invitation to read it again:

PLEASE JOIN US
IN WELCOMING
MONICA AND SAM'S
NEW DAUGHTER
TO THE WORLD!

THE GUEST ROOM
72 BOWER STREET
SOMERVILLE, MA

OCTOBER 7, 2023
2:00 PM

LIVE ENTERTAINMENT
COURTESY OF
"THE BERKLEE BABY BOOM"
(AKA: THE USUAL ASSORTMENT!)

RSVP: CATHY PROCTOR

Cathy was Monica's oldest sister. The steady one. Devout Catholic, like her mother. Married, six kids, novenas, all of it. But she'd gone the nine yards for her prodigal sib, getting their mom to agree to attend the baby shower. A wedding Mass? Yeah, she wanted one, too. But that train's left the station, Ma. Do you want to hold your new granddaughter in your arms? Or read about her in the birth announcement?

The wedding reception, which had been put on hold pending the outcome of Cathy's negotiations, could now proceed as planned.

He assumed "The Usual Assortment" were friends of Monica's from Berkeley. Maybe a jazz trio? He didn't know she had friends, besides him and Sam. She'd never mentioned any.

The bell above the door jangled.

Alan stopped sweeping and lifted his long, narrow face.

"Would you mind turning that sign on the door to 'Closed'? he asked the Op. "Coffee?"

"Yes. Black, please."

After she squeezed by, Alan locked the door, stood the broom up next to it, and walked behind the counter.

The Op put the invitation away as she drew near.

"Excuse me, is this seat t—"

The look on his face stopped her in mid-sentence. He wasn't in the mood.

"You look slimmer," she said matter-of-factly, shrugging off her jacket and setting her purse down. She was wearing her lotus-print dress.

"Must be the suit."

He'd seen himself just minutes ago, reflected in the big glass doors. Tall as ever, of course, but no longer a giant pear. More like an eggplant. He noticed how his thinner cheeks and neck made his jaw more pronounced, and brought out the "v" shapes in his face that had been obscured by layers of fat.

He was wearing the suit he'd bought at DXL, but it was looking a little snug these days. With no interesting cases to take his mind off food, he'd fill it up no time.

"What's that?" She ducked her head to look at the box resting under the table, where he'd moved it when she walked in.

"Nothing important."

Alan brought her coffee and returned to the grill, where he flipped a pile of corned beef and dropped a handful of shredded Swiss on top.

"I ordered us a couple of Reubens. Hope that's ok."

He wanted to be pissed at her—was pissed at her. But he was still feeling like a deflated Mylar balloon. It hadn't been hard to put on a professional face to match Gayatri Patel's in the interrogation room. He was used to hiding his feelings. What was hard was improvising improbable stories without sounding like a grass green idiot.

Here, at Alan's, they were on the Op's turf. This was his interrogation room. She didn't have a Martinez to hand the mic to, or a script to follow. No camera, nothing for the record, no one to impress. She wanted information that only Louisa Montrose could manage to get from him. Thus, the cute jokes, the small talk. He wanted information that only Louisa Montrose could give. Would be willing to give. Was it still an act? Or did she feel something, something she had to put on a shelf in that little room at SFPD headquarters? Did she leave it there? He was starting to hurt all over again.

They sipped their coffee, exchanged inanities.

Alan brought their sandwiches, refilled their cups, and grabbed his coat off the rack. He left the broom next to the door.

"Turn the lights off. It'll lock when you go," he called.

Watching his shock of white hair bob past the window, she began.

"I'm not wearing a wire. You'll have to trust me."

He took a bite of the Reuben, not looking at her. "Why would I care? I haven't been charged on any of the counts you threatened

me with, and I'm not about to say anything that will change your mind."

"I'm sorry."

He didn't think he believed her, but concluded he must, because he could feel his eyes tearing up to the point where he couldn't raise them from his sandwich. He put it down and reached for a paper napkin, faked a sneeze, and wiped his eyes.

"Don't worry. Not infectious. Just an allergy."

"I had no choice."

"And neither did Louisa Montrose. Yeah, I get it."

This wasn't love, he realized, only pity.

"But I do have a choice here. Now."

She was looking at him with what he took to be real affection. He decided to accept it as such. She bit into her Reuben. As soon as she did, Russian dressing began running down her fingers.

"Here," said the Op. He offered her the napkin dispenser.

She grabbed a clutch of three and wiped her hands.

Suddenly, the affection disappeared.

"You know I don't buy your story about the ambush. Not entirely."

"What don't you buy?"

"I get that you didn't want to scare Neff away again by getting the police involved. But the idea that you and Gutiérrez were going to get the better of a highly trained, highly intelligent paramilitary gorilla like Marcovic, with one weapon between you, is totally implausible."

The Op thought for a moment.

"I'm going to speak in hypotheticals. What if we'd prepared to send an SOS to the police, as soon as Marcovic showed himself? All set to go at the touch of a button?"

"So why didn't you?"

"You mean, 'Why *wouldn't* I?' This is all hypothetical, remember. What if Littlejohn appeared, and Marcovic got the drop on us both?"

She thought it over.

"Rain, and then Tommy."

"And then the Chinese guy. Who didn't even look Chinese. Marcovic thought he was Gutiérrez."

"Ah. The Chinese guy. 'Puzzer of Chinese Boxes,'" she said, in a politically incorrect (but quite accurate) accent. "All empty. Except for one."

"I thought you had that figured out."

"No. *You* had it figured out. But let's accept your premise. He rolled under the garage door as it was closing. What was Walter Neff's purpose in delivering—or having someone else deliver--a dozen empty boxes in the first place?"

"There is no Walter Neff."

"You mean he really is Fletcher Kraft, under an assumed name."

"Was."

She paused before asking, "You mean Fletcher Kraft is dead?"

"I mean 'Walter Neff' was a name Kraft used to make it look like the stuff delivered to Theodore Downing was stolen by someone using his secret credit card. Like I've said all along, Kraft wanted to throw off anyone who might be on his trail. He ordered those electronics and had them delivered to a person and an address he found in Amy Briscoe's contacts when they were waiting for their replacement flight to San Francisco. Then he followed up, after delivery, by texting Downing that 'W. Neff,' would be picking up the items at a future date and would pay Downing to keep them until then."

