Last Tango On Rue Monsieur-Le-Prince

The early morning chill and drizzle made Parisian pedestrian traffic sparse. The street was a wet, grey-walled canyon, with three-story buildings rising straight from the edge of the narrow sidewalk. Newer, uniformly ugly buildings mixed uneasily with the beautiful stone faces of much older structures. The few people hurrying through the drizzle to jobs that started early were greyed out by the mist. The shoulders of their coats were dark from the damp. Cars parked on one side of the narrow lane left space for one direction of traffic. Only the small hotels showed lights in the windows.

A careful bodyguard might have spotted a rough circle of fog on the window of the Japanese restaurant located diagonally across the street from the Hotel Les Clos Medicis. Someone was watching, and being careful not to be seen. But there was no bodyguard.

Inside Nagoya, the Japanese restaurant, kneeling on the couch of a window booth, the operative code-named Mauvais loosened the bow on the long white flower box. He lifted the lid and set it down next to a wine bottle three-fourths full of clear liquid, plugged with a rag. The lid bumped the bottle and caused it to wobble. Mauvais grabbed it, steadied it and turned to survey the box. Set in fitted foam inside the box was a brutally ugly Schmeisser MP43 assault rifle. Mauvais turned the gun on edge and pushed a banana magazine into place, but left the weapon in the box. The earliest that any Nagoya employee would arrive was about 10:00AM. Mauvais would be long gone before they discovered the broken lock in the alley entrance. But the box provided a handy rest, and there was no point in making the rifle obvious.

Moving his head close to the window, Mauvais wiped the circle of fog away with his sleeve to see a few hundred yards up rue Monsieur-Le-Prince, with a clear view of Hotel Le Clos Medicis, a small but elegant hotel where the traitor to the people was having a breakfast meeting. The front door opened and a short, chunky man in a dark suit stepped briskly out and walked up the street towards the hotel's tiny parking lot. Possibly the chauffeur.

A few minutes later, the toy walkie-talkie sitting next to him on the cracked red Naugahyde of the booth buzzed with static and a voice said: "Chauffeur is starting the car." The voice was rendered unidentifiable with distortion, but he knew it was the operative Melomane speaking. Melomane was stationed as a blocker with a clear view of the parking lot. Once the chauffeur moved into position outside the hotel door, Melomane would walk slowly down the street, boxing in any retreat.

The walkie-talkie crackled again, and then clicked twice. That was Luciole in the breakfast room, keying the talk button of her walkie-talkie with a hand in her purse. She was seated close enough to see Albert Reneaudot, publisher of the right-wing newspaper *Les Temps-National*. Reneaudot was starting to move.

Three clicks came almost immediately, which meant Reneaudot was at the door, moving at his characteristic brisk pace. Mauvais scooped the rifle from the box, racked the bolt and pushed off the safety. The selector was already switched to fully automatic, but he checked it nervously as he stepped quickly to the door. He unlatched the bolt on the door with his free hand and opened it a few inches just in time to see Reneaudot duck into the open back door of the black Citroen DS. There would be no opportunity to confront the traitor in the open.

Mauvais stepped quickly from the doorway, across the rain-slicked sidewalk, and stood beside a small delivery van as if he were unlocking the door. The Citroen pulled from the curb and started to move slowly up the street with its little four-cylinder engine struggling to accelerate the heavy sedan. Mauvais stepped away from the van, aimed his rifle at the front window of the Citroen, and triggered a burst, emptying half the 30-round clip into the window. The Citroen swerved left, then right, then turned sharply left and crashed into one of the steel bollards that lined the sidewalk.

Melomane was running up the middle of the street with the heavy revolver he favored held high. Mauvais stepped to the back door of the Citroen and wrenched it open. The seat and the sole passenger sparkled with glass and blood spray. Some of the bullets had struck Reneaudot, and he sat gasping, staring at Mauvais with wide eyes.

"Cheap bandits, are we, traitor?" Mauvais said, and he loosed a burst of fire into Reneaudot that walked from hip to head as the rifle climbed its recoil arc. At that range, the high velocity rounds shredded the publisher. Blood splashed against the opposite door and the publisher spasmed—dead before he could move or speak.

Melomane reached the car and said, "Done? Let's go."

Mauvais said "Wait," and opened the front door of the ruined car. The chauffeur sat in a sea of glass and blood, breathing heavily, his right shoulder wrecked by a bullet, but otherwise uninjured. Mauvais leveled the rifle.

The old chauffeur said "Oh mon Dieu, ne me tue pas", but Mauvais pulled the trigger. The rifle fired once, with the round ripping into the driver's side, exploding completely from the far side of his body and spraying a gout of flesh and blood. The bolt locked open on an empty clip.

"Give me your revolver," Mauvais said.

"Is this necessary?" said Melomane, handing over the gun.

"He took the traitor's coin," said Mauvais, and shot the driver again in the stomach. As he raised the gun to administer the coup de grâce, he noticed a head leaning out from the hotel door. It was not Luciole, she would leave the hotel by the service entrance. He saw the horrified look on the man's face. Mauvais changed his aim and emptied the revolver at the front window of the hotel, smashing

the glass windows across the front. He tossed the pistol to Melomane and said: "That should keep them busy, let's go."

Disruption And Other Benefits

As soon as I opened my eyes, my heart started pounding. Somewhere in the lizard remnant of my Limbic Cortex, I silently screamed: "where am I, what happened to me, how did I get here."

I sleep flat on my back, and lately, when I wake up, it scares the shit out of me to find I'm looking at a ceiling I don't recognize. It's an unpleasant and weird little mental tic, and it's new. It's got to be my justifiably guilty conscience. There's no other good reason, some lovely days have started staring at a strange ceiling.

This particular ceiling is flawless coffered plaster with a scroll at the edges. The crisp and elegant perfection is painted a bright white that probably has a bit of blue in the mix. One cobweb in the darkest corner. Certainly nothing to freak over. Beside me, I feel the weight and warmth of a body close to mine. I smell light perfume, heavy sex, and a little armpit. That last bit is most likely me. The delicious scent is Ada Lovelace Richards, a wonderful woman I met on the motorcycle trip I took last summer across the United States.

Cool blue-white spring light lit the room, suggesting yesterday's heavy overcast might have broken, and that we slept at least part of the morning away. Three rising notes of birdsong were answered with a distant squawk. Rumbling trucks, a bit of general traffic noise, and as full confirmation that we were indeed still in Boston, someone laid on their horn for a full ten seconds. A Masshole—the ubiquitous butthead Boston driver. Could be a beautiful day.

Once my heart rate returned to something close to normal I turned toward Ada, raised myself on one elbow and her eyes flickered open. They widened slightly as she saw me looming over her, and then she smiled and said, "Morning lover. Wow, last night was fun. You fucked the living snot out of me. Scoop me up and snuggle me like you'd die if you ever let me go, honey."

So of course, I did.

Ada turned up in Boston with a typical flourish. I was hunched over my calculus textbook in my tiny dorm room on a drizzly afternoon when the dorm proctor, Harold, stuck his colossal noggin in my door.

Harold is ground zero for geek. Big head, skinny body—a human bobblehead. His hair looks like it was gnawed by cats—I have no idea how he gets it cut like that. Wears thick glasses with clear plastic frames that slide down his nose and get pushed back up with the regularity of a slow waltz— 3/4 time with the first beat of the measure being Harold stuffing his glasses up. He always wears an un-ironed blue cotton dress shirt buttoned closed to his scrawny neck with a collar two sizes too big. Wrinkled grey high-water chino slacks. Weird multi-strap brown leather sandals over white athletic socks with one red and one blue stripe on the cuff. Like a uniform. "Who does your wrinkling for you?" I said. First thing that came to my mind. Yeah, I know, I'm a dick and I'm gonna pay. I need to stop doing that.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Never mind, I'm working on being clever. What do you need?"

"You have a visitor in the lounge, and she's disruptive."

The pathetic tool's eyes were bugging out of his head. He's not my favorite person, in fact if there were a button in front of me that I could push that would make his head explode and no one would know I pushed it, I'd push it. Pretty weenie of me, but yeah, sorry, I'd do it. Just to see. We've had a few run-ins, which is remarkable since I hardly leave my room except to attend class or go to the library. He enjoys his petty authority too much for my taste, and I seem to be developing a bit of a smart mouth as I mature. I can't resist poking a pin in his inflated ego.

"No one is getting any studying done. And she's completely disrupted our Go tournament. Everyone has stopped playing. Several boards have been muddled."

"Oh, sweet Jesus, boards have been muddled."

I lumbered to my feet. I'm pretty large, and I'd been studying for a solid three hours without moving. My knees popped, my back resisted straightening as I walked it vertical. Time for a break anyway.

I assumed the disruption was my older sister, Angel. She hasn't stopped by the dorm since I moved in, but it's no surprise she'd cause a stir. My dorm at M.I.T. is nerdville, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. Angel is a striking brunette who takes vicious enjoyment from stunning my hopeless friends. She's a knockout, and she's got one heck of a set of boobs which she has used as tactical weapons since age 14. But when I walked into the lounge, there Ada was, looking beautiful, mesmerizing the assembled future wizards of technology.

"Hey, sugar. Get over here and kiss me, ya big goof."

Every eye in the cramped lounge turned toward me. They did not look happy to see me. I'm absolutely certain Harold was the only guy thinking about Go at that moment. Ada was perched like royalty in the only good chair in the room, a leather monstrosity some alumni named Rosenblum had donated. At least that's what the brass plaque on the seat back said.

Twelve go-playing uber-geeks tried to make me die of a sudden aneurysm with their non-existent telekinetic powers. And all I was thinking was, "There goes my fucking Calculus grade."

I stepped over to Ada, gave her my hand to help her stand, looked at her amazing eye for a long moment, and then kissed her—deep, long, and hard. She tasted like butterscotch.

I thought, "There must be a reason for that" just as her tongue delivered a butterscotch lifesaver to my mouth. I almost choked on it.

"You got my lifesaver," Ada said. "Give it back," And she searched for it.

"Oh well", I thought, "there are so many worse ways to flunk out of M.I.T."

Lack Of Precedent

I went back to my room to grab my old London Fog windbreaker, retrieved Ada from the stunned and circling geeks, pushed open the majestic oak, glass and brass door and we walked down the stone steps to Mass Ave.

"Your dorm seems really nice," said Ada.

"Well, the part you saw is lovely. Unfortunately, I don't live in the common room. My room is dinky, a little musty, it's painted Department of Motor Vehicles green, and the walls are so thin I can hear everything in the next room. That's hardly ideal given the gastric noises college guys generate."

Ada pulled a little away and gave me a slightly puzzled look, then snuggled right back in but she didn't say anything.

The streetlights were on early, the photocells responding to low clouds and the misty rain that turned late afternoon to premature evening. Ada snuggled under my arm with her hand resting on my chest, her boobs pressed against my ribs and her other arm around my waist. Like a mobile hug. It was certainly challenging to walk this way, but I wasn't going to complain.

We walked from the dorm across Mass Ave to the main building of MIT. Ada wanted a tour. As we walked up the slippery granite stairs with the center of each step worn to a catenary curve from the grinding of a zillion feet, I told her, "So here's the bad news. MIT is not what anyone would call an attractive campus. Most of the buildings look like they were designed by Russian architects trying to use a minimal amount of concrete to enclose the largest possible volume. You're probably thinking about ivy-covered halls and beautiful gothic architecture. That would be the liberal arts college down the road: Harvard. They call us the trade school up the road. People here resent that because it's way too close to the truth."

"Okay. Wow, you've picked up some kind of moody ironic guy thing since I last saw you," Ada said. "Did you write all that down and memorize it, or is that the real new you."

I grinned at Ada. She had droplets of mist on her eyelashes and hair. She looked so fucking beautiful. I kissed her again just to feel the drops brush against my cheek.

"I'd forgotten how good your bullshit detector is. Truth is that I'm overtired, fried, and scared spitless of falling behind. I love this fucking place. Every goddam soulless inch of it. I'm working my ass off here, and it feels like it's not nearly enough, like I'm slowly slipping behind while everyone else is effortlessly running forward. I'm trying to tell myself I this isn't the only place in the world for me because I'm terrified that I'm not going to be here in a year and if that happens...

...well I can't stand to think about that. I've heard that things get easier, I hope that's true. I really, really fucking hope that's true, because right now, I don't think I can cut it."

Ada pulled back away from me just as I was getting the hang of walking that way. "Well, sport, I'm not here to make your life tougher. I'll show myself around the city, but I plan on being entertained well at night. You got a problem with that?"

"No Ma'am."

"Don't fucking Ma'am me. If you have to go back right now and study, you can do that, and I'll see you when you have time. Or we can skip the school tour, go to my hotel room and jump around on the bed. I'm staying in a little place across the river from here. It's right across the bridge, though I gotta say that bridge is pretty fuckin' long. Or we can go to your dorm and freak out your roommate. Your choice."

"Actually, my roommate had a nervous breakdown and barricaded the door about week four. I haven't seen him since the EMTs carried him out."

"Well, that's convenient. Do they have any rules against girls screwing the heck out of guys in the MIT dorm?"

"Not that I know of. It's possible that it's never come up before. We can take advantage of the lack of precedent unless your hotel room is a lot more comfortable than a ten by twelve room with walls made of cardboard and a thin foam mattress on a very squeaky spring frame."

"I've never been in a dorm room. Let's go bust that fuckin' bed."

I thought she was exaggerating, but cheap steel and weak springs proved no match for an enthusiastic young lady and an increasingly uninhibited moose.

It's a good thing my ex-roommate no longer needed his bed.

2H Plus O Equals Boom

Time to introduce myself. Monroe Sanborne. I know, fucked name, but I'm used to it. There's no useful nickname for either Monroe or Sanborne—at least none that my geek buddies could think of, and believe me, they tried. The closest anyone came is "Money" which is stupid because I don't have any and I'm not good at getting it, and someone called me "Sandy" for a while but both are just too pointless to last. I don't even have a middle name as a viable alternative.

For a variety of reasons I won't go into, I used to be an underachieving lump. Did lousy in school, puttered away at things I was interested in. Just kind of took the path of least resistance, doing complicated science projects in subjects that interested me, and hoping to drift into some sort of tolerable future. I hardly left my room until I was 16.

I was kind of a waste of space, but all the same, I was a good guy, never got involved in any trouble other than blowing out a few windows with my experiments. Yeah, electrolyzing water with alternating current isn't a good idea. But now we know, eh?

Then I semi-accidentally got a motorcycle, and my world changed. That sounds trite, but mine really did.

In the good column, if my life path hadn't changed, I probably wouldn't have gotten laid until I was forty—if ever. I would have flunked out of some shithole junior college and wound up flipping burgers. I certainly wouldn't have dated a girl so beautiful that every male of any age above age six freezes in his tracks and watches her until she's a dot on the horizon everywhere she goes. No, I don't mean Ada, Claudia is the traffic-stopper, the first girl I ever kissed, and what a way to start. I wouldn't have met Ada either. But in the not-so-good column, I generally think of myself as a murderer and a cheap-ass fucking thief.

Now I'm nineteen, trying hard to stay on the straight and narrow, and I'm going to school in uber geekville: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I've been keeping my head down, working like a madman, trying to pass all my classes in my freshman year. Hoping against hope that no one finds out what an evil little prick I really am.

Seared Sushi

Mauvais walked quickly back into the Nagoya, pulled the clip from the MP43, and placed the rifle back into the snugly fitting foam in the flower box. The empty clip slipped into a slot next to the gun, and closed the cover. He took the box and ribbon in one hand, wine bottle in the other, and walked through the restaurant to the kitchen. He balanced the box on the edge of a steel counter and surveyed the kitchen. The walls and ceiling were caked with oily dust from years of deep frying. The massive hood over the stove fairly dripped with grease. Dirt and clutter everywhere.

"What a fucking mess, I'm never eating here," said Mauvais, "Let me help you sanitize."

He took matches from his pocket, lit the wick extending from the wine bottle, and threw the Molotov Cocktail against the stove. The sudden splash of burning gasoline instantly covered the stove and the wooden crates stacked next to it in bright yellow flames. The heat and light crinkled the skin on Mauvais' face and singed the hairs on his arms. He backed away and watched for a second, satisfied as he heard the roar of the grease in the ventilator, lighting up like a jet engine.

Mauvais brushed singed hair from his arms, took his box and ribbon and exited through the alley door. The alley was genuinely foul, with reeking garbage cans that leaked sticky liquid onto the ground. He stripped the surgical gloves from his hands and tossed them into the most hideous overfilled can. He enjoyed the thought of the gendarme digging through the garbage for additional clues to this morning's bit of work.

As he exited the alley onto Rue de Médicis, the number of pedestrians braving the early morning drizzle increased dramatically. He walked several blocks, then stopped to rest the box on a low wall and retie the bow. A police car careened through the traffic, siren wailing. The first response he had heard, but certainly not the last. By the time he had walked another two blocks, the sound of sirens was constant in all the many flavors of French emergency services. Mauvais chuckled at the thought of dozens of police cars, vans, fire trucks, ambulances—all crammed into the narrow canyon of Rue Monsieur Le Prince. Every service asserting its preeminence. Firemen and ambulance drivers traipsing through the crime scene, dragging hoses and pushing stretchers. Armed response teams searching the buildings. The bureaucratic squabbles would take all morning to resolve.

He skirted the Luxembourg Gardens and then followed Rue Garancière to an unmarked alley between ancient warehouses. Near the end of the alley was an equally ancient set of garages with heavy arched double doors for each stall. Undoubtedly the original function had been stabling and storage for heavy delivery wagons and draft horses. Mauvais stopped in front of the leftmost set of doors and unlocked a bright new padlock. He locked the padlock onto its hasp to ensure neighbor kids didn't lock him in as a prank. He had an emergency exit for the garage, but using it might reveal the egress to prying eyes. Parisians affected a nonchalant disinterest in their surroundings, but they were ever vigilant for something out of place, something to gossip over.

He stepped inside the dusty storage garage.

Fuzzy Slacks

I've decided there's a lot of excellent reasons to get rich. One of them is nice hotels. Ada's hotel was not the Ritz, but it was twenty very long steps up from the motels my Dad picked on family vacations. Angel and I had to beg and plead as soon as he started looking to get him to choose one with a pool. The beds in the cheap family motels certainly didn't have six pillows like the one in Ada's room—two of them puffy and soft, two thin and firm, and two firm but thicker. Turns out I'm a thin pillow guy, the comfy-looking thick one cricked my neck. Seems strange that I didn't know I had a pillow preference, but I do.

The room had a crisp, fresh smell to it. I walked around sniffing to identify the scent. Ada says it's Mock Orange, which is not all that helpful since I've never seen or heard of a Mock Orange. I sat in every chair, bounced on the bed, looked out every window. Bubba comes to the big city, what a fucking rube. The bedroom and sitting room had a nice view of Marlboro street, but the bathroom featured a scabby airshaft. A little jarring considering how pleasant everything else was.

I've also never been in a hotel room that wasn't just a place to sleep. The sitting room had complicated wallpaper with a delicate raised pattern and a paisley print. It teetered on the edge of gaudy, but somehow worked with the plush beige sofa, red upholstered chairs, a TV and a desk with a comfortable maple chair positioned right in front of a window looking out onto the trees and lively commerce of Marlboro Street.

And Color TV! Must be a twenty-one inch. Huge. My folks still have black and white, a fuzzy teninch screen in a box the size of Volkswagen. I tried to get them to spring for a Heathkit color TV that I could build for them. I'd like to learn the technology hands-on, though I already understand the theory. The Heathkit versions are half the price of a Color TV in a store, and if I built—soldered every component in place and did the inevitable troubleshooting that complex kits require, then I know I could fix it. I had a stellar array of arguments in favor, but it's a no go. My Dad says black and white is just fine. I have to admit, even on the expensive state-of-the-art TV in Ada's sitting room the color is distractingly touchy. Lots of green faces and fluorescent clothing.

I don't have time for TV anyway. Fortunately, Ada's beautiful, quiet sitting room was a great place to study calculus, physics, and chemistry, which is what I did for most of Saturday, while Ada roamed around Boston. I even had room service bring me a BLT and a coke. Room Service! What a concept! Ada showed me how to use it at breakfast and on her way out the door told me to feel free to charge stuff to the room for lunch. It felt kind of odd, like I was mooching off Ada, but it was certainly handy.

Great sandwich—the toast wasn't soggy, the tomato was juicy, fresh, and firm, the lettuce was cold and crispy. The bacon was thick and crisp, with the fat rendered into crunch and the lean chewy and

smoky. And it had a peppered edge. Damn that was good. Nice pickle slice too, half sour. I could have used another of those. One slice is just a teaser.

I got a lot of studying done in the quiet room. Ada came back just before four, with that big Ada grin, and a lot of fancy shopping bags.

"I kind of figure you're stretched thin financially. So I got you some stuff and me some stuff. Don't get your skivvies twisted, I ain't offering to support you, I just got you some presents for getting into such a cool college and screwing the bejesus out of me last night. Besides, Daddy gave me a bonus for all the work he and I been doin' lately, so I shared it. We've had a really good couple of years on the Outer Banks. Every square inch of the retail space we own is rented out, and we're building a new little mall in Kittihawk. Just twenty retail spaces and ten office spaces above, but it's a big deal for Kittihawk.

"I figured the way to get our expansion paid for is with other people's money instead of borrowing. Daddy started calling me 'OPM' because I don't see much reason why we should capitalize everything ourselves, or borrow from some fricken' pain in the ass bank that will be counting every two by four when there are people out there that are very happy with a reasonable return collateralized by real estate. So yeah, OPM: Other People's Money. I put together an investment group and it's working well, we're into the development with twenty-one percent of the cash and fifty-two percent ownership. The group is happy and ready to do more. So Daddy's being generous with this expedition, which I'm calling trip number one, 'cause I plan this to be the first of many. The deal is that I stay available by phone and come back by midsummer and keep things cookin'. So besides the money I saved he gave me a nice wad of spending loot."

"Okay", I said, "you have to meet my sister, Angel. You two sound like sisters, and now that I've said that, it's a creepy thought. But all the same, you'd get along".

"Yeah, I'd like to meet her. In the meantime, these two bags are for you. I'm going to shower and change. You could join me and make sure I'm clean everywhere. Then we'll go to the restaurant on the corner for dinner. The concierge made reservations for us, she said it was terrific".

We took the shower, but making sure that Ada was sufficiently clean resulted in wet sheets and a second, much more reserved shower. I shaved carefully so I wouldn't bleed on my new shirt and put on the clothes Ada bought for me. My bags said Brooks Brothers and Sulka on them, and the clothes inside were a significant upgrade from my stained wranglers and black T-shirt.

She'd bought me dark grey, softly fuzzy wool slacks that fit like they were tailored, four Egyptian cotton shirts in grey, light blue, white and black, a beautiful red paisley Sulka tie. In the other bag was a black pullover v-neck sweater that looked amazing with the black shirt, deep red tie, and grey pants. She even got me socks and underwear, but the underwear wasn't anything like my regular

BVD skivvies. These were sulka shorts. Made of light grey silk instead of cotton. Weird. I looked at them doubtfully, but Ada said: "Oh, give them a try you big sissy, they won't bite your ding-dong."

Actually, they felt great. So did everything else. I have some nice clothes, a legacy from my trip, but I haven't worn them lately. I'd forgotten how great it feels to wear fine clothes that fit well. And Sulka's silk shorts definitely don't bite your ding-dong. In fact they made my ding-dong very happy.

"How did you know to do this," I asked.

"Honey, the secret to shopping for clothes is to find the best-dressed salesperson, tell them what you want to accomplish, and get the heck out of their way. I found this beautiful man, and I told him how I wanted you to look, and then I sat there, and he did it."

"What about sizes, how did you do that?"

"Honey, I know your size. I been all over your fuckin' size."

Welcome to the Dungeon

Mauvais skirted a dusty Renault Dauphine, rusting away quietly in the way Dauphines do so well. He followed a twisting path through walls of stacked boxes and shabby furniture. At the back wall he halted before a padlocked door. Opened the lock and entered the 10' by 12' room. The walls didn't meet the ceiling, leaving a one-foot gap that admitted a scant trace of light that filtered through the barred and filthy windows of the garage. Mauvais swiped his hand through the air several times, feeling for a cord dangling from a single bulb and finally caught it, snatching the room into bright illumination. The thick stone walls of the small room were cold and damp, magnifying the chill of the drizzly morning outside.

Mauvais set the fake flower box on a small wooden table, removed the ribbon and cover, and lifted the rifle from its foam cradle. He opened a tall school-style locker set in one corner of the room and placed the gun inside, joining three other identical rifles. He selected one of several heavy metal ammo boxes from the shelf of the locker and used some of the ammunition inside to reload the emptied clip. Mauvais had no equipment to clean the rifle and didn't care to anyway. The guns were disposable tools. He closed the locker and moved to the far wall where two ring bolts had been freshly set in the concrete wall. He used a pocket knife to confirm the patches were as hard as the surrounding concrete. He looped a chain through them and locked the loop with another new padlock. He yanked the free end as hard as he could. The bolts held tight with no sign of shifting.

He pulled the chain to a set of shelves at the end of the wall to check the reach. Each of the three shelves was full of bottled water, cans of vegetables, and potted meat. Holding the free end in one hand, he could just reach the far corner of the highest shelf. Perfect.

His preparations for the safeguard were complete. He felt deep satisfaction in both his preparations and his actions. He'd done his part, in the next few days he'd know if his compatriots had done their preparations as carefully. For their sake, he hoped they had. There was no room for haphazard effort. He resolved to deal with any form of complacency with extreme prejudice.

Mr. Blobby Rocks

Dinner was great—another reason to get rich. I'm a decent cook, at least for any kind of basic stuff that demands proper technique, so I appreciate the effort and experience required to put together a good restaurant meal. It's a lot of work, and I've slaved away in kitchens just like this one. But fine dining is beyond my budget—way beyond. We had a table for two next to the window that faced Commonwealth Ave. The restaurant was dimly lit, but the streetlights outside washed our table with warm light. The people walking by were interesting to watch.

"See that lovely lady with the cloche hat?"

"What's a cloche hat?"

"That smooth grey felt hat with the downturned brim and a silver silk ribbon."

"Okay, yeah."

"Well, she's a former silent movie star and dancer. Now she's a secretary in an insurance office. Thankful for the typing and shorthand classes she took in high school. She's living in a little studio apartment on Newbury Street with her four cats: Snoopy, Mr. Winkles, Bootsie, and Frodo. Pinching pennies to preserve her savings, but living with all the style and grace she can manage."

I goggled at Ada, but then I understood the game.

I said. "That dark-haired man with a deep tan in the nice charcoal suit with rumpled pants? Well, he's just off an airplane from Brazil. He's looking for a market for tourmalines."

"Not bad, but it's never just Brazil. He's from Sao Paulo."

"Ah, of course. You're not from the United States, you're from Carson, North Carolina."

I'm really no match for Ada's imagination, so I just listened to her monologues, amused, and amazed at the detail and depth of her little biographies.

Our waiter was immaculately dressed except for a little crusty stain on his cuff. Looked like Hollandaise. If you're gonna dip your cuff, it might as well be Hollandaise. He never hovered, but as soon as we needed him, he appeared. I realized how polished his waiter gig was when he stopped in mid-stride, conjured up a silver lighter and lit a lady's cigarette at the exact moment she stopped fiddling with the pack and touched the filter to her bright red lips. I guess there's a way to be great at almost anything. But he had this strange buzz to his voice that rattled in my ears like a trapped mosquito. After he left the table with our drink order (Old Fashioned for Ada, iced tea for me), Ada stared at me with googly eyes and stuck a finger in one ear. We both giggled. Ada said, "I like how you treat waiters and waitresses. You treat them like people you'd like to know, and you appreciate them, even Mr. Buzzy Voice. It's just what my Daddy does. When we go to dinner with some of his rich buddies, they treat the waiters like they were dirt. Just there to serve them. I hate that."

"It's nothing I've thought about, they're people with jobs. My Mom is constantly saying, "you're no better than anyone else." I don't think that's true at all, but I understand the message. I think snooty people are insecure--they act like shits because they don't really believe they measure up to what they're pretending to be."

"Maybe so", said Ada, "but I run into people in business that seem pretty certain that their crap doesn't stink. I think they're just dickheads, and I'm glad to see you aren't one of them, not even a little bit."

I had Schrod with corn succotash and herbed potatoes which I blew through like a starving teenager, which I more or less am. Ada had lobster salad. She picked at hers a little and pushed her food around the plate as I demolished my dinner. A sure sign something was bothering her. Ada likes food.

"Monroe, I was planning to stay a few days, but I get a clear sense I'm interfering. I'd like to spend some time with you, but I don't want to be a burden. I want you to feel free to tell me to go. I know that might be hard to say, but you need to be straight with me like I am with you."

I put my fork down and thought for a few moments, trying to clarify my thoughts before answering. I invariably say the wrong thing if i just blurt out answers, I've learned it pays huge dividends to slow down and make sure what comes out of my mouth is at least somewhat related to what I'm thinking. Finally, I said, "Okay, here's the thing. I don't want you to go, but I don't want to feel bad if I can't spend much time with you other than just being in the same room. Our advisors are constantly telling us that we need to have a social life. They say, "MIT is hard. Burnout is the biggest source of attrition—we don't want you to burn out. It's okay if you don't pass a few classes. Retake them when you can, and nothing shows up on your record". Well that's fine for guys that are here on scholarship, or their parent's money, but I'm paying for most of this, and I can't afford that kind of slack. So I'm busting my butt, and it's just super hard. I woke up crying a few weeks ago and thought I was going nuts. I told my advisor that, and he said "everyone does it, it's no big deal. Some guys start wetting the bed". So at least I'm not a bed wetter. I've got that going for me.

"So the answer is, you being here might just save my sanity, and at least keep me from wetting the bed, but I can't let it distract me. I'm thrilled you're here. But I feel guilty not going out and having a great time with you, and I can't afford to feel that way, because sooner or later I'll act on the guilt, and it will screw me up."

Ada paused even longer than I did. I thought I might have just fucked up the whole night. Finally she reached across the table, took my hand and said, "Well, I'm glad you want me to stay, and I'm delighted you're not wetting the bed we're sharing. I'm not going to be here long. Next stop is London, but I'd like to spend some time with you, it just feels really good to me. Maybe I can help you with your class load, I'm the best there is at prioritizing and streamlining. Tell me what class you're having the biggest problem with."

"That's easy," I said, "it's Calculus and Analytic Geometry."

"Do you think if you dropped just that, you could do better in the rest of your classes?"

"No, in fact, the biggest problem is that I need the Calculus to do the Physics and Chemistry classes. Sometimes they get out of sync, and we need calculus we haven't learned yet to do a physics problem. The chemistry is not quite so pressing, but if I dropped Calculus, I'd have to drop Physics, and probably Chemistry."

"How about your other classes, are there any that are a big time sink that you could ditch."

"Not really. I have a gym class that would be a total waste of time, but I was able to get credit for taking Karate from Mr. Takahashi. I don't have a choice about that anyway, A PE class is a requirement each term. I have a literature class with a big reading load. It takes a lot of my time, but it's reading that I like, so I do the reading when I want a break."

"Ahh," Ada said, "That's the worst kind of distraction: something you can justify doing when you don't want to do the stuff you have to do. I know all about that. There's your problem, right there. Kill that class, you'll have more time, and you won't have a justifiable distraction. I bet you'll do better right away."

"Hmm, that's worth thinking about. It's three credits, but it's challenging to keep up with the reading load. I could take it anytime, even over the summer. That would free up about ten hours a week. Maybe more."

"There you go, that'll be twenty bucks for the consultation. But I'll take it out in trade. What do you want to do tonight? are you going to study on Saturday night?"

"Well, normally I play a gig at the Jolly Beaver coffee house in Harvard Square, but I can blow it off, it's just folk music, and the guys in the band can cover."

"Are you shitting me! I've never heard you play, I've heard all about you playing for other girls—-Mr. Magic Man, Mystery Man, blowing women's panties down with your guitar. That's what I came here for! We're going! You're gonna blow my panties down buddy!" Ada and I caught the bus to Harvard Square. Being on the MTA was just everyday life for me, but Ada treated it like it was a tour bus. Ada is a little on the loud side. Well, okay, a lot. Everyone on the bus heard her delighted squeals.

"Oh, what a pretty little park that is, right in the middle of the street. I love that black iron fence. Are those Begonias? Look at that beautiful church! What church is that?"

She turned to a heavy black woman who had just heaved herself up the bus stairs.

"Excuse me, do you know what that beautiful church is?"

The woman said she didn't, but a man leaned forward and said: "That's Saint Peters Episcopal, miss."

Some of the people seemed a little irritated at first, but by the time we got to Harvard square everyone was smiling and pointing sights out to Ada. Her enthusiasm is absurdly contagious. Like every Bostonian, I ignore most other passengers on a bus ride. But I realized that I learned all kinds of things I didn't know about that stretch of Mass Ave and Mt. Auburn Street on a simple bus ride. It was nice. Another set of life lessons from Ada. Squeeze some fun out of every adventure, no matter how tiny. And engage with people to learn what they know.

Harvard Square was busy, as it almost always is. We walked from the square to the Jolly Beaver, which is a basement coffee house on Harvard Street next to a Spanish restaurant. I never quite understood why Ralph, the guy who owned the place, was willing to pay each of us ten bucks to play since the place was packed on weekends whether or not we were there. But he did, so we did.

When I got there the guys in our band "Little Henpecked" were already set up and playing, squeezed onto a small stage in front of the window with an empty stool up front for me. The "Beaver" had seating outside in a concrete patio that was part of the stairwell, so a third of the audience was behind us. Lately, that felt a little unnerving to me. Like someone could walk up behind me. My guilty conscience rides again.

I got Ada settled, sharing a microscopic table up front with the rhythm guitar player's girlfriend.

I got out my old Harmony F-hole guitar that I bought when I was eight. My guitar was reworked by a luthier I met, who pretty much rebuilt it in return for a top end job and a few tune-ups on his Lambretta scooter. The neck was flat, straight, and narrow. The strings were so low that I had to keep the bridge adjusted perfectly or they'd buzz. He added salvaged Grover tuning pegs, FilterTron hum bucker pickups and a pick guard, all from a Gretsch that got run over by a tour bus, so it looked sort of like a Chet Atkins Gretsch except there was no tremolo arm. It also didn't cost a small fortune as a Chet Atkins Gretsch did. It felt like home to me, and after eleven years of playing the same guitar two hours a day, seven days a week, I knew where to find every little bit of sound on that thing. The finish was totally worn off, it looked like it was worth ten bucks except for the fake Gretschy look, but I wouldn't take a thousand for it.

I plugged in, turned the volume way down and tuned in to the band, compensating for the slightly sharp tuning of Fred's rhythm guitar.

