

Crime, Mystery, and Thrills

A Short Story Collection

Steven M. Moore

SAMPLE

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Preface

Crime stories in the widest sense include mysteries, thrillers, and police procedurals (the fictional ones). They've been popular since the ancient Greeks laid the foundations of storytelling. We all like to see the bad guy or gal brought to justice in some fashion. These stories are generally plot-intensive too, so short stories are a natural medium for the crime story.

My stories stem from what-ifs I've collected over many years, so when I start to write one, I don't know if I'll end up with a short story, novella, or novel. (For the same reason, I don't know if a novel will be part of a series.) Some of the following stories are very short and some of them are almost novellas for that reason. I rarely create an outline, so I'm always surprised by where the characters and plot will take me.

In these eleven stories you have a wide variety of crime stories, a potpourri that illustrates the width and breadth of this meta-genre. Some deal with just the victims; others focus on the perpetrators. You even have two that could be considered medical and legal thrillers, subgenres I rarely read and write even less.

There's some romance too—more hinted at than explicit—just to show that the complete range of human emotion can be found in the crime story context. And some stories here are set in the future, though that might not be obvious at first. Are they more sci-fi-like? Not really. They only show that the fight against crime will probably haunt human beings for a long time.

So, enjoy the stories. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did writing them.

Steve Moore
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The Call

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Dirk Eddy looked more like a jockey than a thief, but that was his secret weapon. His size was an asset in his business. He could squeeze through tight spaces and slip by security guards and cops like the invisible man.

With penlight in his mouth, he walked around the mansion, selecting his loot. A decorative chalice here, an iPhone there, but focusing more on lightweight items he could run with if needed. He was a pro.

In a bedroom closet, he saw the flashing red LED light on the security panel. He'd tripped a silent alarm. He removed a gold crucifix from the wall and a pearl necklace from a dressing table drawer and was on his way out when the phone rang. After two rings, he picked it up, thinking it was a security company checking for a false alarm.

"Hello?"

"Just you and wifey in the house?" The connection wasn't great, but Dirk knew it was a man—the voice was a deep baritone.

"Yes," he said, thinking he'd just report a false alarm. That would eliminate any visits by security agents or cops.

"The truck's almost there. Get the garage open." There was a click and the line went dead.

What the hell? Truck? The call wasn't from security at all. *Do they assume I'm the homeowner?*

Dirk decided to flee the premises, but couldn't resist visiting the next bedroom. It stank of booze and orgy, but that wasn't what stopped him. In the eldritch glow of the penlight, the naked cadaver seemed more like a ghost. A silver dagger was buried in one eye socket. If he'd seen it in a case, he would have pinched it—the handle was ornate.

The stench and the stains from body fluids showed that he man had been cavorting with a woman. He looked around and saw the large painting on the wall. The colors and heavy acrylic said modern and showed a pouting nude. He was something of a connoisseur, having stolen his fair share of canvases by slicing them right out of their expensive frames.

A small photo of the same woman in a wedding dress graced a bureau; the groom was the man in the bed who was at least twenty years older. *The syndrome of middle-age crisis?* Maybe the woman had been his secretary.

They were probably the owners of the house. He spun at the sound of the truck coming up the long drive. *Now what? The garage!* He remembered there was a door to it through a mudroom off the kitchen. He ran and hit the door opener and then hid behind the water heater in the mudroom.

The truck was a van. Two burly passengers and driver started unloading what Dirk thought looked like body bags. A BMW drove up the driveway and entered the garage. Another man stepped out and waved at one of the three, who hit the button to close the door.

"Where's Arthur?" said Bimmer-man.

"He's around somewhere. I talked to him on the phone. Maybe he's waiting for us in the basement? No sign of Nina either, but she's usually drugged to the gills anyway."

“Of course Arthur’s not here. He wouldn’t want to do any heavy lifting.” Bimmer-man looked around. “I didn’t see his car out front, but he must have opened the door for you. Frank, check the house. The other two of you, keep unloading.”

Dirk shifted to make himself even more invisible behind the water heater as the original three passed his hiding place. He was afraid of Bimmer-man. The others were just muscle, but the BMW driver was cunning and therefore dangerous.