"Ok, let's assume you're right. How could he make sure the Daly City police, or anyone looking for him, would find out about the shipments, unless Downing told them? How could he, what's the word I'm looking for? 'activate' the diversion? In fact, he'd just offered Downing a cash incentive not to."

"The statement from the secret credit card account. Kraft was pretty sure it'd be found sooner or later, once the post office box key was discovered. But let's suppose the post office box key had

never been found. If at any point after Kraft vanished from the Fort Dodge airport he felt the hot breath of Nevis or Marcovic, or the police--or the FBI--on the back of his neck, an anonymous tip to the Daly City police would trigger the diversion, sending all of his pursuers on a wild goose chase more than a thousand miles away."

"And 'sublimate.com'? Is that another diversion? The State Department testified that no 'Huff' or 'Neff,' or 'Fletcher Kraft,' for that matter, has left the country since Kraft disappeared."

"Maybe he was looking into it and hit a snag, couldn't complete the transaction."

She thought about it. "Maybe. Any idea where he is now?"

"None. But why does it matter? Marcovic has given you everything you ever expected to get from Fletcher Kraft, hasn't he? Maybe more. At least, from what I've read."

Patel nodded, swallowed, wiped her fingers and her mouth. "Including the murder of Meriam Leversohn. Too bad suicide let Lorrimer escape justice."

"It was a form of justice. But can you shed some light on why Marcovic did what Lorrimer told him to do? Or even why Lorrimer wanted Miriam dead? Marcovic never went to trial, so I never found out."

"According to Marcovic, Lorrimer said Mitzi was threatening to blow the lid off the money washing operation unless she was paid to keep her mouth shut. We do agree she was blackmailing Lorrimer, or threatening to, but not about the money laundering, per se. We found the explanation in a letter she had in her purse, a letter from Lorrimer to Kraft, with the envelope it was sent in. It was addressed to Kraft's PO Box and postmarked a few days before Mitzi got access to it, when Brit asked her to start checking the box for her."

The Op nodded. "Maybe the very day she discovered the secret credit card statement," he said.

"Right."

"What did it say?"

"I don't remember the exact words, but it was deliberately vague. Something like, 'Where the hell are you? You know you can't get to it without me.' Etc. 'Get to' what? you ask."

He hadn't, because he could guess. "Money that he and Kraft were embezzling from Transcoastal. Or maybe skimming from the Serbs laundered money?"

Patel nodded. "That's what we think. Mitzi must have guessed something along those lines, too, but she couldn't be sure. Confronting Lorrimer with the letter—and the envelope—would be one way to confirm her hunch and insure Lorrimer's cooperation at the same time."

"That little set-up would be the last thing Lorrimer would want Marcovic and Nevis to know about, wouldn't it? That he and Kraft were stiffing the company, or the mob, behind the mob's back. Quick one: how was her body found so fast? I assume Marcovic used his silencer. She could have been lying there for days."

"He was impatient. Shot her through the padded envelope he was carrying, there in the doorway—just as the occupant in the neighboring room opened her door. He missed the heart, nicked the artery. And he had trouble closing the door with her body in the way. So he just fled. The neighbor dialed 911, but Mitzi bled out before the EMTs arrived."

"You must have dug up everything you could find about her."

"Formerly Meriam Aaberg. Implicated in her husband's smuggling operation. Indicted, found not guilty."

"Found another good thing, apparently. And another fall guy."

Patel nodded. "She expected the first payment, in cash, hand delivered. Got 'Paid in Full' instead."

Maybe this was the moment to ask. "Did your investigations turn up anything about this?"

The Op reached into his suit jacket, pulled out the Egyptian tie, and unfurled it like a roll of toilet paper.

Patel looked at it with an expression on her face suggesting it was.

"What the hell?"

"It was something Kraft received for setting up a complicated international shipping deal involving Egypt, back when he and Leversohn were married. I'm guessing the deal was a cover for the same kind of smuggling operation Mitzi had arranged through Aaberg. When I mentioned the tie to her and dropped Lorrimer's name, she got spooked."

"Something he and Kraft *and* Mitzi had going?"

"Emphasis on 'had.' I doubt it was still going by the time she threatened Lorrimer with blackmail. She'd be opening the door to her own destruction. With the Aaberg case in her past, it'd be all but impossible to keep herself at arm's length this time around. My guess is it ended a good while ago, maybe with the divorce."

Patel was silently staring out the window. Rush hour, such as it was, had just begun. But she wasn't looking at the traffic.

She took a deep breath and let out a sigh. "Christ almighty," she said. "How many irons did Fletcher Kraft have in the fire? Altogether?"

The Op held up his pudgy hand and raised his thumb and three fingers in quick succession. "The Serbians, the Chinese, the Egyptian operation, the scheme with Lorrimer." He wiggled his index finger. "The Chinese. Let me guess: laundering money for domestic espionage."

"You know I can't confirm or deny. I will say, though, there are a lot of high-tech firms here in Boston. Dense lab-coat-to-square-foot ratio."

"As long as we're talking about the Chinese, what's between you and Sandra Wong? The instant you saw her sitting with me in the Laurel Court you ran for the exit."

"Her name's Patricia Sung. She was in my graduating class at Princeton. Chinese national. I was afraid she'd recognize me."

"Nice acting job. The jealous girlfriend."

"Did it work?"

"On me? Honestly, I was never sure. You had me going, though." He looked down at his empty plate. He'd been a fool. "And that 'Immodium moment' at Starbucks?"

"I had to think fast. Wong followed you there. She was dressed as a man, but I recognized her walking past the windows, heading toward the door. I was at the 'Order' counter reaching into my purse to get you something to eat, when I saw her. I had to act fast."

He'd even fallen for that.

She saw the look on his face.

"I am sorry. I really am. You're a nice guy. You didn't deserve it."

"I hope it was all worth it."

"If it's any consolation, you were hard to crack."

He felt Louisa's presence in the room.

Suddenly, Patel leaned forward, her eyes looking up from under half-closed lids, as if waiting to be kissed.

