

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 had 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?"

"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.

"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," he 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.

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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. 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.

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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.

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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.

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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 Wingersheek 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, holding it on his lap. 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 Marcović, 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."

"Marković—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.

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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.