I don't have perfect pitch—far from it. But I know what open E sounds like on a guitar, and Fred's E-strings were pretty much E-sharp, which any piano player will tell you shouldn't even exist. Tell that to Fred.

I looked out at the audience. As usual, the Jolly Beaver was packed. At the table closest to the stage two couples were eating expensive sandwiches and sipping coffee drinks. All four had the slightly mussed, wrinkled cotton shirt, tweedy look of professors from Harvard or one of the myriad little colleges that surround it. I picked them as my targets—I'd look just over their heads while I played. If I made eye contact it would distract me, and I'd flub notes.

Ralph did a brisk business in espresso-based drinks I'd never heard of. I guess that stuff is popular in Europe. In Boston, we drink weak, cheap coffee with cream and two sugars. Ask for "regular" coffee in Boston and that's what you get. The most potent drink you could get at the Beaver was a cranberry juice mix called a "Nantucket Sleigh Ride". Two bucks for a glass of cranberry juice with a lot of ice. I asked Ralph once why he didn't do wine and beer. "Fucking drunks" was all he said.

Anyway, I joined in halfway through Donavon's "Try and catch the wind," which is one of my favorite songs for reasons too long-winded and pointless to go into. Our singer is this strange, skinny, unappealing hippy girl named Doris who has a deadpan look and a personal style to match. But she's one hell of a singer. She stands in front of the mike in a shapeless, sleeveless gray dress with puffs of armpit hair showing under arms so skinny and sallow they look like chicken legs and belts out note-perfect songs. I have no idea what her range is because we've never come anywhere close to the lower or upper limit. If she had a shred of personality someone would sign her and off she'd go, but she doesn't. So she sings with us for ten bucks a night on weekends.

Ada stared at me throughout our first set. Clapping hard and loud after every song and just looking at me. Made me want to check my fly. So I did. All zipped up and everything. We finished our set, I put my guitar down in the stand, shook hands with the other band members and dropped into the chair vacated by the rhythm guitar players girlfriend who had left it to go talk with her boyfriend. Ada said, "Okay, just toss me on the table and fuck me here and now."

She didn't sound like she was kidding. "I take it you liked that?"

"Are you nuts? I'm so wet the tops of my knee socks are damp. You're dangerous buddy.

"You look so innocent and happy up there, and then you just play the living shit out of that guitar. Every woman here wants to be your mommy and wants to fuck you. It's unholy."

"I'll try to only use my powers for good."

"You better. You have something going there. The other band members know it too. Whenever you take off on a little riff, they pull back and just let it go. I looked around when we walked in—people were talking to each other. You sat down, and they all stopped talking and looked at you. They're here to see you. It might be a casual thing, and I don't think it's your playing. It's really good, but it's a little mechanical, and I've heard better. You're doing something that holds attention. I don't know what it is, but if you said it was okay, I'd blow you under the table right now."

I leaned close to Ada and said, "Umm... you're talking a little loud for saying that kind of thing. I'm pretty sure people at the far table in the back heard you. I'm glad you liked it, and no, that would embarrass the heck out of me, but I haven't seen anything like that. Maybe one of the waitresses is interested, but that's it."

"You're blinded by the lights. It's there. If this was something you want to do, you could do it. I'd be your manager, we could go places, kid."

"Yeah, well, I don't think that would help my Calculus grade. I just like to play guitar, and my voice sucks, so that's all I can do musically. I'm just having fun."

"If you change your mind, I'll help you do something with whatever this is. I know it could be interesting. Probably wouldn't be huge, but it would be cool."

I have to say, Ada kind of freaked me out. I have this mental picture of myself that hasn't changed much from the fifth grade. A big, soft looking guy with rounded corners, kind doughy-looking, with an enormous head. If I were a Dick Tracy cartoon character I'd be Mr. Blobby. I know my body has changed some, I get a lot more exercise than I did when I was a total geek living in my bedroom and my lab next door, never leaving except to go to school. My old clothes don't fit me at all, the pants fall right down unless I belt them tight. I work pretty hard at Karate twice a week with Mr. Takahashi, and he gave me a morning exercise routine that I do religiously—mostly sit ups, push ups, and squats, and that's added substantially to my general fitness and muscle tone. But I see myself as Mr. Blobby. I don't relate to anything Ada was saying. When I play I can't look at people because I can see flickers of disapproval at every flubbed note—instant feedback of fuck-ups—and it's very distracting. So I look at the middle distance, just over people's heads.

I played for my sister recently, and she said I had a look on my face like I was constipated, so I try not to do that. I do my daily practice looking in a mirror so I can aim at a sort of consistent smile, but I keep forgetting, so I yank myself back to it, which makes me looks like I have some kind of facial tic. If that translates into something even remotely sexy, it has nothing to do with me. I'm just

trying not to fuck up, keep smiling, and not look like I haven't shit for a week. That's my big, sexy secret.

We did three sets, then Ralph paid us, like he always does, right from the cash register, so we know where it comes from I guess. I got a four buck share from the tip jar, a buck less than the other guys because I didn't play all the sets. Fair enough. Ada and I rode the bus back to her hotel. I offered to buy a late dinner with my fourteen bucks, but Ada wasn't interested. "Nope, the only thing I want to eat is you. I'm sleepy, we're going to go to bed, and I'm going to cuddle up to you like the big bear you are and sleep until I wake up—no fucking alarm clock. Damn, I love vacations. Then I'm going to screw the hell out of you in the morning and stay in bed 'till brunch. Wow, that sounds good."

I dropped my lit class on Monday and it felt like I freed up a vast amount of time. It was a little miracle. I went from frantic to serene in a few days. I could get into the mental mode to do calculus and stay in it without interrupting myself, taking breaks to do the assigned lit class reading. I had lots of time to get calculus, physics and chemistry done, and my tutor helped me get a little bit ahead in both calculus and physics, which was a fantastic place to be. I suddenly felt somewhat in control, though I certainly didn't feel like slacking off.

Honey, I'm Home

Mauvais opened a second locker and removed a shoulder bag packed with medical books and papers. He had stopped attending classes nearly a year ago, but his student status was a good cover. He locked the doors, exited the garage and walked seven blocks to a row of apartment buildings.

His apartment was a second-floor walkup. The building looked adequate on the outside, but it was shabby inside, and the stairwell always smelled like cooking cabbage. But once he entered his apartment, he was in a bright, cheerful space, created by the beautiful woman who had transformed his ugly garret with her decorating skills and tireless effort. A stupid way for her to expend time, energy, and money. But what more would one expect from a privileged American bitch? She bored him now, though her beauty was always astonishing. She was perfect for his use though. When he gave her to the movement, they would take it as a great sacrifice.

"Claudia? I'm home..."

Swimming with the sharks

My comfortable feeling drained away rapidly late Thursday afternoon when Ada and I watched a little television in her room before meeting Angel for dinner at Durgin Park restaurant. A news special came on about the "Motorcycle Murders." Ada stood up to change the station, but I said: "I'd like to see this."

The guy being interviewed was a pesky reporter, Morris Brogan, who I had been assiduously avoiding. He did a series of stories for the Boston Globe, and now he was promoting his in-depth article that was coming out in the Sunday editorial section.

Most of the conversation covered old ground, but near the end, he said some things that scared the crap out of me:

Interviewer: "So I guess it's safe to say that the police investigation into these murders is starting to wind down."

Brogan: "Hardly. If anything, it's getting more intense. There's clearly someone else out there that was involved in all this. Whoever it is might be the brains behind the operation. We have the murders of a policeman, two mobsters, an innocent elderly woman, a member of the Warlocks motorcycle gang and a woman associate.

"Then there is Alan "Stick" Covey, one of the members of the Hard Cats motorcycle gang, who was found murdered at the Fresh Pond Drive-In, as well as another Hard Cats member, Silvio Anatole, who was also the nephew of the murdered mobster Gino Capano. Anatole was found dead in the desert near Winnemucca, Nevada with evidence of a motorcycle crash and a bullet wound to his head, perhaps self-inflicted. That's eight murders that are a long way from being solved.

"Another open question is 'where are the contents of Gino Capano's safe?' Mr. Capano was highly placed in the Italian mob, and his safe was probably the source of the \$150,000 that was sent to Miriam Genoble, the widow of the slain police sergeant. You may recall that the money was sent to Mrs. Genoble from Malden, with a postmark date that clearly shows it was mailed four weeks after Silvio Anatole fled Boston, and perhaps after he was dead. But how much more money did the safe contain?

"There's also speculation that the safe contained Mr. Capano's 'book' which would have the names of anyone on his payoff list. We know from the payoff book that came to light last year in New York City that there could be some significant names in that book.

"And I regret to say that the presence of a police officer, dead in Mr. Capano's home, could indicate law enforcement officials might be listed, as they were in New York. I don't mean to impugn

Officer Genoble's reputation, he may have had a legitimate reason to be at the Capano home when the murders occurred. It's one more issue that bears investigation."

Interviewer: "But doesn't the death of this Silvio Anatole and the testimony of the surviving Hard Cat, Mr. Wallace, indicate that this was a drug ring takeover that may have gone bad?"

Brogan: "That's one interpretation. But it might just be what we're supposed to believe. There might be a deeper, darker meaning. And the person who pulled the strings and caused all this death might be out there, still spinning his webs. I guarantee you that the police, and to a less well-known degree, the Italian mob and the Warlocks motorcycle gang, are not letting this go. They're looking for this person, and they aren't stopping their efforts to bring him to justice anytime soon."

Ada looked at me and said, "Are you okay, you look terrible?"

I gathered myself up and said, "I'm okay, I knew some of those guys. That guy Silvio tried to recruit me into his gang, and when I wouldn't join he sent a guy to beat me up. If I hadn't got out of town, I might have been involved in all that scary stuff."

"Oh, geez, baby! Do you want to cancel dinner with your sister? You don't look well."

"No, I'll be okay, and getting together with Angel will be better than sitting here in this room thinking about those horrible things."

Of course, I didn't tell Ada that one of those horrible things was that I shot Silvo in the head.

We took a cab to Durgin Park, one of my favorite restaurants in downtown Boston. It's in Quincy Market, a long, very old building full of ratty stores, butchers, produce markets and cheap clothing outlets. There are flea markets in the courtyard all summer. Some people like it, but whenever I've passed through all I see is junk. There's been a lot of talk about either tearing it all down or renovating the area and turning into some kind of tourist mecca. I can't see that ever happening. It's in a typically Bostonian warren of tiny, twisty streets with almost no parking and nothing but warehouses and ancient apartment houses around it. They knocked some stuff down to build the behemoth government center, which apparently had the same commie concrete architects as MIT. Characterless and looming. If it weren't for Durgin Park, I'd probably never go there.

The downstairs bar and common dining at Durgin Park is kind of dark and dreary, with a low wood ceiling that sucks up all the light. But upstairs the ceilings are white-painted embossed sheet metal, and the big arched windows make the room cheery even on a dreary day. The food is excellent, the service is worse than horrible, and it's rarely crowded, especially in the evenings when the market is empty.

The market was dark and cold, with a pool of light surrounding the entrance to Durgin Park. I pushed open the heavy, ancient door and felt a welcome rush of warm humid air, redolent with

fried, boiled, poached, broiled and steamed fish and shellfish, Yankee Pot Roast, Poor Man's Roast Beef, and Shepard's Pie, with an overtone of Narragansett beer and Seagram's Seven rye whiskey. The place always smelled the same—one of the things I like about it.

Angel was sitting at the bar, looking nothing like the older sister of a four-star geek. Little black dress, dark hose on her long legs, her hair up in a twist that showed off her elegant neck, taking a tiny sip of something bright red in a martini glass.

I walked over and kissed her on the cheek. "You look fantastic. Somehow I suspect this is not for me."

Angel snorted. "You rate jeans and a sweatshirt. So this is the famous Ada. Sweetie, I feel like I know you already. Whenever Monroe needs some reinforcement about his opinion on a business issue, he starts with 'Ada says' and then he says something much smarter than I know he is about everything but geeky shit."

"I've been dyin' to meet you, Angel. I don't get to meet many women in business. Mostly I deal with old geezer men."

"This is going to be fun, said Angel, "I got us a booth upstairs. It's ready unless you want to get a drink here at the bar first."

The fat Irish bartender looked up and squinted at me, relaying with a glance that the bar wasn't going to welcome my custom. I'm not 21 yet, and even with beautiful older women on each arm, I still look like a colossal version of Opie.

We made our way up the maze of twisting stairs and small doorways that lead to the dining room. I guess the place is repurposed from other use, but the remodeling was probably done about a hundred years ago.

The waitress came relatively quickly. Usually the wait is uncomfortably long—to the point you wonder if they forgot you. She actually smiled at us. Maybe they got some less bitchy waitresses. Yeah, and perhaps the Earth was wandering out of its orbit. Angel and Ada ordered grilled Haddock, but I was still trying to decide.

"What'll it be bud? That's a menu, not an encyclopedia. Don't memorize it, I ain't got all night", the waitress said.

Order restored to the universe, the Earth clicked back into its orbit. I ordered fried clams.

"Full belly or strips?" the waitress said.

"Full, who eats strips?" I said.

"Tourists like you." she snapped and wandered slowly back to the kitchen to fuck up our order.

Ada and Angel hit it off to an absurd degree. They started talking about Cobalt, our car and motorcycle alarm business that I started when I returned from my cross-country motorcycle trip. I asked my business-major sister to help run the company, and it took off pretty well.

After a few minor pleasantries I was cut out of the conversation. I could follow the general drift, but the details sounded like they were speaking Swahili. Growth scenarios, the limits of organic growth, and how slow growth and unserved markets in the product line opens the door to competition. Managing and funding receivables (In what grammar is "receivable" a noun?) Marketing strategy, penetration models, and how to fund faster growth to take advantage of the full market potential. Angel explained that she was bumping up against a cash flow limit (what the hell is cash flow??) in expanding the business because she had more profitable advertising venues than she had the capital to pursue. Ada explained how she financed the mini-mall they were building, and Angel was fascinated.

"I need to do that. I need to find people who will invest that won't try to control things, I don't need more fingers in the pot," Angel said.

"Well that's not hard honey, you want investors, not partners. Investors just want to see a profitable business or good growth potential. Partners want to run the biz—which is fine if you need more hands and brains. But if the business is successful they can be a huge liability. Most folks take on partners because they're scared to run their business themselves, but I don't see that in you. So yeah, investors are what you need—ones with no expectations other than a return on their investment. But what about what Monroe thinks," Ada said. "Are you comfortable with outside investors, honey?"

"I don't know, do we really need them?"

Before I could say more, Angel said, "Seriously, Monroe hasn't been involved since school started. I've tried to get his attention, but it's pointless, and most of his ideas are not useful—he's way behind the curve."

That pissed me off. I started this business, and now Angel was acting like my opinion didn't matter. I said, "Really Angel, I'm behind the curve? Who's idea was this?"

"Monroe, I'm not minimizing what you did to start the company or the fact that it was all your idea, but you aren't here doing this stuff every day. I am, and I'm happy to do it. I'm proud that you're going to MIT and doing so well. But this business is a lot of work. We haven't done anything about international distribution yet because I can't fund production for it. It's just sitting there, making me crazy. I have interest from Canada, England, and Germany. But every time we set up a dealer, the payment terms dealers expect screws up our cash flow. Setting up distributors is much worse-- we have to fund their stocking order for at least 60 days, and we get less margin. We have one distributor for the entire USA and their coverage in the south and west coast is spotty. We need west coast and southern distributors but I can't afford to stock them. Every bank I've talked to wants personal guarantees backed by assets for loans the size we need, and we've got nothing for assets other than a little bit of inventory.

"I've looked at the competition here and around the world, and it's pretty soft. We can be competitive everywhere. If we keep growing as we have, even just in the US, next year we'll pass one million dollars in sales. We won't make a profit, because we're growing as fast as we can, and we're financing growth from current business, but we'll get there. The profit margins are fine, but cash flow is killing us, I'm just spending all the money on growth.

"I've backed my class load to the minimum, because I'm learning more running Cobalt than I do in class, but it's hard work. And I'm not paying myself so we can afford more employees. So please don't bust my chops, I'm already mad at myself that we don't have a firm deal down on paper. I need to rely on your generosity to be compensated for working my ass off, and when I say something about it, you get pissed off. That's not a good sign."

My face turned red, and I was getting ready to answer Angel, but Ada put her hand on my cheek and said, "Never, and I mean never talk business when you're upset. This is my fault for talking about business with your sister when I know you were already stressed out about that news report we saw. But your sister is doing something very difficult for you, and you need to think about what you want before you speak."

She turned to Angel and said, "I shouldn't have started talking business with you. Monroe saw some upsetting news on the TV about those murders by that motorcycle guy he knew. It was thoughtless of me just to jump in, but I was excited to meet you. We think a lot alike."

She turned back to me and said: "I'm sorry Monroe, that was thoughtless of me."

Angel said, "Oh, geez, I'm sorry too Monroe. I know you have a lot on your mind, that horrible stuff and the pressure of school. I saw that too—the reporter that was being interviewed? It's pretty horrifying that you knew that Silvio guy. Let's talk about something else."

I had collected my thoughts, and calmed down a bit so I said, "Let's not. You and Ada both brought up reasonable points, and I know I can't do much to help you with this business. I need to step away entirely and stop pretending that we're running this together. I asked you to run this for me, I need to get out of the way and stop second guessing you, Angel.

"So look, Ada, you're as knowledgeable about business as anyone I know. If you and Angel worked a little bit together and came up with a formal agreement about who owns what and which kind of

decisions I should get involved in, I think we'd all be more comfortable, and I wouldn't get these little twitches when Angel says my opinions don't matter."

"I didn't say that brother", Angel said, "or if I did, I didn't mean it the way it sounds when you say it back to me."

"It wasn't wrong, and I can't be bullshitting myself about that stuff. I don't know the first thing about running a real business. I was just trying to make a few bucks. You've turned it into something bigger, and I have to understand that. So, Ada, will you help us do that?"

Ada smiled and said, "I'll do more than that, honey.

"Angel, I've been looking for a reason to hang out here while Monroe does his thing at school. I like hanging out with your brother a lot, but I've done all the sightseeing I can stand. If you'd like we can work together on this business for a little while. I'll find some painless investors who'd like a decent return on their investment from a fast-growing business. I know who I'd go to for most of it—perhaps all of it. And we'll work out an ownership agreement that protects you and Monroe. I'll take a little piece depending on how much investment I bring in—say ten percent of the new investment money paid as stock. Monroe will pay attention to Calculus and Physics, and you and I will make all of us a little bit richer. What do you say."

They both looked at me. I thought, "so much for last night's idea of being my manager in the exciting music business," but I wisely didn't say that. I said, "I don't see how this is my decision, I think I just have to pray that you two sharks don't take my skivvies along with my pants."

Ada and Angel shook hands, and that's the last significant thing I said in the dinner conversation and the last I saw of Ada from seven in the morning until five or six at night for the next month. She rented a little apartment near MIT, and I moved in with her. It had a tiny but functional kitchen, so I made breakfast for both of us every morning. I'd get up at five, make coffee, finish up my homework, and whip up omelets or whatever suited my mood. I'm a damned good short-order cook. I worked a lunch counter for a summer, and I learned a lot, but I've been interested in cooking since I was little. Breakfast is my specialty, particularly eggs. I can do them every way, but I am a pro at omelets, which I consider a nearly pure expression of technique and timing. I also make a wicked toasted pecan waffle, but they take forever. I whip the egg whites separately, then fold them into the batter, and I use a stove-heated Belgian waffle iron. A gas stove of course—I cook, I don't heat. And real maple syrup or don't bother. Really, don't even think about it. You probably don't care about any of that, but I'm really hungry for waffles right now.

Ada would stagger out of bed, she is not a morning person, eat breakfast in a daze, dress and be out of the apartment before I left. We barely had time for sex. Okay, that's an exaggeration. Fortunately, Ada likes sex as much as I do.

My first semester classes ended early in December. I "passed" everything, meaning I got credit for every class except the lit class I dropped. I had some free time to spend with Ada, but now she was too busy. I thought about trying to help, but Ada and Angel weren't very interested in my ideas.

So I paid even less attention to the business, though I went to the Christmas party and was surprised at the number of employees. I didn't know any of them. Angel and Ada canned my original two engineers. Too slow, too arrogant, and lousy attitude was the consensus. No one checked with me—zap, they were gone.

Ada told me about it after it happened, and I said, "shouldn't you guys have tried to work with them some? If you have a problem, you could talk it over and maybe they'd do better."

Ada said, "Your Sis said the same thing. I told her 'honey, the time to fire someone is the first time you think of it unless it's really a personal problem that just tweaks you.' Anything else is unfair to your employees and unfair to you. Bad attitude spreads like black mold. Anyone that isn't pulling their weight drags down the people who are. I told her 'by the time you pull up your big girl panties and shitcan those arrogant shits they'll have cost you time, money, and done damage. Get rid of them before that happens.' So she thought about it for ten minutes, and then went and fired those two pains in the butt."

The big changes at Cobalt left me with nothing productive to do, so I decided to spend more time at Mr. Takahashi's Dojo. MIT has a real thing about physical education, mostly because there are only two flavors of geeks: Fat and pencil-neck. Sure, some jocks are smart enough to go to MIT, but they're rarer than pretty coeds. The place is mostly full of pasty-looking men and women whose major exercise is picking books off a shelf. So the school insists that we take some kind of physical education every semester, probably to cut down on the number of geeks kicking off with heart failure from eating cafeteria food.

Fortunately for me, I was able to get credit for taking Karate lessons which I had bumped up to three days a week after ditching my lit class—it was a lot more interesting than doing calisthenics with a bunch of staggering, uncoordinated, weak-as-a-kitten geeks. No one should have to look at that many flabby thighs in ugly maroon gym shorts.

Mr. Takahashi said I had a natural talent for Karate, which was a huge surprise. He said my handeye coordination was exceptional. Who knew? I spent most of my life getting picked on, pushed around, pantsed, and having my books shoved out of my arms. I know from long experience what a wedgie feels like. I know that if two tough kids decide to give you a swirly you're better off just holding your breath and waiting for them to quit than trying to resist. Other than being shoved around by tough kids I've had two actual fights in my life, and I accidentally won both, by throwing crazed, panicky, blind haymakers that anyone could dodge—but they somehow didn't. You might wonder why a geek like me would settle on Karate. I certainly wasn't going to start picking fights with all the guys that abused me growing up. But one fine spring evening last year a huge biker named Walrus told me he was going to beat the shit out of me. I said, "I'm not looking for trouble." and he said, "Sometimes trouble finds you". And then he punched me in the mouth. He was my second haymaker victim, but I certainly wasn't going to continue counting on people stepping into a punch that I threw with my eyes closed. I decided Walrus was right—sometimes trouble finds you. Trouble might never find me again, but if it did, I wanted to have some kind of chance to face it with my eyes open.

With extra time in the dojo—actually more or less all day long, every day—I was progressing rapidly. Mr. Takahashi charges a flat rate for lessons, so it didn't cost me anything extra to stay there all day long and take lessons with one class after another, regardless of their level. In between classes, Mr. Takahashi gave me some one-on-one time and sparred with me. The little bastard can kick my ass so quickly that he has to slow everything down to a crawl so I can see how he just hit me in five places and went past my blocks like I was waving at flies.

I asked Mr. Takahashi if I should be paying extra. He said "many students pay to say they are taking Karate. I see them maybe once a week. I don't care, they pay all the same. I am here, it's better to have someone to teach than to read the paper. I've read the paper. The Red Socks suck. What else is new? Get up and show me soto-uke, age-uke, gedan barai, uchi-uke and shuto-uke. In that order, fast and hard. Your position is always perfect, but your rotation is not. Concentrate on arm rotation. That is how deflection comes. Remember, block is not right name—is not to stop. Japanese word for these moves—uke—means receive, and by that we mean to take energy of an attack. Go. Five sets of each."

So here's the funny thing. Mr. Takahasi is a second generation Japanese-American. When Mr. Takahasi is teaching, he speaks broken English. When he's having a conversation, his English is better than mine. I thought about pointing it out to him but decided against it. He hits me hard enough as it is.

Rich Man, Poor Man

Just after Christmas Ada told me she was headed for London as soon as my semester break was over, but I should keep the apartment—the company was paying for it. We celebrated New Years together, and suddenly, she was gone. My life had this huge hollow space in it, even though I only saw Ada for breakfast, and an hour or so before we went to bed.

I was a little shell shocked after Ada left. Angel came by to check on me a few days later.

"I'm okay, I just suddenly don't have anyone sitting across the table from me at breakfast. It's a little lonely, but really I'm used to that," I said.

"She'll be back," Angel said. "I think she felt like she trapped herself here. But she's having fun growing this business."

"What about you," I said, "I haven't heard you mention school in months."

"Umm, I'm pretty sure I told you I took a leave from school, the business is a full-time thing."

"Wait, what? Are you kidding? Is that all you want to do-run a little alarm company?"

"Honey, Cobalt is not little. We've closed our books, and we're still working on the final, final numbers, but we did almost half a million in sales this year—more than 15,000 alarm systems, and most of those sold directly at full retail. And thanks to Ada and the money she pulled in to let us expand faster I expect to triple that next year. This is a real business. The Chamber of Commerce is going to award us their prize for the fastest growing business in Massachusetts. Assuming things go the way Ada and I plan, and we do distribution properly both here and internationally, we'll be a two million dollar business next year. There's a lot of "ifs" involved, and things can go sideways, we have little problems every day and big issues once a week, but we're a going concern, and now we have money in the bank to fund distribution and brand extension.

"Cobalt isn't really little even right now. A typical valuation for our current revenue would be more than two million dollars. Your 30 percent should be worth about six hundred thousand dollars. I own twenty percent, Ada earned four percent and bought one so she owns five percent, and her Dad bought ten percent. We gifted our mom and Dad with five percent, and the remaining thirty percent is fully subscribed to our shareholders. We raised a little more than six hundred thousand by selling 45 percent of the company as non-voting, minority shares, which makes that valuation pretty real. This business is important to a lot of people, and this is what I was going to school for. I learn more in a day running this business than I'd learn in a month at school. So yeah, I'm taking a leave of absence, and BU says that's fine, so what's your problem." "I guess my biggest problem is that everyone is doing what I said I was going to do— taking some time off from college to do other stuff. Should I quit school and help out?"

"Nope. I don't want to sound brutal here, brother, but we don't need you, and I don't want you. We're doing very well, and honestly, I don't have time to make sure you feel good about everything that's going on. You're still cranky about me firing your engineer buddies, but I got tired of them rolling their eyes and running to you every time I told them to do something. So yeah, they're gone. Do you have a problem with me making you rich while you go to the kind of school you always dreamed of?"

"I don't know what to say about that," I said. "I figured on working at Albion Cycles over the summer to try to cover as much of my cost for next year as I could. Do you think I could pull some money from the business to cover that instead of working?"

Angel grimaced and said: "Don't shoot the messenger, I hate having these talks with you, it feels like I'm just either disappointing you or hurting your feelings. But I have to be straight with you, and the answer is no, you can't take any money out, not right now. We're putting every penny into growth. I'm paying myself a hundred bucks a week to cover living costs that my scholarship covered. And we pay our employees to build and ship systems. You could work here doing that, but it's a minimum wage job. You'd do better at Albion. Every extra penny I take out comes right out of financing growth and anything we paid you above a usual wage would be a distribution from our corporation. Our shareholder agreement says distributions have to be proportional to all shareholders. Paying you thirty bucks would cost the company a hundred. So no. If we have some profit next year we might do a distribution, but don't count on it. You could sell some stock to one of our investors, but that would be incredibly stupid, and the shareholder agreement says we have to agree for either of us to sell stock, and I wouldn't let you do anything that dumb."

"So I'm rich", I said, "but I still don't have any money? Doesn't feel much like rich."

"Welcome to the real world buddy. The company is paying for your apartment, and we'll keep doing that—we had to lease it for a year for Ada, so we'll be paying anyway. I'll ask our accountant if there's a legitimate way we can pay you a little as a consultant. But it won't be much. We'll get there, but it takes time and a hell of a lot of work. And there's the risk that nothing will come of it. We're all rolling the dice, and the investors Ada brought in are trusting us to make something of it. I slept better when my only fiduciary responsibility was to you and me, but the other investors are what makes this big growth possible. Just do well in school. When you finish, we'll figure out the next steps."

"Okay," I said, "I feel like I'm being left out a little, especially with Ada gone. And yeah, I'm a little lonely. I don't have time for relationships anyway, but now I feel like I'm not allowed to have one."

"Well, I've come to know Ada pretty well," Angel said, "and she doesn't expect that of you—she wouldn't accept that kind of commitment from you. I hate to keep sounding so brutal, but she isn't committed to you. She loves you. Sort of. I think. But she's not done figuring out what she should do or be and she's much too smart to get sidetracked in her effort to figure that out. I can say with absolute certainty that she's not just going to be some accessory for a man. Don't bank on her being the solution to your loneliness. She'd say that herself if she were here, and you know it.

"I see the relationship you two have, and it's not that goo-goo kind of love. It's a lot more like buddies who have sex. Find your own fun while she's gone. She will. If she falls in love with someone else, then that will be completely up to you to deal with. She doesn't expect any different from you. I wish I had a few worthwhile guys in my life with that attitude. Lots of guys want to go with me and screw around on the side, but they want me to be some kind of nun. Silly fuckers."

Necessary Evil

Mauvais drove his rattletrap Renault Dauphine through St. Denis on the outskirts of Paris. The secondhand piece of crap was only five years old, and already the floor pans had rusted through. Plywood panels held in place with wood screws were the only thing keeping his feet from dragging on the street. He'd had to recruit some kids on the street to push start it. But at least he wasn't riding a bicycle twenty miles to this vital meeting of the Populaire Résistance Directe. He turned into the gravel driveway of the isolated farmhouse, and as he struggled out of the tiny car he noted with satisfaction the shadowy form of a guard in the open door of the barn, revealing himself long enough to acknowledge Mauvais. He knew four other guards remained invisible—a necessary precaution for a gathering of the leaders of five PRD cells.

He entered the farmhouse and found all four of his fellow cell leaders already seated at a scarred pine table. Standing near the kitchen door was the fearsome "Tarasque", the master at arms. Mauvais took his seat amid nods from his fellow leaders and listened to the leader called "Onachus" holding forth on the coming major action.

"I feel this planned action runs against our mission. We have popular support that we will squander. Yes, we strike a blow against the monopolists and the bourgeois, but we also harm innocent workers, women, and children. I believe we need to be more selective, not strike general terror."

Mauvais replied, "We have heard your argument before, Onachus, and we voted. Four to one. We must show that we are capable of resisting the tide of fascism. Small demonstrations make us look weak. You value a few lives against millions. We are just as troubled as you are by the necessary sacrifice, but there is no choice."

The grizzled leader Onachus came to his feet, knocking his chair over backward. "Sacrifice!" he bellowed, "what do you know of sacrifice! Where were you when we froze in the woods? Where were you when the Germans killed all but two of my resistance cell? Where were you when they hung half the people in our village, including my wife and uncle? You were warm in Paris, keeping your head down, doing nothing. Don't tell me you were too young. I saw children your age machine-gunned by the Nazis when we stormed their lines. You know nothing of sacrifice except what you would visit on others, and I'll have nothing to do with your ridiculous, shameful plan. Vote all you like, my cell stands down."

Onachus pivoted on his heel and walked from the room. Mauvais looked at Tarasque and pointed with his chin toward the door Onachus had passed through. Tarasque turned and followed the big man into the kitchen.

Mauvais and the three remaining leaders turned toward the kitchen as the sound of a struggle started and then intensified. Tarasque was powerful and ruthless, but Onachus was no pushover. The

fight went on for several minutes with an intensity revealed by the sounds of breaking wood, smashing cutlery, and the dull thud of fists and feet on flesh. The cell leader called "Gargouille" started to rise, but Mauvais motioned him back into his seat. A muffled scream and breathy gurgling spelled the end of the fight. The table of cell leaders sat in silence. Tarasque returned to the dining room with a spatter of blood across his pantlegs. He nodded to the group solemnly.

Gargouille said, "Unfortunate, and that means we lose contact with the members of Onachus' cell. It was one of our larger cells, we can't afford to lose any more active agents. Does anyone else have concerns about this plan?"

Mauvais laughed and said, "I doubt anyone will say they do after Tarasque's threat management demonstration. But I believe it is more important than ever to implement plan "Silentum Mortis", both at the leader level and with any critical members of our cells."

Gargouille replied, "You do understand that your plan creates exposure for each cell. It undermines the very reason for our cell structure."

"Of course I understand that, but our largest operation is imminent. As soon as it is complete, we will end "Mortis" and restore cell isolation. But today I am more concerned with betrayal than with isolation. All that is necessary for our destruction is one "Onachus" turning traitor. Mortis will guard against that. It's temporary and necessary. I call for a vote."

The vote was unanimous.

Sex and Hygiene

Angels visit to "check on me" left me feeling a lot worse than before she showed up. I'd lost control of the little business I started and couldn't expect any money from it. Ada was gone, and Angel figured she'd be sleeping around if she chose to. I did too. The sheets still smelled like her. Fortunately, that sadistic bastard Thomas had some surprises in store in the calculus department, and I wound up with my head stuck deeper into my books.

I joined a study group for calculus, which helped a lot. We met daily in the cavernous MIT library, which was a lovely building on the outside, but the inside looked like a warehouse for books. I guess that's reasonable, but I could have used a little bit of the somber hall of learning, oak and marble motif that seems to be laid on so thickly down the road at Harvard.

There were two women in the group, which made our study meetings a lot nicer. MIT has quite a few coeds, they say it's 40 percent women, but it seems lower, at least in my classes. I wasn't attracted to either of the women in my study group—Wendy and Tina, but I liked talking to them.

Wendy was a classic geek girl. Very serious, dressed like she was in her late 50's, straight hair with two barrettes and a bunch of bobby pins to make it do something unattractive, zits, and a nose that's bigger than mine—which is not small. But I liked her, she was a nice person, and of course, super smart.

Tina was a little harder to classify. She had a certain masculinity, even though she dressed nicely if a little plainly. No jewelry, trimmed fingernails, not much makeup, short hair and more muscle than I'm used to seeing on women other than my best friend Lenny's girlfriend Maria, who is a star athlete, attending college on a full-ride soccer scholarship. I liked her too, she had a sarcastic sense of humor that I enjoyed. Tina had a roommate who made me crazy. I can't even say why. She's not gorgeous or anything. She's got a great body, but there's something naughty, or sexy, or I don't know what about her. She looks at me straight in the eyes and then tips her head back but doesn't break eye contact. It's odd, and it feels ridiculously intimate. She's a little clumsy--her movements are sudden and ungraceful--but for some reason that makes her even sexier. Like she might lose her balance going to shake your hand and grab your pecker instead. No idea why that comes to mind, but it does. Of course, there are a few thousand geeks just like me who are interested also.