Dirk heard Frank stomp up stairs to where the bedrooms were. *Not good! Is it a good time to sneak out?* To reach the French doors off the patio where he’d sprung the lock and entered would be a long trip through the mansion. It would be better to leave through the garage. He couldn’t risk the noise from opening the garage door, but maybe the garage had a side door to the yard.

He entered the garage and looked around. There was a side door, but it was locked. He could try to kick it open, but that would make more noise than the huge three-car garage door. He wasn’t sure he had the strength either.

He heard mutterings in the kitchen. *Frank reporting back to the Bimmer-man?* He spun around three-sixty, looking for any means of escape. Saw the keys were still in the BMW. *Why not?* It would smash through the door OK. He’d back down the drive a bit, do a three-point, and be on his way.

He hopped in and started the car. Turning his head to back up, he stared into the barrel of a gun.

“Easy fellow. Show me your hands and get out of my car.”

The man called Frank approached. “Who is it?”

“I think we caught a cat burglar,” said Bimmer-man. “Did you off our friend Arthur?” Dirk shook his head in the negative. “I don’t believe you. Get out!”

Frank’s gun was covering Dirk too. “How are we going to harvest without Arthur?”

“I can do it. We’ll harvest Arthur’s organs too if we can find them in the layers of fat. And we’ll have this little jerk’s fresh organs to sell too.”

Down the street, Nina, still shaking from her ordeal, smiled. They were blaming the burglar. He had interrupted her. She hadn’t even had time to shower and dress for the club. Now the thief would probably pay the price because Arthur’s little gang would blame him for killing Arthur. She would be long gone before they even thought of her. She would miss that dagger, though. It had been a family heirloom.

She pulled her bathrobe tighter and sped off into the night in her Mercedes.

Silo

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Mike Preston knew his old car well and didn't like the sound it was making. He pulled off the interstate and made his way into a small prairie town. He'd been driving all night on his way to Chicago to research another article, but getting stranded on a lonely interstate hadn't appealed to him. *Doesn't this backwater place have a service station?*

He spotted a diner with a parking lot full of old pickups—that was a good sign because he needed some breakfast, a good one because he planned to skip lunch. He saw the usual hardware and drug stores, the first outnumbering the second because this was the great American prairie. Most of those pickups probably belonged to farmers. *Or were they called ranchers here?*

Finally, after passing almost the length of the main street (he realized there might be only one), he found a service station across the street from an auto body shop. Both names started with Abe's. He pulled into the station.

"Know the sound, sir," said Abe, the mechanic and CEO of both establishments—that name was on the sewn-on tag, the overalls' only adornment. "You have a frayed belt. Give me thirty minutes and you can be on your way. Pull right into the bay. You're my first customer today."

Good lord, did the guy write jingles on the side? Way, bay, today—Preston's ears were sensitive to language nuances. The fellow had a Midwestern twang and seemed nice enough. *Is he honest?*

It took him only twenty minutes and sixty-five bucks that Preston put on his Visa after calculating he'd still be just under the credit limit. He topped the tank off paying with cash, leaving only a few bucks in his wallet. *There goes breakfast, unless it's really cheap.*

"Diner back there any good?" he said after thanking the mechanic and shaking his hand.

"Julie's is the only game in town. Just don't get any fish unless it's local. They serve breakfast all day."

"If you don't mind me asking, how do you folks keep going with just the farm folk as customers?"

"Missile silos," said the mechanic. "Guys come into town for R&R. I fix the official vehicles too. Julie feeds them. The pub serves them drinks. It's an important component in the local economy."

Maybe the only steady one? "Aren't all those missiles old?"

"The Cold War's come and gone and they're still there. I ain't complaining."

Preston sensed the genesis of a future article. After thanking Abe again, he jumped in and headed out of town. Julie's sounded good, but he had lost too much time, and didn't want to be embarrassed by having to wash dishes.

Where's the GPS? Preston's car didn't have one, so he used an old portable Garmin he hadn't updated in a while. Carrie had given him that. At least she hadn't thrown that at him when she stormed out of the apartment. He figured it was better to learn about incompatibilities before they became too involved. *But I've never become too involved. Women want a commitment—all his girlfriends had that problem!*

After finding the GPS and straightening up, he saw the red light. *A traffic light?* He slammed on his brakes but skidded into the intersection with some county road.