"One last question," she said in a low voice. "Why did Kraft keep up the charade—the 'distraction,' as you call it—about Neff?"

He stopped chewing. She continued.

"He'd been missing for almost a month before he texted Downing with the pickup date and time. Why prolong the charade? Why give us even the faintest scent of a trail that might lead back to him? And then, doing it again, setting up your meeting at the house on 27th Avenue?"

She paused again to let him reply. When he didn't she said, "How did he know about you? And how to contact you?"

Still nothing.

"And why would he trust you?"

He'd never felt as much longing for her as he did at this moment. Or as much distrust. Or as much desire to earn her admiration, even at the risk of angering her. He pushed his empty plate to the side and leaned forward.

"Suppose there was a detective," he began, "who wanted to trap a murderer, but didn't want the police involved."

Patel straightened up, slowly. There'd be no kiss.

The Op continued.

"The murderer and the police are both after a third person, a missing man. The detective decides the best way to catch the

murderer without letting the police in on it is to get them to stake out a location where they think this missing person will appear, and then get the murderer to stake out a different location where *he* thinks this missing person will appear. The detective waits for the murderer at the second location."

Patel was listening, motionless.

"How?" she asked in a dead voice. "How does the detective arrange this?"

"By pretending to be the missing person."

A quizzical look appeared on her face.

"On a burner phone," said the Op.

"Texting," said Patel. "As the missing person."

The Op shook his head. "As the missing person's known alias, using his pseudonym."

"But Martinez watched you board the cable car on Mason St. She rode along and saw you get off and drop your burner in the storm drain. We retrieved it and found nothing useful."

"Who's talking about me? This is a hypothetical detective. And speaking hypothetically, that should have told whoever was following him that there was another phone: the detective had no reason to dispose of this one, except to suggest it mattered. There was nothing on it to raise suspicion, as you say."

Patel's face gave nothing away.

He decided not to rub it in by asking if Martinez had followed him to Jefferson Street. No point in giving them a clue to the location of the burner he had used.

There were other ways to get full satisfaction, however.

"That text message that Neff sent to Downing, arranging the pickup at his house? In this hypothetical scenario, that would be the detective, using the burner, right after he'd called his partner to set up a meeting at a coffee shop. And that message the detective received from Neff, saying they should meet at the house on 27th Avenue? That would be the partner, also using a burner. Oh, and the delivery truck? To fortify the illusion that Neff was about to

show. That would be the partner, again, something he arranged, along with renting the house to meet at."

"And then the partner would just walk in," said Patel, sounding as if she were in a trance, "and pretend to be Walter Neff."

"And as soon as he did," said the Op, "the murderer, who'd been hiding in the house all along, would show himself. At which point, the detective would push the 'Send' button on his phone."

"A prepared text message. To the police. Cavalry to the rescue."

The Op gave a slight nod. "Then it would be just a matter of stalling for time."

"How?"

"The partner would say he's there to take the detective to the missing man. The murderer isn't invited. I'm betting the murderer would offer a bribe. Faster and less work than torturing 'Neff' to get the information he wants. In any case, the guy playing Neff would agree to a figure, if the offer was made, but tell the murderer that the missing man won't show himself until he's sure the detective is alive and well."

"And they'd keep that up until the cavalry came over the ridge." Now it was done. No way back.

"If that really is your last question," the Op continued, "I have one for you."

Patel took a moment, then shrugged. "Only fair."

"I understand why the FBI didn't come to me and ask for my help. I was on Nevis's tab. But why did you think I'd be any better at tracking down Fletcher Kraft than you were?"

She took a minute to gather her thoughts. Or, perhaps, to redact them.

"We'd been trying for three weeks and gotten nowhere. Then Shun tipped us off that you'd been hired by Brit Patterson, bought and paid for by Transcoastal. You're right about Shun's delay in notifying his Chinese handlers. We needed a head start. It was a lead we couldn't ignore, and your inside track with the family, and Transcoastal, gave you an advantage we didn't have. We'd already

accessed Kraft's computer when his wife reported him missing and the police examined it. Not a hard code to crack, was it? Then we had the police return it to Ms. Patterson. We wanted to remain entirely off stage."

"Was it the FBI who broke into Brit's house and saw the COGS file?"

"The what?" asked Patel.

"Never mind." It had to be Mitzi, he thought. "How about the night I was at the ICA, at Brit's exhibition. Someone searched my apartment. Was that you?"

Patel said nothing.

"That's how you learned so much about me. About my tropical fish, my reading *Drood*."

Patel hesitated. Then her face softened. Her body relaxed.

"That, and we had other means."

The Op waited while she made up her mind.

"You just asked why we didn't trust you."

The Op's face said, "Well?"

"I could tell you it was because Transcoastal was paying your bills. But that was only part of it. The truth is, we've been watching you since you were born. Not directly," she hastened to add. "Sort of out of the corner of our eye."

He stared at her.

"I don't mean me personally, of course."

"The FBI? The FBI opened a file on me the day I was . . ."

She corrected herself. "An *allied* organization. Nowadays we're both plugged into 'Homeland Security,' along with TSA."

The CIA, then.

"Your grandfather was a diplomat. He and his wife had connections. You know that. What you don't know is that when they came to this country as refugees, they were allowed to stay only on the condition that they go to work for the State Department, gathering intelligence on their countrymen, here and abroad. The Revolution is, as it boasts, 'permanent,' and not everyone seeking refuge from it does so in good faith. Your grandmother, in fact,

became a double agent, and she ended up recruiting your mother, when she was old enough. We couldn't tell whether, at some point, she hadn't recruited you, too.

"I've already told you more than I should. But I will add, just for emphasis, that a double-agent, while twice as useful as an ordinary spy, is only half as trustworthy, and for that reason requires twice as much scrutiny. We know more about your family than you do, and probably more about you, too."

"And my dad?"

She shook her head. "Not in it. Although we suspect he knew about it."

He did, thought the Op.

"My mom—can you tell me what happened to her?"

Patel looked at him, considering.

"Your mother got herself into a jam with someone working the other side of the street. A man I can't name."

That Man.

"Is she alive?" he asked.

After another pause, Patel relented. "She's alive, and in hiding. You're safe as long as she stays that way. That's all I can tell you."