I get sweaty palms and start being weird whenever she's around. I'm sure she thinks I'm a complete dick. Tina certainly wonders what got into me. The roommate's name is Toni, which makes things confusing. I call Tina, Toni and Toni, Tina. I'm not impressing either of them.

The waitress at the Jolly Beaver—Amy—finally made a move. Invited me to her apartment for a drink after work, meaning about midnight. She's a junior at one of the small colleges in Cambridge. Pretty girl, and very sweet. But I was kind of surprised by her apartment. If she were going to invite

me over, you'd think she might have cleaned up a little. Or maybe a messy apartment is cool, and I just continue to be clueless. But a bunch of dirty dishes with food in them, clothes everywhere and a strong, musty odor wasn't much of a turn on for me.

She gave me some wine in a smudged water glass with lipstick on the rim. We wound up talking until two in the morning, made out a little, then I said I had an early class in the morning, and I left. She's a nice girl, and very pretty, but I just wasn't all that attracted to her. The little shot of body odor every time she lifted her arms didn't help.

Once I got out of the apartment and on the street, I realized the busses had stopped running. It was cold, a little drizzle was falling, and it was about seven miles back to my apartment. I alternated walking fast and jogging most of the way, but I didn't get to my apartment until about 3:30, soaked and cold. Then I realized I'd left my guitar at her apartment, and it worried me so much I couldn't sleep. I felt like a complete fuck up, like I couldn't get my life going in any kind of useful direction. Which is weird, because all I'm supposed to be doing is studying and doing well at college, and that's going just fine.

I sat through my classes, battling more than my typical degree of distraction, and then called Amy and asked if I could come to get my guitar. She said she had to study, but if I came by later in the evening, it would be fine. I got to her apartment at about 7:00 and when she answered the door she was wearing panties and a T-shirt. The apartment was a little cleaner—at least the dishes were cleaned up. We talked a little, she invited me to sit on the couch, then she kind of climbed onto me and started kissing me. Her breath was a bit sour, but she felt great, and we got pretty passionate. She stripped off her few clothes, took my hand, and led me into her incredibly messy bedroom, where we had sex on a pile of dirty clothes on her bed. There were shoes on the bed—I found one under my back when I rolled off her.

I know I sound like some kind of clean freak, but it was really distracting. I'm not that neat myself, but this was odd and extreme. I couldn't imagine spending any serious time with Amy, and so I wondered what the hell I was doing screwing her. I told her I needed to make sure to catch a bus back to my apartment, and got the heck out of there, feeling like I'd done something wrong, even though it felt good while I was doing it.

Amy called me the next day, but I told her I was really busy with both calculus and physics midterms coming up. She called the next day again, and I decided to come somewhat clean with her. I said I really enjoyed being with her, but I couldn't afford the distraction of a girlfriend when school was so difficult for me. Of course, she knew I was blowing her off, but she was fairly nice about it, though she sounded a little brittle.

The next Saturday I was playing at the Jolly Beaver, and Amy was pretty short with me. Tina and Toni showed up, and Toni came up at the break to talk to me. She told me she liked to sing, and perhaps we could get together sometime and make some music. I said that sounded like fun. It was

all I said, but Amy overheard and came over, clearly angry. She told Toni that she'd better not fuck me because once I'd gotten in her pants, I'd just dump her.

So that was just great.

Tony and Tina left soon after that, and at the end of the evening when I was putting away my guitar, Amy came over and said "Please don't tell Ralph that I freaked out and scared some customers away. He's halfway ready to fire me already. I need this job."

I said, "Geez, Amy, I wouldn't say anything. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. I shouldn't have started anything with you, I know I have to focus on school. You're a really nice person, and sexy as hell, but I just can't be involved now. Can you forgive me?"

Amy said, "Yeah, If things change, you know how to find me. I don't really date much, but I'm really attracted to you. I knew something was wrong the first night, but when you left your guitar I figured you were making an excuse for being with me, but then you dumped me. Not that it's anything new. I don't know why, but guys that are really hot for me seem to lose interest pretty fast."

I was tempted to tell her, but I just couldn't. So that was my attempt to "find my own fun". Such a total disaster that in one fell swoop I had three women that thought I was a complete asshole.

Sweated By the Man

I didn't think things could get any worse until I got another visit from Lieutenant Hartsook, the Boston Police Department officer who interviewed me months ago. He was waiting for me outside the apartment on Monday after my classes. He said he wanted to ask me a few more questions and asked to come inside. I said I had to study, but I'd help if I could.

He started off by saying, "The college told me I'd find you here after your last class, pretty nice apartment for a freshman."

"Yes, I lucked into it. I started a business with my sister. She's running it, but we had a friend of ours help get financing for the business. The company leased this apartment for her, but now she's gone, so I get to use it until the lease is up."

"Yeah? Where did you get the money to start the business?"

"Well, it didn't really take much. It's a car and motorcycle alarm business. I built an alarm system after my motorcycle was nearly stolen on my trip. It seemed like a good idea, and there weren't any good systems available, so I paid for a little ad in a motorcycle magazine, and got enough orders to make it worthwhile to keep going. Just a little business, but I got my sister to run it for me, and she's really smart. She's got it going pretty well. I don't have anything to do with it—I have too much schoolwork to do, MIT is tough." I said.

I knew I was rambling on too much, but as long as he stayed away from subjects I didn't want to talk about, I figured I could relax. I was wrong. He zeroed in on my motorcycle trip.

"So tell me, when you left San Francisco and headed back to Boston, did you come straight here?"

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I got that horrible empty-gut feeling of being caught in a lie. I had to tread very carefully.

"No, I stalled a while and took my time. I didn't want to get back to Boston while Silvio might still be there."

"You didn't mention that when we interviewed you last time. Why not?"

"Really? I don't remember much about the interview other than how scared you guys made me. I don't know why I didn't mention it. Did you ask me about it?"

Hartsook frowned at me and rubbed his chin. "You're a pretty clever guy, turning that back at me. How did you know Silvio was a problem?" "I called Albion Motors to check in, and they told me my boss, Paul, had been shot. I called him in the hospital, and he told me about Silvio going nuts and killing people. He was worried about my safety. When Silvio threatened me, Paul tried to do something about it, I don't know what. But he said it backfired, and that I should stay out of Boston. So I went slower than I intended on the way back. I stopped whenever anything looked interesting. It took me eight days instead of three."

"Okay. Your boss' name turned up recently when I interviewed a Warlock called "Mountain." When I talked to your boss, Paul, he told me after Silvio tortured him and tried to kill him that he'd warned you to stay away. That was all news to us.

"So right now, your story sounds okay, but I get a feeling about you every time I look at you. I think you know things you aren't telling me. If you have something to say, you should say it now. This investigation doesn't end until we find whoever mailed that package. You got anything more to say?"

"Not really, officer. I'm only involved in this because I got a job at a motorcycle shop. I don't know what else I can tell you."

"You could start with the whole truth. Okay, I'm going to leave you to your books. I've got a feeling about you. My gut tells me you're holding out on me. I've been doing this a long time. This is the kind of case that eventually breaks open. We'll just keep hammering until it does. If you put me and the BPD through a lot of work that we could have avoided, then I promise you that hammer will fall on you," Hartsook said.

He got up, picked up his notebook and raincoat, and let himself out of the apartment. I locked the door behind him. It felt like the world--or at least the cops--was closing in. Sooner or later they'd find out that Silvio crossed paths with me on that lonely desert road.

I sat at my table and cried. Yeah, I know, what a sissy.

Lawyer Up

I needed advice and didn't know where to get it. I thought about talking to my best friend, Lenny, but he's such a blabbermouth, I couldn't completely trust him. I know he'd never hurt me on purpose, but he might slip up. My Dad was out of the question. He's such a "law and order" dude, it's surprising he isn't a cop.

I thought about telling Angel, but I thought it was too close to home, and I wasn't sure her advice would be all that great—she's smart, but she doesn't have any relevant experience. It would just be opinion, and sometimes she's kind of dogmatic. I kind of wished Ada was here so I could talk to her, but I didn't want to take a chance on poisoning our relationship. I didn't feel like I loved Ada, at least not to the degree of pure love I felt towards my first ever girlfriend, Claudia, but I cared deeply for her and didn't want to take a chance on losing her. I thought about talking to Paul, but I wasn't sure of his ability to keep a secret if I decided never to come clean. Finally, I decided the best thing to do was get advice on getting advice. I decided to talk to Dr. Armbruster at MIT, my science advisor since high school. I called and made an appointment. He made time for me the next day.

His office is along a quiet corridor in one of the faculty office buildings on the amorphous edge of the campus. MIT is always expanding a bit, leaking past its boundaries. The corridor walls in Dr. Armbruster's building are a pebbly green surface above dark wood wainscoting with random chalkboards and cork bulletin boards next to the office doors. For some reason, it feels comforting to run my hand along the wall. The building has a pleasant odor I've never been able to identify adequately. Probably a combination of pipe smoke, damp wool, cedar, maybe alcohol or formaldehyde, and a touch of mold. It smells academic, but not in the skanky way that the dorms do.

Dr. Armbruster didn't have an admin assistant, just a couple of lab and teaching assistants, so the protocol for visiting him was to show up at the appointed time, knock on his door once, and then take a seat in the old straight-backed wooden chair next to his door. I knew he'd come to get me as soon as he finished what he was working on. Sometimes that was a minute or two, sometimes ten. Today I heard his chair scrape as soon as I knocked, and he opened the door before I got a chance to sit.

"Monroe, come in, good to see you. I was worried you might have bad news for me, so I called your academic advisor, I hear you're doing quite well!"

"I'm not sure I'd call it that, but I think I'm keeping up."

"Well, I'll tell you, we have a lot of students that don't pass anything their first semester and not much the second. MIT's pass/no pass system makes that OK, except it might take those students

five or six years to graduate. I see you're doing well in all your classes though you dropped Literature. Good choice. It's a lot more study load than students expect. Take it when you have lots of time. So what can I help you with."

"I hardly know where to start. It's something that doesn't have anything to do with school. I got involved in something innocently that could get me in a lot of trouble with the police. I'd like to clear it up, but I don't know how, or even if I really should. And I need some good advice."

"Well, have you talked to a lawyer?"

"No, I'm concerned I might pick the wrong one."

"Any lawyer that accepts you as a client is required to keep your secrets. But you're wise to not just pick one at random. Anyone can slip up, and people brag about things, or get drunk and say things they shouldn't. From what I understand, the wrong lawyer won't talk to the police about you, but they might let things slip, or take some unwise action that would have a similar effect.

"I don't want to know anything more about what you might have done, you don't have any legal protection if you reveal things to me. I can be compelled to tell the police your secrets. But as I understand the law, your lawyer can't except in rare circumstances.

"I don't have an answer for you off the top of my head, but let me check around. I'll see if I can find you someone who is smart, a good lawyer, and honorable. I think I know who to ask. But let's stop talking about that until I do my research. Tell how you're doing here at Tech. Are you feeling comfortable here?"

We talked for about an hour about school and my problems with Calculus. Dr. Armbruster said the study group was a great approach, but I should probably also consider some added tutoring. He said, "The only problem with a study group is that you are all at the same basic level, so you can get stuck. I know just the person to tutor you, and I think you'd get along well. He's a little odd, but who isn't. Well, OK, he's very odd. I'm going to write you a note about this to give to your advisor. You know we have a tutoring program that pays outstanding students to help students that are struggling. He could use the money, and you could use the help."

"Well, I have a tutor for calculus, though he's not really all that helpful. Mostly he tells me to study harder and do more example problems."

"That's what I'm getting at. You'll find Andre is different. He's a freshman, like you, but his understanding of mathematics is well beyond the graduate level. Many of the math wizards here could not, and more importantly, would not communicate well with you. I think many of them don't really understand their own talent, and how different it is from how other people think. But Andre understands mathematics so profoundly and thoroughly that he can make it clear for you. I've used him myself to work through complicated calculations. He's not like most people I've met that are really talented. With rare exception, genuinely gifted people can't understand your difficulties. Andre will understand where you are, and what's holding you back. I think he'll do you a lot of good.

"But now I must get back to work. Here's contact information for Andre Bose, if your advisor has questions tell him to call me. In the meantime, I'll get to work finding good legal advice. Take care Monroe, I'm very pleased you're doing so well, and I'm sure we can get you through your current difficulties."

I assumed he was talking mostly about my calculus issues, but when I walked past the student message center in the early evening there was a sealed envelope with my name on it. The note inside said, "Julius Holtzman. My colleague says he would trust him with his life." There was a phone number and an address on Mass Ave.

I called Mr. Holzman at nine the next morning, and a woman with a shaky, ancient voice answered. She told me the earliest appointment Mr. Holzman had open was a little over a week out, though if I could get to the office in the next hour, I could see him for 30 minutes. I hung up and caught a bus down Mass Ave to the vicinity of Mr. Holzman's office.

A beautiful woman was sitting on one of the odd three-person benches that run along the wall. I always wonder why busses have those benches. You could fit two of the typical transverse seats there and seat four people. Seems like a waste of space for a place that most people would rather not sit in. I sat on the empty three-person seat across from her to enjoy the view. Gorgeous. Full lips, big blue eyes, auburn hair. And even in a long winter coat, I could tell she had a great figure. She glared at me and said, "What are you looking at?" She held her hand up, and I saw a thin gold band. "I'm married."

I grinned and said "I'm heartbroken. You are beautiful."

There was a time, actually less than a year ago, when I would have just looked at my shoes. Of course, back then, I wouldn't be so bold to have been caught looking at her.

"You're fresh. You shouldn't be staring at married women," she said

"I didn't see the ring, but it wouldn't have mattered. The heart wants what the heart wants."

"Oh jeez, spare me," she said, but she smiled when she said it.

My stop came, and I got up to get off the bus. "I guess it's goodbye then, I'll never forget our time together." She laughed, and I got off the bus.

I walked quickly to the three-story brownstone building that fronted onto Mass Ave about a mile from Harvard Square. It looked like a residential apartment building that had been converted to professional office space, mostly doctors and lawyers according to the directory.

Mr. Holzman's office was on the first floor in the front. I entered the waiting room and discovered that the receptionist was at least as old as she sounded. I expected to sit and wait, but she ushered me immediately into a large and impressive office.

A big hardwood desk dominated, but there was also a conference table and some casual seating like a living room. Beautiful cherry bookshelves covered much of the wall area, interspersed with several interesting landscape paintings and a windowed corner with a window seat. I daydreamed about curling up in that seat with a stack of books. It looked like an excellent place to spend time. Not what I expected.

Mr. Holtzman was a compact, trim looking man in a perfectly tailored black suit, crisp white shirt, and a red silk tie that looked like it cost more than my entire wardrobe.

"What can I do for you young man, it's not often that I get visits from students other than law graduates looking for a job, or young men in trouble brought in by their fathers."

"I have a legal problem, and I need advice, but I don't know where to turn."

"I do mostly criminal law, son, you don't look like someone with a criminal issue."

"I'm afraid that's the kind of advice I need, but I can't talk about it unless I'm certain what I said can be held in confidence."

"Hmm. I don't do much pro bono work son, and my billing rate is \$125 an hour. And yes, I actually get paid that ridiculous amount of money."

"Well, I can afford about an hour. If I pay you for that much advice, can I be certain you can't be compelled to talk to the police about me?"

"Can't is a big word son, if you tell me you're going to commit a crime, then I have responsibilities as an officer of the court and member of the bar, but if we're talking about something you've already done, then you're pretty safe. And I'm a curious man. So yes, I'll take you on as a client on that basis. Do you have money with you?"

I looked in my wallet, "I have a little more than \$40, but I could go to a bank for more."

"That's OK, give me \$40."

I handed over a twenty and two tens, leaving three lonely dollars in my wallet. He made out a receipt and handed it to me.

"Keep that—it's evidence that you're my client. You should start off by telling me that everything you're going to say is confidential, and that qualifies our communication as privileged. I'm not compelled or even allowed to reveal it unless you waive the privilege."

"Everything I say from here on is confidential..." And then I told him the long, sad story of how I met Silvio and how he eventually invited me to join his motorcycle gang. When I told Silvio I couldn't. He got mad and had this moose named Walrus come to beat me up. I got in a lucky punch that laid Walrus out, and then I took off a couple of days early on the trip across country I'd been planning for months.

I was in Berkeley, California, when I found out Silvio went on a murder spree. I took a zig-zag route to delay coming home so I wouldn't encounter Silvio, and unfortunately bumped right into him hundreds of miles south of where I would have been if I'd taken a straight path home. He tried to kill me, but I accidentally made him crash. When I last spoke to him he was laying across a rock with his feet pointed backward, trying to convince me to give him his .45 Colt so he could end his fucked up life. He told me there was a lot of money in his saddlebags that I could have if I gave him the gun.

I actually started to give him the gun, but I saw in his reptile eyes that he was going to use it to kill me, so I shot him in the head. I'm still not sure why I shot him. I think it was just a reflex, not something I thought about.

About thirty minutes into the story I glanced at my Timex and said: "Your secretary said I could have 30 minutes, I think my time is about up, and there's still some to tell. Should I stop?"

"No... ...no, are you kidding? This is fascinating. Wait a second."

He keyed the intercom on his desk and said: "Gloria, what am I scheduled for next."

A nearly unintelligible murmur came out of the speaker, but Mr. Holtzman could apparently understand it.

"Call him and let him know I'm going to be about an hour late, and cancel my lunch so I can make up the time."

He released the intercom lever and said: "Go on."

So I did. I told him I found about \$150,000 in cash and bearer bonds in Silvio's saddlebags. I sent \$140,000 to the widow of a policeman Silvio murdered and buried \$10,000 plus the notebooks I found with the money.

When I finished, Mr. Holtzman said, "Well, I've heard a lot in my 28 years of practicing law, but that's right up there with the wildest situations. The first and most important thing I'm going to tell

you is that you're done talking to the police. If they ask to speak with you—about anything—just say no, and ask them to contact me. I'll give you some cards that you can hand them. If they don't like that, it's just tough titties.

"If they arrest you, and I don't see that happening, you refuse to say anything, not a word other than 'I want to see my lawyer' until they call me and I am in the room. And then you talk freely only if I say exactly this: "These guys are on our team, and we need to help them". If I say anything other than that, even something like "Monroe, you have to cooperate" then I want you just to clam up and refuse to talk. Like most people, you're digging the hole you're standing in with your own mouth.

"Technically you can be charged with murder, though probably it would be manslaughter and grand larceny—both are major felonies of course. In practical terms, we could probably make a deal that would result in reduced charges and a minimal sentence—maybe even suspended. But it's possible a prosecutor would go for real jail time, and they could win. So if I were advising my own son in this case, that isn't what I'd recommend. But before I say more, I need to know what you want."

I thought for a moment and said, "I don't know. I know what I did was wrong, and illegal, but I know I didn't do it for evil reasons. Does that make sense? I was trying to do the right thing, or at least mostly the right thing, but it came out really bad. I don't want to go to jail, and I don't want to stand trial in front of my parents and friends."

"So you kept \$10,000 and the notebooks. What's in the notebooks," Holtzman said.

"Mostly it's records of payoffs, and there are some names I recognize there from reading the newspapers. I went back and dug up the pickle jar, and went through the names to see if Officer Hartsook is there, and he's not, though that only means he wasn't being paid by Mr. Capano."

My new lawyer said, "I need to think about what you've told me, but for now I'll tell you two things. I'm familiar with the popular accounts of this case. I don't know anything about the behind-the-scenes efforts, but I'd guess that the police have about all the information they are likely to get unless you give them more. If they don't have enough information to arrest you today, it's unlikely that will change tomorrow. Simply put, the only person that knows what happened is you, and you don't have to say a word.

"We need to keep your involvement off the record. The police aren't the only ones interested in this case. The mob and this motorcycle gang are also involved. If they understood that you had information, they would get it from you, and it wouldn't go well. So everything I do for you has to be out of the public eye, and you need to make every effort to appear as a bystander at most.

"From an ethical standpoint, you didn't do much wrong, but from a legal standpoint, or even worse, from a justice system and political standpoint, you're screwed. If you enter the justice system under any terms, what comes out the other end won't be much like you are now. And regardless of the

outcome, people will always believe you are guilty of something. Let me ask you this, do you think most of the people charged with a crime are guilty?"

I thought for a second and said: "yes, I'd assume so, they wouldn't have been charged unless there was evidence."

Mr. Holtzman nodded, "well, you're right, most are. The law says "innocent until proven guilty," but public opinion doesn't care about that. If you have a record or are even charged with a crime, you are a criminal, and that label will follow you through your life. If there's a way to avoid that, we need to do so. I don't have any moral problem helping you "avoid justice". There isn't much justice in the justice system.

"I've shepherded truly innocent people through the process, and it ruins their lives. I don't want you ever to think that the easy way out of this is to come clean. These people will do their best to destroy you, not because you deserve it, but because it makes them look good. Because it demonstrates that they are doing their job. We don't want to let that happen. And then there are the other parties who would treat you with even less justice.

"So go home, sleep well, don't say a word to anyone, and if the cops come knocking again tell them to come here, and I'll tell them to get lost and stay lost. Right now I gotta prep for my next appointment, but I'll be in touch after I think about things and check a few things out. And don't worry, we'll take care of this thing."

"I don't know how I'm going to pay you a lot more," I said, "I've got that \$10,000, but it isn't my money. I regret even keeping it for emergencies."

"We'll figure that out too. Maybe you can tune my cars up for the rest of your life. Don't worry about it, but you have to go, I need to review some confidential files before my next meeting and you can't be here when I do."

When I walked out of the office, I felt like a knight in shining armor, or maybe a little guy in a black suit and a nice tie had set me free. I went to my classes, did some studying at the library, then went home to my little apartment, climbed into a bed that smelled like Ada, and slept for ten hours straight.

Shut Up Dummy

The next morning as I was putting my books in my bag, there was a sharp knock on my door. I opened it to find Lieutenant Hartsook standing there looking smug. "I have a few more questions to ask you, Monroe."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but Mr. Holtzman says I shouldn't answer any more of your questions. He says you can call him if you like". I reached in my pocket and took out a card that I handed the Lieutenant. He looked at it like it was covered in dog shit.

"You lawyered up, you stupid bastard! Do you know what this means? You're suspect number one now."

I shouldered my book bag, stepped past him into the hall, and shut the door to my apartment.

"I'm sorry sir, you'll have to call Mr. Holtzman if you have any questions. I have to get to class."

He grabbed my arm just below the elbow. I looked down at his hand and said, "Mr. Holtzman told me to tell him if you touched me or impeded me in any way. Is that your intention?"

He pulled back and said, "This isn't over, not by a long shot. You're on my shit list," and he left.

I thought what he said was probably true, but Mr. Holtzman was right too. The only person that could close the case ultimately was me, and I wasn't talking.

Vigor Mortis

She was sleeping when the men in the ski masks came. There was no sound to alert her before the hands pinned her arms and others roughly stuffed a gag in her mouth and tied it tightly behind her head. Then the bag was pulled over her head, and her hands were tied behind her back. She was yanked to her feet. She heard someone whisper in guttural french. "This one is worth keeping."

Hands cupped her breasts from behind. A second voice said, "Fool. You are asking to have your throat cut, you know whose bitch this is."

The first man grunted, and the hands left her breast. Rough hands grabbed her elbows and dragged her away.

All The Pimps Go There

When I walked by the student message center after my first class, I had two messages. One was from Andre Bose, the guy Dr. Armbruster suggested I ask to tutor me. He offered to meet me in the early afternoon and asked for a specific time. I had study time open from two to four PM, so I suggested two and left the reply note in his box.

There was also a call from Claudia's father, Mr. Kabekian. My heart immediately started pounding most strangely. Claudia was the first girl I ever dated, the first girl I ever kissed. And what a fantastic way for a hopeless nerd to start. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, anywhere. I know I'm hugely biased, but that's how I see it, and I'm not alone. You can see her in fashion magazines—she's working as a model in Paris for a year before she starts at Harvard.

I also love her. Nothing fancy here, I just love her. Forever. I think she's moved on and I don't believe there's anything I can do to change that. Now we're "just friends" which really sucks, but it's my own fault. She's dating some pre-med student in France, but hey, you never know. Maybe she misses me. I found a phone and called Mr. Kabekian back. He answered right away.

"Hello Mr. Kabekian, this is Monroe, I got your message."

"Oh, good, Monroe, have you heard from Claudia."

"Well, I got a letter from her about three weeks ago."

"Nothing else? She hasn't called? Perhaps she called your home?"

"I don't think so, I talked to my Mom yesterday. She would have told me if Claudia called."

"We haven't heard from her in a week, and she's not at her aunt and uncle's house. They haven't seen her in a week."

"What about her boyfriend, did you talk to him."

"Yes, he said he hadn't seen her. He said he thought she might have gone home to Boston. That's when we started worrying."

"How about the modeling agency? They might know where she is."

"No, she hasn't been there. They think she might have had a problem with her boyfriend and just took off."

"I don't know Mr. Kabekian, is there something I can do. Is there someone I should call to help find her. Maybe Maria or someone else that was on her soccer team has been in contact." "That's a good idea, Monroe. I'll contact her high school. Most of the girls have graduated I'd think, but perhaps they can help me get in touch."

"I have Maria's number. Let me give it to you. Or would you rather I called and tried to run this down for you."

"No, I'll do it, it will keep me from going crazy. If you hear anything, please call me right away, any time, night or day."

Sure, Mr. Kabekian, and please let me know what's happening."

I gave Mr. Kabekian the number for Maria Stanghorn, the unlikely 6'2" amazonian fiancee of my 5'6" geeky best friend, Lenny Rosenthal.

Mr. Kabekian hung up, and I was free to have a panic attack about Claudia being alone and in trouble somewhere in France. After a few minutes of pacing, I came to my senses. Claudia is a capable and independent woman. Her parents were overprotective of their beautiful and talented only child. It wasn't out of character for Claudia to be out of touch for a week. Her letters to me revealed her increasing independence and adventurous spirit. She was probably skiing in the Alps, or bicycling through the Luberon—two goals she related to me. Probably had a spat with her boyfriend and just took off. That sounded like Claudia. I made it to my next class just before the TA closed the door. I pushed my concerns to the back of my mind and concentrated on Chemistry.

I met my new math tutor that afternoon. Andre Bose is a short, skinny, brown-skinned guy. When I saw him walking toward me, I thought, "Why does this guy look like a toy?" and then I realized his head is so out of proportion to his body. Andre has a narrow jaw, but everything tapers upwards quickly, past a broad nose, enormous brown eyes, a wide, bushy monobrow, huge forehead, and a mop of unruly black hair. If he claimed he was extraterrestrial, I'd probably believe him.

"Smitten by my good looks, are you," he said.

I guess I was staring. I fumbled for some kind of apology, but he said, "Never mind, large, lumpy white boy. In Europe, I am considered gorgeous. It's only here in America that people think I look like a praying mantis, I assure you. So I hear you suck at calculus."

His articulation was clipped as if he were British, but the accent sounded French. The combination distracted me, and I was still struggling with my obvious gaffe in staring at his disproportionate head. The praying Mantis comment was spectacularly apt and claimed the remaining bit of my overburdened thought processes. I struggled to get out a coherent sentence. "I'm Monroe, you must be Andre."

"Must' seems restrictive. Let's say I choose to be Andre. Do we really need to cover these formalities? You're Monroe, I'm Andre, stop staring at my head and tell me about your calculus issues. What don't you understand?"

"I don't know, I eventually understand the calculus and use what I learned to do my Physics problems, but it comes very slowly. It seems like the problems in Thomas don't have that much to do with the accompanying text, and I'm always struggling to reconcile that."

"Ahh, yes, you must come to love Thomas. He is doing a clever thing. He makes you think about the tools of calculus, not just memorize rules. He supplies the tools, but he doesn't want you to build only what he has shown you, he wants you to learn what the tools can do. Learning calculus is not about doing problems, it's learning to use tools to help you do stuff. You don't think Isaac Newton invented calculus to do problems, do you? No, of course, you don't, that would be very silly. He needed new tools to describe gravity and planetary motion. Think about it that way, and it's ever so much easier."

I really didn't see how, but we started to work together, and each time I learned something new, Andre would say, "and what does this new tool allow you to do". We would discuss the uses of the method, and I have to admit it became much clearer to me. Not only that, but when I looked at the problems in Thomas, I could see how he was making me use the tool, and why the problems were posed as they were.

"So are you saying that all mathematics is comprehensible as tools to solve problems?" I said.

"No, of course not, absolutely not. Only baby stuff. This level of mathematics is about gizmos. Ways for engineers to make gizmos that work or explain simple things like planetary motion. Serious mathematics is about understanding mathematics, which may seem recursive to you, but I assure you, well... ...I guess I'd assure you that it is. You must understand mathematics to understand what mathematics is and what calculation is. You don't have a mind for that, I'm just working to help you understand gizmos. And to make one dollar and fifteen cents for every hour that I do that. Let's take a break and go get a hamburger. Cows are sacred in India but very tasty in America."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were French."

"Don't be sorry, I'm from a Bengali family, but my paternal grandfather moved to France just after world war one. Spectacularly bad timing, but we've been there ever since. My mother is from India, an arranged marriage. My father was looking for an old fashioned Indian girl he could dominate, and he got the opposite—she manipulates him effortlessly. She's much smarter than he is and almost as smart as me. My mother named me for André Derain, whose paintings she admired. Imagine my father's dismay." Dr. Ambruster was right, I was enjoying Andre, and he was helping me. We went to the dorm cafeteria, where I still had credits and got hamburgers and fries. One of the tables had three female students seated at it. Andre watched them for a moment and sighed, "I fear those ripe breasts are forever out of my grasp."

He sounded like Lenny. I said, "I don't know, most of the women at MIT seem pretty open and friendly, you might find a pair of breasts attached to a woman who would like you."

"Easy for you to say my oversized and very white friend. Those women look at you and see a potential reproductive partner—white babies of a dominant size that might be smart enough to make gizmos. They look at me and see tiny brown babies with strange heads."

"Well, it's not all about reproduction, some of the relationships between men and women is just propinquity. Spend enough time close to enough women, and one or two might find attractive qualities in you. I confess I have no idea what that might be, but it could happen."

"Huh. Perhaps I will teach you calculus, and you can teach me about white women. Or ones of any color or hue for that matter, I haven't done well on any continent."

"I think you're trying to solve problems instead of using your tools," I said.

"That's very funny. Perhaps we should get back to where I torture you with differential equations and insult your overall intelligence. I will expect you to show me how to get closer to a fine American set of breasts, which I do believe are a wonder of the world. But don't expect to receive one dollar and 15 cents per hour, unless your advice gets results, in which case I will be pleased to pay".

"That sounds like a request to pimp for you. In that case, it's money up front. Though I should warn you that MIT is a bad place to find pimp qualities in a student. Perhaps you should hang out at Harvard. I hear all the pimps go there."

Comfy Slammer

She woke slowly. Her head felt stuffed and buzzy, and her vision was blurred. Afternoon sunlight blazed through the barred window. She must have been unconscious for many hours. Drugged. The room was small—one wooden chair with a patterned cushion, a chest of drawers with most of the finish gone, with magazines and books stacked neatly on top. Tight against the wall opposite the window was the narrow single bed she woke up in, with clean sheets and a thick comforter. The walls were painted deep red, but it looked like the paint had been applied over wallpaper—it had raised impressions that looked like flowers. The floor was wide pine boards with no carpet. A cramped room, but comfortable. She was wearing a flannel gown, pilled from many washings, that she'd never seen before, and thick bed socks.

She got out of bed and tried the door. The handle turned, and the door moved but stopped against a hasp. She heard the rattle of a padlock against the door. She crossed to the window and looked out at a walled courtyard. It looked like she was on the second floor.

The padlocked rattled and the door opened. A small dark-haired woman smiled at her.

"You can join us for lunch if you like. We will explain everything. I'm sorry to say that if you are not with one of us at all times, you must remain locked in this room. We'll try to make you comfortable, but you must stay here. It's for your own protection as well as ours. Will you have lunch with us?"

She nodded slowly and left the room with the woman.

Picalilli and Lock Picks

On Saturday I got out of bed just before six. Spring was around the corner, and it was time to wake Sophia from her winter nap. I made a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast and walked down the smelly back stairs into the basement. There's a long tradition of putting rubbish and garbage outside the back door in Boston apartments where it rots to an utterly disgusting mess before it eventually gets carried to the dumpster. Perhaps the idea is to make it easy for the rats and cockroaches to find food. After fifty or so years of spilling garbage that liquifies and soaks into the concrete, the back steps have an odor that no disinfectant can ever touch.

The furnace was roaring away in the far corner, making the room pleasantly warm, even in the far reaches of the storage area where Sophia lived. I unlocked the padlock on the wooden slat door, and there she stood, glorious in the dim light. My 1958 BSA A10 Golden Flash, six hundred and fifty cc's of mighty British motorcycle, outfitted for long distance touring. She bears the fictitious name I made up for Claudia when I first saw her on a bus. At that point in my life, I couldn't have possibly asked Claudia what her real name was, my vocal cords would have turned to stone. So I called her Sophia in my fantasies about her. And since my father assigns names to any vehicle in the Sanborne household, I got out in front of the situation and named my motorcycle Sophia, to keep it from being called Pegasus, or Aerion, or Bronte, or some other classical horse name.

I complain about my dad's goofy naming habit, but Sophia is a perfect name for my motorcycle, and it makes me care for this inanimate collection of parts in a way that seems almost a little unhealthy.

The storage room had been set up as a workplace by a former tenant. I had several to choose from when Ada leased the apartment, and I picked this one because it had three overhead lights in the small space and a workbench across one end. I covered the workbench with half of an old chenille bedspread—knobby side up—and laid out my tools and a few supplies like chain oil, fork oil, grease, and a paper bag from Albion motors with enough Castrol oil for a full oil change. I also had new spark plugs and points for the magneto in case I needed them. Changing the points was unlikely, a properly phased magneto is very easy on points, and as long as the rubbing block is lubed they last a very long time. Sophia's magneto is precisely phased at full advance—a fiddly job, but fiddly is what I do best.

When I turned all the lights on, I could see that Sophia was pretty grimy. The furnace probably kicked off plenty of sticky dust. I didn't have any easy way to wash her, but I didn't want to touch any of the paint without lifting the grime with a good detergent. It's likely the grime had hard particles that would scratch the paint. When I was a gunk at Albion Cycles I learned that clean soapy water with a good foam was the only safe way to lift dirt off painted surfaces. I washed hundreds of bikes before I got promoted to mechanic.

I rolled Sophia over near an ancient soapstone laundry sink in the far corner of the basement. There was a floor drain right next to the sink, so I figured I could wash Sophia in a warm basement instead of the frigid alleyway. I went back to my apartment and dug the dish soap and a couple of rags from under the sink. I took them and the plastic wastebasket from my cramped bathroom, dumped the trash into the dumpster behind the apartments so I could use it as a bucket, and got busy washing Sophia.

