

# THE FLIGHT

by Charles Rzepka

## 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.

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It wasn't until he was waiting with the rest of the passengers at a gate in the Fort Dodge Regional Airport (one of the few nearby where you could land a Boeing 757), that Fletcher remembered to call his wife. He didn't know why it hadn't occurred to him. Long before the plane touched down, the woman next to him—a petite brunette, 30s-ish, with hair fastened up in back by an amber claw clip—had 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?"

Twenty minutes earlier she'd been clutching her armrests, shoulders raised in a shrug of horror, gasping like a toddler about to blow out a birthday candle. She'd 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. Fletcher could see his face in the glass, still wearing his oxygen mask. He took it off.

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

"Todd?" she repeated, as they taxied to the gate. 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.

At the gate, waiting for a replacement jet from Nashville, he remembered. Reaching into his jacket, he noticed Amy sitting three rows away and felt a sudden urge to go over and see if he'd guessed right. 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.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Excuse me?"

The woman 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 tapping the screen with his thumb and then moving it up and down. He kept putting the phone to his ear and listening, and then hanging up and jabbing again. "I keep getting 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 he 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 to lumber through 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 over-stayed 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.

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 he 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 five inches and 300 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 a few days ago. 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 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 MP 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." 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, 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. One of them 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, 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?"

He didn't want to go there, but was pretty sure she'd 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 has 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, he 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 portable, maybe an iPad, and backs it up when he gets home?" She nodded.

"With your permission, I'd also like to search the 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? 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 now, 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 began to tell her how much they charged, retainer plus hourly, but not to worry, Continental could spread out the payments and would try to minimize any added expenses . . . . Before he got to the hourly, 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 he 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."

"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. Her "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 he 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. He'd 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. "Wishes we were still at Park Street. Straight shot on the Green Line. 'And there's nothing to eat here—just grass!'"

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

"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."

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When he returned to the aquarium, he 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. He walked to the end of it and 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."

He 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."

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

"Can't talk now," he said. "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 books 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. At the same time, he liked feeling that the story was all there, all at once, "in the flesh." You could see it and touch 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 was easily matched, however. Thus the hard cover edition and the 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, the Op for his size (mostly), Sam for his race. During the next three years they learned to look out for each other. Now, eight years after graduation—Monica got into Berklee, 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."

"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 called Brady. Brady put him on hold while he called tech. Tech didn't have it.

"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.

"Yes, 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."

"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, as though he were criticizing her.

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.

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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. "Computer—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 zero and one and then 1 again, 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 76. 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 with a delicate touch that exposed only the tips of his fat thumbs to his iPhone screen. 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 21? He'd already tried enough failed number 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.

When he came downstairs the first thing he did 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."

"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 reassembled 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, shared a frame.

"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, there was no reason to keep in touch. We never shared anything except a house."

"You said 'a mutual friend' introduced you and Brit?"

"Sort of. 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.

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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. The box it opened 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 Guillemos was short and basketball shaped. The Op was a giant pear. Cal was a *bon vivant*. The Op was a recluse. The Op didn't seem to 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. First in 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](mailto: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 ASAP." 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 BPD 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 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!" 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 paper boats. You were wearing your track suit that day."

Men's XL. 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.

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."

He 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, he 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?

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"Why should I?" said Monica.

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

"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 in his cubicle, 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 an 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 lull, 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 gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

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.

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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. He 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 was throaty, 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."