He kept waiting. Patel shook her head.

"I don't know where she is. Even if I did, you know I couldn't tell you."

It was raining when they left.
The door locked behind them.

EPILOGUE: EASTPOINTE

TWO YEARS LATER

Chapter 33

Dick Arrowsmith set the sprinkler down in the middle of the back yard and looked around. Brown grass stretched in every direction, right up to the cyclone fence, but this is where he needed to start. Three months of no rain plus the town's ban on outdoor water use had done its deadly work. He'd held off, like every other law-abiding citizen in Eastpointe, for as long as he could. Now, like every other scofflaw in town, he'd do what he could to save his lawn.

Dick walked back to the house and turned on the faucet. Water began to arc out of the four nozzles, but the sprinkler head wouldn't budge. It was old and often got stuck. In a few seconds it began to rotate.

Just then he caught sight of a tall, heavy-set man coming around the corner of the house. Not fat, more of a conical shape. The man stopped and called his name.

He was wearing a tie that Dick Arrowsmith recognized.

The sun was already hot as blazes by the time the Op pulled up in front of the house.

It was a ranch on a double lot with black shutters and wide, white aluminum siding. Garage attached by a breezeway. A boat on a trailer sticking out of it. Dead lawn, mostly crabgrass. All enclosed by a cyclone fence.

No car in the driveway. Maybe no one was home, but he'd come all this way so he had to try.

He opened the gate, climbed the steps, rang the bell.

Not a sound. Not even a barking dog.

They might be out in back, although he doubted it, in this heat.

Still. . . .

Coming into the backyard he discovered a man leaning over a spigot and looking in the direction of a rotary sprinkler set in the middle of a sea of brown. He was wearing a faded T-shirt and cut-offs. He looked up as the Op approached.

"Fletcher Kraft?"

It took the man a few seconds to respond.

"You've come to the wrong house, bud. My name is Dick. Dick Arrowsmith."

The Op came closer. He noticed the man was staring at the tie he was wearing.

"Recognize it?"

The man shook his head.

"Dick," said the Op. "As in 'Richard'? The 'powerful leader'?"

The man looked up at the Op's face.

"From the German, '*Reek*-hardt.' Related to 'reich,' I think. 'Rich'? 'Wealthy'? But I think 'Kraft' is the more common word for 'power,' isn't it? In German, I mean. And 'Arrowsmith.' Arrow-maker. What do they call it when someone puts feathers on an arrow? 'Fletching'?"

Arrowsmith's face fell.

"You'd better come inside," he said. "It's cooler."

They went in through the breezeway.

"The wife's not home," said Arrowsmith. "She took our two-year-old to his swimming lesson."

The inside of the house no more matched the Op's expectations than the outside. A heat-pump was squeezed above the kitchen window, blowing cold air. The window gave him a view of the sprinkler, whose arcs of water flashed in the sun. Somewhere along the way the ranch had been remodeled to an open plan. A beige linoleum floor united the living, dining, and kitchen areas. The kitchen held a Formica table, four chairs and a high chair. The table was littered with scrap-booking materials. Aside from that, the place was immaculate.

"Something cold to drink?" asked Fletcher Kraft. He drew a pitcher of what looked like iced tea from the fridge.

"No, thanks. I'm fine."

"Here, look, I'll drink from it first."

He took two glasses from a cabinet above the sink. He put one on the counter and filled the other, then drank it down without stopping. The Op held his up.

"Just push those to one side and have a seat," said Arrowsmith, nodding at the table. "Sylvie's adding to the baby book. Be careful, though. She takes it seriously. Got a knack for it."

Gingerly, the Op made a space for his tumbler. A pile of red hearts toppled into the two piles next to it, knocking them over like a row of dominoes.

It was two years since he'd stopped looking for Fletcher Kraft. Two weeks since Flo Patterson asked him to resume the search.

She'd just finished her sophomore year, and her dry run PSATs—practice for the real thing coming up. Her sister was at Stanford, living near Tommy, who was now wearing his hair long and tied back over his ears despite some decent plastic surgery. With the braid down his back, said Brit, he looked more like what he kept insisting he'd been all along: authentic.

He and Brit never did marry, even though she succeeded in getting her missing husband declared dead. Kraft's assets amounted to a few hundred thousand in securities and a five-million-dollar life insurance payout. If the man was fleecing Transcoastal all these years, he was doing a damned poor job of it. But the securities and the insurance would be enough, along with her growing reputation and sales, to let Brit keep the house and studio in Weston and put her daughters through school. Tommy contributed, even though she'd decided she didn't want another husband. The two of them got along well, but his values weren't hers. She didn't measure success in sales figures.

None of that was enough for Flo. She needed the truth. In two more years she'd graduate from high school. Xenie had a father. Where was hers? So she called the Op.

He was in Gloucester, now, on Cape Ann, Charles Olson's old habitat. He'd lost weight during The Fletch Kraft Affair and, after

learning that a foreign government might be hunting for him, he decided to keep it off. He hadn't yet changed his name, though. When Continental went stern up, he hung out his shingle, set out in his own box on the sea, starting in Malden. He was by then well known, even nationally and internationally, for his role in the Fletch Kraft Affair, and that helped draw clients. Now that he'd established himself, it was time for a change of name to go along with the change in shape. To what, he hadn't decided.

Bannon was in Continental's New York office, but stayed in touch. He'd emailed a copy of the OM's obituary. Nothing in it corresponded to the office legend.

Running his own business was not in the Op's genome, so he often called Monica for advice. Sometimes the advice he needed related to a case, and Sam would get involved. Monica and Sam had started a non-profit offering legal counsel for the indigent. Even with the help of what Sam had saved up while working at Parker and Houk, Monica had to hit up some of her wealthier relations to get it going. It now had a dedicated staff of three, plus a bit of outside funding. Their daughter, Portia, was just out of diapers. The three of them lived nearby, in Manchester-by-the-Sea.

Cal Guillermos had also set up shop, and not far away. "ArtIntel CG" solved security problems up and down the North Shore. The Op sometimes threw business in his direction.