She was nice and clean, and I was wiping off the beaded water when I happened to notice the cover to the telephone junction box on the wall behind the sink was cockeyed. Things like that bother me, so I went to close it properly and noticed a new black wire among the grimy old beige ones leading into the box. I thought that was interesting, so I opened the box to see where it connected. I thought, "somebody is swiping a phone connection". But my scalp tightened when I traced the wire to a pair of terminal screws and read the tab. It was my phone number. I knew instantly that I'd stumbled across a wiretap.

I traced the wire where it tucked along a beam on the ceiling and then disappeared into a storage cage. It was one of the cages I rejected when I chose mine. There was a new padlock on the rusty hasp.

The walls of the cages are made of 4-inch slats nailed to a two-by-four frame with about a two-inch gap between boards. The cage on the left side had no lock and just a rusty old baby carriage inside it. I peered through the slats and couldn't see anything in the cage except perhaps a small box in the far corner. I went back to my cage and got a flashlight from my workbench. In the beam, I could see a small grey box in the far corner of the locked cage.

I've been fascinated with picking locks since I was ten when I successfully jiggled the one-pin lock on my sisters diary with a bent paperclip. Over the years, I've perfected my skills and my toolset. A typical geek obsession. I went upstairs and got my lock picking set—I've picked ten-pin double plug spooled locks with it, though they take a hell of a lot of time and patience. I can open a fivepin Master padlock like this one as fast as with a key. I use my stiffest tension wrench to overcome the friction caused by cheap manufacturing and a single diamond pick.

I generally make my own picks from feeler gauges though I was given a few picks that I treasure by a locksmith I met who is a true pro. He can open anything with pins and a key. He has a ring of handcuffs that must have a hundred cuffs on it. He challenges the cops to cuff him with the provision that any cuffs he opens within a minute he keeps, and if he doesn't, he gives the cop a hundred bucks. They're always bringing him new, unpick-able cuffs, and by the time he turns around to face them after being cuffed he holds the open cuffs out. He told me the harder they close the cuff, the easier they are to open. Pretty funny. He gave me a rake, a snake and a half round that are made from metal streetcleaner bristles. I avoid using my streetcleaner snake because it makes picking five-pin locks too easy. You don't learn anything.

I rake Master locks back to front. They seem like they are made to be picked, they don't have any false sheers, and you can feel each pin slip free in just one pass.

I also grabbed Ada's rubber dishwashing gloves. I never used them, but she was careful with her skin. I put them on when I was back in the basement. I struggled a little with the compromised finger sensitivity, but I had the lock open on the third try. The phone wire dropped down the wall and disappeared through a hole in the side of the box, and there was a power cord plugged into an extension cord connected to an adapter screwed into the single light fixture. The adapter had two plugs, a light socket, and a pull-chain to turn the light on and off. I noted that the switch on the wall that controlled the light was in the on position. The box was powered up with the light turned off.

The box had a dinky three-pin cabinet lock that yielded quickly. Inside was a very cool Grundig miniature tape recorder that made my geek heart flutter. I wanted it as soon as I looked at it but dismissed that as insanity. Sure, steal an expensive tape recorder from the cops.

The tape recorder was connected to a hammertone grey metal box any geek would recognize as a custom electronics chassis. Both the phone wire and the power cord fed into it. I assumed this was a controller box that turned the tape recorder on whenever the phone was lifted off its cradle upstairs. Easy to do, I sketched the circuit in my head while I looked at it. Just sense the voltage drop from the connection and pick up a relay. There was probably also an amplifier in the box to connect the audio to the tape recorder and a little circuitry to match impedance. Possibly some filters to keep the phone from picking up interference that the recorder's motor might generate which would make a hum in the phone and give the wiretap away. At least that's how it would work if I designed it.

I put everything back the way it was and started to close up the storage cage. I thought through all the steps I had taken, looking for ways I might have left evidence of my visit. I got one of my damp rags, went back into the cage, and wiped down everything I might have touched before I got the gloves. Then I looked around with my flashlight and noticed the dusty floor had a lot of footprints. Fortunately, I was wearing loafers, and my prints didn't look different than the cops. Just to be sure I stepped on top of every footprint I saw. I have big feet—every footprint looked like mine. At the very least, it was confusing.

I locked up the wiretap storage bin, closed the door to the bin with the baby carriage and was stripping off the gloves, feeling pretty good about myself, when a voice behind me snapped "What are you doing in here?"

I practically jumped out of my skin. I spun around and saw my neighbor from across the hall diminutive, 86 years old, bright blue hair—Mrs. Federson. My heart slowly returned to its usual position though I was pretty sure my nuts would be up in my abdomen for the rest of the day. "Holy smokes Mrs. Federson, you startled the dickens out of me. I was looking at this storage cage, I thought I might trade for the one I use because it's closer to the deep sink. But it doesn't have any lights, it's not going to work for me."

"Well, that one is taken anyway. Mr. Stanton on the third floor has it."

"Really? There's nothing in it but an old baby carriage."

"Humpf. Well, you should stay out of these cages unless they're yours. People might think you're stealing their stuff, though I know better. You're a good boy Monroe. Since you are such a good boy, I'm sure you'll carry a couple of boxes upstairs for me. I was going to ask my grandnephew, but he's such a little shit I hate even to have him around."

"Sure, Mrs. Federson, just show me what you need moved."

The boxes felt like they might have Mrs. Federson's fishing weight collection, or maybe Mr. Federson, chopped up and preserved in jelly jars. Actually, that last guess was close—the boxes were full of pickled green tomatoes and peppers. From the dust, I'd say they were twenty years old. She gave me several after I washed the dust off all the jars for her, stacked them in her pantry, and hauled the old stained boxes to the dumpster.

Mrs. Federson handed me two jars and said, "They're not as old as they look. I put them up four years ago, they'll be perfect now. You'll like them, Monroe. If you don't, then don't be just tossing them in the garbage. Give them back, and I'll use them. I want the jars back too. Now shoo, I have friends coming to play bridge. And stay out of Mr. Stanton's cage."

I went to my apartment and put the scary-looking pickles in my dinky pantry. There wasn't much else in there. I needed to do some shopping before my dorm credits ran out. It would be nice to cook some anyway.

I sat down and thought about what to do about the wiretap. The big question was how long it had been there. It didn't seem likely that it was placed before I contacted Mr. Holzman, because of how Lt. Hartsook acted when I told him I'd contacted a lawyer. He was either a great actor or he didn't know. Of course, I had no idea how often they listened to the tapes. I thought about the conversations I had on the phone and thought it really didn't matter how long the tap had been in place. I didn't use the phone much, and I'd never said anything about Silvio on that phone.

I left the apartment and went to the drugstore on the corner to use the pay phone. I called Mr. Holtzman, planning to leave a message with his service, but I was surprised when he picked up on the second ring. I identified myself and he said "Hello Monroe, I happen to be in my office working on some files this morning, I thought you were my wife calling. What can I do for you." I told him about the wiretap. He laughed and said, "Can you come here in the next hour. We can talk about this, it's very interesting."

I decided to ride Sophia since the streets had pretty much dried off. It was chilly, but nowhere near freezing. Even if the leaden skies dumped a little rain, I wouldn't be contending with ice. The ride would warm up the oil nicely, so I could drain it better when I did my delayed tune-up. I went back to my apartment, put on a sweater with my leather jacket over it. Laced up my boots over heavy socks. Wrapped a scarf around my neck, grabbed my gloves and helmet, and walked down the back steps to the basement.

I pushed Sophia out of the storage cage and up the ramp to the back alley. The building super told me the ramp was for coal bins back when the apartment was heated by coal instead of oil.

I turned on the gas taps, booted the kickstarter through a couple of times with the clutch pulled in to free up the plates, then put Sophia in neutral, tickled the carbs and gave her a solid kick through. She popped but didn't start. I found top dead center again and gave it a firm kick. She started cleanly and settled into a lumpy idle with the choke on full in the cold air. I pulled off the oil cap and checked the oil return—it was spraying copiously, emptying the crankcase of the oil that had snuck in by the check valve. In just a few moments, the stream slowed to spurts, and when I put my finger in the oil stream and looked at it, it was clear of metal sparkles or carbon. I let her warm until the choke made her stumble a bit, and then teased the choke fully open until she ran cleanly. The engine sounded terrific, the deep bass of the idle thundered off the walls of the nearby apartments. I put her in gear and rolled out to the street before windows started opening and neighbors yelled inaudible complaints.

The ride was much too short. I felt the fresh miracle of a responsive and well cared for motorcycle between my legs. The grey streets were almost empty of traffic. I guess cold, overcast weekend mornings are a good reason to sleep late. For long stretches, the only movement was papers blowing around in the cold wind. The air smelled clean and crisp.

I pulled up in front of Mr. Holtzman's building. Got off, locked the forks and set the code on Cobalt's very latest prototype alarm system. I looped my old standby heavy chain inside a bicycle inner tube through the back wheel and the lower frame, locking it with a hardened padlock. Belt and suspenders. Sophia deserves care.

I rang the bell for Mr. Holtzman's office and was buzzed into the brownstone. He stood in the window and looked at Sophia while I shed a few layers of clothing. "So that's the famous Sophia. She is beautiful, I understand why you named her Sophia. I always wanted a motorcycle when I was a young man. At that time the only motorcycle to have was an Indian because they were made right here in Massachusetts—out west in Springfield."

"They made some nice motorcycles. I love the looks, but they didn't keep up with technology. Sidevalve flatheads with a primitive transmission. I've worked on a few, it feels like I'm working on an old tractor."

"No, I'm afraid that's true, and things move so fast these days, I don't know how anyone keeps up. My secretary wants a new typewriter that can actually erase errors. Can you imagine such a thing? It remembers what letter you typed—up to 25 of them. You push a backspace/erase key, and it types the letters you used with correction tape. Picks the ink right off the paper. Unbelievable! IBM makes it, she tells me it will revolutionize our office. I doubt any technology can do that. Grace is in her seventies, but she's still always looking ahead. I guess I'll have to get it for her. At least it will keep us current for a long time, what could make that obsolete? Well sit, son, and tell me all about this wiretap."

I told Mr. Holtzman the whole story of how I had found the tap and then covered my tracks, though I expressed concern that I hadn't had time to really be sure. I told him about Mrs. Federson, and he laughed out loud.

"I doubt covering your tracks made much difference anyway, and I'll tell you why. I bet it's an illegal tap. I could be wrong, they might have found a judge that would give them a warrant since a cop was killed, but there's absolutely no probable cause—just pure suspicion, and that's not enough for any real warrant. No judge wants his warrant questioned. Even if they have one, a first-year lawyer could get anything they got tossed out of court. But I bet they're fishing without a license and that's illegal. So they won't be hanging out in that basement, they'll sneak in and out like thieves.

"I think we can use this to our advantage, and I'm quite happy doing so. They're invading your privacy, and probably breaking the law, so fuck 'em I say. You're going to have to act a little, if you can't speak naturally on the phone then we shouldn't do this. Can you do that?"

"Sure, I think so."

"Well, we'll need better than that. You can call me on another phone to make sure.

"They have two issues they're watching for. First is they think you contacted me because you're guilty of something, we need to eliminate that as an issue, we're going to give them a different reason. Second, they want to find any indication that you have money you shouldn't have, we can take care of that too. We should do this as soon as you can manage it. I'll write you a script, then you try saying it to me here, and then from your tapped phone.

"This is an important opportunity. If the police become particularly suspicious of you, the word will get out. Perhaps not to the warlocks, but certainly to the mob. You've seen in that notebook that the

mob has contacts in the police force. We need to quash any suspicion to avoid the possibility of mob interest in you. They won't just ask questions."

I shivered a bit—I had a good idea of how the mob would make me talk. I said, "I just realized that your phone might be tapped too, I called here and talked about my phone being tapped. That would screw everything."

"Wow! I doubt it, they'd be way off the reservation if they tapped a lawyer's phone. There's no way they'd get a warrant to listen in on privileged communication where there is an expectation of privacy—that's central to our constitutional rights. Can you tell if they have?"

"If they did it the same way I certainly can. I can go down to your basement and look at the phone box."

"Boy, if they did that, I'm calling the Police Commissioner, we'll have them by the short hairs. They'll be civilians before suppertime."

We adjourned to the basement, found the phone junction box. I looked it over thoroughly and found nothing.

"No taps, and no indication that there has ever been one. I doubt this junction box has been opened in many years."

We went back to the office and worked on the script and the ideas for about twenty minutes, then I ran through it once. Mr. Holzman said it was perfect, that I didn't need a practice call on an untapped phone and in fact, I shouldn't practice anymore. I sounded scared and nervous, which was perfect.

That was easy for me—I was scared and nervous.

I left the office, got on my bike and rode back to my apartment. I dialed Mr. Holtzman's phone--he answered on the third ring.

"This is Saul Holtzman."

"Mr. Holtzman, Monroe Sanborne, thanks for taking my call."

"Certainly Monroe, I told you I'd have time to talk this morning."

"Well, that policeman came back to my apartment, just like you said he would. I was so scared I could hardly talk."

"Monroe, I told you that the police detective was not going to beat you up. He won't unless he has a reason. What did you tell him."

"I just told him to call you, but he yelled at me. Said that I was a suspect now because I talked to a lawyer. He grabbed my arm."

"Did he hit you or push you or anything."

"Not really. Hey, I called you because my friends said I need a lawyer to keep from getting beat up by the police, but now it seems like things are even worse. And it's costing me money I can't afford."

"You did the right thing, Monroe. If they contact me, I'll tell them they can only talk to you if I'm present. But you know, if that happens you're going to owe me more money. I charge by the hour Monroe. If this takes more than a few hours, I'm going to need some cash in advance."

"I have a little more saved for college, but do you think that will happen?"

"There's no way to say. I know you're frightened of the police, but you haven't done anything wrong. If I'm in the room, they can't hit you. Just call me if there's any more trouble."

"Okay. I've got to go study. Thank you, Mr. Holtzman."

I hung up and went to the drugstore to call Mr. Holtzman. I said, "was that okay?"

"That was perfect Monroe. Simple and to the point. We'll give it some time to fester, and we'll see if they leave the tap in place. Have a good rest of the weekend."

"You too, sir, and thank you."

"Thank you, Monroe, I haven't had this much fun in years."

A Special Hell

Monday afternoon, I called Mr. Kabekian and got Mrs. Kabekian instead. Claudia has always expressed irritation at her mother's impenetrable calm. What Claudia refers to as her sang froid. I couldn't detect any remnant of calm. Her voice was shrill and trembling. She was terrified for her daughter.

"Oh, Monroe, we don't know what to do. Claudia has disappeared, and it feels like we can do nothing to find her or help her."

"No word at all?"

"Nothing. No one has heard from her, no one has seen her. My sister—her aunt and uncle—they are doing what they can. We've talked to police, to the American embassy. We are flying to Paris tomorrow. David's brother will stay at our house in case there is a phone call or letter. If you hear anything, please call him."

What bizarre things you think about when you're going crazy. It popped into my head that I had utterly forgotten Mr. Kabekian's name was David.

Someone told me once that the best way to deal with your personal strife is to help other people. Seemed like an unlikely solution at the time, but when Mr. Holzman called me on Tuesday afternoon and asked me to stop by his office, I realized I hadn't checked on the wiretap, or thought anything about my own problems since I talked to Mrs. Kabekian. All I could think of was that I somehow had to help Claudia. I went to classes, and paid attention in a jittery, freaked out manner, but every spare moment when my attention wasn't focused on school I was mulling what I could do to help the Kabekian's and Claudia. I didn't come up with anything that seemed useful.

Before I drove to Mr. Holzman's office, I went down to the basement and checked. The lock was gone from the storage room door. All that remained of the wiretap was a smudged spot in the dust where the box had been. Even the wire was gone. I rode Sophia to Mr. Holzman's office, but I drove right past it, and wound up in Harvard Square, so distracted that I didn't recall why I was there. I circled back to Mr. Holzman's and was ushered directly into his office by his secretary.

"Monroe, good to see you. Have you had any more contact from our BPD friends?"

"No, and the wiretap equipment is gone. I don't know when they took it, but the wire is gone, the storage unit is unlocked, and the recorder box is gone."

"Ah, that's very interesting. It probably means our little charade worked as hoped, their interest in you is diminished. It also means that the wiretap was almost certainly illegal. A wiretap done with a warrant would probably still be in place. The longer an illegal tap is in place, the more likely it is

that it would cause trouble. If only because the department might need the equipment and it wouldn't be checked out according to procedure."

"I guess that's good then", I said.

"You don't look pleased about this, I would think you'd be greatly relieved."

"Well, there's another problem that has my attention," I said.

I told Mr. Holzman about Claudia going missing in France, and how frantic her family was. I filled him in a little on my relationship with Claudia.

"You certainly have an interesting life for a man who is not yet twenty. I don't mean to stoke your fears, but I think they are reasonable. Europe seems safe to Americans, but it's more politically and socially unsettled than most Americans understand. Your young friend is not a student—correct?"

I nodded.

"That's both good and bad. She's probably less involved with the political upheavals, but she's also not in an infrastructure that might protect her somewhat, or at least keep an eye on her.

"Her aunt and uncle are from a different generation and won't understand the culture she's immersed in. Her parents are at an even greater disadvantage in being further out of touch with the environment, and even the geography. I doubt they will accomplish much. The authorities can't and won't react in any meaningful way. Thousands of people go missing every year, and the overwhelming majority go missing intentionally, with no illegal or heinous activity involved other than scaring the crap out of everyone that cares about them. Your Claudia doesn't sound like she would do that, but the authorities won't differentiate unless pressure is brought to bear or there is some political advantage to be gained. I'm hearing none of that in what you are speaking about."

"You seem to know a lot about this."

"I'm Jewish. Europe has been a special kind of hell for Jews, before, during, and after world war two. And of course, it's not only Jews. More than 30 million Europeans died in World War Two, and many millions more had their lives and families destroyed. The social and political upheaval that caused will last for a century. I've helped some people try to locate loved ones—mostly giving legal and political advice and counsel."

"How did you help them, is there something you can do for Claudia? For the Kabekians?"

"Probably not much. Mostly I've helped people penetrate government obstruction, and that was primarily in Germany. In theory, the German government has been de-nazified. In practice, there are former Nazis and Nazi sympathizers in positions of power and influence throughout government and industry. France is a less extreme example of the same thing. The public administrators from the Vichy government didn't really leave either. Getting any of them to cooperate with Jewish families is a substantial challenge.

"I can help overcome those kinds of barriers, but there probably isn't any information in government hands. They won't be doing anything to find your friend, and they probably won't know anything useful."

"So how do I help Claudia?"

"That's up to you Monroe. I have a few people I've worked with who could make some inquiries, but in my experience, even the most diligent and experienced investigator can only scratch the surface of situations like this. It takes persistence and focus to keep on digging into a blank puzzle, and most people without a true stake in finding the truth will give up on what seems like a lost cause."

"It sounds like you're telling me I need to go to France. I can't do that. I have school, and it would cost a lot of money."

"I'm not telling you what to do, Monroe, and I understand you don't believe you can go, but if this were someone I loved, I believe that is what I would do."

Don Quixote Girds His Loins

I left Mr. Holzman's office feeling like I was letting Claudia down. As I rode home, I decided that he was right, someone had to go find her. I just didn't know if it could be me. I suspected I could postpone my next semester—I'd already received permission to delay starting my first semester, though circumstances changed and I started on time. I could ask Angel about the money, maybe Cobalt could lend it to me or I could sell some of my stock. It felt like I could potentially go, but what would I accomplish that the Kabekian's couldn't? I don't even speak French other than whatever soaked in by osmosis from flunking it for three years of high school.

So I had no real plan, but at least I had some idea of what I was up against. The only thing I was sure of is that Claudia was worth any sacrifice. I'd do almost anything to be sure she was safe.

I stopped at a phone booth and called Angel. As soon as I said "Hi", she said, "Any word about Claudia?"

"No, nothing. Are you in your office? I need to talk to you."

"Yes, I'm here. I'm worried sick about Claudia. I don't know what you want, but if there's something I can do to help, I want you to know that anything and everything is on the table."

"I appreciate that sis, I have the beginning of a plan and I need your help."

"Anything brother, anything."

I love my sister.

I rode Sophia to the red brick warehouse Angel had leased for the worldwide international headquarters of Cobalt, Inc. It was old, scuzzy looking, a little drafty, and very plain inside. In the dim past, a 120-foot smokestack had fallen across one corner, and a lot of the bricks from the smokestack were used to repair the damage. Smokestack bricks are long and curved, so the rebuilt corner looked like it had chicken pox. But there was room to grow, it was cheap, and Ada negotiated a lease-to-buy that was favorable.

Angel was in her office with stacks of paperwork on every horizontal surface. I moved some folders off a chair, closed her door, and sat down.

"So here's what Mr. Holzman, my lawyer said. I know, I know," I said, holding my hands up, "you didn't know I had a lawyer. The cops were giving me some trouble, so I got some legal advice. Let's not focus on that. I told him about Claudia, and he has some experience in finding people in Europe. He said hiring an investigator isn't likely to get results. He's got some people there that we might work with, but he said I'm pretty much going to have to go myself." "I don't understand, Monroe, what are you going to do that some professional investigator wouldn't do?"

"Be persistent, even if it looks hopeless."

"Do you have any idea where you'd start. I wouldn't know where to begin to find someone that's missing, even here in Boston."

"No. I have to think my way through that. I'll just start wherever I can start and keep pushing. It's not much of a plan, but I need to do something and I need to start somewhere. I know sitting around here while bad things could be happening isn't something I can do. I need to make an effort. I love her, Angel. I just do. I can't just leave this up to other people. I need to help."

"Okay, I get it. What do you need?"

"Money, mostly. I need a plane ticket to Paris and some money to cover my expenses while I'm there. I have some in my college fund, but I don't think it will be enough."

"Don't touch your college fund, I'll call Ada, she's still in London. We'll figure out a way to get you the money. I think we can lend it to you, secured by your shares. We'll figure it out. What are you going to do about school?"

"I'm not sure. I think I can take leave, I had permission before and never did it. The spring semester ends in two weeks. Two of my classes don't have finals, two of them do, but I probably don't need to take them. MIT is kind of weird, I could probably ask my professors if I'd pass if I left tomorrow, and they'd probably say yes. Tests don't mean that much and I'm doing well in everything. I'll talk to the professors and the dean and see what's feasible. I might need to take the finals when I get back, or I might have to take the classes over. Basically, I'm just leaving two weeks early for the summer. I don't think it's a big deal."

"Tell you what, you start working on what you need to do for school and tell people you're going to be gone, I'll work on getting you money and a plane ticket. Do you want me to get you a hotel?"

"No, I don't know where I'll need to be. I'll figure that out as I go. I'm going to head to school and get started. The sooner the better for the flight. I guess I need a passport too. I'll get that started."

"Call me if you run into any problems and I'll do what I can to help. I love you Monroe. You're a good man. I know you'd come to find me if I was in a jam. Claudia is lucky she has you."

I just looked at my sister and nodded. I didn't think I could speak right then. If I opened my mouth, I might start bawling.

Commit To Craziness

As I thought, school was no big deal. My professors agreed that I had passed the semester, which was pretty cool, I wasn't pressing the reset button on any class. I'd passed everything my first year at MIT except the lit class I dropped. If I hadn't been so worried, I would have bought a bottle of champagne.

The passport looked like a big problem, the clerk said it was going to take two weeks. She kept saying that was what it took until I said just the right words: "Is there some expedited processing I can pay extra for?"

"Well, yes, but no one does that, it's very expensive-25 dollars and we have it ready in one day."

I paid the 25 dollars. She said I needed a passport photo, but there was a place that did them just down the street—another buck. I was already bleeding money.

I called Paul and told him what I was doing, that I would probably be back for the summer to work, but there was a chance this would take longer than the three weeks remaining for classes and finals.

"Geez Monroe, that's tough. I'm sorry to hear that, I hope things come out OK, she sounds like a great gal."

"Yes, she is. I'm going to find her, Paul."

"Monroe, if anyone can do it, you can do it. Don't worry about your job, Fred and I can handle the work until you return. The spring rush is almost over, and there's always a lull until people start breaking shit. How are you going to get around once you get there?"

"I don't know, probably public transport."

"Well, that's pretty good in a lot of places, though Paris is kind of difficult. The public transport is great for people who have a repeated commute so they can figure out all the fine details, but it's not so handy for ad hoc transport. I spent six months bumming around Europe, and I found the most practical transportation was a motorcycle. I think you need to get around efficiently, and it's something I can help you with."

"How would we go about that, my funds are limited."

"I know a guy who does business exporting used motorcycles to the US. I buy some from him now and then. I can probably get him to rent you something while you're there. He's a good guy to know anyway. He's got his finger in all kinds of pies. I'll call him and set you up. His name is Alex Tennat, and he owes me some favors. He sells British bikes, but his main warehouse is near Paris." Paul gave me Alex's number and said he'd call to pave the way for me.

Things felt like they were moving. I didn't have any real idea of how I should proceed once I got to France, but some of the outside pieces were coming into place. And I had the beginnings of a team to support me.

Team Building Exercise

My mood was swinging up and down—elated that things were working out, depressed because I didn't think I could really help Claudia. The most significant break happened just as I was hitting a deep low. The cold rain dumping on my head reinforced my bleak mood as I crossed Vassar street, headed for the administration building. I wanted to speak with the dean of students about leaving before the end of the semester and potentially even delaying the fall semester. Even though my professors said I was good to go, I didn't want to fail to fill out some form and have some problem returning to school. I saw Andre Bose walking across the parking lot and angled away to avoid him. Andre was not to be deterred, he trotted across the lot to intercept and me and said, "Monroe, where have you been, you've missed our last two sessions. You've cost me two dollars and thirty cents."

"Sorry, Andre, I have a lot on my mind. I'm going to leave before the end of the semester. I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"Monroe, you look like your puppy died. Is there some way I can help?"

"I doubt it, it's a long story, a friend of mine is missing in France, and I need to go try to find her."

"Have you completely forgotten that I'm from France? Why are you not consulting with me at length? I may be able to help you substantially."

I looked at Andre and realized what he was offering first and foremost was a sympathetic ear. He could see I was hurting and wanted to help me.

"Okay. Let's find a quiet place, and I'll fill you in."

Andre and I nursed cups of coffee in the cafeteria while I related as much as I knew about Claudia's disappearance. Andre said, "This is very unfortunate. There are many possibilities, and after this long without contact, I fear many of them are bad. We must talk about that though it will be painful. But I agree with your lawyer friend, you are unlikely to find someone who would aggressively pursue this case. It will take persistence and care. I have a brother you could hire to investigate—he's intimately familiar with all kinds of bad behavior, but without someone there, in the city, monitoring him, I doubt he would make a serious effort. How do you plan to proceed?"

"I figured I'd go there and start asking everyone questions. I think I need to build a timeline and understand where she was, who she was seeing, and what might have happened. I might be able at least to learn where to start looking."

"Ah, my friend, that sounds very unwise. If your friend has been abducted and remains alive, then asking questions may alert whoever is responsible. It may result in her demise and disposal. You

must proceed cautiously. Furthermore, you speak almost no French. How will you ask all these questions?"

"I don't know, how do you think I should proceed?"

"You say the Kabekians are still in Paris. I doubt they will have made progress, but they can identify the people they have spoken to and tell you what they said. You can safely meet with the Kabekians, but be certain to tell them you need to make your inquiries quietly. You shouldn't make your presence known to the aunt and uncle. The possibility that they could be involved should not be dismissed. You can start your timeline with the Kabekians."

"Why does everyone seem to know more about this than I do?"

"That's an excellent question to ask, but where would you expect to have received such experience? Sitting in your warm attic making gizmos? I grew up in postwar France, a funny-looking brownskinned boy in a country full of malice. Most of Europe was devastated in World War Two. The Germans stole everything in France, and after Normandy, the fighting was horrific. Paris was mostly spared but everyplace else was rubble and bodies. More than 350,000 civilians dead mainly in the towns and villages. After the war, there was almost no food. My family was reasonably well off before the war, but after there was nothing. I learned caution, I learned to steal, I learned to avoid being killed. I learned to hide and watch. So yes, I am more experienced than you.

"Americans know nothing about Europe. Your soldiers came, thank god, and helped defeat the Nazis, but then they went home to an undamaged country. My father is as big as you. I'm small because I starved. For years.

"This talk is making me hungry. Buy me a hamburger, and I'll forgive you for eating well in your formative years."

I bought some cheeseburgers and fries. Andre ate with much greater appetite than I had. I kept thinking of someone disposing of Claudia.

"As I said, I have a younger brother in Paris. He's not as brilliant as I am, but he's clever and venal. He will help you faithfully as long as you pay him. His English is almost as good as mine, which means better than yours. I thought briefly of going with you, but he is far better connected to mischief than I am, and I have no desire to skulk around Europe when I have a warm, dry office and dorm room to do maths. His name is Vinod Bose—my father prevailed, or he would have been named Pierre-Auguste. My mother likes Impressionist painters. I will call him tomorrow. What will you pay him to help you?"

"I don't know what should I pay him?"

"I think that for ten dollars a day he will happily work with you, that's fifty francs, I doubt he's making more than 25 now. I will negotiate on your behalf. He is small and harmless-looking, like me, but understand that he is not a nice man. Calling him a criminal is going too far, but he has no respect for the law. I will make it clear that I expect him to treat you well, but you should understand that you should not tempt him into indiscretion."

"I greatly appreciate this Andre. I have to go talk to the Dean of Students about my leave of absence. Thank you for the blunt talk and help."

"I hope you return in triumph, and soon. You still have to help me find some lovely breasts attached to a woman who will not run away when she sees me."

"First thing we'll do when I get back."

Bum's Rush

The dean was distracted by some other issues, so when I said I needed to take a leave but I'd more or less finished my semester he didn't ask any questions—he just said: "Certainly, there's some paperwork to complete." He opened his door and said, "Darla, please give Mr. Sanborn the necessary paperwork for a one-semester leave of absence. If there's nothing else Mr. Sanborne...?"

The paperwork was simple, I completed it leaning on the counter of the admin office. I went back to my apartment and called Angel. She said she had tickets for me for a flight tomorrow, and I should come to the Cobalt office to pick them up. Then I called the Kabekians in Paris, where it was early evening. They were staying with the aunt and uncle—Mrs. Kabekian's sister. Mrs. Kabekian was nearly incoherent. Mr. Kabekian was rational though strained. I told him I would be coming to Paris the next day to help search for Claudia, but I asked them to keep my plans to themselves. I fibbed a bit and said that I was working with an investigator who said no one should know we were searching. That our effectiveness would be compromised if anyone—even Claudia's Aunt and Uncle—knew we were present. They promised to keep my arrival a total secret. I wasn't sure of my arrival time, but even given an early morning flight, with ten hours in the air, and a six-hour time difference I doubted I would be there before midnight. They suggested we meet the morning after my arrival in a cafe they knew a reasonable distance from any of Claudia's known contacts.

In many ways, things were moving quickly. I had something of a plan in place—at least the elements of one. I might have a prayer of shedding light on Claudia's disappearance. But still, I felt like I was wading through peanut butter, trying to get to a place where I could do something. I rode Sophia to pick up my passport, which mercifully was ready and waiting for me. It looked very official if a bit virginal. My picture looked like a felon who hadn't slept for a week. Accurate in every way. I stuffed it in my jacket and rode to Cobalt. When I walked into Angel's office, she was red-eyed and somber. She handed me an envelope and then hugged me hard.

"There's five hundred in twenties and fifties, and another thousand in traveler's checks. It's a loan from the company. The accountant says we can keep it on the books for years as long as the majority shareholders do not object—that's you, me and Ada, so we're cool. Your ticket is also in there. Pan Am flying into Orly airport. You leave tomorrow morning at 6:30. Go see Mom and Dad. Spend a little time with them. They're freaking out about Claudia, and they don't understand why you are going to France. Dad wants to drive you in the morning—you need to let him. Go home, pack up your stuff, and then go spend the night with Mom and Dad. I'll come to have dinner with you guys. How about I pick up some Chinese takeout? I'll call Mom and let her know. In the meantime, I'm sure you have a bunch to do, so go."

I'd been packing and unpacking my bag for days. I planned to take only a backpack, and that required a lot of culling. If Paul's contact worked out I'd be riding some kind of motorcycle, so I needed my helmet and leather jacket—I figured I could wear the jacket and tie the helmet to the

pack, wear boots, carry sneakers. I had a lightweight, dark raincoat that would cover a lot of scuzzy clothes and serve as a robe in cheap hotels with a shared bathroom.

I went home and called Paul. He said Alex Tennat would help me and I should call when I got to Paris. I called Mr. Holzman and told him what Andre had said about his brother. He thought that sounded like a useful and necessary contact, if only for translation and local guiding. Mr. Holzman also gave me numbers of two of his contacts in Germany. He hadn't been able to contact them, but he said he would keep trying. Finally, I called Andre, who said his brother was ready to help. He gave me an address in Paris and a phone number where I could leave messages. I gave Andre my flight information in case his brother could meet me at the airport. The long distance charges for this trip were going to be substantial. I felt very fortunate to have friends who would spend time and money to help me.

I grabbed my gear and rode Sophia to my folk's house in Brookline. She would spend the time while I was gone under the back porch, chained to the gas pipe, with a tarp over her. I'd be happier leaving her in my basement, but she'd be safe at my folk's place.

Mom was fretting about Claudia, Dad was worried about me. From what Mom let slip, I think Mom assumed I'd be okay but that Claudia would not, and I might discover something horrible. Dad didn't say much. Angel came by with Chinese takeout, which tasted like cardboard. Not the fault of the food, just me. I went to bed early and surprisingly fell right to sleep.

I woke to my alarm at 4:00 AM, went to the kitchen and found my Dad awake, drinking coffee. I grabbed a cup to go. We got into Dad's car, his venerable Rocinante, and headed for Logan Airport. After we had driven for a few minutes he said, "You know you might be walking into a dangerous situation. You can't just call the cops if you have a problem, you don't know how anything works there, and neither do I. I'm not sure what we could do for you if there's trouble. I know how helpless Claudia's parents feel, and you haven't even left yet."

"I understand Dad. I've got some contacts and help so I have some chance of success. I'm not walking in blind. But you know I have to help."

"I understand, please just be careful. I don't know what else to say. You grew up so suddenly. One day I'm worried you may never leave your room, and the next you're in college, living with Ada and starting a business with Angel. Now, this. I feel powerless, and completely out of my league—I don't have any advice to give you. I've never even been on an airplane."

Dad's voice had a fearful note to it that I'd never heard before.

"Dad. I'll be careful."

"I guess if you can go across the country on your motorcycle without getting into trouble, then I shouldn't be worried about this."