He backed up and pulled off the side of the road, shaking. *What I should have done to begin with. I could have been killed if there was any traffic in this dumpy burg.* After setting up the GPS, he checked his rearview mirror and saw flashing lights. *Damn! Talk about bad luck.*

The cruiser pulled up to his back bumper. It contained some kind of deputy or state trooper, a woman, and two kids. The kids were in the back behind a screen. *Good place for them.* He didn't like screaming kids; these looked like they were screaming. *Ugh! Keep them in the car.*

"Not from around here," said the cruiser's driver. Sheriff Deputy J. Jenkins. Abe's label had been cloth; this was engraved plastic. "The light gets you slickers every time. Let's see your driver's ID and insurance card, fellow."

"Why are you on my case? I left money in your town. Are you taking that woman and her kids to jail? That could be more important than a simple traffic ticket. She looks like she's angry. Maybe violent?"

"That's my wife and our kids, if it's any of your business."

Oops! "It sure is. I might have to report you. Joyriding using official cars isn't allowed from where I'm from."

Jenkins frowned. "Where you're from they probably don't treat authority with respect, so I'll try to let that pass. Your credentials."

"Some welcome you folks give," said Preston. "Why is your wife angry?"

"Because Jake Jenkins is an asshole," said a lilting voice from the back of the car.

"Get back into the car, Judy."

"He's behind on his quota. He knows you'll pay up to be on your way. That's the scam they work around here."

"Shut up, Judy! Get back in the car."

"We're late, Jake. Let this stranger be."

"He broke the law."

"Just give me the ticket," Preston said. "I don't want to get into the middle of a family quarrel, or any quarrel for that matter. I'm willing to help with the quota. How much is the donation?" *Do I have enough room on the credit card?* He couldn't remember if he had some outstanding purchases. *What happens when you go over the limit?*

"It's a fine, not a donation. Twenty-five for speeding, fifty for running a red light."

"Speeding? I just came out of the service station. This car goes zero to sixty in about ten minutes!"

"Twenty MPH is the limit. You were going faster than that."

"You're full of shit! Where's your radar gun? I bet it hasn't been calibrated since your department bought it back in the Dark Ages. Those missiles in the silo are probably newer."

Jenkins frowned. "Out! I'm hauling you in for resisting arrest."

When Preston stepped out of the car, Jenkins handcuffed him.

"This is going to make the best exposé article I've ever written," he said.

"Are you crazy?" the wife said to her husband. "You're doing this just to avoid seeing my parents!" She stomped off to return to the cruiser.

At the jail, Jenkins read Preston his Miranda rights. He asked for his one call.

"Do you know a lawyer in the area?" said Jenkins.

Does that imply there are none? "Not calling a lawyer. I'm calling an editor. This will make a great story. I can see the title on the Tribune article now: 'Mayberry Sheriff's Department Hassles Reporter.' Here's an even better one: 'Excessive Force in a Prairie Town.' How's that sound?"

"Forget the call," said Jenkins, shaking his head. "The magistrate will be through here in three days. You can enjoy Julie's jail-cell cooking until then. Let's go, Preston. Into the cell."

Preston had to strip and put on orange overalls. Once in the cell, he sat on his cot and rested his head against the construction-block wall. Next time he saw Jenkins, the deputy was carrying a cold dinner.

"I forgot to give this to you," said the deputy. "My apologies." The sneering smile said he didn't give a rat's ass.

"When I'm out of here, you people are going to be slapped with a lawsuit that will eat up your entire budget for the next ten years and end your job, deputy. Mark my words." He took the tray and tossed it into the garbage can. "You people are a bunch of fascist country hicks. Where's my car?"

"You won't be needing it. Seeing as how you have only three dollars in your wallet and your credit is maxed out, you won't be able to pay the fine. If someone's dumb enough to lend you the money, you'll have the towing and impound charge, plus Julie's fine meals, added to the bill." He laughed and pointed to the garbage can. "You might want to dig out her dinner. Unless you want to go on a long-term hunger strike like one of those A-Rabs. No skin off my nose if you die from starvation in here."

Preston's stomach rumbled, but he finally fell asleep. Sometime during the early morning hours, all hell broke loose.