The Op was embarrassed by Flo's email. Her desire to find her father was something he'd made up, a necessary counterpart to the fiction he'd devised to convince Nevis that Walter Neff's arrangement to meet him at 1382 27th Avenue was real. It never occurred to him that Flo's need to know her father might be real, too.

And Fletch Kraft? Was he real?

* * * * *

"Fletcher Kraft' isn't my name," said the man who called himself Dick Arrowsmith. "I don't know if I have one. I mean, a

name my biological parents gave me." He was raised by a childless couple connected to the Winter Hill gang, in Somerville. When it came time for him to go to school, they said his name was "Fletcher Kraft." They had the adoption papers to prove it.

"I don't know if the documents were real or forged," said Arrowsmith. "I suspect forged."

The boy was sharp, especially with numbers, and advanced quickly through school. Graduated Somerville High at fifteen. But the whole time, he was being groomed.

"Winter Hill, as you probably know, owned a huge share of the Boston area drug trade back in the 70s and 80s. And untaxed cigarettes, and booze, and prostitution, and protection. That was the heyday of the Irish mafia, back when Whitey Bulger and Steve "The Rifleman" Flemmi walked the earth, and it needed a major conduit to scrub its earnings.

"It chose Transcoastal because it already had someone inside smuggling bootleg cigarettes and other merchandise past the tax collector. His name was John Lorrimer, son of Winter Hill boss Terry "Tot" Lorrimer. He'd gone through the same mill as me, but about ten years earlier. This was without Transcoastal knowing about it, except for their top security guy, George Nevis, who got a kickback.

"You've heard of square pegs and round holes? By the time I finished U. Mass Boston, tuition courtesy of the mob, I was whittled to fit perfectly. I got my BA in three years, my MS in accounting in a year and a half. Started at Transcoastal in December of 1994. On the 23rd of that month, Bulger went to ground when his FBI handler told him the Feds were about to level a RICO indictment against him. The Winter Hill Express went off the rails, with me in it.

"But parts of the machine were still in working order. It didn't take Nevis long to get it back on track with another passenger on board: the Serbian Mafia. Enter Yosef Marcovic.

"Marcovic was helping Ratko Mladic kill Muslims in Srebrenica at the time, but scum always rises, and by now he was floating near the top of the swirling toilet flush that was the Bosnian War. Once Nevis recruited him, it wasn't long before he was sitting in the locomotive and tooting the horn. Have you met him?"

The Op nodded. "We play chess together."

"Not anymore, I'll bet," said Arrowsmith. "Not even in the visiting room."

"Tell me something," said the Op. "If Marcovic was calling the shots for Transcoastal Security, why would he get his hands dirty coming after you? Why not send a mob stooge?"

"Because I might tell the stooge something Marcovic didn't want him to hear. He had his own thing going—siphoning cash from the Serbs' laundered money, with my help."

"Wait." The Op held his hand up to his face and popped out his thumb and three fingers, just as he had with Patel two years before. "Serbs, Chinese, Egypt, Lorrimer," he said. "That's four." Then he raised his pinkie and looked up. "You and Marcovic. That's five?"

Arrowsmith wiggled his own little finger. "This one, I had no choice. Didn't see a dime. I did it to keep me and my family safe."

"What about the Chinese? And this?"

He held the tie up from his chest.

Arrowsmith reached out and gently brushed his hand down the embroidered illustrations, as if he were stroking a pet cat.

"Hand stitched, you know," he said.

"I didn't."

Arrowsmith stopped stroking the tie. "All in due time."

"As soon as the Serbs got on board, I opened an offshore account. It was in Fletcher Kraft's name at first. Later, I transferred all the funds to an account in the name of 'Gordon Pough.'"

"Puff?" asked the Op. "The Magic Dragon?"

Arrowsmith looked at him as though he were temporarily unhinged. "No, that's how I pronounce it. It's spelled 'P-O-U-G-H.' Originally, I thought, 'Poe,' as in 'Edgar Allan'? or 'Poof.' As in 'disappear.' Make the money disappear. Later, I decided I wanted it to rhyme with 'Huff.'

The Op looked at him, waiting.

"But we'll get to that, too."

"So you were put in place to handle money for the Irish mob, but you ended up working for the Serbians."

"Right."

"And you were making a ton of money, I assume."

"For them, and for me."

"And eventually, Gordon Pough."

"But 'working' isn't the right word. It was fun."

"Fun?"

Arrowsmith nodded. "Sounds strange, I know, but the fact is, I was doing what I was brought up and trained to do. It's what my whole life, well, 'meant,' really. But I was also good at it because I loved doing it. Nothing else mattered. Irish, Serbian, hell, even the side-hustle I managed for Marcovic—step right up. Give me something to *do* with this."

He tapped his head on both sides.

"Once the Serbian operation was up and running, I was like a magician with new tricks but no audience. Getting the Chinese involved? That was my idea. I told Marcovic to go after them. Well, not the Chinese exactly: other 'interested parties.' But I wasn't after more money. The money was like Monopoly money by then—just . . . the material. The magician's deck of cards. I loved the *game*, the action, the God-mother-fucking-damn. I was good."

Arrowsmith stared out the window, as if his former life were buried somewhere under the dead grass.

"I won't bore you with the details . . ."

"I wouldn't understand them anyway."

"You've heard of 'kiting'?"

"Check-kiting."

"This was something like that. It's how Lorrimer and I added to our offshore account."

"Account'? Singular? You two shared an account?"

"For the funds the two of us embezzled."

"This isn't Mr. Pough's account, is it?"

"It became his. Is his. Now."

At this point it was the Op's turn to look out the window. Then around the room.

"I bet you and Mr. Pough haven't seen each other in a while."

"Mr. Pough is fictional," said Dick Arrowsmith, sounding annoyed. "So is Fletcher Kraft." He waved his hand in an angry gesture around the room and toward the window. "This is real. It isn't much to look at, but it's real." He pointed to his skinny chest and tapped it, hard. "This, this is real." His vehemence grew. "Real people can't communicate with fictional characters. Someone else created Fletcher Kraft. I created Dick Arrowsmith."

"*Richard* Arrowsmith.' You're a philologist *and* an accountant?"