I couldn't think of anything to say, his comment certainly touched a nerve. I'd hardly characterize spattering Silvo's brains across the desert as trouble-free. So I stopped talking. We got to Logan, I hugged my Dad, shouldered my pack, and an hour later I was on an airplane flying nonstop to Paris.

Bose Condensate

I spent my uncomfortable hours on the plane looking at guidebooks of Paris and marking up maps —just like any good tourist. But the marks I was making were locations of people who knew Claudia. I'd started a timeline from when Claudia left Boston until she disappeared. I wrote every scrap of information I could glean in my notebook, day by day. Mr. Kabekian gave me the address of Claudia's aunt and uncle, her boyfriend, and the modeling agency she worked for. I had received eleven letters from Claudia since she left. She mentioned places in Paris in six of the letters, and I was able to find each location and the date when she was there. I marked each on my maps and added them to the timeline. One was the cafe where she met her med student boyfriend, Gunnar Habermas.

When I called Lenny and Maria, she told me she had seven letters from Claudia. I requested them from her. Maria protested that they were personal, but I said that just didn't matter. They came in the mail the day before I left. The first time I read them was on the plane, and I cried when I read the letters, which made my seat-mate pretty uncomfortable. She was having a lot of sex with the guy. No surprise, but it made me sad, angry, sick, horny, fearful, desperate, and generally nuts to read about it. But I needed the information, and I added three other locations to my map and several timeframes at specific areas to my timeline—including a park where she'd given the asshole a blowjob.

I had recent pictures of Claudia. I had something that felt like background, but it was slim. I stared at the stuff until my eyes ached and watered. I leaned back in the seat for a moment to rest my eyes. A big jolt startled me awake, and I was tossed forward into my seatbelt. I had a moment of panic until I realized we were landing. I'd slept for the last hour of the flight. My seat-mate couldn't wait to get away from me. I staggered off the plane with my calves cramping, carrying my backpack and was shocked to see Andre walking toward me. As he came closer, I realized he was a slightly stockier version of Andre. "You must be Vinod", I said.

"Must seems too imperative. I would say I choose to be Vinod."

Un Homme et Une Femme

Paris looked amazing. Even the back streets and poor neighborhoods had a style and character that I'd never seen before. Every bridge we went over was astoundingly beautiful. I would have loved to spend some time just looking around, but that was out of the question. Vinod had arranged for his cousin, who owned an unlicensed cab, to drive us around. It might have been a better alternative to driving myself on a motorcycle, but Vinod's cousin spoke no English, and I had plans for Vinod. We went to an inexpensive hotel that was more or less halfway between Claudia's aunt and uncle's house and her boyfriend's apartment. Calling the place "tired" would be kind.

The bottom floor was a bar that apparently featured jazz, though in the late afternoon sunlight it mostly featured seedy-looking barflies. The lobby smelled like stale cigarettes and rancid wine. The lady behind the desk looked like she was wearing some kind of bathrobe or housedress. Her hair was up in curlers with a kerchief over it, and her eyebrows were plucked away and redrawn as a thin brown line. She wanted to hold my passport, but Vinod negotiated with her for three days rent in advance instead.

"Never surrender your passport! I can't believe anyone does that."

We got on a small cast iron open elevator platform that shivered up the three floors in a corrugated tube that looked like half a culvert pipe. I resolved to get exercise by climbing the stairs. One ride in that ancient deathtrap was enough. The room was tiny—a bed, a chest of drawers, and a sink. There was a dinky metal balcony with a glass door that served as the only window. I looked at the rusty bolts holding the balcony in place and resolved to stay off it.

"Is perfect," said Vinod, "at night you wash up, then piss in the sink, in the morning you crap in the bathroom down the hall. Very sanitary."

I dumped my big pack on the bed, pulled my lightweight daypack out of it, already stuffed with the things I expected to need—including money. We went downstairs, and I called Alex Tennat, the motorcycle exporter. He gave me directions to his shop on Avenue Benoît Guichon in Cachan, a suburb to the south of Paris. Vinod's cousin drove us there while Vinod navigated, yelling in rapid-fire French and pointing wildly. The cousin drove like we were escaping from the police. I wondered how he would operate in an actual emergency. By the time we had driven the five miles to Tennat's shop, I had a sharp headache from my pulse pounding. My interest in having my own transportation had increased hugely.

The outside was unremarkable yellow brick with two big graffiti-covered metal roll-up doors firmly closed. I found an entrance in a side yard that opened into Aladdin's cave. At least a hundred motorcycles. They all looked used, and some looked like junk. But they were all in orderly rows. At the far end was a workspace where a gaunt man was working at one of three work stands. The wall was covered with tools, and there were several metal shelving units stacked with boxes of parts.

Alex Tennat proved to be a short, florid Frenchman who had spent most of his life in England. He shook my hand and waved one arm towards his hoard.

"As you can see, I have many motorcycles. I buy them mostly in England, fix them up a little and sell them here where they bring a higher price or ship them to the US where I can get even more for them. I call it motorcycle arbitrage. My friend Paul buys many of my better BSA and Norton bikes. He's a good man and a good customer—knows what he wants and pays a fair price. What more could one ask? He called in one of the many favors I owe him. So I will rent you one of my bikes—cheaply. If you like it, I can sell it to you at wholesale and ship it back at a reasonable cost. However, there are only a few that are ready to go. Many are spoken for, and as you might guess, many do not run yet. I have several BSA Bantams that are in fair shape—I would rent one of those to you at two dollars a day. I also have this old Vincent, which seems mechanically sound, but doesn't run very well. I think my mechanic doesn't understand it well. He's used to vertical twins and singles. This is the only V-twin I've had so far."

The thought of driving an underpowered, under-braked Bantam in the insane Paris traffic seemed like a sure path to being flattened. I looked the Vincent over. It was a fantastic looking bike. Very compact with a massive engine.

"I've never seen one of these. I've heard of them though. Fastest motorcycle in the world."

"Yes, well, not this one, and that was in 1950. I rode it yesterday and found it misses badly on acceleration and clatters at idle. After all, it's twenty years old. I don't know why I bought it, it's probably worthless. Perhaps the magneto is defective. I suggest you go with the Bantam."

"Could I borrow a stand and some tools? I'd be willing to see if I could make it run better if you rent it to me for the same price as the Bantam."

"Surely. That would be excellent. Paul told me you are a good mechanic."

I turned to Vinod and said, "you and your cousin can leave me here. This is going to take a while, but one way or another I'll have a ride back to the hotel."

I rode the Vincent around the block. It seemed tiny for such a big engine—the flat bars pulled me forward far over the tank. I could look down at most of the front wheel. The engine started on the third kick but never settled into an idle. It sounded like the front cylinder was firing erratically and there was a lot of mechanical noise. No grinding, just a lot of clatter. It popped and bucked when I fed it gas. The headlight and taillight didn't work. The prospect of using this thing looked dim, I was probably doomed to ride a Bantam. I searched for the oil tank and finally found the fill cap in front of the gas tank—the frame was the oil tank. Lovely. I wondered what you did if you had an engine problem that got metal shavings in the oil—replace the frame?

I pulled the cap and saw the oil pulsing into the tank from the return line. I put my finger in the warm stream and was pleased to find clean oil.

I put the bike up on the stand and removed the gas tank. With the tank out of the way, it was apparent that there was no frame--just an upper section that connected the front forks to the top of the engine. The engine and transmission bolted to heavy plates that connected to the rear swingarm. The engine was the frame.

I know I'd heard that before, but actually seeing it was kind of shocking. The rear swing arm had two springs but only a single shock mounted between them in a triangulated subframe. It made a lot of sense, but it was as if someone had decided to design a motorcycle with no concern for how it had been done for the last fifty years. Even the beefy forged aluminum girder front forks ignored current telescopic design.

Alex had a copy of Modern Motorcycle Mechanics that included a chapter on Vincents. The black engine cases identified this as a Vincent Black Shadow. With all the clatter I thought the first thing I should check was the valve lash. I unscrewed the adjustment covers and found that the pushrods tiny things—had ball ends that fit into cups. How in hell were you going to measure clearance with ball ends? There's no way to use a feeler gauge with a ball and socket. Turns out that the pushrods are adjusted with the engine warm, by feel. I pulled the sparkplugs and put the engine in fourth gear, then turned the engine over with the rear wheel until I found the loosest point for each pushrod. I tightened the adjuster until the pushrods would just turn smoothly with no shake. As I had suspected, the valves were set very loose.

With valves adjusted, I turned my attention to sparks. The magneto brushes were fine—free to move in the holders and still almost full length—and the points were gapped correctly and in good shape. They looked fairly new. I clipped the sparkplug wires back onto the plugs, set the gaps a little wide, grounded the plugs onto the engine and turned the engine over with the kickstarter. The rear plug had a brisk, blue spark, the front one was weak and red. Modern Motorcycle Mechanics provided some insight as to why this could be so. Since the Vincent is a 50-degree twin, the magneto saturation time is less for one cylinder than the other. The magneto needs to be fiddled using point gap, phasing, and the advance mechanism to strike a happy medium. Why they didn't just employ points and coils to overcome this problem escapes me. But I pulled off the timing cover to expose the magneto drive. The advance mechanism looked tilted, and the springs felt very weak. With no spares available I shortened the spring by two coils and found a burr on the magneto shaft taper that was binding the advance. I filed that off with an ignition file and used valve grinding compound to reseat the advance unit.

Getting the magneto right was painfully fiddly, and I was fully aware that while I was playing around with a motorcycle, Claudia might be undergoing some hellish situation. But I needed good transportation.

I was finally rewarded with a fat spark for both cylinders. I put everything back together and restarted the engine. It roared into life, revving painfully high. I quickly reset the idle adjustments to a reasonable lope and then adjusted both of the huge Amal GP carbs for lean best idle. There was no tach, so I just did it by ear. The engine would tick over at incredibly low RPM, but I wanted the oil to feed well, so I set it to what sounded to me like 500 RPM. Then I synced the carbs and took it for a ride.

The bike was transformed. It was scary quick, with speed building rapidly with no strain from the motor. I turned onto a long, deserted dead end street and opened the throttle. The bike gained speed quickly, while the engine continued to sound like it was loafing. I looked down at the speedo and was shocked to see I was going nearly 100. The end of the road was approaching rapidly, so I got on the brakes hard, and virtually nothing happened. I stayed hard on the brakes and downshifted frantically, watching the barrier get larger. I finally got it hauled down just a few feet from the barrier. I sat on the bike, which was idling calmly and thought: "Okay, now we fix the brakes."

When I got back to the shop Alex was standing outside.

"That bike sounds wonderful. You're a great mechanic! Paul was right. Want a job?"

"No, but thanks."

"Let me ride it, I want to see what it's like."

"First I need to fix the brakes and the lights. It's dangerous as it is."

Alex pooh-poohed my concern and tossed a leg over the Vincent. He roared off without a helmet. He was back a few minutes later, white-faced and big-eyed. He said "Yes, it's very dangerous. Next time I listen to you."

Alex hovered a bit while I worked. He was much more interested in what I was doing now that I had proven myself. I arced in the brake shoes—as expected they were only contacting the drums in tiny patches, and the shoes were glazed hard at the contact points. The lighting problem proved to be the generator, which needed to be remagnetized. A simple procedure called "flashing" that Modern Motorcycle Mechanics covered well. The battery was dead, and Alex didn't have anything that fit, but with the generator working it was more or less unnecessary. The bike had lights, though they were pitiful. The bulbs were six volts, and puny. The stoplight said "stop" in a metal cutout, which reduced the weak light even further. But I was ready to go.

I offered to pay Alex a deposit for the bike, but he said "You've already paid your rent. I couldn't have gotten a hundred dollars for this bike, now it's worth five hundred. I'll get rid of this thing as soon as you return it. No one is going to want these old bikes in a few years. Where will they find parts when the manufacturer has been gone for twenty years?"

"I appreciate the loan. If I didn't already have a great bike in the US, I'd probably want to buy this. But it will help me greatly while I'm here. I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

"What will you name it?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Paul tells me your bike in the US is a beautiful A10 BSA called Sophia. So what will you name this bike? She needs a name now that you have resurrected her."

"Well, I don't know. I didn't really think about that. I named my bike to keep my father from giving it some silly name, though I have to admit that Sophia fits her very well."

"See! You call your bike 'her'., so this bike deserves a name that sparks the same love. But this bike is in Paris, the city of light! It needs the name of a French girl, not Italian. Pick one."

"I don't know any French names, oh, wait, what was the name of the woman in that movie about racing cars—A Man and a Woman!"

"Ah, yes Un homme et une femme, wonderful choice. A haunting face. Her name is Anouk Aimée. Perfect—she is named Anouk."

Alex handed me a heavy chain and lock in a leather case. "Strap this on Anouk, and keep her locked when you are not riding her. She would be a tempting target for any thief, and we have far too many of those."

I should have thought to bring an alarm for the bike, but locking it would have to suffice.

Intuition

I rode Anouk back to my scuzzy hotel and locked her to a lamp post. I was going to meet the Kabekians in a little over two hours. I cleaned up in the cramped bathroom, showering under a trickle of tepid water while someone knocked on the door every few minutes. When I came out a heavy guy with an underslung jaw wearing a stained robe muttered something at me in German and pushed past me to the bathroom. "Enjoy it asshole", I thought.

I met the Kabekians at a cafe a few miles from Mrs. Kabekian's sister's home. They looked like they hadn't slept or eaten for weeks. Mr. Kabekian rose from the table, gripped my hand in both of his and said, "Monroe, you are a good man. I can't say how good this is for you to be here."

"I'm sorry for the circumstances, but I'll do everything I can to help find Claudia."

I sat, and Mrs. Kabekian grasped my hand.

"What can you do Monroe? We have visited the police many days," she said. They know nothing. We speak to the embassy and everyone we could find who knows Claudia. We walk the streets all day asking if people have seen her. We show them her picture. People say 'oh, she is beautiful, perhaps I see her in a magazine', or the men make nasty jokes."

She started sobbing. I patted her hand.

"First let me ask you, have you told anyone I am here?"

"No, no one, just as you asked," Mr. Kabekian said, "not even Sabine."

"Is that your sister, Mrs. Kabekian? I don't have the names of Claudia's Aunt and Uncle."

"It's Etalon and Sabine Beaudin."

I scribbled in my notebook.

"What I will do is quietly follow people. I will observe everyone who knows Claudia. I will go to the places I know she went, and look for any kind of information. I will be persistent. I have read that in most cases of abduction, the guilty person is known to the victim. If that is the case, I will find them. That's what I can do because no one knows me."

"Monroe, I pray you are right. We will continue doing the things we can do, the things we are doing. Speaking to the police, speaking to the embassy, asking people if they see her."

Given what Andre had said, I was tempted to ask them not to wander the streets with Claudia's picture, but I understood their urgent need to do something. It was precisely the same desperate motivation that I had. I had no way to be sure my approach was better.

"Good. We'll both work hard at it. If you see me, just ignore me. I hesitate to say this, it's just my intuition, but I believe she's okay. We just need to find her."

"Oh, I do hope you are right, Monroe. The police say she may just have decided to leave. They say it happens all the time. I will be so angry if she did, but so happy too."

"I know you have spoken with Claudia's boyfriend, I have his address, but I've never seen a picture. Did you bring one?"

Mrs. Kabekian dug in her purse and pulled out a manila envelope. She withdrew a picture and laid it in front of me. My throat constricted, and my chest ached. It was a picture of Claudia and Gunnar Habermas, her boyfriend. She looked absolutely beautiful—happy and excited. She was looking up at her boyfriend as they stood in front of an ornate fountain. She was grasping his arm in a manner that was all too familiar to me. Claudia liked to stand close and stay in contact. I loved it when she walked with me and held my arm like that. I felt my eyes sting, but I fought back the tears. I could hardly look at the shithead she was standing with, but I forced myself to concentrate on him.

"He's a big guy, very handsome," I said, in a voice thick with emotion despite my best efforts to appear calm. "Was he able to give you any suggestions about where she might be."

"Well, he told us she was angry with him," Mr. Kabekian said. They had an argument over the amount of time he was spending with friends and at school. He said he didn't think it was at all serious, but then she disappeared, and he hasn't been able to find anyone that knows where she might be."

"May I keep this photo?"

"Yes, it's a copy, for you", Mrs. Kabekian said. "And here is a photo of my sister and her husband —Etalone, and that is Sabine," she said, pointing to a smiling woman who looked like a somewhat older and more worn version of herself. Claudia stood between her aunt and uncle. Looking sweet and vulnerable. I wanted to scoop her up and protect her from anything that might harm her. I felt inadequate and guilty. I had failed to protect the woman I loved. The circumstances didn't matter.

I pushed the photos into the envelope and put it carefully in my pack. I couldn't stand to look at them any longer. The Kabekian's looked at me with concern. "Are you alright Monroe?"

"Yes, yes. I just need to find Claudia. I'll be fine once we've done that."

The Kabekians filled me in on other names and addresses they had of people who knew Claudia. I added a few new ones to my list. I told them if I needed to contact them I would call their home in Boston and leave a message, or in an emergency, I'd call at the Beaudin household, but I didn't want to use that for general contact. They both hugged me, and I left.

Riding Anouk back to the hotel, I felt depressed and alone. The Kabekians were working hard to find their daughter and had made no progress. What I planned to do had no greater chance of success. Paris looked pretty bleak.

I was lying about my feeling. I don't believe in intuition. I think it's just your subconscious mind, working hard in the background, collecting all the little clues and information, sifting them, drawing conclusions that you haven't reached consciously.

My intuition told me that Claudia was dead.

Sorry Snoops

When I opened the door to my palatial room, a cockroach convention was underway in the sink. The roaches vanished into whatever cracks and crevices they'd come from but left behind two silverfish in the bottom of the sink that just kind of sat there, looking like they wondered where everyone went. I considered squashing them with a wad of toilet paper, but I felt a particular empathy for their situation. I was often the stunned kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar when the lights came on. I settled for turning on the water and sending them back to the sewer they'd crawled from.

I sat in front of the window, looking over the rooftops of Paris and started working on my timeline. From my conversations and the letters I had a spotty overview of the last three weeks of Claudia's activities—more holes than reliable information, but after my conversation with the Kabekians I had general locations Claudia had reportedly visited for almost every day over the last few weeks before her disappearance. In the four days before she disappeared, she had been to the modeling agency twice, done one photoshoot that took most of a day, and visited her boyfriend once.

Claudia had slept at the Beaudin house for five days before she disappeared. I didn't have any information for where she spent her nights before that, but it seemed odd that Claudia had a serious relationship with her boyfriend but slept at her relatives' house all those nights. The argument had supposedly occurred on the day she left. Something to look at. Maybe the relationship was frayed. Maybe his apartment sucked. Maybe he had roaches and stunned silverfish, or his socks stunk. Maybe I didn't know what the fuck I was doing.

I met Vinod at a cafe near his apartment. Paris seems to have cafe's about every block. Not real restaurants, just places to sit and have coffee and a pastry. With so many, and such a consistent and limited offering, I don't see how they could get enough business to survive, but they seem to do fine. Might be a business model there someplace. I couldn't imagine that many cafes in the USA.

"I'm going to start by observing the Beaudins: Claudia's aunt and uncle. I know it seems unlikely, but a friend told me most abductions are by family members. I'd like you to shadow Gunnar Habermas, Claudia's boyfriend. Here's a picture of him and Claudia, and his address. That's the only copy I have. Perhaps you can find a place to make a few extra copies. We'll start our shadowing tomorrow."

"What do I do if I see something suspicious."

"If you think whatever you see requires fast action, like you see him stuffing her in a car, then call the police and follow if possible. Grab a cab and follow them, call in when you can. For anything less pressing just call the number for my hotel. It's on this card. I'll call the hotel four times a day for messages." "That sounds workable, though I don't know about grabbing a cab. You've obviously never seen a brown-skinned man try to get a cab in Paris. If there's time I can call my cousin. His cab has a mobile phone in it. Very sophisticated. You probably didn't notice it—very small, no bigger than a breadbox. A modern miracle. And it works almost everyplace in Paris."

"How can I contact you?"

"Very easily. This cafe has a telephone. Using my great powers of forethought, I have written the number on this card. You can leave any message for me here, the cafe owner always answers the phone, and he is perfectly discreet. The second number is one of my neighbors who has a private phone, but she is forgetful and a gossip. You should consider that only a fallback. The third number is my cousin. Don't call him unless it's an absolute emergency. He is scum."

"Okay, get a good nights sleep. We start early tomorrow—say 6:00 AM. I don't want to lose these people if they depart early."

A Little B&E

I tossed and turned all night, falling asleep briefly, and then partially waking, wondering about Claudia and working myself up until I was wide awake. The sagging springs and the lumpy mattress didn't help, but I've always prided myself on my ability to sleep anywhere. I was scared, sad, lonely, horny, and desperate. So I spent most of the night staring at the ceiling, drifting to sleep, then repeating the cycle. I woke a final time before dawn, shut off my travel alarm before it rang, and dressed quickly.

As I looked in the mirror above the stained sink, I realized that I looked obviously like an American in my Levis, black T-shirt, work boots, and a motorcycle jacket. I would stand out in any french crowd. I needed to fix that sometime during the day, but this morning my American Motorcycle Hoodlum outfit would just have to suffice.

I unlocked Anouk from the lamp post in front of the hotel. The chilly, damp morning air made the back of my throat sore. I should have brought a scarf. Another item for the list. The starting drill for Anouk was a welcome distraction. I opened the fuel petcocks, tickled the big Amal carbs until a spurt of gas dribbled from the float bowls. I retarded the spark, set the choke to full, and pulled the compression relief in to kick the engine through a few cycles and get some oil moving. I pulled the clutch in and kicked through to free the plates, surprised at the light pull and the immediate release of the clutch. But then I remembered the unorthodox clutch design in this big engine. A little pilot clutch actuates a big clutch that looks like a brake drum. I've never seen any other motorcycle use such a design, but that seems to be typical for this machine. All I was doing in breaking the clutch free was slipping the pilot clutch. The main clutch is fully retracted until the pilot engages it.

I brought the engine a little past top center, closed the compression release, and kicked the motor over. Nothing, nada, bupkis. I repeated the procedure three more times, and the engine finally caught and settled into a rough idle. Sophia would sneer at such reluctance to start. Maybe I should pick up some new spark plugs. I eased the choke off a little, and the engine ran smoother. I clicked the transmission into first with a solid clunk and chugged away before I woke the whole street with Anouk's throaty bellow.

The ride to the Beaudin household took about 30 minutes through the deserted streets. Even as freaked out as I was about Claudia, I still took great pleasure in riding Anouk through the fascinating streets of Paris. The powerful engine loped along, shaking windows and scaring pigeons. The bike transported me in more ways than just taking me to the little park near the Beaudins. It gave me some kind of confidence and some kind of peace. I needed all I could get.

There were no nearby cafes or logical places to stay in sight of the house, but there was a park on a long diagonal to the entrance of the walled courtyard of the Beaudin home. I would have been immediately suspicious of such a home in Boston—it looked like an armed camp. But it's a typical

style in Paris. For some reason, Parisians seem to love walls and the ability to close themselves off from the city. Apparently, they always have, there are lots of ancient houses that have that isolated layout.

From where I sat, I couldn't see much of the house, but I could see the entrance. I would be able to tell when the house was empty. I intended to enter the house for a quick look in every room. I assumed since the Kabekian's were staying there that Claudia would not be imprisoned in the basement, but I was taking nothing for granted.

What does a geek kid know about doing a little breaking and entering? Way more than I should actually. When you are fifteen, curious, and can pick locks faster than some people can open them with a key, a little unauthorized exploring is probably inevitable. First, I just unlocked and relocked people's doors when they were away from home--just practicing. Then I graduated to stepping inside and looking around. I never touched anything, never took anything. I've only stolen two things in my life—a Playboy magazine from a newsstand, and four dollars from my sister's gnome bank. I was consumed with guilt and fear on both occasions. Paid for the magazine the next day, with a lame excuse the newsstand owner saw right through. And put the money back in my sister's bank a week or two later when I earned it back. Her four bucks financed a used microscope that I just couldn't pass up.

My home explorations ended when I was trapped inside a house when the tenant came back unexpectedly. I hid in a closet for more than four hours until the house was empty again—plenty of time to consider what would happen to me if I was caught. But the skills remain.

I sat on the bench and opened a magazine with my backpack propped beside me. I had a small pair of opera binoculars that I thought I might occasionally use, though I suspected it would look pretty odd. For now, I contented myself with watching and pretending to read.

I started getting sleepy after about an hour. My butt was numb, I was cold, and more than a little hungry, but I used my iron will to force myself to pay attention. Next time I'll get up and walk around a bit, willing myself to stay awake has never worked. Fortunately, I woke up as the first car of the morning—a Renault Dauphine—crunched through the white gravel of the Beaudin driveway

I had a hole cut in the binding of the magazine I could look through with the magazine up close to my face. Very 007. I could easily see this was Mr. and Mrs. Kabekian, off for another day of bugging the cops and showing people pictures of Claudia. Seeing the grim look on their faces burned away the tiny bit of peace my ride on Anouk had gifted me with.

About a half hour later, a middle-aged woman that clearly was Mrs. Beaudin appeared, pushing a bicycle. She looked a little less like Claudia's lovely mom in person. A little more substantial, a little drab—but still clearly Sabine. She walked the bike about halfway down the street, then mounted and rode away. It looked strange except that in my short time in Paris I had seen several

French women do precisely that—push their bikes for a while and then ride them. Why don't they just ride them as soon as they can? I have no idea what that is about.

About ten minutes later a man I was confident was Mr. Beaudin drove away in an odd little car that looked like a canned ham and putted with an irregular exhaust note—A Citroen 2CV, a car the French call Deux Chevaux. Obviously a very small motor—it sounded like a lawnmower running on the governor. The driver looked straight at me as I sat with my spy magazine covering my face. He had a distinct appearance—big nose, narrow face, deep-set eyes, droopy mustache—definitely Etalon Baudin. The car was two-tone paint, black and burgundy. I memorized the license number, and when he was safely away, I wrote it in my notebook along with a description of the car. I waited a few minutes, walked up to the front door, and knocked loudly. There was no answer.

The door lock was a pretty good quality five-pin Yale. I like Yale locks, they require solid picking skills to open, but I've done hundreds. I was through the door in less than thirty seconds. I don't bend over to pick a lock—that makes it obvious you're doing something other than using a key. I stand straight, arch my back a little like I'm inserting a key, flex the tension bar, and riffle by feel. It's silly to look anyway—what are you going to see? Everything important is buried inside. The technique is mostly in the tension bar, though the choice of pick is essential too. For Yale locks, I favor light tension and a single diamond pick. Too much pressure and the pins stick, too little and they drop back instead of being trapped at the shear line.

I stepped into the hallway and closed the door softly behind me, holding the latch open so it didn't click. I stood motionless, controlling my breathing, with my mouth open wide to sharpen my hearing. Nothing. I slipped on my light leather riding gloves and moved through the rooms on the ground floor left to right, familiarizing myself with the layout. Then I walked upstairs. Master bedroom, two smaller rooms, with one converted to an inside bathroom, and stairs leading to a third floor. I climbed the stairs to a single attic room under the steep roof peak. It had a small window at one end, balcony windows on the courtyard end with a rusted iron balcony. As soon as I stepped into the room, I knew it was Claudia's.

I had never asked her what perfume she used, I didn't want to know—part of the mystery of Claudia. But she always had the same crisp, light scent along with a hint of Jergens lotion. The bed was made. A few books on a table—two in English, one in French, and a notebook. The notebook was mostly blank, just the first few pages had notes, and they were dates and locations for modeling assignments. I copied everything verbatim into my notebook.

I stepped over to the bed, picked up her pillow, sniffed it lightly, and then pressed it into my face, feeling her presence in the scent. I almost started crying but forced myself to stop. Well, maybe I cried a little. I had a crushing sensation that she was gone for good. I put the pillow down and smoothed it out carefully as if making sure it was neat would ensure she returned, left the room a little hurriedly and went back to the first floor.

I found a door in the kitchen that led to the basement. I felt for a light switch but couldn't find one. I took my penlight out of the daypack and found a string tied to a nail that led down into the cellar. I pulled it and was rewarded with dim light below. The stairs were rickety and narrow, the wall was unfinished plaster with some kind of hair in it. I don't know what that's about, maybe it's like 19th-century fiberglass. When I got to the bottom, I could see footprints in the dust, but not a distinct path. The basement wasn't used much. It was relatively small considering the size of the house, so I searched for indications of another room. In the back corner, behind some stacked furniture, I found a narrow door with a padlock on a hasp. The lock looked reasonably new. I got out my lock-picking kit, held the penlight in my teeth, and with trembling hands, I opened the padlock. It took me ten tries to open a lock I normally could pop in seconds.

I opened the door on a dark and very musty space. My flashlight revealed an empty room with an uneven floor covered with rubble. Damn. I had a vision of Claudia bound and gagged behind the door, but it was merely a less finished side of the basement, with enough size to account for the rest of the foundation. I searched the walls for an indication of a hidden room, but the floor told me all I needed to know—no one had walked here in a long time.

I relocked the door, checked over the rest of the basement one more time, and climbed the steps to the first floor.

My intuition told me that Claudia was not there, but I searched the bottom floor one more time, looking for any indication that her Aunt or Uncle had something to do with her disappearance. Nothing.

I was taking one last look, considering going back up the stairs, when I heard a slight crunching of gravel outside. I peered through the edge of the window, being careful not to flutter the light curtains. Mrs. Beaudin, pushing her bicycle across the yard with a big cloth bag in the basket. She'd been to the market. I rushed to the kitchen, through the pantry and opened the side door a tiny crack, planning to exit by the side as she entered the front door. Fortunately, she was looking down at her bag when I did, because that was the door she was headed for. Of course, how stupid of me. She would enter at the pantry, and the bicycle was probably parked at the side door, not the front.

I ran softly back through the house and watched her through the curtains. She parked the bicycle, pulled the bag from the bicycle basket, and entered the house. She left the door open, which meant she was going to do something else with the bicycle. If she stepped out the door while I was leaving, there was no way she could miss seeing me.

I opened my mouth wide to listen while she rummaged in the pantry. It's a tweak seems to sharpen hearing a bit. If she came to the front door or even the dining room, she would have a direct line of sight to the entryway, and I'd have to run for it.

The rummaging noises stopped. I saw Mrs. Baudin walk back outside and start to maneuver the bicycle through the side door. As soon as she got the front wheel in I cracked open the front door watched. Once her body was inside, I stepped outside, closed the door quietly behind me, and ran along the front of the house, staying in the grass border instead of crossing the noisy gravel. I turned the corner and stopped. I peeked back at the side door and saw Mrs. Beaudin's head pop out the door as she reached for the side door handle to close it. Lucky move. If I had been running for the front gate, she would have seen me.

For an honest guy, my instincts for B&E were pretty good.

The door closed. I walked briskly across the courtyard and out the gate. A few minutes later I was riding Anouk back to my hotel. I planned to take a quick breakfast, and then try to follow Mr. Beaudin at his workplace—a Real Estate office. He told the Kabekians he was a senior partner. But first I had a little shopping to do.

I found a cheap-looking men's clothing store. I figured if people saw me repeatedly in leather, they'd soon notice me. I bought a reversible jacket, blue on one side, black and white patterned on the other, a grey slouch hat and a black ball cap.

Very few French men wore Levis—the most common pants seemed to be cotton chino-style. I bought two pair in Khaki and grey. And I bought a button-front work shirt in the style I'd seen on the street. I certainly wouldn't pass for a Frenchman under any serious scrutiny, but at least I wouldn't stand out.

When I found the real estate office, I locked my leather jacket and helmet to Anouk by passing the chain through the sleeve. I put on the reversible jacket with the grey side out, pulled the slouch hat down low, and walked past the window of the office. I spotted Mr. Beaudin right away—sitting close to the front window, shuffling some paper. I crossed the street to the inevitable cafe, ordered coffee and a Croque Monsieur sandwich, and settled in with my magazine.

After about two hours, the waiter stopped bothering to ask me if I wanted anything more. I'd nibbled at the sandwich so slowly that I was sick of it. I was actually trying to catch the waiters eye to get a fresh Cafe Americano when Mr. Beaudin walked out the front door of the office and hurried up the street.

I went to the waiter station and paid, then ran to my bike, but by the time I had it unlocked my quarry was nowhere to be found. As I rode slowly down the street, I spotted his 2CV still parked—I should have followed on foot.

I rode back to a side street near the real estate office. Parked Anouk and locked her, then reversed the jacket to the black and white pattern and pulled on the black ball cap. I sat at a cafe further

down the street, but still within sight of the office. It's unbelievable how many cafes there are. How can they all stay in business?

Two hours later Mr. Beaudin reappeared, walking briskly down the street. He entered the office. Half an hour later he exited again with his briefcase. I had already paid for my untouched coffee, so I sprinted for Anouk. I was driving slowly down the street when he pulled out. He drove straight home.

I left the Beaudin's house and rode back to Vinod's apartment, It was nearly 4:30, our appointed meeting time. He showed up just a few minutes late.

"Your friend Mr. Habermas is a very odd student," Vinod said.

"How so?"

"He doesn't go to class, doesn't study. He walks around all day meeting people and having long conversations. Very boring. Though I do think he is anxious about something, and he's concerned about being followed."

"What! did he spot you following him?"

"I think not. No, no, of course not. I'm clever at this. He looks behind himself fairly often. He also stops in shop windows and looks at the reflections. He pretends to look at the goods inside, but I doubt he really is interested in trusses and support garments. I didn't follow behind him, I was usually across the street and sometimes ahead of him. I am brown, and I have a unique appearance, but I've done this before. He telegraphs his movements, I'd see him look ahead to a window, then glance behind him. That meant he was going to scan the street using the window. I just kept walking away until he was finished. But that's all he did."

"How do you know he didn't see you?"

"If you want to find where someone is hiding things, then following them is one useful way. That's part of how my brother and I stayed alive. My brother and my cousins and I practiced this as a game. A very practical one. We'd follow each other, sometimes for hours. You lose if you are spotted following or lose the quarry. I rarely lost. I'm good at this."

Sometimes I think Vinod just makes everything up, but he looked serious.

"Okay, the uncle is doing something a little suspicious, he leaves his office for several hours in the afternoon. I thought he was going to drive, so I tried to follow him with my motorcycle, but he was out of sight before I got it. He didn't take his car, he walked. If he does that again tomorrow, I will do better."

"It could just be part of his business, perhaps he inspects properties."

"Perhaps, but he does real estate. He might have a building nearby with Claudia locked up in a room."

"Ahhh, you think he rapes her for lunch."

"God, I hope not, but tomorrow I will try to find out. After tomorrow I think we should switch. A new face following our suspects will be less likely to raise suspicion."

"Not so, my friend. The first day of spying on someone is the most dangerous. Once I know their habits it's easier to avoid detection."