"You can find the meaning of any name you want on the internet."

And you went to the trouble of creating one that's just another version of the one you erased, thought the Op.

When Arrowsmith had calmed down, the Op asked him about the tie. He smiled then.

"That Egyptian hit and run was all Mitzi's idea. I rode shotgun. Lorrimer was in the back seat.

"We met at a party in Brooklyn. I was in New York on business. She'd just wriggled off the hook for the Aaberg smuggling rap, but her reputation in the art world was trashed. We hit it off. I don't know why. Maybe she felt as unreal as me. It didn't work out. I wanted real kids. Also, I'm pretty sure she's a lesbian. Neither of us knew it at the time, obviously. Probably why our marriage felt so . . . fabricated. I mean, to her. Everything about my life was

fabricated, so I thought this part of it, marriage, was just par for the course."

"But why? Why get married at all?"

"It was what Fletcher Kraft would do. I was 28, a successful businessman. It's what came next in the story.

"It wasn't long before Mitzi brought up the idea of smuggling artifacts. She said Aaberg showed her how. I'm pretty sure it was the other way around."

"And you couldn't resist."

Arrowsmith shrugged.

"Anyway, the scheme involved Egyptian cotton and going the long, wrong way around, from Egypt to San Francisco via the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Lorrimer was our West Coast manager by then, so we got him involved. Transcoastal had no clue. Neither did anyone in the Egyptian Ministry of Finance. They were so impressed with the final arrangement that they held a banquet in my honor and presented me with that tie."

"Brit said it was a joke."

"I told everyone it was. But it wasn't to me. You have to understand: it was the first award I'd ever received for something I'd created myself, on my own initiative. I'd won prizes in school for achievement in this or that. But they were always in recognition of what I'd been *assigned* to do.

"And the *chiffonier*?"

"That was Transcoastal thanking me for the money I was making them. Because I was. The deal itself was above board. Under the table is where the three of us were making our nut. No, the *chiffonier* was just a piece of furniture. But the tie—that was a gift from people who could really appreciate what I'd created."

"Why did you wear it to meet with Lorrimer every year? And why did you meet at all? It wasn't because you were there to attend the annual business meeting."

Arrowsmith looked surprised. "How did you know that? Did John tell you?"

"A friend figured it out for me."

Arrowsmith nodded. "The tie had some kind of hold over me. That's the only way to put it. It was tangible, something real, and stood for something real. It was a token of appreciation. A token of affection, too, because don't we all feel some kind of affection, some kind of . . . *affinity*—that's the word I'm looking for—affinity with people who give us pleasure by doing what we also like to do, and doing it very, very well? Like a high school basketball player watching . . . who's a good example? LeBron James, say."

Or a member of the SFX chess club watching Morphy. Or Fisher. Yes, the Op understood.

"I was the MVP of that particular deal, and I wanted to commemorate it, meet with Lorrimer, a player in it, once a year to celebrate it. Like high school jocks at a class reunion, off in a corner, talking about "the Big Game." Share that feeling with someone who understood what the tie meant. I started timing my visits with the annual business meeting once I married Brit, to give me cover."

"Why did the meetings continue at all, after the Egyptian smuggling scheme ended?"

"Because John and I had another reason to celebrate."

"The embezzling scheme you and he cooked up."

"Right, and the tie had become, by that time, what? a symbol of our relationship. The nearest thing to a real human relationship Fletch Kraft ever had."

Chapter 34

"Marrying Brit. How'd that come about?"

"After the divorce, I asked for a transfer to the West Coast. Mitzi still had schemes, and I needed to put more distance between us. I met Brit when I was walking by a construction site in the Mission one day and heard a 'thunk' on the sidewalk behind me. It was Brit's hard hat.

"What can I say? Fletcher Kraft still wanted to be married. And to have a family. And Brit was funny, and beautiful, and smart. And she seemed to like me. Or rather, Fletcher Kraft. She saw something in him I couldn't see. So I took it on credit. As for Xenie, she was an advantage from Kraft's point of view. He'd envisioned having two kids. Now the wait would be cut in half.

"The three of us moved back to Boston when Kraft got his promotion to Chief Accountant.

"But this marriage failed, too. With Mitzi, Kraft was dancing with someone as unreal as himself. With Brit, the ghost was dancing with a real person, and she had nothing to lean on."

"Then Mitzi turned up."

"I was terrified. What was she planning? I had made damned sure there was nothing to connect me to the artifacts con. Or had I?"

"And she kept teasing me about it. Dropping hints. Like putting that closeup of the tie in Brit's publicity brochure."

"She said she wanted to surprise you."

Arrowsmith glared.

"You weren't pleased?"

"Not just not pleased. I was sure she'd taken that photo just the week before, when I caught her snooping around my office. That's where I kept the tie, in a desk drawer."

"What did she say when you walked in?"

"Oh! There you are!' As if she'd been looking for me."

"Right after Brit hired me, she found a folder marked 'COGS' on your desk. Mitzi again?"

Arrowsmith nodded. "The cooked figures in that folder would have told her I was up to something she could use."

For the rest of the conversation they compared notes: Arrowsmith's movements after abandoning the kayak at the Saylorville Dam, how he lived on the streets of Des Moines for a year and a half, drifting in and out of shelters and soup kitchens. How he faked amnesia until someone sent him to the doctors at the Carver College of Medicine, who were easy enough to fool into certifying the diagnosis. After that, he could legally name himself.

The Op, in turn, briefed Arrowsmith on the investigation, and the follow-up.

"I'd decided that, if you were on the run, it had to be from someone you'd seen at the Fort Dodge airport, someone who could do you harm. Once your death was declared, I saw no reason to keep looking. But when Flo called, I knew I couldn't let it rest. I flew to Des Moines and started asking around social services and outreach programs. The heart-warming story of 'Dick Arrowsmith' was still fresh in the minds of the people I talked to. After that, it wasn't hard to track you to Eastpointe."

"All on the nose, except no one was chasing me at the airport. I'd just decided to disappear."

"After all the pains you'd taken to become Gordon Pough, all that time and money spent on sublimate.com and 'G. Yardley.'"

Arrowsmith paused. "You know about sublimate.com?"