"Hmmm, I hadn't thought of that. Let's see how it goes tomorrow. I'm going to get a little food and some sleep. I think we should continue our following until later in the day. Tomorrow let's meet at 7:00PM."

"Very well, but you must pay for my lunch and dinner. Reasonable expenses for longer hours."

"Okay, sure, get a receipt."

"You don't trust me?"

"Andre told me not to tempt you into indiscretion. I think this qualifies."

"Andre is a crapeaud—a toad."

Harry Bahls

I was at my post the next morning wearing the jacket with the black and white side out and my black ball cap when Mr. Beaudin left in his 2CV. I waited a few moments and then jogged to Anouk and reversed the route Mr. Beaudin had used the previous evening to return home. I caught up to him as he was parking a block from the real estate office. I parked on a side street and locked Anouk carefully to a lamppost. I chose a cafe out of sight of the office, but on the path my quarry had walked yesterday. I had a leisurely breakfast at the cafe and then walked to a newsstand that was across the street and closer to the office. I browsed through the magazines, bought a Herald-Tribune and an English language copy of Newsweek printed on oddly lightweight paper. Killed as much time as I could without eliciting too much notice. I returned to the cafe to read and sip coffee. The waiter was getting pretty tired of me, so about 12:30 I ordered a sandwich.

At 1:30, Mr. Beaudin walked by at a fast pace. I put down a ridiculous two buck tip, picked up my papers and bag, and followed him at a distance. He walked up to an apartment building on a quiet side street and unlocked the front door with a key. The door closer was very slow, but I knew at some point it would suddenly release to latch the door firmly. As soon as I dared I stepped forward and put my toe in the door. Good timing, I saw Mr. Beaudin's feet disappear up the stairs. I ducked in the door and listened carefully, counting steps. I heard him stop, then I heard the faint sound of a door closing. I started up the stairs, counting. I almost reached the third-floor landing—off by a couple of steps.

I looked in both directions and saw four doors, two on each side of the landing. Four apartments. I stood in the middle and listened intently. I finally heard a soft, feminine cry from the left side. Down to two doors.

I moved close to the left side doors where I was sure the sound came from. I listened carefully and finally heard a muted gasping coming from the door marked 11, a sort of rhythmic moan of pain—"unng, unng," It sounded like it could be Claudia.

I reached in my pack for my lock pick set, but then I heard a louder cry from apartment 12. No time for subtlety. I braced myself against the wall and kicked hard under the handle. The jamb cracked, and the door opened a little. I kicked again, and the door flew open. I strode into the room and found Mr. Beaudin, with his flaccid, hairy ass up in the air, naked except for his black socks at the ends of his skinny white legs, having sex with a fat naked woman, doggie style. She turned her face toward me and shrieked. Brassy, red-dyed hair, heavy eye makeup, puffy, jowled cheeks and fat arms with dimples on the elbows.

Definitely not Claudia. The polar opposite of Claudia. Different universe from Claudia.

They both started yelling at me in French. I backed out, slammed the door and ran down the stairs. I heard the door bang open above me as I ran, but I doubted that Mr. Beaudin would be following in his socks.

I hurried down the main street and turned onto the side street where I parked my bike. As I walked, I thought "I'm going to be seeing that for the rest of my life". I kept picturing his hairy balls bouncing against the woman's wide, fat ass. I shook it off, unlocked Anouk, jammed my helmet on my head, and rode away. I've never had the thought come into my head that I needed a drink before. But I needed a drink.

I had several hours before I could meet Vinod and review the day's surveillance, so I parked Anouk, dug into my daypack, and got out my notebook and map. I decided to go look at as many locations that I knew Claudia had been as I could manage in the time remaining. The modeling studio was the first stop. I parked nearby and walked around the neighborhood, just taking it in and trying to see if there was anything I thought Claudia might be attracted to. The office was a disappointment. I expected something elaborate, with photographers dashing about and an elegant reception area. Instead, it looked a lot like Mr. Beaudin's real estate office—a cluster of desks in a single open room.

I sat at a cafe nearby that seemed to be a hangout for the models—either that or there was just a large number of improbably skinny young girls hanging around. Some of the models weren't particularly attractive, they were so undernourished they looked like boys with finer features and high cheekbones. There were a few that were stunningly beautiful and curvy, like Claudia, but they were a minority.

Most were speaking in French, but I heard English coming from one group of three—what sounded like two British and one American girl, all members of the skinny variety. I didn't see any real reason not to talk to them if I could. They weren't likely to be involved in Claudia's disappearance.

I listened to fragments of their conversation while I waited for coffee and a pastry. When there was a lull in their buzz I turned to the table and asked: "Do you ladies know Claudia Kabekian?"

Two of the girls pulled back, with a cold look, as if I'd committed some kind of social blunder by speaking to them, but the third leaned forward and said, "Oh! Oh yes. She's my best friend here in France, do you know where she is?"

Her New York accent was straight from the Bronx and seemed so out of place that it distracted me. I had to concentrate to follow her. Even seated, I could tell she was tall, and she was very thin. She had high cheekbones, and luminous blue eyes set in skin so smooth it didn't seem to have pores. She was oddly dressed in what looked like a sleeveless man's T-shirt with a ruffled tuxedo shirt, worn like a jacket with the sleeves rolled up past her elbows. Her fingers were long and elegantly pointed, and her hand was almost weightless when she settled it on my knee.

"No, I'm looking for her. I'm helping the Kabekian's try to find her."

"I'm so worried about her. I've talked to her mom and dad several times. They're just frantic. They made me scared, the poor things. Are you Monroe?"

"What? Ah, no, my name is George Rosen."

Christ, this wasn't going the way I expected. George Rosen is my dentist—first name that popped into my head. I don't look anything like Mr. Rosen. I probably don't look like anyone named Rosen.

"Oh, I just thought......Claudia mentioned a guy named Monroe a few times, and said he was a big teddy bear like you are."

"Do you have any ideas about where she might have gone."

"Not really, I know she was kind of fed up with her boyfriend. At first I thought she might have just taken a break to shake him, but it's been too long without hearing from her for that."

"What was wrong with her boyfriend?"

"I don't know, he seems nice, very serious, but nice. Claudia said he's got strong opinions about everything and she just got tired of it."

"Do you think he might be involved in her disappearance?"

"What? Oh god no. He's a handsome guy. If anything he was too casual about Claudia. If she ditched him, he'd just find another girlfriend."

We talked for about half an hour. The American girl, Andrea Collins, was indeed from New York. I didn't get anything concrete from the talk, but I didn't hear anything that really ruled out Habermas. Andrea seemed to believe that good looking people don't do bad things. I haven't found that to be true. The two snooty British anorexics got up and left after the first few minutes, saying goodbye to Andrea and then staring pointedly at me. Yes, I'm intruding, no, I don't care that it bothers you.

I wrote down the number for the contact phone Vinod and I are using. "If you hear or think of anything that might be helpful, please call that number and leave some way I can get in touch with you. Anything at all, any time."

Andrea smiled, took my pen, and tore the paper in half. "Here's my number, I have my very own phone. Call me when Claudia turns up, Monroe. Yes, I know your name isn't George. I've seen your picture. Claudia talks about you quite a bit. I really am her best friend here."

"Please don't tell anyone I'm here, I'm trying to keep my inquiries quiet, I don't want to spook anyone that might be involved in her disappearance."

"I understand. I won't talk. I didn't rat you out in front of those brit bitches did I? Snooty cunts, I hate them, but they're the only people at the agency that will talk to me. The French girls treat me like dirt. It's us against them, though if we were in London, those cunts would be pissing on me too.

"Oh, sorry about my language. They piss me off, and it's how I think of them. Anyway, nice to talk to you, Monroe. I hope you find Claudia. It's so sweet that you're here looking for her, so romantic. I've had lots of boyfriends, but I can't imagine any of them looking for me if I disappeared. If you want to talk more, or you'd just like to meet for lunch, you have my number. After a year in Paris, I think it would be nice to spend time with someone big and English-speaking. Everyone here is a shrimp. It would be great to hug someone bigger than me. I think we'd get along as long as you can stand my potty mouth."

"Nice to meet you, Andrea, I'll let you know how things work out."

I got out of there and went off to meet Vinod.

Kicking A Hornet's Nest

"You are an incredible fuck up, my friend. First, you can't tell the sound of a fat whore pretending to enjoy herself from a young lady in distress, and then you get busted by a model. Perhaps you should leave this all to me", Vinod said.

"It wasn't my best day, but I found out a few things. Mr. Beaudin is screwing around on his wife, for one."

"Bah, that's meaningless, most of the married men in France are doing that. I would have assumed it from the start. You are so naive."

"How did things go with Habermas?"

"More of the same, a lot of walking around, no classes, he spent more time in his apartment, so maybe he did study. He wasn't there when I got to the apartment this morning. I assumed he was until he came walking up the street carrying an empty cloth bag. I was there at 7:00, so he did something very early."

"Wow, that might be important. Do you have any idea of when he might have left the apartment."

"No, he could have been gone all night. I can't say."

"Well, even if I hadn't planned to switch tomorrow, we need to now. I don't know that Mr. Beaudin would recognize me, he only saw me for a moment, but he probably would. So you take the Beaudins, and I'll take Habermas."

"Of course he'd recognize you! You barged in while he was fucking a whore. You looked right at him, he looked right at you. What an amateur you are!"

We went over my notes on the Beaudin household, what time people left the house, where Mr. Beaudin's office was, where he liked to park, the location of the apartment of his lover, and the time he generally visited her.

"I don't know that he'll do that tomorrow, but he might. He probably doesn't have Claudia locked up at that apartment, but I certainly didn't clear him. I don't suspect the wife, but I just don't know. I searched the house well enough, I don't think there's anything there. Just follow Beaudin and see what he does tomorrow."

Vinod did the same kind of briefing for me. Showed me where Habermas usually went, the cafe he went to, the places he met people.

"Follow him carefully, keep your distance. He's looking for people following him. He's up to something. Maybe we should double up on him and ignore the uncle. It's much easier to follow someone with two people."

"Possibly, let's give it one day, maybe I rattled Beaudin, and he'll tip his hand. If he doesn't do anything tomorrow, we'll double up on Habermas and cover him longer. I'm going to start early, maybe 5:00AM and see if he's up to something early in the morning."

I woke up at 4:30 and stared blearily at my noisy travel alarm. By the time I got it turned off, I realized that it wasn't some kind of malfunction. I had set it for that ungodly hour. I dressed quickly, rolled Anouk out of the shed behind the hotel where I kept her, and pushed her quietly down the street, away from the hotel. I'm sure that when I started Anouk that someone was blasted from their bed, but at least it wasn't the old bat that ran the hotel. Anouk was muffled, but that's a lot of engine before five in the morning. I rode through the chilly, dark streets--less romantic in the early morning with garbage on the curbs, but only just a little. It's a magnificent place.

I passed Habermas' apartment and found a good place to chain up Anouk on the next block. I looked the bike over and thought how wonderful it would be to just roam through France on her. So much to see and do. So much to experience, and what a great motorcycle she was. Perhaps someday. Today I needed complete focus.

There was nothing open at that time of the morning, so I found a doorway with a proper viewing angle for Habermas' apartment building, pulled my jacket tight with my gloves and hat on, and settled in to watch.

After an interminable wait, the sky started to lighten, the street got a little busier, and a few people left the apartment building, but not Habermas. Just before seven the lights came on at a little cafe a few doors down from my perch. People started entering the cozy cafe, so I decided to get some coffee.

The cafe was warm and bright, with the rich, buttery smell of baking croissants heavy in the air. I sat by the window and had cafe au lait with a chocolate croissant fresh from a tall, glass-fronted oven behind the counter. The croissant was amazing.

I sat and watched the apartment while pretending to read a magazine. The croissant disappeared before I was ready for it to be gone, so I ordered another one and another coffee. More people left the apartment. A steady stream of customers came through the little cafe. As I watched, I realized how much money this one little cafe must make. I counted 52 customers in the next hour. Most got coffee and a croissant, but quite a few took a small order of both, probably for an office.

I ordered one more croissant—they were terrific—and another coffee, and paid for everything in case I needed to leave hurriedly. Sure enough, as soon as I sat down, Habermas appeared and

started walking quickly up the street. I saw him scan the road as he walked, even turning around to check behind him at the end of the block. He was obviously concerned about being followed. This was going to be difficult.

I left the cafe and stayed across the street from Habermas, obeying Vinod's instructions. I walked at a casual pace, a little slower than Habermas. But when he would stop or slow to look around, or look in a shop window, I just kept walking. Several times I got some distance in front of him, so I'd take a turn away from him and then angle back once I had seen him cross the intersection. It was complicated work, and I warmed up to methods of staying in touch without being in sight. I thought I was getting pretty good at it when Habermas suddenly disappeared.

I crossed the street and doubled back, and as I walked, I spotted him sitting at a cafe with a toughlooking guy. As I passed, Habermas looked at me and then looked away. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I'd seen something in that look, maybe his eyes widened a little, or maybe I saw some sign of recognition. Or maybe I was just as paranoid as Habermas was.

I followed him carefully for the rest of the morning. He wasn't looking around as much, so it was a little easier. I kept having a little subconscious prickle like something was wrong, but I couldn't determine what it was. I decided to break off my surveillance for the day and head back to the hotel. Vinod was going to have to switch back. With Habermas' odd paranoia, he was the most likely suspect anyway, and there was a distinct possibility that I'd been noticed. If so I was two for two in getting spotted by my subject, I wouldn't have done well in Vinod's game.

When I got back to the hotel, there was a message from Ada with an unfamiliar number. I called the number, and she picked up immediately.

"Hey, Ada, how are you doing. What's up."

"Hi sugar, I'm in Paris. I got bored with London, and I was about to wither away. I couldn't find much that I could stand to eat there. Great city, great museums, but jack shit for food honey, if you ask me."

"Wow, where are you. It would be great to see you, but you know I have to stay focused on looking for Claudia."

"Monroe, don't be such a dumbass. Of course, I know. I'm here to help you. I'm better at organization and planning when I'm drunk and sleeping than you are sober and wide awake. I'm gonna help you find her, and then I'm going to continue my tour. I don't have much time left before Daddy's going to need me on the Outer Banks."

"Okay, I need to meet with the guy who is helping me, where can I find you after that?"

"I didn't get a hotel yet, I'm at the airport. I figured I'd stay with you if that's okay".

"Sure, that would be wonderful, but the place I'm staying is kind of a dump."

"Not a fussy girl, dude. I'm here to see you and help you out. If the joint gets too oppressive, we'll move, but let's start at your dump."

I gave her the address, told her I'd meet her in the bar in the lobby, and then I had to rush to meet Vinod.

Stupid Plans

"Good God you are a very sad amateur," Vinod said. "Of course he saw you. You walked right past him. You would have to be a great actor not to look as if you had been caught red-handed as you say. What does that mean by the way?"

"I have no idea. Maybe bloody hands? I guess you are back on Habermas. I'll stand down for a day unless you need my help in following him. I can't take a chance on the Uncle seeing me, I think he'd recognize me. A friend of mine just arrived in Paris, I'm going to spend a little time with her today. She believes she can help by organizing my efforts."

"Of course, the Uncle would recognize you. You caught him with his pants down, literally, and you let him see your face. That huge face is burned into his memory. You are very bad at this game. You would starve if you played it for real. Your lady friend would do better if she taught you to be careful. You don't need better organization, you need to stop staggering around like a drunken bear."

"I"m not impressed with my performance either, I'd protest that I'm new at this, but that doesn't matter much. I don't think there's much doubt that Habermas is up to something, just stay on him. He didn't do anything early this morning, but he might tomorrow."

"I will be there very early, and he will not see me."

Guilt Sex

Ada gets a little more beautiful every time she pops into my life. I think if you looked at her features individually, you'd come up with either plain or odd-looking. A round face with wide-spaced eyes, thin nose, and big, pouty lips. But she is a tall, beautiful, elegant woman with a great body. I wasn't the only guy that thought so. Every man in the bar was looking at her appreciatively. She jumped up from the barstool when she saw me enter and flung herself onto me, kissing me deeply. Ada is automatically and unapologetically dramatic.

When she finally came up for air, she said "I've missed you, baby. Wow, you got even bigger. Your shoulders are huge! You working out or something."

"Not really. Well, a little bit. Working with Mr. Takahashi, getting my ass kicked. Great to see you Ada, you look fantastic."

"I fuckin' aye do, don't I. I bought some killer clothes in London, but I shipped most of them home. This is my border crossin' outfit. I hear if you don't want to get a bunch of crap from customs you gotta look good."

"It's working."

"You want a drink or something? I'm trying the local stuff. It's called Pernod, and you add a little water to it to make it turn to green milk. Don't bother askin' for ice, they don't have any. It tastes about as good as it looks—like licorice medicine. I don't know what the fuck these Frenchies are thinking drinking that crap. Maybe it's good for you somehow."

"You make it sound so tasty. I think I'll pass though."

"Then let's go up to your room, honey. I want to look over your notes and hear what you been up to, but I also want to climb on that big body. It's been too long."

That sounded about perfect.

Felt a little weird to be screwing the daylights out of Ada when I was supposed to be searching for Claudia, but somehow I got over it. Funny how testosterone works. Besides, I didn't volunteer for the priesthood. I was searching for a friend who I happen to love. Okay, so that's all a bit complicated. but as soon as Ada yanked her clothes off, all the philosophical stuff went out the window.

My skanky room was an ideal place for sex. Blues coming through the window from the club downstairs, a squeaky mattress and a headboard that thumped the wall most satisfyingly. We got a

little dinner afterward. Ada looked over all my notes and said she thought she could add some organization and sense to them in the morning, and we snuggled up in the bed and went to sleep.

Ada's warm body was spooned against me when the door to our hotel room splintered inward. Two men rushed into the room with military-looking rifles aimed at us. They were wearing black jackets and ski masks. I struggled groggily to make sense of what I was seeing. Ada started to scream, but one of the men hit her across the face with the barrel of his rifle.

"Make another sound, bitch, and I just shoot you."

I sat up and bed and said: "Who are you, what do you want?"

"We want you." He stepped forward and grabbed my hair, pulling me from the bed. He shoved me onto the floor, naked and stunned.

"Why are you watching Gunnar Habermas? Why have you been following him? Who are you working for?"

The second man stepped closer and held his rifle casually in my face.

"No matter. I don't care. We shoot them, and we go."

He raised his rifle. I heard Ada say, "Hey, Buddy." The guy with the rifle pointed at me turned his head toward Ada. I heard the crack of a shot, but I felt nothing. A halo of red formed around his head and he fell backward. The first man turned towards the bed and started to raise his rifle. There was a second crack. I saw the mouth area of his mask cave inwards, and he started gurgling. He tried to raise his gun again, but a third crack made his head jerk back, and he sagged to the floor.

Little Gun, Big Hole

I got up off the floor and looked down at the men. I stared at them for what felt like ten minutes but was probably just seconds. I shook my head to clear it. One of the bodies was still, but the gurgling guy was scrabbling and flailing a little, kicking his feet gently, taking a while to die. I looked back at the bed. Ada was braced against the headboard with both arms extended, a pistol cupped in her hands. Her eyes were wide, and her arms were shaking.

"They were going to kill us," she said.

"Yes, but now they won't. Can I borrow your gun, there might be more."

She held the gun out to me, an elegant little black automatic. The web between the forefinger and thumb of her right hand had two bloody tracks across it. She must have held the pistol grip too high, and the slide scraped her.

"How many shots?" I said.

"Eight, so now there's six."

I resisted the urge to correct her. I handed her one of the rifles. "If the door opens and it's not me, start shooting and don't stop."

I slipped on my jeans and T-shirt, and walked barefoot out the door and down the stairs, looking for backup. I padded through the lobby—there was no one at the desk, just a sign in French with a bell resting on it. I reached the front door and pulled the dusty curtain aside. There was a car at the curb with the engine idling and a man at the wheel. I couldn't see him clearly, but he seemed to be watching the street instead of looking at the hotel door. So I opened the door wide enough to slip through. I crept to the passenger side door and pulled it open.

I said, "Freeze," but he didn't. He grabbed for a pistol on the seat, so I shot him in the shoulder. He looked at me with a panicked expression and slowly raised the gun. So I shot him again in the ribs. The weapon sagged out of his hand to the seat. He stopped moving and stared at me, panting.

I slid into the seat, took his gun, then reached across him and turned off the engine. He said nothing. He just stared and panted. I got out of the car, went around to the driver's door, opened it, and pulled him out. I used the key to open the trunk, dragged him to the back of the car, rolled him in, and slammed the trunk closed. I wanted to question him, but first I needed to get Ada out of the room and off to someplace safe. Her gun didn't make much noise, but surely someone had heard the commotion. Hell, they could probably hear my pulse—it was pounding so hard that I worried about stroking out. If I survived this night, I'd consider myself immune to hemorrhagic stroke.

But as I walked up the stairs, a curious calm descended. Two men dead or dying, another seriously wounded. Men who planned to kill Ada and I. But I was on the right track. I'd kicked a hornet's nest, and things were happening. I was making progress. There was a chance that Claudia was alive, and there was some kind of reason she was missing. I felt more elated than scared, though scared was straining hard to regain its lead.

When I got back to the room, Ada was dressed, and her bag was on the bed along with my pack. My clothes were stuffed in with sleeves and pant legs sticking out under the flaps. Ada had done some high-speed packing. So much for shooting anyone that came in the door.

"We need to get out of here," she said, in a strained, shaky voice.

"Yes, we do. I'm taking you to the airport. You're going to catch a plane to anywhere. I" m on to something, it might get worse, and I won't be able to focus if I need to protect you."

"Really? I think I was the one doing the protecting. In fact, I'm pretty damned sure of it."

Her words sounded almost calm, but she was wide-eyed, breathing hard, and her voice was shaky. She was on the verge of hysteria.

"That's true, and that doesn't matter. I need your help, but I need you out of the line of fire. Go back to London. I'll stay in touch. If I need the cavalry, I'll call you first."

She kept breathing hard, but she looked away from me, with a strange expression.

"You know I'll come, baby. I'm probably going to go have a nervous breakdown pretty shortly, so I'm not going to argue with you. Get me to the airport, and then go fuck up that son of a bitch Gunnar Habermas. He's behind this. They were going to kill me like a fuckin' bug. I need to go somewhere quiet and cry for a while. Where are we going to get a cab at this hour?"

"I have a car downstairs. Just don't open the trunk."

"Oh, dear Jesus! This is getting very messy baby."

"I think it always was, but now we're part of the mess."

I gathered up the rifles, searched the men's pockets and found knives, green paracord, a straight razor, and ammunition clips. No wallets, no ID. I pulled the ski masks off and stared in their faces. One of them looked like the guy who was sitting with Gunnar at the cafe—except for the odd dent where his mouth used to be. I didn't recognize the other one.

"Do you recognize either of these guys?"

"No, never seen them. Oh God! What happened to that guy's mouth?"

I couldn't think of anything reassuring to tell her. Bad dude number one looked like he'd been hit in the mouth with a sledgehammer. Her bullet must have caught him in the teeth or the jawbone.

I dumped the guns and gear in the middle of the bed, rolled them up in the blanket, and carried them and my pack to the car. Ada tossed her bag in the back seat, and we headed for Orly. A few minutes after I drove away I heard the strange French police sirens screaming beee-dah, beeedah, beee-dah as they converged on the hotel.

Ada was understandably quiet in the car. We were nearly halfway to the airport when I asked her, "where did you get that gun?"

"Honey, I'm a southern girl. I'm not going to wander the world without a little protection. My Daddy gave it to me. I was going to bring my 38, but it's kind of heavy. This little Beretta tucks away nicely, doesn't kick much or make a lot of noise but it still makes a big hole. Thank goodness I always keep one in the chamber and seven in the clip. Daddy says if your piece isn't ready to rock, you might as well have a hammer." "Where did you learn to shoot like that?" I said.

"Daddy."

Ada turned towards me in the seat and said, "Are you sure about all of this. Are you sure about what you're doing here? These are bad people, they were going to kill us. They might kill you. How can I leave you here while you're still trying to dig into their organization? They're going to kill you, honey."

"I'm making headway, Ada. That's why they came after me. I need to keep going. They've got her, Ada. They've got Claudia. I can't stop until I get her back."

"I understand, but I'm scared for you. I'm scared for me."

"I'd do this for you too, Ada."

"I know you would."

The guilty look returned and she stared out the window as the airport tower came into view.

"I'm a chicken, Monroe. I'm glad I'm leaving. I wish you were too. If you need me, I'll do my best to help, but what I said back there in the room... ...that I'd come. But I don't know if I can, I'm not sure can make myself. I'm scared, and I know I'm gonna be a whole shitload of scared-er. I don't want you relying on me if I can't help."

"I know that baby. I understand. Back me up in London. If I need money or tickets, or something arranged—that's all I want. That's all I ask."

"Okay, okay, but keep my pistol." She rummaged in her purse and pulled out a plastic box.

"Twenty-five rounds. Hollowpoint. They won't go far, and if they do there's no telling what they'll hit, but close up it does the deed."

"I'd say so. You sure you don't want to keep it."

"I do, but no, I really don't. Hang on to it for me. I think I might want a different one. Maybe one with less history."

We pulled up to the departures and ticketing entrance.

Ada said, "I never said I love you, Monroe. This ain't a good time to figure out my feelings. But I know that you're the most important man in my life. Don't get hurt, don't get fucked up. But mostly, don't die. My life would suck without you in it."

"Wow, and you call me a romantic. I can say it, Ada.....I love you. Doesn't mean we're going to get married, doesn't mean I don't love Claudia. But I love you, Ada Lovelace Richards, now, and for the rest of my life."

"I love you too, Monroe. I fucking love you. Take care you big fucking goof."

Ada hugged me as best she could in the cramped car, then got out of the car, grabbed her bag, and walked into the airport without looking back—thank god.

I found a quiet industrial street near the airport with no streetlights, parked and checked on the guy in the trunk with my flashlight. I hoped to ask him some questions, but he didn't seem to be breathing. I checked for a pulse and couldn't feel one, but then he started groaning and trying to sit up.

"Do you want to ride up front? I can take you to a doctor," I said.

"Yes. Yes, doctor, please," he said in a barely audible voice.

I half lifted, half dragged him out of the trunk and got him to the seat. Even as quiet at the street was, I thought someone might have seen that clumsy and absolutely criminal-looking maneuver, so I drove for a little while and found another place to stop.

"Why do you stop? I need a doctor."

"I need some answers first. Who sent you and your two friends."

"I'm just a driver. I don't know anything."

"If that's true, then I'm just going to leave you here. Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Please, no. I will die." His voice had a liquid sound to it like he was talking with water in his mouth.

"Your friends wanted to kill my friend and me. You tried to shoot me when I opened the car door. If you can't help me, I don't care what happens to you."

He stared at me and panted again, saying nothing.

"Okay, have it your way."

I got out of the car and circled to his side. I opened the door and grabbed his shoulders to pull him out.

"No, no. I will tell. Please, drive. Hard to breathe."

I got back into the driver's seat.

"Start talking, tell me everything or I dump you out right here."

"We are soldiers in struggle against imperialism. We strike against fascists, authoritarian government, and monopolists that support them. Same people who ruled under nazis are in power, subverting the outcome of a war that took millions of lives."

The political diatribe energized my captive. He sat taller in the seat.

"What does Gunnar Habermas have to do with this?"

"You follow. You know. You are the police."

"No, I'm following him because his girlfriend disappeared. She's a friend of mine."

"Ahh. Stupid. I knew the plan is stupid." He sunk back into his seat.

"Don't stop talking, what's going on. What is Habermas up to?"

He sat and stared out the window, breathing shallowly with little gasps. I drove on, waiting for him to say more. His gasps got shorter and smaller. And then they stopped. He spasmed a few times, then opened his mouth wide like he was taking a deep breath, but there was no sound. He had a horrified look on his face. Not pretty. My experience in people dying after being shot is limited to four victims. Wow, four! How fucked up is that? But none of them looked to be at peace.

The sun was coming up, and there were people on the streets. I drove past a Metro entrance and found a parking spot. I pushed Mr. No Name's mouth closed. Turned his face into the seatback as if he were catching a nap. I wiped down the steering wheel, but it was a pointless effort. My fingerprints were everywhere in the car—I couldn't wipe the whole thing down while people walked by on their way to work. Besides, my name was on the register for the hotel room containing two dead guys. I was running out of time. Police would be looking for me, and when they caught me, I wasn't going to be able to help Claudia any more. I left the roll of rifles in the back seat but pocketed one of the combat knives and the paracord, locked up the car and headed for the subway. I dropped the keys into the trash bin and figured out how to get back to Vinod's place.

Financing Taxis

"People are dead?!? People tried to kill you! Why have you come back here? I can't help you any more. You should be going to the police, or running back to America and praying no one comes after you!"

"I can't stop now Vinod, those guys came after me because I'm headed in the right direction. It's that asshole Habermas. He's behind Claudia disappearing. The guy who survived for a while said that there was a plan, a stupid one. I don't know what that means, but I know I can't stop now."

"Well, I'm not going to help you. I'm going to pretend I've never heard of you. Get your motorcycle and your stuff and get out of here."

"Okay, I'll go, but you've been watching Habermas. Whatever he's up to, he's not doing it in his room. Did he go anywhere else?"

"Yes, if you promise to forget you ever met me, I'll tell you. And pay me. You owe me for six days. I want the sixty dollars you owe me and fifty dollars more for making my life suck. I'm going to be watching behind my back for years. A hundred dollars! I want a hundred dollars. You owe me a hundred and sixty dollars."

"Okay Vinod, I'll pay you. A hundred and sixty dollars. And if I can stay away, I will, but I might still need a translator or a guide. If I need your help, I'll pay you fifty dollars a day for it, for the added risk. What do you say?"

"Fifty dollars a day! Fifty dollars a day? Okay, for fifty dollars a day.....I will work with you. Just don't ask me to kill anyone. That would be more."

I paid Vinod, and he sat down with pencil and paper and sketched out Habermas' movements.

"I got to his apartment at 5:30 this morning. He came out at 6:45 carrying a cloth bag and he went to a locked garage two streets away. It's in a row of storage garages, all locked. No one else came or went when he was there, and when he came out, the bag looked much lighter. I did not stay to survey the garage, I continued to follow. More boring meetings, no school. I don't think he's a student. At least not right now. But you are right, he was not so worried about someone following him. I thought he might have someone he knows covering him—a trick my brother and I played on our cousin one time. Follow the follower. So I pulled back and watched, but there was no one. Obviously, they already had spotted you and were planning to take you out. If you like, for fifty dollars, I will find out what is in the garage."

"No, I'm going to do that myself. But I"m willing to pay you to keep following Habermas for a few days. But not fifty bucks. I can't afford that for a low-risk job like that. How about seventy-five for three days."

"What! Already you want to cheat me. We have a new price."

"Yes, but I can't afford that for something this mundane. I'm not even sure it's necessary. I may find what I want in that garage."

"Mundane!! This guy tried to have you killed! How is following him mundane? Okay, one hundred twenty-five dollars for three days. I'll give you a discount."

"How about one hundred for three days and I'll pay fifty up front."

"Hmmm. Okay, you might be dead or in jail tomorrow, this is a good compromise. I like you, Monroe, even though you are incompetent and a danger to yourself and me. Don't get dead, I could use the other fifty bucks. I want to buy a car. I plan to be a cab driver like my cousin, for brown people in Paris. The white cabbies cheat my people shamelessly."

"Really? If you and Andre are representative, I have a tough time imagining anyone successfully cheating your people."

Vinod just grinned.

Cowboy Up

The clock was surely ticking. By now the police would probably be looking for me. I got on Anouk and made my way to the garage Vinod had located. I cruised slowly past it, turned onto a larger street, and stopped outside a cafe. I locked Anouk to a parking sign, shouldered my backpack, and walked back to the garage. I decided there was no point in observing the garage. If Habermas showed up while I was there, I would deal with him in whatever way was required.

I checked the little Beretta in a shadowed doorway. One round in the chamber, full clip. I walked straight to the garage and lifted the padlock as if I were using a key. The lock was an unfamiliar brand. I tried it with my favorite single diamond pick, but I could feel it sticking. It felt like disk pins. I'd never seen that before with a padlock. Usually they're only used for cheap drawer locks. I switched to a half-round pick and opened it in about thirty seconds. In the unlikely event someone was watching I hoped it would just look like a stubborn padlock that needed some graphite.

I locked the padlock onto the eye, then stuffed a toothpick into the key slot and broke it off flush to prevent someone on the outside from opening the padlock with a key and locking me in. If they put a key in, the toothpick would jam deep into the lock and block the key from going all the way in. I opened the door just enough to slip through, and closed it quickly behind me, jiggling the door as I closed it to rotate the hasp across the eye. At a glance, the door would look locked. The garage had large dirty windows, up above head height near the ceiling. The light was fairly good, I didn't need my flashlight.

The room was full of old furniture and cardboard boxes, covered with dust. The floor was dusty too, and I could see where someone—probably Habermas—had walked a twisting path between the piles of boxes. I followed the path and came to a second door, with another lock of the same brand. I put my ear to the door and strained to hear. I heard a scrape, like a chair being slid back. A plaintive female voice softly called: "Gunnar?"

My heart was thumping. In the quiet garage, I could hear a rushing sound in my ears. I fumbled with the lock, taking an eternity to slip the last pin and twist the tumbler open with my tension bar. I opened the door, and in the dim light of the windowless room, I saw a slim figure sitting on a chair, with a chain stretching from her ankle to the wall. I turned on my flashlight and saw her face. Blonde hair. Coarse features.

Not Claudia.

Not Claudia didn't seem to speak any English, not even the usual rudimentary amount that most French people seem to have. I've learned that what I call "my limited French" is about as intelligible as Swahili. So I just concentrated on springing her and getting the hell out of there. The padlock on the chain was the same as the other two. Habermas must buy them in bulk. I opened it quickly, got her to her feet, gave her the universal "shhh" sign, and we got the fuck out of the garage. We walked briskly to my motorcycle. I lashed my backpack on the luggage rack, pointed her to the seat, and pushed down the passenger pegs for her. I didn't have a helmet for her. I might be breaking laws left right and center, and leaving bodies lying around Paris, but taking a passenger on a motorcycle without a helmet still tweaked me. I got Anouk started, and we got the hell out of there.

I found a cheap hotel close to Vinod's apartment and checked in. The clerk wanted me to surrender my passport, but I've learned never to do that. Not Claudia said something to her, and she took my money and gave me the key. I used the telephone in the lobby to leave a message with Vinod. I told him to meet me at the cafe across the street at a table on the street. I could watch the cafe from the room.

I settled in with Not Claudia, who it turns out is named Jeannine Sterling. I dug out my phrase book, and we got to work trying to figure out why she was locked up in a garage. I determined that it was indeed Gunnar Habermas who had chained her to the wall, but I wasn't making much progress on understanding why. Every few minutes I glanced out the window, and I was thrilled to see Vinod finally arrive and sit at a table on the sidewalk. I told Jeannine I would be right back and ran down the stairs to get Vinod.

I got Vinod to come upstairs quickly, I didn't want to take any chances on Jeannine deciding she should run while she could. It's a good thing we got back to the hotel when we did, Jeannine was out of the room and headed for the back stairs when I grabbed her arm and led her back to the room. She was angry she had been caught, but Vinod spoke harshly to her, and she sat down in a chair with a sour look.

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her that you risked your life for her and that the woman you love is being held like her. That she must be grateful and help you find your woman."

"Ask her why Habermas was holding her, and if she knows where Claudia is."

Vinod and Jeannine talked for quite a while, and Vinod finally said: "Her husband is part of a resistance cell, Populaire Résistance Directe. She participated. She thought the PRD was just protests and sit-ins, confrontations with the police. But they have some much bigger plan. She doesn't know what it is, but it involves explosives. Her husband is studying chemistry, and he has been making explosives."

"Why was she being held in the garage."

The spoke for an even longer time. Vinod's shocked facial expressions while he listened to her were making me crazy. Finally, he said. "This is very—I can't think of a word. Complicated, perhaps, or

just strange. A cell of a related movement in Germany was betrayed by one of the senior members. The police were able to roll up many members because the executive members know the leaders of other cells.

"She says they heard that the girlfriend of the man who betrayed his faction was captured during a failed bank robbery. He surrendered to the police and betrayed his fellow members to save her. The leaders of the PRD decided that each cell leader should hold another leader's spouse, girlfriend or boyfriend, someone they care deeply for, as a hostage until this big event they are planning has occurred. Solve both problems at once. No girlfriend to save, and if a member betrays the Populaire Résistance Directe, the hostage dies."

"Ask her about Claudia."

They spoke for some time, and she kept shaking her head.

"She doesn't know Claudia. She doesn't know any of the other hostages or where they might be. She knows some other people in her cell, but her husband is the only leader she knows. That's why they are organized in cells—so they won't know many people. She said she thinks the selection of who holds which hostage was random. She thinks there are about six hostages. She didn't know Habermas until he came in the middle of the night to take her from her husband. Her husband said she must go. She wants to shoot her husband. I think she's serious."

"Now I know why the guy in the car said, "the plan is stupid". It's the silliest thing I've heard of. If the police find a hostage and the hostage talks, they know two leaders—the person holding the hostage, and the person related to the hostage. They can roll the whole ring up, hostage to member related, to their hostage, to the next member related. It's ridiculous. They've created a map to the whole organization."

"It's not ridiculous if their action happens soon," Vinod said. "I think there's very little time."

"Find out where her husband is, I'm paying him a visit."

Vinod was still talking to her when the door smashed in—the second time in 24 hours, but this time the room filled with policemen in protective gear. I had the random thought that at least I wasn't naked this time. They tossed me on the floor, and a big guy knelt on my back. They cuffed me, searched me efficiently, took my pistol, and held it up to show the other cops. They put a bag over my head and dragged me off down the stairs.

They half-carried me into some kind of panel truck and shoved me down on a bench. Two bulky men sat on either side of me. I could hear Vinod being carried in, his complaints were constant until I heard a couple of blows land and he was silent. I heard Jeannine crying softly. The doors closed, and we were moving. I said, "where are we going?" and was rewarded with an expert elbow just below my sternum. My diaphragm was paralyzed, and I gasped for breath for the rest of the ride.

It was a short ride that ended with a sudden stop that threw me against one of my captors. I could see a change in the light through the bag as the truck doors banged open, and then I was dragged into a building and thrust into a chair. I heard chains rattle, and the door slammed.

It seemed I was alone. I sat there in my hood, with little pinpricks of light coming through, for quite some time. Someone came in quietly, fingerprinted me and left. I continued to wait. No idea how long. I heard the door open, my hood was yanked off, and a tall, hard-looking man grimaced at me. Or maybe it was a grin. Hard to say. He was pretty frightening. His face was thin and jowly, with lots of pockmarks and spider veins. His eyes were cold, like grey glass, and his lips were a narrow line, like a lizard's lips. He was immaculately dressed in a dark suit and tie. My minor forays into quality clothing gave me limited insight into men's fashion, but what he was wearing looked expensive. He wore it casually and well. When he finally spoke, his English was clear, precise, and grammatically elegant with just a slight French accent.

"Mr. Sanborne, we've been looking for you. You've been busy."

I didn't say anything, so he just stared at me for a few minutes.

"You are involved in the murder of three of our citizens. Under normal circumstances, I would simply arrest you, and we would continue to investigate and make our case against you. In this particular case, I'm willing to make some accommodations. I need you to tell me everything you know about everything that is going on. I want you to talk without restraint and never lie—tell me everything. Here's why you will do this: It's your only chance.

"Let me prime the pump a little because I know you Americans love lawyers and you may be tempted to hold back information. That would be fatal to you and inconvenient to me. You have blundered into something of importance. I know you are trying to find a girl you care for. Apparently, you think you're some kind of cowboy. I don't really care about that, though I want to hear every detail, I want to hear what you've found, and I want to know what you intended to do about it. I know the dead men are criminals, and they were probably sent to kill you, though their assault rifles were inexplicably in the back seat of the car we found with our third dead citizen, along with other implements that suggest someone planned to tie people up and cut their throats. The vehicle with this well-equipped corpse carried both your fingerprints and the dead men in your room.

"Before you speak, let me say this one more time. This is your only chance. If you don't help me as much as you can, your prosecution will be simple. Dead people in your room. A dead man in a car with your fingerprints everywhere. You may be thinking you can plead self-defense. Dispense with that thought, it won't work here. We are not cowboys. You'll go to prison until you are old. So tell me. Don't fuck around, don't ask for a lawyer or to speak with the embassy, tell me."

I looked him in the eye and thought about the circumstances. I could tell he was departing from standard police procedure. As Mr. Holzman had told me, cops don't give information, they take information in and keep you in the dark as much as possible. I wouldn't expect this man to do anything differently than a Boston detective, but he had laid out his case. There had to be a good reason to do so.

I started talking. I told him about Claudia, a little about our relationship, how she went missing. When my voice got hoarse, he sent for water and a Coca Cola. Because, I guess, every American drinks coke. I didn't bother to tell him I wasn't a cola fan, and besides, the coke tasted terrific. I told him about tailing Habermas and how Vinod had spelled me in following him while I followed Claudia's uncle. How I thought at first it was her uncle that abducted her but when I broke into the room where I thought she was being held it was just her uncle with a lover—I think he almost smiled at that. Hard to say, his facial expressions were challenging to read. I told him about Habermas spotting me, about the hard guy sitting with him in the cafe, and about the killers breaking into my room. I didn't tell him about Ada, I said they didn't know I had a pistol and were distracted for a moment, so I shot them.

He produced the Berretta. "This pistol?"

I said, "Yes, that looks like mine."

"Odd", he said, "Interpol was able to identify this pistol as being registered to the father of an American woman you know—Ada Richards. She filed proper clearance paperwork to bring it to England, but not to France, and she was here in Paris when the men were killed. She left for London the next morning."

"Yes, I borrowed it from her."

"The question of who shot those men is a detail. One I will come back to if I don't feel that you are being completely cooperative."

I understood his meaning.

I told him about the garage where I found Jeannine, and the convoluted hostage plot. And how I thought it might lead to Claudia if the trail was followed quickly enough.

"That's an interesting story Mr. Sanborne, and fortunately for you, it agrees substantially with other information we have gathered. Let me tell you a little about what you have blundered into and perhaps how we may help each other."

The grim man pulled his chair closer to me. He leaned back

"To begin with, I am not really a policeman, though I have police powers, and if you think that means I could not have you thrown into prison forever, let me assure you, I can do that and a lot worse. If you are like most Americans, you know nothing about European politics. I'll give you a brief rundown. After World War Two, there was a substantial power vacuum in all of the defeated or occupied countries. Anyone who was a Nazi or a collaborator was put out of positions of power and replaced by people who were often unsuited for their job of governing or administering. Any power vacuum is quickly filled by the people who are the most experienced, the strongest, most ruthless, and best prepared. That meant the Nazis in Germany, and here in France the Vichy and Nazi sympathizers. Even when they were ejected, they came flooding back in—or just never really left. This alarmed the leftists greatly, and they organized and protested—and were overzealously put down by the authorities.

"You might think I sound sympathetic. I am. I'm of the generation that lost parents, family, and friends in the meat grinder of that war. I fought in that war, in the mud and horror. I saw the bodies stacked like cordwood, villages of dead people being buried in the dirt with bulldozers.

"Seeing some of the same people who caused that come back to power makes me furious. But it doesn't make me want to kill more innocent people. I've seen enough of that. But that's what this Populaire Résistance Directe group has done and they plan to do much more. The men you killed were suspects in two bank robberies including the death of a bank guard. They are also suspects in the kneecapping of a policeman, and the assassination of a prominent businessman and his chauffeur.

"Yes, I'm revealing information to you that would make your defense much more effective. I don't care about that. As I said, I'm not a policeman, I don't need to prosecute you to earn promotion. I don't mourn these killers deaths. We had no evidence to arrest them, just information from valuable sources I will not disclose which have nothing to do with you.

"The leftist students who organized these protests, and who now are escalating to criminal and terrorist behavior, have a lot of sympathy in the public. Perhaps as many as half of the voting public support their goals if not their methods. We must move against them carefully. When we arrest them, they have excellent legal help, and their communication to their compatriots is not ended if they are in prison. We have great difficulties in stopping their escalation, which we must do. It could easily be the trigger point for another war. It could easily be an excuse for the right wing to act in ever more authoritarian ways and give the left more reason for terror. We know the Russians have been supporting this and other left-wing groups to some degree, providing arms and a little training, pushing them towards this escalation. They have their own agenda for chaos in Europe. You understand my concern?"

"Sure, but what does that have to do with finding Claudia?"

"My, what single-mindedness. I wish the world seemed that simple to me. You seem brighter than this—you should be asking me why I'm sharing information that might be classified. Here is why I've given you this little lecture. Your penetration into the PRD has been crude but effective. I've read your notebooks, you are better organized and more capable than your stupid question suggests. As a person acting alone, you are not subject to the rules and laws that we must operate under except when we catch you in criminal behavior. You have no rules of evidence, no need for warrants. You can move quickly where we must proceed slowly and within the rules if we are to prosecute the people we apprehend successfully. We know that the PRD is planning major actions. We believe it will be bombings. I wish to dissolve this organization before they take more lives. I want to stop them. Do you understand what I'm saying."

"I'm getting a general idea, but how does this work. And now that I've been arrested, how can I continue to try to find Claudia."

"You haven't been arrested. At least not formally. Our officers were on a training mission as far as they know. You and your friends are actors. Even in my organization, which is charged with counter-terrorism, only three people know what has actually transpired. The rest of my department believes we are working on turning an informant. I want you to continue your effort, but we don't want you blundering around. We want you to locate evidence for us, so when we kick a door in, we find not only a perpetrator but evidence linking them to their crimes. We will help you if you help us, all within some definite limits that I will explain in a moment. For example, you have reached a dead end tonight, we'll guide you around that."

"What do you mean? Jeannine gave me the name of her husband and his location. She wants to kill him herself."

"Jeannine Stirling lied. We've been interrogating her while you sat here. She told you the true story of the hostage plan, but she is more sympathetic to the organization than she admitted, and she gave you a false location for her husband."

"What! How do you know that?"

"We made her realize her ordeal was not over. You've heard part of the story of the woman who provided the leverage to break the cell in Germany. The end of the story is that she was murdered in London a few weeks ago. The faction in Germany apparently discovered where she had fled after her release and wanted to send a message to her lover, and to all the remaining members of their cells. It's interesting to note that this woman did not betray her organization. They killed her just to send a message. We simply told Jeannine that we would release her, and then arrest her husband and make it clear to the PRD that she had provided evidence."

Mr. Grim stared at me. The silence stretched on. His light grey eyes were implacable, the perfect color for a man so cold. Apparently, it was my turn to talk.

"Look, I'll be glad to work with you if the end result is freeing Claudia. I never intended anything beyond that. I had no idea what I was getting into. The first I knew of this organization is when those guys I shot kicked down my door. I would have been glad to leave all of this to the police if I thought they would try to find Claudia. I didn't know you guys were working on doing that."

"We are not. We are charged with preventing terrorism. If we came across this Claudia person, that would be a happy accident. But she's just one girl missing in France. Do you think when a French girl disappears in New York City that the police drop everything to search for her? Understand very clearly. The chance I am offering you is to roll up this organization. So go ahead and find your girlfriend—that's nice—but it doesn't end there. I want all these people, and you're going to help me, or you're going to spend your useful life in prison. And believe me, our prisons are not like the United States country clubs."

I started to protest, and he said, "Yes, I know, self-defense. Perhaps, but even a successful defense of the charges we would bring will take years, and you'll wait for trial in prison—that's how we do things. And there is no guarantee you will prevail. The third man in the car, how did he attack you? The evidence suggests he was seated in the car when he was shot from the passenger side. And while you wait for trial, who knows what happens to your friend. And then there's Miss Richards."

"Okay, I get it. I'm happy to help you, you don't need to threaten me. How do I start?"

"We release you, you go about your business. When something happens, you call this number, and we come. If you need information, call that same number. For communications purposes, you may call me Hugo. Don't bother calling if you get captured by the PRD or arrested by local police. We won't provide help. If we get involved, it will be to arrest you. I want minimal communication with you, and you will have no contact with any police official other than me. That's the only way this works for us.

Any evidence illegally obtained that can be shown to be a result of our actions is not only inadmissible, it is also toxic to our efforts. You don't have that problem, and if we come behind you in response to a tip about criminal activity, then the evidence we gather subsequently is untainted. If you get arrested, get injured, get in trouble—this relationship doesn't exist. If you were a professional you'd know all this, but you're a cowboy, so I'm telling you. Officially, I detained you for questioning but didn't believe you had any relationship to the groups we are pursuing."

"These people are armed and dangerous. Am I supposed to go after them unarmed and vulnerable? Or do you expect me to kill these people for you?"

"You flatter yourself. I would never trust you with such an assignment. You were vulnerable to the PRD when you were blundering about, how will this be different? How will you be doing anything you wouldn't have already done? But no, I will return your popgun to you for your protection. I will consider any violence you find it necessary to commit on a case-by-case basis. Taking PRD

members into custody has proven to be mostly unsatisfying. It creates a media circus that is undoubtedly an excellent recruiting tool for them. In Germany, I have reason to believe the police are killing these people while they are in custody. Despicable and unprofessional, but I understand the temptation.

"Penetrate the organization, do what you meant to do. Roll them up, one by one. Find a hostage, use the hostage to find the next PRD member. Tell us who they are and where they are. Don't harm any bystanders or you are finished, and you will rot in jail. That would inevitably make news, and I can't afford news. My interest is to stop the PRD from killing large numbers of innocent people. I can deal with repercussions later as long as your actions are confined to the PRD. Try not to get killed, keep going. Same as before, but now you report to me."

"I'm not going to harm anyone, bystanders or PRD. I'm not here to judge these people's actions. I'm here to rescue Claudia."

"I'm not surprised. You Americans have the luxury of an unsophisticated moral stance. It doesn't trouble me, but understand this, you will do what I say, or you will go to prison. If you flee to America, I will turn over all our evidence to the national police, and they will extradite you to stand trial for three murders."

"Okay, I get it. But what about Gunnar Habermas. He's going to know Jeannine is gone, perhaps as early as tomorrow."

"Then you had better move quickly on Jeannine's husband. We'll have policemen at the garage tomorrow. We could pick up Habermas, we have cause, but I suspect that might cause all the rats to flee. I'd rather force Habermas into hiding which should limit his ability to act with other faction members. But the clock started when you freed Jeannine Stirling."

Hugo rose from his chair and uncuffed me. He handed me back Ada's pistol.

"The safety is on, and there's a round in the chamber, just as you had it. I can't believe anyone managed to kill two armed men with three shots from this peashooter. I personally know a police officer who survived having a .380 pistol emptied into him. I think perhaps your friend Ada is a remarkably good shot.

"I have one piece of advice for you, cowboy. Harden up. The people you are confronting abducted a young woman you care for. They'd snuff her life out to make a point. That chauffeur they shot recently was a man I knew and liked. A seventy-year-old gypsy who survived Auschwitz. He posed no threat to them, never hurt a soul in his life. He left a family that loved him and relied on him. They shot him in the kidney and left him to die in agony because he was driving a car for a man they didn't like. Not even a Nazi, just a man who owned a newspaper that said the PRD are criminals. How ironic. They killed that old man because he was there. They will kill you if you let

them. Don't let them, or at least don't let them kill you because your feelings are too fine to fight their arrogant brutality."

I couldn't think of anything more to say. It felt like a big break, but I didn't like the idea that my focus was being directed away from Claudia, or maybe past her. On the other hand, I wasn't on my way to prison, and there weren't any French police looking to arrest and extradite Ada.

"Here's the real address of Roger Stirling. We will detain Mrs. Stirling until your efforts are concluded, one way or another. Her husband is a chemist, making the explosive they want to use, but he's not the bomb-maker. We don't know who that is. You should go now. Your friend Vinod is waiting for you in the lobby. He is less than pleased with you. Go."

Noble Quest

" In all my life, I have no more than a few words with a policeman. 'Hello, officer. Good evening, officer'. Now I am arrested, carried like a bag of yams, bound and blindfolded, interrogated for hours. And why? Because of you! Why are you not in jail where you belong? Why are you not on your way to prison for your crimes?"

"Because I'm not a criminal. Self-defense. No charges. Stop whining at me and let's go. An officer is waiting to take us back to your place, and I don't want to be talking about this in the police car. I need to get my motorcycle and go. You need to go trail Habermas and see what he does. Follow him and find out where he hides. The police will be at the garage where he held Jeannine this morning."

"I'm not doing anything of the kind, I'm finished with you!"

"Would you like to be detained here in the police department like Jeannine, until all of this is finished, or would you like to make a hundred dollars a day?"

"A hundred dollars a day! Truly? One hundred dollars a day? Why didn't you say so, my friend? Of course, I will help you on your noble quest. But don't even think of renegotiating the price just because I say yes."

"Habermas will be freaking out when he sees cops at the garage. He might move fast. You have to be ready for that. I'm counting on you to follow him wherever he goes. Can you arrange that kind of transportation?"

"I will enlist my cousin and his cab. I will need to pay him ten dollars a day. That will not come out of my hundred dollars. Agreed?"

"Agreed, let's go. But be very careful and don't tell your cousin anything about why you are tailing Habermas. You know these are violent and vengeful people. I doubt you'd be safe here in Paris if they knew you were working against them. And remember, no talking in the car. Just act like you're mad at me and don't want to talk. Don't respond, no matter what I say. I'm certain they'll be listening closely."

"That won't be hard--I am mad at you. And don't worry about my cousin. I never tell anyone anything. I learned to shut up when I was in diapers. I continue to be amazed at your willingness to lecture me about being careful. You have blundered in every conceivable way while my actions have been impeccable. Impeccable!"

The police car was waiting in front of the station with the engine running and the passenger door open. A few minutes later, after a typically insane drive through the city, the driver pulled up

outside Vinod's apartment pointed to the sidewalk and said, "Casse toi!". I'm not sure how that translates, but I knew what he meant.

Vinod was muttering to himself while we climbed the stairs to his apartment. I retrieved my backpack from his room. I said, "I'm going after Stirling. Please don't lose Habermas."

"Again, you talk to me as if I were the fool. Every fuckup so far has come from you. You are the fool. Your fault, all your fault. I will do my part. It's a good thing you are rich because you are helpless. You are the only fool here, don't talk to me as if I were a fool. "

I couldn't really argue with him, so I shook his hand and left. I unlocked Anouk and tied my bag down carefully. It was a little after 2:00 AM. I rode Anouk at the limits of her wimpy headlight through the dark streets. Vinod had marked up a map for me, but I had a tough time with the street signs. It was nearly 3:00 AM by the time I found Roger Stirling's apartment building. I decided on a direct course of action. "Harden up" seemed like good advice. I'd proceed like the two guys that invaded my room last night.

I wouldn't kick the door in, and hopefully, I wouldn't get shot in the head by someone sleeping with Mr. Stirling, but I couldn't piss away the time waiting and following him.

The street door to the apartment building was an old-fashioned brass lock. The mechanism was probably too heavy and sticky to be easily tensioned, but the gap between the frame and the strike plate was wide, and I could see that there was only a ramped latch bolt—no locking bolt. I slipped it easily with my laminated Massachusetts driver's license. I pulled my boots off and climbed the stairs quietly to Stirling's apartment. I listened at the door for a few moments—all quiet. The apartment door yielded equally well to my card, and I slid the door open a few inches. It stopped against a typical slip chain. I pressed my foot against the bottom of the door and sprang it inward. I quietly heel-and-toed the door, springing the bottom of the door further in until I could feel the short screws starting to pull. I reduced the pressure a little to keep the door from banging open and held onto the knob tightly. The chainplate pulled loose with a bit of cracking sound, and I was in the apartment.

I paused at the door to ease it shut, holding the knob tightly open so the latch didn't click. I slacked the knob and closed the lock soundlessly. I tempered my breathing and stood still a few minutes with my mouth open to intensify my hearing while I waited for my eyes to adjust to the low light. Good thing, there was stuff stacked everywhere in the room. I didn't need my flash—there was enough light filtering from what appeared to be the kitchen windows to let me navigate the main room. On the left wall, I saw the blank dark rectangle of the likely bedroom. I crept to the open door. Light snoring coming from that room confirmed my guess. I pulled on the black balaclava I appropriated from one of my would-be killers. It had a little damp hole in the forehead. I hoped it wouldn't be joined with another anytime soon.

I slid my feet across the cold floor, hoping to avoid a collision with something noisy. I reached the bedside and looked down at the solitary form of a small man. I leaped on top of him, with my knees on either side of his body, my flashlight on and full in his eyes, and Ada's Beretta pressed to his forehead.

"Don't say a word. Make a sound, and I blow your brains all over your pillow."

Mr. Stirling looked terrified. I hoped I was in the right apartment.

I dropped the flashlight onto his chest and fumbled for the light next to the bed. He took advantage of my distraction to buck me partly off. He freed one arm, and he started whacking me in the head. I brought the Beretta back up, but he wiggled down between my legs. I felt a pistol next to the light. Yup, probably the right place. My flashlight bounced behind the headboard onto the floor. The room was nearly dark again, and Stirling was flopping around under the covers at the bottom of the bed like a fish, trying to get free. I made a grab for him, but he was quick as an eel and slid off the bed on the far side. I grabbed the lamp and turned it on, knocking the nightstand over in the process.

Stirling got free of the covers and dove for his pistol, which had fallen to the floor when I knocked over the nightstand. I dropped the lamp onto the bed and dove on top of Stirling. Somehow in the process of landing on him, the Beretta got wedged between us, and it went off with a muffled crack. I felt a burning track blaze down my thigh.

I'd shot myself.

But apparently, I got Stirling too, because he started screaming, holding his knee with both hands.

I clamped a hand over his mouth. He bit me, and then he kept screaming, just going nuts, so I started stuffing his bedsheet between his teeth until I couldn't fit anymore in. I was going a little crazy myself.

I backed off a little and tried to catch my breath. I needed to start thinking again instead of just reacting.

He was screaming into the sheet, still holding his knee. I pulled a length of paracord from my pants pocket and wrested his arms behind him, tying them tightly. I grabbed the ruff of hair on the back of his bald head, pulled it back, and stuck my face close to his. I said, "I promise you, I will kill you inch by inch unless you stop screaming and tell me where your hostage is. You have one knee left. Will you walk with a limp, or will you ride a wheelchair for the rest of your life?"

He'd stopped screaming, so I pulled a surprising amount of bedsheet out of his mouth, like some bloody, gross magic trick. I thought most of the blood was from me. I had a deep gash in the web of my hand from the slide of the Beretta. The little bugger had a bad habit of biting its owner.

I made the mistake of looking down at Stirling's knee—good thing I hadn't had any dinner. His kneecap looked strangely soft and his lower leg was angled off in a way that it shouldn't be able to go. The bullet must have hit his bent knee at the worst possible angle.

I said, "Do you speak English."

Stupid question, since I knew he could understand my threat to shoot his other knee. But he said, "Non."

Stupid answer, so I poked him a little in the knee. Apparently, that was the equivalent of a few years of English lessons, because he made a sound that was somewhere between a scream and a moan and said "Stop! Stop, no, please, please stop!"

I said, "Where is your hostage?"

"The basement, there's a room. the key is on my ring in my pants."

"I'm going to leave you here. You're bleeding badly, is there something I should know about your basement? A guard? If I'm successful in finding your hostage I just call the police and they collect you. You get to talk to your lawyer. None of my actions have been legal, they can spring you. But if I don't make the call, well.....you'll just empty out I'm afraid."

He looked down at the steady flow of blood pumping from his knee and said, "There's an explosive wired to the door. You have to open it a little and unhook the wire. Go quickly, I'm cold already."

"You'll be fine." I stuffed about half the previous amount of bloody bedsheet into his mouth and tied the other end around his wound. He screamed and bucked around when I bound the wound, but he'd surely die if I didn't stop the bleeding. Not that I gave him much of a chance anyway. He didn't look fine, and there was a lot of blood on the floor. Some of it was mine, of course, I had a puddle of blood under my foot. I dropped my pants to look—there was a narrow trench running along the top of my thigh. Dramatic looking, but shallow. It was still oozing blood, but it looked like it was already coagulating.

I pulled my pants up but kept my shoes off. I retrieved my flashlight from behind the bed. I tied the laces of my boots together and slung them around my neck and ran down the stairs to the basement.

When I unlocked the door and opened it a crack, I heard a snuffling sound. I shined my light around the edge of the door and located the wire. There was no tension on the wire, so I unhooked it from the nail it was attached to and let it drop. In the beam of my flashlight was a young boy, bound hand and foot. He was gagged, and his face was bruised. I looked at the doorframe and saw a grenade with the pin straightened and attached to the wire. If the grenade went off, it would kill not only the person entering but certainly the boy as well. Mr. Stirling was a nasty little prick.

I took the gag off, said a few words to him and realized he didn't speak English. I cut his binding, noticing that his hands and feet had been tightly tied to give him pain. Mr. Stirling was a sadistic nasty little prick. His hostage could hardly walk. I pulled his arm over my neck and supported him, walking quickly out of the basement, out of the apartment, and to Anouk, who sped us away. I located a phone booth and called the magic number. Mr. Hugo answered on the first ring.

"Yes."

"This is an anonymous tipster. There's been strange noises and a gunshot from Mr. Stirling's apartment. I believe you know where it is."

"Yes, but tell me anyway, it's nice to be able to speak with conviction."

I rattled off the address.

I said, "You should be careful, there are chemicals everywhere in the apartment, and there was a grenade booby trap in the basement, where a hostage was held. I accidentally shot Mr. Stirling in the knee. We had a struggle, and my gun went off. I got a minor wound to my thigh, but Stirling got it right in the top of his knee, and it's pretty bad."

I heard him speaking rapid fire french to someone else. I recognized the address, but nothing else.

"I stationed a team close by, they will be there in minutes, is the hostage your girl?"

"No, it's a young man, and he doesn't speak English. Can you translate for me, get a name and address for me?"

"Yes, put him on."

The boy spoke on the phone for some time. He finally handed the phone back to me.

"The kid doesn't know much, but he was taken from his father. The name is Saul Clemente and here's the address."

I wrote it down the address—on Rue du Tage in the 13th Arrondissement.

"Please ask the kid what his name is, his father might be more forthcoming if he knows the kid is safe."

"I already got his name, it's Jean-Paul," said Hugo.

"I'm leaving the kid at this restaurant I found open, it's called La Garage on Rue de la Montjoie in St. Denis. He's in kind of bad shape so don't leave him long. I'll ask the counterman to give him some food and watch out for him."

"I'll get some gendarmes on the way, get going, it will be light in half an hour."

"Tell them to be gentle with the kid, he's been through a lot. I think the sadistic little bastard did things to him."

"Yes, yes, okay, we'll do that, now go."

Turns out the restaurant wasn't really open, the guy I'd seen inside was apparently cleaning. I tried to tell him people were coming for the kid, but he had no idea what I was saying. I got the kid to talk with him, the guy brought him some crusty bread, cheese, and a glass of milk. Seemed like a friendly old guy. I sat next to the kid with my map to figure out how to get to his father's address. He watched me a little and then pointed out the street where he lived. I put five bucks on the table, tried to get across to the kid and the cleanup guy that I'd be right back—a little white lie. I walked back to my bike and headed for Saul Clemente's house.

Queen Of My Heart

Once again, some sort of direct action seemed appropriate. It worked last time, though my thigh was stiff and stung like hell from the bullet that grazed me, and I accidentally kneecapped a guy, so I could hardly call it an unmitigated success. I'd need some minor tweaks to my methods. It was starting to get light, a lousy time to pick locks and try to find people asleep and groggy.

Mr. Clemente's house was a detached single family house with a small courtyard. There was an old Citroen parked near the door. I parked Anouk on the street nearby and locked her up to a lamp post —the neighborhood didn't look upscale. I decided on a modified direct approach. I knocked on the front door—and then immediately wished I hadn't. It seemed like a very foolish thing to do. Especially since I don't speak French. I thought about running away and trying something else when the door opened a crack, and a haggard-looking woman peeked out at me.

I recognized the initial "Oui?" but everything that followed was gibberish to me. I said, "Monsieur Paul Clemente? Emergency."

The door closed.

I heard a conversation behind the door, and then it opened a little again. This time an equally haggard-looking man faced me. I said, "Do you speak English?"

He said what sounded like "umpa", which my feeble French vocabulary translated to "Un Peu"—a little. Not great news.

I said, "I wish to speak to you about Jean-Paul."

His eyes narrowed, he opened the door and started to raise a pistol that was in his hand, hidden behind the sash. I shoved through the opening and grabbed his pistol arm.

Most of the disarming moves I'd learned from Mr. Takahashi include pushing the arm up and away while you rotate inward to gain leverage and control on the arm. I spun inwards, as I shoved, but I tripped on the sill and fell backward into Mr. Clemente. We both hit the floor with me on top. I heard the pistol discharge, and plaster rained down on my face.

I held his gun arm with both hands, twisted to push the gun arm down and started banging his knuckles against the floor. Someone pounded on my back with a stout stick while Mr. Clemente was trying to scratch my eyes out of their sockets with his free hand. I grabbed his gun when it came loose from his hand and rolled to my feet. The stick hit my shoulders so I turned toward the source—the woman, holding a mop backward. I pointed the gun at her face and said: "get back".

She probably didn't understand the words, but she understood a gun pointed at her face and retreated a few steps. Mr. Clemente took advantage of the distraction and tried to tackle me around the knees. I saw him coming and automatically did a very snappy gedan barai—a downward block —only in this case I was holding a revolver weighing a few pounds in one hand. My pumping adrenaline put some real heat in it. I missed his outstretched arms and hit him on the head very hard with his gun, which took all the fight out of him—and then some.

He rolled over on his back, twitching and clutching his head. I pointed the gun at his face and told him to stay still. He didn't, but it didn't look like he could really control his motions.

The woman holding the mop stepped forward and started to raise it again, so I stepped close to her, stuffed the gun roughly into her stomach, and yanked the mop from her hands. I was so angry and pumped up that I almost pistol-whipped her, but she cringed away.

I kicked the door shut, motioned the woman towards me and tied her hands behind her back and sat her on the floor. Clemente was still rolling around, holding his head. Fortunately, I had extra ties, so I got him on his stomach and tied him up.

I rolled him over and said, "Is there anyone else here. I don't want to have to shoot anyone."

"My daughter. Sleep. Don't shoot I beg."

"If there is anyone else I promise I shoot you all." I shook the pistol at him.

"No. Nobodies. I beg. Don't shoot."

"Your son, Jean-Paul, is with the police. Stirling hurt him, but he is arrested. Where is your hostage?"

"No hostage."

"I promise. You will tell. Hard or easy. You will tell."

Geez, I'm starting to sound like English is my second language. I pulled the combat knife out of my belt and looked at his wife, trying to look as mean as I could. She said something to him that I didn't understand at all.

"Is not daughter. Is hostage. Upstairs."

After Stirling's little booby trap, I wasn't feeling very trusting. I tied Clemente's wife's feet together and looped the free end to her wrist tie, hogtying her loosely. While I was tying her, I realized that both she and her husband were fully dressed, which seemed strange so early in the morning. I shrugged it off.

I shouldn't have.

I yanked Clemente to his feet and forced him up the stairs. The bedroom door was locked with a padlock, but the keys were in Clemente's pocket. I unlocked the padlock and pushed Clemente against the door.

"Any traps. Any bomb?"

"What? Non!"

I shoved him through the door into the bedroom. Early morning light was filtering through a lone window covered with chicken wire. A slim girl sat up in the bed, sleepy and groggy. The most beautiful face I've ever seen. The queen of my heart.

Claudia.

I started crying immediately. I kicked Clemente's feet out from under him and shoved him unceremoniously onto the floor face first, forgetting that his hands were tied behind him. The sound his face made when he hit the floor was unpleasant. I stuffed his heavy pistol in my back pocket and caught Claudia as she tumbled out of bed and ran into my arms. My heart was pounding so hard it made me dizzy. Claudia clung to me and held on so tight I could barely breathe.

"I knew you would come. I knew you would come," she whispered.

Nice to hear that. I had no idea that I would successfully rescue Claudia. But apparently she did. And she was right, at least so far.

Freeze

I got Clemente to his feet and marched him back down the stairs. His face looked smashed, I think he would need a lot of dental work in his near future. When his wife saw Clemente's ruined face, she started flopping around yelling at me, so I pulled the gun and pointed it at her.

"No, Monroe!" Claudia said, "These people have treated me well. I haven't been harmed. They've been kind to me, and they are worried sick about their son."

"Claudia, they are part of a plot to kill innocent civilians, to bomb buildings and kill people."

"I know, they are members of the PRD, but Andrea, Saul's wife, told me they were swept along in the movement. Saul is appreciated for his sabotage expertise, they were both in the resistance during the war. They don't agree with where the movement is headed, but they are in too deep to stop."

"What! They're in too deep, so they're just going to go ahead and blow people up? Claudia, if they were told to, they would have killed you. Doesn't matter, you're safe, they won't harm you."

Clemente's wife spoke to Claudia for a moment.

Claudia said, "Andrea says men are coming this morning. They were expecting them when you knocked. They will be armed. If they find this situation, they will start shooting. We could all be killed. They are dangerous men."

"Why is she telling you that?"

"They like me. They don't want me to be hurt. I think it's true that they were carried along. I don't think they are bad people. And they expect the men would shoot all of us. Both of them as well."

I spotted a telephone and made a call to Hugo. As usual, he answered on the first ring.