"Never mind how."

"You're right. That was the plan. By the end of 2022 the walls were closing in. I decided it was time to do a Whitey."

"What about Brit? And the kids?"

Arrowsmith shrugged. His indifference gave the Op no reason to pursue the topic. For now. "You used the name 'Huff' in your emails with G. Yardley—I assume because it rhymed with 'Pough'? And you added a 'W.' For 'Walter,' right?"

"You know *Double Indemnity*?"

"Only the movie. A friend of mine helped me make the connection. But I'm surprised you read that kind of thing."

"Or that I read at all?"

The Op remained silent.

"Isn't it clear by now that Fletcher Kraft related better to fictional characters than to real people?"

"You mentioned Poe . . ."

"Only *The Purloined Letter*. Kraft hated *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. A fucking orangutan? No. The scammers, the grifters—the math geniuses from MIT who give the blackjack dealers nightmares—those were Kraft's heroes. In *Purloined Letter* one con artist, the detective, outwits another, Minister D. The plot reads like an algebraic equation. Did you know that Poe was a gifted mathematician, like Dupin? Went to West Point, studied engineering?"

"And *Double Indemnity*?"

"Walter Huff is an insurance salesman who knows how probability works."

The Op looked around the open-plan living space and saw no books anywhere.

"Do you still read this stuff?"

"I'm real now. I don't need to suck the blood of storybook characters."

"So, what about this offshore account with Lorrimer?"

"We had set it up as a joint account requiring both our signatures, to keep us as honest with each other as we thought we were. But once I created Mr. Pough, it occurred to me that, for my own safety, I'd be wise to let him manage the account for both of us. John was already so nervous that it didn't take much to get him to agree."

"I still don't see why he would."

"First, he trusted me. Second, he was congenitally illiterate when it came to reading fine print. Two signatures were required to withdraw funds. Mr. Pough's became one of three."

"Lorrimer thought he could tap the account at any time," said the Op. "All he had to do was get Pough's signature. A mere formality. But of course, that would never happen."

"Once I'd disappeared, it was easy to put all the funds in a new account, Mr. Pough's, using his signature and mine."

"Before you were declared dead."

"You mean before Fletcher Kraft was declared dead. Yes, that was a priority."

"You still have all of Mr. Pough's documents?"

"He's a law-abiding, tax-paying citizen."

"And yet you live here, like this."

"We're happy here, like this. Sylvie and me, and Jack."

"How much is in that account, right now?"

Arrowsmith thought about it. "Eight figures, looking at nine."

The Op waited a moment before saying, "You can't let go of it, can you?"

Arrowsmith sighed. "It's my monument. The 'tie' I won for my lifetime achievement."

"It must kill you that you can't tell anyone. That no one knows but you, now that Lorrimer's gone."

Arrowsmith didn't answer, which the Op took as a yes.

"You never touched a penny of it, did you? The whole time you were married to Brit, you lived off your earnings. Bought a house in the poorest neighborhood in Weston. Drove a Prius, I'll bet."

"The important thing was the schools, for the girls. And Brit's career, her studio. The barn was perfect for that. We didn't—Fletcher Kraft didn't—need more."

"Your daughter does. She needs to find out what happened to her father."

"Fletch Kraft was her father. He's dead. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts says so."

"But Gordon Pough is alive and well."

"Gordon Pough is a fi . . ."

"They're all fictions. But Fletcher Kraft was somebody else's fiction. Gordon Pough is just as alive as you are. The same flesh and blood man named him and Dick Arrowsmith both. The same

man *is* both. They are as near to 'alive' as he can ever make them—or ever be.

"As for those eight figures? They aren't your legacy. They're Fletcher Kraft's. The 'tie' doesn't belong to you, either. You didn't win it. He did. And he appointed Gordon Pough to take care of the money it stands for, and all the rest of the money besides."

The Op wasn't sure where he'd ended up or how he'd gotten there, but Arrowsmith was listening.

"I didn't spend the last eight days tracking you down just to hear your life-story, Mr. Arrowsmith. Or Fletcher Kraft's, or Gordon Pough's, or how Mr. Poe or Poof or Huff or Neff or whoever else is sitting in the green room fits into it. I'm here because Flo Patterson asked me to find her father. And I have."

"But . . . "

The Op held up his hand.

"And I can do one of two things. It's up to you."

"Go on." He had the man's full attention.

"I can go back to my client and tell her I located her father. He's living in Eastpointe, Michigan, and going by the name of Richard Arrowsmith. He has a child named Jack and a wife named Sylvie and nearly \$100,000,000 stashed in an offshore account under the name, 'Gordon Pough,' but he lives in an aluminum-sided ranch house surrounded by a dying lawn. And then I'll give her your address."

For the first time, Arrowsmith looked genuinely worried. "Or?"

"Or you can have Gordon Pough get in touch with Flo and tell her he was a close friend of Fletcher Kraft and just heard he was declared dead. Or make up your own story. It has to include the part where Mr. Pough tells Ms. Patterson how his friend ended up depositing tens of millions of dollars into Mr. Pough's account, 'for safekeeping.' And how he disappeared before telling Mr. Pough what to do with it.

"Also, Mr. Pough is going to start transferring Fletcher Kraft's 'legacy' to a bank account in the name of 'Florence Patterson,' to be

administered by her mother until Florence is 25, at which point she will assume full control."

The Op paused. Outside he heard the U-latch on the driveway gate clanging up, then the gate creaking open.

"But that will bring the IRS sniffing around," said Arrowsmith. "And the Feds, and who knows"

A car door slammed shut and the car pulled into the driveway.

"What will they find? Gordon Pough is a person in every respect that matters, except bodily. Has an address, a Social Security number. He pays his taxes every year, to the penny. Why would they want to rock that boat?"

"But"

The car door opened and closed. They heard the gate being shut. The latch clanged down.

"Don't you see? Fletcher Kraft's 'legacy' will be known, it will be shared with another person. He will get the credit and recognition he deserves, and his daughter will get her father back. He was never anything but a name, after all."

"But"

"I could even imagine Mr. Pough and Flo Patterson becoming good friends, Flo learning more about her father's accomplishments in school, his math wizardry. Who he really was: the man, not just the name. And Mr. Pough would discover who Flo Patterson is, and will become."

The door to the breezeway opened.

"Think fast," said the Op, nodding toward the door.

"Sorry I'm late, Sweetie," said a woman's voice. "I decided to stop for groceries. Maybe you could"

The door closed, revealing a tall, slender woman holding a toddler in her arms. Her big round tummy indicated another was on the way. Damp tendrils of curly red hair clung to her freckled cheeks. She looked young, maybe early twenties. The boy was plump, with strawberry blonde hair, and getting cranky.

"Oh," said the woman. "This explains the car outside."

Arrowsmith introduced the Op, using a name he made up on the spot—perhaps after glancing down at the scrapbooking disarray. "Mr. Hart, this is my wife, Sylvie, and my boy, Jack." He pointed to Sylvie's midriff. "That's Jack's brother. We don't have a name yet."

Dick Arrowsmith's family, like his name, resembled Fletcher Kraft's, the Op realized, but with an inverse male-to-female ratio.

"Mr. Hart's an old friend . . . of a friend of mine. Dropped by with some sad news. Seems our friend passed away recently."

Sylvie nodded politely and headed for the highchair. "I stopped for groceries on the way back. Could you bring them in, Dick? I've got to feed Jack before he loses it." She stooped over to fit Jack's legs under the tray.

"I'll come with you," said the Op as Dick headed for the car.

As Arrowsmith opened the tailgate, the Op asked, "Exactly what happened to you that day, the day UA 1008 nosedived? That's the part I could never make sense of."

"You couldn't because I couldn't either," said Arrowsmith. "Not then."

He paused to gather his thoughts.

"You ever go on the 'Round Up'? That carnival ride where you stand up inside a big wheel and it starts to spin and then it tilts straight up in the air? You're spinning vertically, but your back is still pressed against the inside of the wheel, right? That's what it's like to be in a nosedive, but you're not pressed back. You're pressed down, into your seat. It's the weirdest sensation.

"I did some research on it because I was curious: had I been hallucinating or what? I found out that in a nosedive the spin exerts a centrifugal force on the bottom of the plane. The passengers experience it as gravity.

"I'm telling you this because otherwise you won't understand what happened to me. We were diving straight down, picking up

speed, but I felt like everything was normal. I mean, my body did. Outside, I can see the world spinning like a top, but inside the main cabin, it's steady as she goes—except for the other passengers. They were completely out of control, just like the world outside my window. Not me. I felt centered. I felt like, for the first time in my life, I belonged in my own body, and it belonged where it was, anchored in its seat, while the rest of the world went crazy. For once, I didn't feel like a character in a movie. I felt like someone watching other characters in a movie, while I sat somewhere else, waiting to see what would happen next.

"What happened next was we pulled out of it and for a couple of hours I couldn't remember any names. I don't mean amnesia. I knew I had a wife and kids living in Boston, and I knew where I was headed—even the name of my hotel. But people's names were just . . . erased. Beginning with my own. Amy Briscoe was sitting next to me when we landed, and the first thing she did was call someone named 'Todd.' I thought that was an interesting name, and later, in the airport, I saw her and had the impulse to go up and ask her about Todd. Maybe I thought I could become a 'Todd.' It's hard to describe. I was like a piece of driftwood waiting to get snagged on something that had a name."

The breezeway door opened and Sylvie called, "Dick?"

"We're coming," said Dick.

"It's over a hundred degrees out there," said Sylvie as they walked in. "Why don't you put those away and sit in the living room and finish up, and I'll bring you two a couple of cold beers?" She'd fed and changed Jack, who was sitting in a playpen, hitting wooden pegs with a wooden hammer.

"Mr. Hart says he has to go," said Dick. Then, to the Op, "I'll walk you to your car."

On the way, he resumed his story.

"I asked Amy if I could use her phone to call my wife. All I wanted, right then, was to know more about this 'Todd' person. Once I had the phone, I started searching her contacts for his name and found it, along with his address. I memorized them and, right

then, something clicked—I really *did* have to call my wife! Whoever I was, I had to let her know I was alive. But what was her name? Amy got impatient, grabbed the phone, and asked. The only name that came to me, off the top of my head, was 'Marilyn.'

"A version of 'Meriam'?"

"That sounds right. Anyway, I went back to my seat and, for the first time, I thought to open my wallet. It's hard to explain. I *thought* I knew my name, my wife's name, my kid's names, all my friends and business associates' names, but only because . . . only because I didn't know I *didn't* know them anymore. Not until Amy asked me for my wife's.

"Looking at Kraft's face staring back at me, I realized this was my chance to reinvent myself—to name myself, not live with the name someone gave me just to make me their tool."

There were so many other details the Op wanted to ask about, but the sun was beating down mercilessly, and Sylvie must be getting suspicious.

"You'll get in touch with Mr. Pough. By the end of the week," said the Op. He looked back at the house, where Sylvie was now standing at the living room window.

Dick Arrowsmith looked, too, then waved. Sylvie waved back.

"Yes, within the week."

* * * * *

What a mess men leave behind, she thought, picking the tumblers out of the scrapbooking debris and heading for the sink.

As she was about to turn back to the table and begin reorganizing her materials, she caught sight of the sprinkler in the back yard. It was jammed again.

Then she noticed something.

Her teacher in the scrapping class had told her and the other students to spend a few minutes each day looking at the shapes of the ordinary things in their lives. Not the things themselves, just their shapes—their outlines, their surfaces. Sylvie was one of her favorite pupils, and was often praised for her "artist's eye."

It occurred to her now that the four jets of water arcing out of the sprinkler head made a kind of pyramid shape, with the point pressed down to earth. But unlike a real pyramid, which was built from the bottom to the tip, this one was built from the tip to the bottom. Falling like rain, but not from the sky. Rising from the earth to return to the earth. A pyramid-shaped fountain.

She was playing with the idea when the sprinkler came unstuck and the glistening arcs of water began to spin, like a pin-wheel, scattering drops of moisture on the parched earth.

Behind her, she heard the sound of a wooden hammer pounding wooden pegs.

Then the breezeway door, opening.

THE END