"I'm at Clemente's house. I have Claudia, and I have the Clemente' s—the husband and wife, tied up. They say armed men are coming here this morning. I know you said you wouldn't help, but this is a chance to sweep up a few more, and I can't do more for you if I'm dead."

"We'll help, I have two men positioned close by, and I'll bring more. Ask them how many men, and how they will be armed."

Claudia spoke to Madame Clemente and said "she says at least four, and they will have something called an MP43 as weapons. They plan a bank robbery today to finance their new operation."

I relayed the information to Hugo, and he said "That's very bad. The MP43 is an automatic rifle like a machine gun. They are heavily armed. We'll be there as quickly as possible."

I turned to Claudia and said, "What do they have for weapons in the house?"

Claudia translated in rapid-fire French. She looked so beautiful speaking that melodic language that I almost forget why I was there. That sounds absurd. I guess you had to be there, looking at Claudia's incredible beauty, with tousled hair and no makeup, dressed in flimsy flannel nightclothes with her perfect nipples and high, firm breasts distending the light cotton. Her soft, full lips pouted as she formed what linguists call anticipatory vowel protrusion. Fascinating and highly erotic.

But I digress.

"They say besides the pistol you have, there's an MP43 in the closet by the front door."

I heard a vehicle pull into the courtyard and doors slamming. I ran to the closet and found the assault rifle in the corner. I racked the bolt, and a round ejected. I could see a new bullet get pushed into the chamber. The long banana clip looked full. I found two buttons that might be safeties. One was a pin that ran through the gun that read E when pushed one way and D the other. It was on D so I switched it to E. Why? Hell, I don't know. The second was a lever with two positions. I figured it was the safety, and it was down, so I flicked it up to what I assumed was the on position, but kept my finger close to it in case my guess was wrong.

I went to the door, waited until I heard the crunching of feet on the gravel, then I swung the door wide and pointed the gun at the two men standing there. I could see two more men doing something in the back of a tall delivery van. I yelled, "Freeze!"

Why does that never work? Both men started to raise long guns that looked like mine. I pointed the rifle and pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

Given a 50-50 chance I seem to blow it every time. I flicked the safety the other way and tried again. The gun hammered in my hands, raising on its own, and walked a line of holes up the first man's body, from his crotch to his head and beyond. He dropped his rifle and slumped against the second man, grabbing his shoulder and staggering him. I released the trigger and turned toward the second man who was firing wildly, hitting everything but me. The door frame splintered next to me. My aim was better since I didn't have a bloody compatriot hanging on me. The shooter went down with a lot of holes in him before he could correct his aim.

The two men at the van dived behind it with rifles in their hands just as I emptied the rifle in their direction. I doubt I hit anything. Maybe a bird a mile or so away. I slammed the door and locked it to what was left of the doorframe, and ran back to the closet. No extra clip.

I briefly considered trying to retrieve a clip or a rifle from the two guys laying in front of the door, but I figured that would be an excellent way to get shot to tiny pieces by the two guys at the van.

I could dimly hear screaming. The racket from the gun had deafened me. I think it was Claudia doing the screaming, but it might have been me. The screaming tapered off to a moan. Still might be me.

I pulled the heavy pistol from my pocket, went to the window, and crouched low. I could see four legs under the van. As I watched, one set of legs moved to the left side. The man attached to the legs started running for the side of the building, aiming to flank me, I guess. I fired at him. The first shot shattered the window and started a new round of screaming. I could tell that the second and third missed the guy completely—I didn't swing fast enough—and he disappeared around the end of the building.

It would be nice to have a do-over, I could have done a better job leading him, but that wasn't likely. The other set of legs was still visible, so I aimed carefully at one leg and shot. Nothing. I tried again, and the guy went down on his side next to the van. Presented with a bigger target, I fired again, and the guy started flopping around. I tried to shoot him again to be sure he stayed put, but the pistol just clicked.

I fiddled with the pistol for a moment and the drum flopped out. At first, I thought I still had six shots since all the chambers were full, but I tipped it up, and six empty shells dropped out. Ah yes, the shells stay in a revolver. Should have known that, but my brain wasn't working in any normal mode. It was hardly working at all. I still had Ada's little Beretta. Not much armament against a guy with a machine gun. I turned to Claudia.

"Ask the guy if he has another clip for the rifle."

She stared at me for a moment but finally turned and started talking to Mr. Clemente.

"No, just what was in the gun. There's ammunition for the pistol in a drawer in that table."

She pointed to a hall table with a lamp on it. I dug in the drawer, found the ammunition and reloaded. I dumped the rest of the box into my hand and shoved the bullets into my pocket.

"I want you all out of the line of fire. The police will be here shortly, is there a basement or something?"

Claudia translated. This time I avoided drifting off into erotic fantasy and waited impatiently.

"Yes, a basement. Mr. Clemente says we'll be safe there. Let's all go there and wait for the police. Please, Monroe." "Let me take a look at it."

We went to the door, I whipped it open and was surprised to find a man almost right behind the door, concentrating on the stairs as he climbed with a penlight between his teeth and a rifle clutched across his body. He looked up in surprise. I shot him in the face, and he fell back down the stairs.

Damn, I forgot to say "freeze" though that seems just to mean "shoot at me now" in French.

I said, "I guess Mr. Nice Guy forgot to tell you about the entrance in the basement."

Claudia just stared at me with a shocked look.

"I think that's the last one, I guess we can go back to the kitchen and wait for the police."

An Arrangement

Hugo and his troops arrived in full battle gear about ten minutes later. Helmet, bulky vests, boots, and outfits that looked military. Most of them had short rifles of some sort. They moved into position like they were expecting a pitched battle. I waved a white napkin flag on the end of the mop handle out the thoroughly shot-up door.

I yelled, "Hugo, we are all fine in here. I think all the bad guys are down. None of them in the house."

They did some complex movements, scampering around the grounds and covering each other for about five more minutes, and finally, two big cops with Hugo right behind them came through the door.

Hugo said, "We found three, all dead. You said four."

"Oh, I forgot the guy on the basement stairs. I didn't check on him, but I don't think he'll be coming back up the stairs."

Hugo followed a big cop with a bulletproof vest down into the basement. Hugo came back in a few minutes.

"No, he certainly won't."

We sat down at the kitchen table. Hugo, Claudia and I. A squad of burly cops had swapped handcuffs for my paracord on the Clementes and hauled them away. They even gave me my paracord back.

Hugo spoke in his elegant English: "Claudia, it's very good to see you safe. Your cowboy boyfriend here has made a big mess here in Paris looking for you. But he's helped to stop these dangerous people, and so we're almost as grateful as we are irritated. I'm going to have my men take you away now. They will stop at your aunt and uncle's house so you can assure them you are safe. You will pick up your passport, pack your things, and we will take you to the airport and see you safely onto an airplane to wherever you must go—I recommend that be the USA. Otherwise, until the rest of these people are arrested, we would have to hold you in protective custody. That could be weeks or months. We don't need or want your testimony. I must caution you against telling anyone what you saw here today. This never happened. For your own safety, and the safety of others, you must just say that the police found you, arrested your kidnappers and released you. You believe you were kidnapped for ransom.

"I suspect you will be happy with this arrangement. I am sure you have had enough of being held against your will. I can give you a few moments alone with Mr. Sanborne, but then we must begin to see you safely away. I will have several of my best men with you until your airplane leaves."

Hugo stood up and walked out of the kitchen. Claudia took my hands across the table and said, "Monroe, I don't know what to say. This has been so shocking. You have had to kill people to save me. I can't even think of what that means. How could this be? My sweet Monroe. How could this be?"

I had tears running down my face again. I could see the fear in Claudia's eyes. I hoped that wasn't directed at me. But I understood that it could be. That at least part of it certainly was. I realized that the only person she had seen do violence was me. Her incarceration was mostly an inconvenience. One that could have killed her, but she didn't really know that. She knew for sure that I had killed four people, threatened to shoot Mrs. Clemente and turned Mr. Clemente's face into something that looked like bad Swiss steak.

I said, "When you left Boston I didn't tell you I love you. I know I said it in a letter, but I want to say it to you now—I love you, now and forever. Even if we are not together, even if we are never together, I love you."

"I know Monroe, that's why I dreamed that you would rescue me. Gunnar betrayed me—he willingly gave me up as a hostage. We were already on the verge of breaking up, he was so vehement about his cause, and if I said anything about his obsession, if I criticized his certainty that he was right, he would become so angry. He ranted at me, overwhelmed me with his angry words. He always apologized, but I decided he was not the man I thought he was. I wanted to get him out of my life. I guess I have done that now."

"Don't worry about any of that. Go and see your Uncle and Aunt, your Mom and Dad. They'll be so happy. Then go home. Tell your parents they should come with you—right away. There still is danger. But you can't tell anyone about my involvement. Not a soul, ever. I probably would be killed if you did. My life is in your hands. They are hands I trust completely. Not a word about me. Not to your parents, not to anyone."

"Oh, Monroe, never. If you say so, never."

Claudia got to her feet, a little shaky. "Hold me, Monroe."

I did, happily. We held each other for quite a while, then Claudia pulled away a little, cupped my big head in her small hands and kissed me, long and sweet. She said, "I love you, Monroe. I have to go, I have to see my parents, my Aunt and Uncle. They must be so scared."

And she left with three of Hugo's men.

Niagra Falls Seems Nice

Hugo came back into the kitchen and pulled out a chair. We sat.

"I know I said I wanted you to keep going once you found your girlfriend, but this cowboy shootout at the OK corral changes that. Too many people have seen you, too many people have heard some American speaking appalling French and seen you with me. Besides, I've just heard from my team that Mr. and Mrs. Clemente are singing like birds, as you say. He was the bombmaker. There are enough explosives in the basement to obliterate the entire block. So I no longer require your services. You are free to go. No charges, no record, a small mystery in a big case. We are arresting people all across Paris and several other cities as we speak."

"Did you get Habermas?"

"No, he has run, but I'm sure he will pop up sooner or later. We will find him, or he will leave France forever. Either way is fine with me. In the meantime, please give me your Beretta."

He dropped the clip, emptied the chamber, and stuffed the clip and the extra round in his pocket. He wordlessly handed me back the empty gun.

I'm not sure why I didn't say anything about Vinod's efforts to stay in contact with our friend Gunnar. I had a substantial grievance to air with Mr. Habermas, and I wanted to do so personally if I could. I was also concerned about vengeance. If the PRD undertook to avenge their losses today, Habermas would direct them to me. He knew about me, he sent those thugs to kill me, and he certainly knew Claudia.

"So, Mr. Sanborne, take your motorcycle and go. I hope we never meet again, though I'm quite pleased with the outcome from this absurd mess. I guess you decided to harden up indeed. Your friend Stirling was displeased that you blew his kneecap apart. He survived by the way—a near thing, but the doctors filled him back up with blood in time. He had very little left. Mr. Clemente will undoubtedly need surgery for his face, and I understand that massive injury was simply an oversight—a moment of clumsiness. And these four PRD criminals will not be recruiting new members in prison. Certainly not the one with his brains all over the basement. While it's likely that all could be considered self-defense, you unquestionably make a mess. If you decide to marry that girl, and you'd be a fool not to, please spend your honeymoon at Niagara Falls, or perhaps California—I hear it's pleasant. I'd prefer that you avoid France for seven years. I retire in six.

"All the same, if there are repercussions, or some new disaster surrounding you, which seems inevitable now that I mention it, that is in any way relevant to my department, here is my card. The number you have will work as well, but the cable address may be more convenient. Goodbye, cowboy."

I looked at the card. It said H. Benoit and listed the phone number I already knew and a cable address. Nothing else—no title, no organization, no address. Maybe he really was named Hugo.

I left the house, ducked under the crime scene tape, got on Anouk, and rode away—like a cowboy.

Takahasi-ed

I contacted Vinod through his usual phone drop number. He called me back less than an hour later.

"Yes, your bird did fly, but my cousin is a master at following, though he drives like a cautious old woman. Habermas is still in the city. That's fortunate, it would have been hard to be inconspicuous following him in the countryside. All drivers in Paris are insane, and a taxi breaking a few minor traffic laws does not stand out, it's common and natural."

"Where is he?" was all I replied.

Vinod gave me the address.

"Should I meet you there? Do you need backup as you Americans say? My uncle has a Ghurka knife. Very terrifying. We could display it, he would quail at the sight, I'm sure."

"No, your involvement is finished. I will leave an envelope for you at the cafe. Thank you, Vinod, you've been a true friend. An expensive one, but true nonetheless. I know you'll be tempted to talk about this stuff, but please don't. It would be bad for me, but it could be equally bad for you. These are not nice people we were dealing with. If they knew of your involvement, they would be vengeful."

"How many times do you think you need to tell me to keep my mouth shut? I don't want these maniacs looking for me, I'm not stupid. You make sure you don't tell people I helped you. Go with God, my friend. You know how to reach me if you wish to fund more taxis."

After I hung up I signed three traveler's checks for a hundred dollars each over to Vinod Bose and put them in an envelope and sealed it. I knew Vinod would shit a brick when he didn't see cash, but he could cash the checks and no one else could.

I was getting better at driving around Paris. I followed Vinod's directions and quickly found the hotel where Gunnar Habermas had gone to ground. Vinod even knew the room number. It was one of the seedy ancient hotels that dot Monmarte. I breezed past the empty registration desk, ignoring the pushbutton intended to summon the clerk, who was also probably the bartender in the bar on the bottom floor. I climbed the stairs to the second-floor landing, then dug Ada's little box of spare bullets out of my pack. I had no spare clip. I put one round in the chamber and five in my pocket. I'd be a little quicker than a guy with a flintlock if shooting started, but not much.

The room lock was the typical ramped latch with plenty of room between the door edge and the striker plate for me to slip it. I could see that the deadbolt wasn't thrown and that the door opened inward. I held the latch back, put my shoulder against the door, and shoved hard as I turned the knob, The inevitable chain ripped out of the doorframe, trailing screws and wood splinters. I walked

into the room with Ada's Beretta in my hand. Habermas was standing next to the bed, packing a suitcase from clothes strewn on the bedspread.

"Going somewhere Gunnar."

Okay, yeah, it's trite, but it was all I could think of.

He turned to face me, and instead of the frightened and shocked expression I expected, I saw a confident smile.

"Ah, Claudia's moronic friend, Monroe. I see my compatriots were not successful in killing you."

"How do you know me?" I said.

"I saw you following me like a clumsy oaf. One of our group followed you to your hotel. You registered under your own name—such an idiot. I have heard Claudia mention your ridiculous name far too many times. 'Monroe does this, Monroe does that'. Very tedious."

"Sorry to have bored you."

"So, now you arrest me and call the police? You think they will throw me in prison. For what? For being part of the PRD? There's no evidence I did anything illegal. And even if there is, you're not going to call anyone. Not if you want Claudia to live, and your parents, and your friends, and yourself. Turn around and leave, stupid American, and perhaps we will forget you exist. Believe me, we have long arms. You don't get away just by going to America. The police can do little. Our lawyers run them in circles. They can't eavesdrop on our conversations with our lawyers, so I will have no trouble ordering you killed. Get out of here and leave me alone, and I will consider letting you live."

His smile turned smug.

I said, "there will be a lot fewer of your PRD members after today. Stirling and the Clementes are in custody. Their hostages are under police protection. The three men you sent to kill me? I killed all three. I also killed the four men who came to the Clementes' house today to rob a bank. Whatever that leaves will be in custody by now. The Clementes and your friend Mr. Stirling are cooperating with the police. I think your long arm just got short."

Habermas' face turned crimson. He drew himself up, looked at me arrogantly, and said, "You fool. You're condemned by your own words--I know who you are. We will find you, and we will kill you. But first we'll kill that spoiled bitch Claudia, so you'll know what's coming."

I said, "My God, you're stupid. I just told you I've killed seven of your people—all of whom were armed. I'm pointing a gun at you, and you're threatening me? What an idiot. If I were worried

about your ability to get revenge on me, I'd just shoot you right now. You've mostly convinced me that I should. Your organization is pathetic, your plans are ridiculous. You created not only the situation that brought me here but also the means for me to destroy your organization. The only thing that makes me think I shouldn't kill you is that Claudia is unharmed. I certainly have no sympathy for your bloodthirsty, asinine plans. All you will accomplish with your approach is to hurt innocent people."

I raised the Berretta and sighted carefully. His smug look changed to fear, and he stretched his hands out toward me, to block the shot I guess.

"No!" he pleaded.

"I'm not going to kill you. But I'm considering whether or not a few excruciating wounds would be instructive. You might still be considering some kind of revenge. But if Claudia or anyone near to me suffers any kind of injury, I will come for you. If that happens, I promise you will die slowly, screaming. It won't from something quick like a bullet—I will butcher you. Pray there isn't just a suspicious accident—that's all it will take. I came here with no resources and no weapons, uncovered your plans, killed your killers, and dismantled your organization. If I come back, my sole aim will be to end you in the most painful way I can imagine. But for right now, I'm just going to turn you over to the police."

I safed the Beretta and stuffed it in my pocket. Yeah, I know. Why would I do that? Monumentally stupid, but if I wasn't going to shoot this bastard, I wanted him to know I could make good on my threat. In a moment of karate-lesson fueled delusions of competence, it seemed like the best way to do that was to kick his ass. I was probably wrong.

Habermas smiled and came at me fast, swinging a hard right toward my head. I blocked it hard, giving my wrist precisely the right amount of twist to distribute and absorb the blow. Mr. Takahashi would not smile, but he might have given me a little nod. As I rotated in the block, I used the energy to power a spear hand strike under his left ribcage.

I have to admit, he was pretty tough. Most people would be bent forward, gasping for breath. He staggered back a little, but then lurched forward and swung at my face again. I thought I ducked it, but he managed to clip my forehead, and the punch snapped my head back and made me dizzy. I staggered back, and he came at me like a bull, reaching for my throat. I guess I should have shot him a little when I had the chance if nothing else just to slow him down, but going for the gun now would just give him an opening to beat my face in and then use it on me.

I swept his arms and ducked inside, hitting his gut with my shoulder and pushing him off me. He must have pounded between my shoulder blades with both fists, because it felt like I got hit with a two by four. Hurt like hell and took my breath away.

As I stood up, he finally connected with one of his swings at my face. Caught me right in the cheekbone. I tasted blood and saw stars. I knew if I went down, it would be over. He'd kill me. Do or die.

Fortunately, he stepped back a pace to catch his breath. I crouched and slid back a bit, shifting my weight to the balls of my feet. I watched as he collected himself to charge again. As soon as he started his rush and had his weight on his left leg, I lifted my left hand to distract him while I spun right and kicked his left knee. My kick must have improved drastically, or perhaps 212 pounds of pissed-off geek is a more potent force than I realized. His knee buckled sideways to a degree only allowed by severed tendons, he nearly fell, and his leg wouldn't support him.

I continued the motion that started the kick and ducked under his arms like a matador. Only this matador was a bit too slow, and the bull clipped him with a hard punch that smashed my ear. It rang my bell again, and I staggered across the room and slammed into the wall. Good thing the wall was there or I would have fallen. And it was a good thing my kick had connected so well because Gunnar couldn't charge after me. He was hopping towards me—not very quickly.

I shuffled sideways away from him, to give myself time to shake off the effects of the punch. One of the critical things Karate teaches you is that getting hit hurts, but you have to shake it off and either defend or counter-attack. There's no such thing as giving up in Karate--not while you're alive and conscious. When Mr. Hoppy got close and off-balance in mid-hop, I hit him low in the throat with an extended knuckle punch. When his hands and attention went to his throat, I followed with a straight old fashioned kick to his balls as he reeled back.

He fell back on the bed, gasping and clutching his throat. I would have thought he'd be holding his nuts. I guess the throat punch was pretty solid.

He looked kind of shocked, but he didn't look like he was dying. Not what he expected from Mr. Blobby. Then again, when I put the gun in my pocket it was because I was sure I could handle him with all my fancy Karate moves. I can really be a dumb fuck when I put my mind to it.

I thought briefly about shooting him in the temple—he threatened Claudia and my family. It was one sure way to end that threat. But I know killing a defenseless person, even a shit like Habermas, would never leave me. I know that firsthand—Silvio was helpless when I blew his brains out. Deja vu all over again. For my own sake, I rolled him over and hogtied him tightly.

Adrenalin buzzed in my body. I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin. I hurt everywhere. You'd think I would have burned it off while I was getting my ass kicked. My hands shook so badly I could barely make the knots.

I put on my thin riding gloves and searched his belongings while Habermas gurgled on the floor. He didn't seem comfortable, but he was breathing, though it was with difficulty. I found a notebook

that was encrypted, and it looked like a straight-up word substitution system. Trivial to break if I could find the source of the words. This guy was serving up geek treats on a platter. What could be more fun than breaking a terrorist kidnapper's coded notes while he's tied up at your feet?

I looked through the three books he was carrying, holding each up to the light as I fanned the pages. The copy of "Les Miserables" had a pinprick on one page roughly in the middle of the book. The notebook was more than half-full of handwritten notes. I tried decrypting a sentence by substituting each word with the word that preceded it in the text. It was in French, but my French-English dictionary supplied the translation. Nailed it in one, the word hash became a rational sentence. They could have picked any interval, but the simplest and most reliable way is to use the next word. I sat down and decrypted the last page. It was bomb placement scouting results for Galeries Lafayette. They planned to drop the balconies onto shoppers.

What a great guy. That's how to stop the right-wing extremists—drop concrete and steel balconies on a bunch of innocent women and children. A great little piece of evidence though, probably written in Habermas' own hand. It clearly implicated him in the PRD terror plans.

I wiped down the doorknob and the outer face of the door—the only things I had touched barehanded in the room--other than Habermas. I stepped out of the room, set the lock, and then walked quickly down the stairs. I got on Anouk and drove a few miles, found a phone booth and called Hugo.

He answered after a few rings-things must be getting relaxed in the secret anti-terrorist world.

"I found Habermas."

I gave him the address.

"Are you certain he's still there, do you have eyes on him."

"No eyes, but he's not going anywhere."

"What! Do I need to worry about you cowboy? Was this necessary?"

"Very necessary. Habernas isn't dead, he's just a little roughed up. I hogtied him and left him waiting for you. He has a notebook in his luggage that outlines the PRD targets. I suspect he's the leader or at least one of the senior leaders. The notebook is encrypted, but it's just a substitution code. The book that provides the substitutions is there too, "Les Miserables," with the relevant page marked with a pinprick. You take a word in the notebook, start at the pinprick page and scan the text until you find the word, then substitute the word before it. Not very sophisticated for such an arrogant bunch. We can meet to talk about this if you like." "Actually, I think not. Get on a plane and go, but don't kill or injure anyone else on your way to the airport. Goodbye Mr. Sanborne."

He hung up. Pretty handy to have an official cleanup squad.

Aftermath

I know all this violence is going to fall on me like a Galleries-Lafayette balcony shortly. I'm already pretty horrified at what I did to Stirling. Sure he's a nasty prick, but I shot him in the kneecap. It was an accident—sort of. I thought there would just be a neat little hole like in the movies, but it didn't look like that. The joint turned to mush. Pretty gross. And the driver of the getaway car. I shot him and let him die. I didn't feel much about the first two guys other than a strange, persistent dread. Maybe that's because Ada shot them, not me. But the driver and the second four at the Clemente's house. I killed them all. I tell myself it was self-defense, but I started shooting first. And the guy on the stairs—I didn't give him any chance at all to surrender. Just shot him in the face and blew his brains out the back of his head. It all feels surreal, and I'm sure all that's keeping me from collapsing into a pile of steaming dread and guilt.

As far as Habermas is concerned, I don't feel a thing except for a certain sense of relief and completion. I considered shooting him, but I didn't, so I feel pretty good about that. Maybe I can convince myself I'm not a monster. We'll see how the nightmares go. On the positive side, I haven't thought of Silvio for weeks.

I returned Anouk to Alex Tennat's shop. I briefly thought about buying it, I really like the bike and I love the staggering amount of low end torque and power, though the handling and brakes are not up to Sophia's standard. But what the hell would I do with two motorcycles, and what would Sophia think? I can picture her sulking when I ride Anouk. This anthropomorphosizing is getting a bit out of hand, but that's what happens when you give a machine a name.

Alex wasn't there, so I just turned it over to his mechanic. He was busy working on a rough looking Triumph Bonneville and barely looked at Anouk or me. Just glared a little and grunted at me. I figure Alex took him to task when I fixed the Vincent so quickly. Too bad dude, you need to up your game.

I took a cab to the airport and called Ada's hotel. They couldn't locate her, but I left them the phone booth number. She called back about an hour later just before my plane to London boarded. I had her gun buried deep in my pack, unloaded and stuffed in a sock. I also kept the combat knife. It was a pretty cool knife.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear from you Monroe, any news?"

"Yes, Claudia was found, she's fine, she's on her way back to the US."

"That's such good news! I'm so happy for you."

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"So how are you doing. You okay?"
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"Yeah, I'm gettin' there. A little cryin', a little freakin' out, but I'm getting better. I even got out of the hotel today and got lunch. So yeah, I'm doin' okay."

"Can I come to see you? Can I stay with you for a few days?"

"Sure, I suppose. Don't you need to get back for Claudia?"

"Probably not, I think right now she needs her family. I think she's going to need some time before she'll want to talk to me much. I'll explain it all to you later. Besides, I'd like to see you. I could use someone to hold onto for a while."

"Baby, that sounds really good, but I gotta warn you, I'm probably not in the mood for gettin' laid for a while."

"Me neither. Just some serious snuggling."

"How soon can you get here, buddy?"

While I was waiting in the airport for my flight, I picked up a fresh morning edition of the International Herald. Page two just above the fold said that Gunnar Habermas, a suspect in the terror bombing plot on the front page, and on all the French language papers I couldn't read, had been captured but died as a result of injuries he received while resisting arrest. I felt a moment of panicky shock, but I don't know if that was me or just Hugo cleaning up. I knew when I was tying Habermas up that the injury to his throat was severe, and could get worse as the tissues swelled. It's entirely possible I killed the bastard accidentally.

Oh, well. I considered calling Hugo to find out but decided it would be a meaningless act. He'd just tell me what he wanted to.

Either way, the feeling passed quickly. It didn't seem to matter much. I certainly wasn't going to mourn for the guy. Even if Habermas survived, I doubted that the PRD was going to be effective enough to go looking for trouble with people that didn't present any future threat, but it made the people in my life a little bit safer. Okay, me too.

I called my Mom and Dad. Told them Claudia had been found and was headed back to Boston, and that I was going to stay in London for a few days, or maybe a week. They had already heard Claudia was safe, the Kabekians called them. That's nice.

I called my sis. She'd heard the news as well, from my folks, but she wanted to hear what really happened. I said, "That's going to have to wait until I get home. My plane is boarding, I'm going to go spend a little time with Ada in London."

"I understand why you're downplaying this, but Ada told me what happened to her and you. Holy shit buddy, I'm glad you're okay. That sounded horrific, even the short version Ada gave me. I'm glad you're going to see her, she's pretty fucked up."

"Look, I know I can trust you, and I can trust Ada—sort of, once she gets unfucked. But there are a hundred good reasons for this never to get out. I asked Claudia to keep quiet too, I asked her to say just that the police came and released her and that's all she knows. She really doesn't know much else, but she saw me do some things that I'm sure she'll have a hard time with. Hell, I'm going to have a hard time with them. So please, don't breathe a word of what you heard, and if you hear any rumors, let me know. I'll tell you the whole sad story when I get to Boston, but for now, I'm going to go."

"Okay, brother. I can wait. But you're going to have to deal with this story leaking out. It sounds like too many people have at least parts of the story. We'll work on that when you get home. But just so you know, you've always been my hero, even when you were in diapers. You still are."

"Oh bullshit, but thanks, sis. I love you."

When I got to London, I figured out pretty quickly that Ada wasn't exactly telling me the truth. She was pretty fucked up over killing those two guys. The story about leaving the hotel to have lunch was a bunch of crap. She'd stayed at the restaurant long enough to order, but then some guy stared at her—big surprise, she's a cutie—and she ran back to the hotel and shook uncontrollably in her room.

For my part, I have a nice shiner on my right eye from the punch to the cheekbone, a squashed ear that keeps seeping blood, and a ridiculously stiff neck from Habermas whacking me between the shoulder blades. If I want to look at anything that isn't straight on, I have to pivot my shoulders—my neck is frozen solid.

We stayed in the room, ordered room service, read books, and played pinochle. Either I really suck at Pinocle or Ada is really good. Or both. Probably both. I bought a cheap guitar and started practicing until my fingers bled. I lost myself in music. Ada read business books that looked as dry as Thomas' Calculus and Analytic Geometry. Formulas, in a business book. Who knew those folks use math?

On the third morning, I woke up and said, "Ada, this is stupid, let's go back to Boston. Move back into the apartment. You can help Angel run Cobalt. Make some trips to the Outer Banks to help your dad. Whatever, but let's get the fuck out of here."

"Are you going to stay in the apartment with me?"

"If you want."

"I want."

So we're back in Boston. Two somewhat broken people hanging on to each other, waiting to get better. On the plus side, my nightmares are rare when Ada sleeps with me. They were worse when she spent a week in the Outer Banks, but she was glad to get back to Boston too. She says she can do most of her work for her dad by phone or mail. On the downside, neither of us feel like having sex very much. We gave it a go a couple of times, but we both felt kind of remote from the actual act. I hope that goes away soon.

I'm surprised I'm not crushed by guilt from what I did. I don't know how that's happening. Intellectually I'm horrified. I know part of it is that I saved the love of my life, and the PRD didn't drop balconies on innocent people. But emotionally, I feel dull, disconnected from my usual feelings, with occasional spikes of what I can only describe as pride. It's a conflicted feeling because I also feel deeply ashamed of feeling proud, but that doesn't seem to stop me from feeling it. I wonder how soldiers feel when they come back from a conflict, not that I style myself as any kind of soldier, but I've been in a conflict. I'm certainly having a bit of trouble.

I'm just a geeky guy, I've been running from trouble all my life. I feel bad when I kill a mouse or even a bug. I see how things struggle to live. I know how complex even the simplest living thing is, and what a miracle life is. I've done experiments that killed mice, and I've dissected things, but I always felt sad about it. Ending any life—even with some kind of reason—feels wrong to me. And yet I've been involved in killing eight people—maybe nine. Not involved, that's a bullshit word. I killed nine people. Me. I did it. Pulled a trigger or committed a violent act and they died. Nine! Holy shit, what's wrong with me?

That's more people than Silvio killed, and he was a psychotic criminal!

I had my long talk with Angel when I first got back to Boston and told her about everything. Well, I didn't say much about Habermas and of course nothing about Silvio. That feels like ancient history now, a lifetime ago, but I doubt the cops, the mob, or the Warlocks feel that way about it. So I'm not telling anyone everything other than Mr. Holzman.

She keeps saying I'm a hero. I understand what she means, but I don't feel anything like that. I look back over what transpired, and I think I was just lucky not to be killed or to cause Claudia's death. I can see how I should have done almost everything better. The single skill I have that actually helped was lock picking. Well, that and obsessive note-taking. And Karate came in sort of handy at the end of this clusterfuck.

Oh, and Mr. Holzman called me, which was kind of surprising. I had to wonder if a lawyer is on the clock when they call you—I bet they usually are, but he wasn't. Apparently, he saw a little story in the Boston Record-American about a girl from Boston being rescued from kidnappers by the Paris police, and he remembered my former girlfriend's name was Claudia. Not much of a story, a lot

was going on the day they ran it: Two mobsters were found shot in the back of the head and shoved in the trunk of a car on Commonwealth Ave., there was a big warehouse fire in Dorchester and an anti-busing demonstration in South Boston. So it got relegated to page 12. The Globe didn't cover it at all, or perhaps they didn't know about it. The Kabekians and Claudia declined to comment, which minimized the interest in the story. I appreciated their reticence, I assume Claudia told them there could be some danger to all of us.

Mr. Holzman was elated. He invited me to lunch because he wanted to hear the story. We ate in his comfortable office—roast beef sandwiches from Elsie's lunch in Harvard Square. Merely the best roast beef sandwiches I know of. Cream soda, a couple of really great half-sour pickles, and cherry cheesecake. Helluva good lunch. I ate every crumb.

Sitting in beautiful green leather library chairs around his small conference table with the remnants of our meal, Mr. Holzman extracted the full story from me. He rocked back and forth in his chair, simply blown away by the story.

He told me he was utterly sympathetic to the PRD's political stance but absolutely opposed to their methods. "They are as bad as the monsters they oppose. I hope you can reconcile your actions, I believe they were moral, completely justified, and honorable."

I got a little pissed at that and said, "My actions had nothing to do with politics, morality, or justice. I would have butchered every one of those people to save Claudia. And if the price of saving her was walking away and leaving them to carry out their plans that I would have taken the deal."

He was kind of shocked by my vehemence and looked at me with some concern for a while. Finally, he nodded a few times and said. "I can understand that. And I understand your honesty in not ascribing some higher purpose to saving your girlfriend. You have to live with your conscience. You can't blanket it with bullshit. Sooner or later you'd find the truth inside yourself. It's better to confront it now."

When I was leaving Mr. Holzman said, "You have a unique set of experiences and abilities and obviously a fine mind. I think you and I should stay in touch after you finish school. I doubt you're going to be happy with an ordinary career and mundane work."

I said, "I'll be glad to stay in touch, but I don't believe I'm going to miss any of the nasty things that have happened to me. I've had enough excitement to last two lifetimes. And I know how much of the good outcome was pure chance. I could have been killed at any time, I could be spending my life in jail. Or worse, Claudia, Ada and I could be buried in a shallow grave somewhere. I'll take that ordinary life, thank you very much."

I like Mr. Holzman, and he's been a godsend, but I was glad to get out of his office.

Claudia called a few times. She wants to meet. She says, "let's go to lunch". I've been putting her off, but I'll do that for sure. Sometime. Sometime soon, but not now. I'm going to have to feel strong enough to face her and not fold under her inevitable questions. I have a terrible time lying to her. I look into those amazing eyes and spill my guts. It's been that way since the first day I met her. She thinks I'm just this really honest guy, I really don't think she knows that she turns my brain to mush.

But I can't tell her about any of this stuff. I don't want to see fear or judgement in her eyes. I saw how she looked at me after I shot those four guys that were trying to kill us, dropped up Mr. Clemente on his face, and threatened to shoot Mrs. Clemente. She doesn't know I'm responsible for three other deaths and a kneecapping. She doesn't know I beat up her boyfriend and coldly considered shooting him in the head while he was hogtied and helpless because I believed he posed a threat to her, to my family, and to me. She doesn't know I might have crushed his throat enough that he choked his life out, writhing on a filthy floor, waiting for the cops. I doubt it would be a revelation that would enhance our relationship.

In fact I think it's a secret that dooms our relationship.

I'll just keep loving her from a distance.