A local who moonlighted as a watchman for the jail was incapacitated by flash grenades and tear gas. Preston saw the flash through the small window in the door leading to the cell block; some of the tear gas seeped through there too, making his eyes water. The tear gas level increased as that same door was blown away. Two men in gas masks with automatic weapons and body armor came in. One had the keys. He opened the cell door and handed a gas mask to Preston.

"Put it on and let's get out of here!"

Preston didn't have much choice. They grabbed him under the arms and crab-walked him through the thicker tear gas cloud in the outer office. He almost tripped over the watchman's body. *Not dead. Still breathing.* Outside an idling, black Humvee was waiting in front of the jail; three other men were standing guard, two facing down the main street in opposite directions, the other crouched with gun trained on rooftops.

The two from inside threw Preston into the back of the Humvee and slammed the door. The Humvee swayed from side to side as the five men scrambled aboard, the motor sang, and they were off.

Preston ripped off the gas mask. He couldn't stand due to the Humvee's motion, so he crawled over to one of two benches. There were four seatbelts on each one. He strapped himself in.

What the hell is going on? He was thinking that breaking out of jail might be more than a traffic fine. He knew one thing for damn sure: he was going to take a plane next time!

After a long ride—he no longer had a watch, so he couldn't tell how long—the Humvee started to go downhill. That seemed odd to Preston. The prairie was pretty flat in these parts, but the slope was steep. Things leveled out and the Humvee came to a stop. Preston unstrapped and moved to the rear of the Humvee. He'd decided to jump whomever opened the door, hoping the element of surprise would compensate for his new jailor's bulk.

But when the door opened, he didn't jump.

"Welcome, Mr. Preston," said a smiling young woman in soldier's fatigues. "I'm Colonel Linda Betancourt. You're now on USAF property. I hope you enjoyed the trip here."

He stepped down slowly. "You have to be kidding me. Why would the U.S. government stage a jailbreak?"

She smiled. "Not exactly the government. We've taken over this silo. We don't like investigative reporters, especially when we're not quite ready to go into action."

"I'm missing something. Aren't you Air Force?"

"Technically, but we're patriots above all else. We're readying a missile launch that will change the course of human history."

"This is a Minuteman silo, right?"

"And we're the crew that's usually here, correct. My crew is the best there is. All patriots. Walk with me."

The facility was more like a man-made cave than a silo. Preston supposed that somewhere a missile lurked, a deadly leftover from the Cold War that most people had forgotten about. *But maybe not Putin?* Betancourt could have been standing on a right-wing soapbox in the nation's capital with her running diatribe about personal responsibility and patriotism. He started tuning out and focusing on where they were going and remembering where they'd been. They ended up in a rec room of some sort. A round table with eight chairs plus a kitchenette with small fridge and microwave furnished it. A flat screen TV hung from one wall. *Barebones comfort for the troops.*

"You're a good listener, Mr. Preston. Have a seat."

Now comes the quiz. He took a chair nearly opposite her.

"As a reporter, I observe. One observation is that you sprung me from one jail to put me in another. Why? I'm no threat to you."

“Potential threat. The sheriff and his deputies have no idea about what’s going on here, and I want to keep it that way. We’re maintaining the illusion that we’re loyal Air Force boys and girls while we prepare.”

“What’s to prepare? You have a missile. I assume you’re either going to shoot it somewhere or use it for blackmail. Which is it?”

“No blackmail. We have certain procedures, mostly failsafe mechanisms, we have to circumvent. We’ll only have one chance to fire our bird.”

“I assume your entire group is on board with this. You do realize it’s treason, right?”

“Was it treason when the Founding Fathers rebelled against the British tyrant? There’s a fine line between treason and patriotism. Like I said originally, we want to change the course of history. Each MIRV will be targeted against a holy shrine in the Middle East.”

“I’m not sure the Muslims will appreciate that,” said Preston.

“Not just Muslims, Mr. Preston. Although ISIS has done a good job of destroying ancient antiquities that aren’t Islamic, including many Christian ones, we will spread the pain around. Along with the shrines, Arabs, Christians, and Jews will die, along with the rabid centuries-old ethnic hatreds among them.”

“You’re not one of those Rapture fanatics, are you?”

She smiled. “You’re mocking me. I’m a rationalist who believes that a strong secular state is necessary to maintain civil order. Irrational beliefs have no place in the modern world.”

“But isn’t that in itself an irrational belief?” He saw the anger flare in her eyes. “Never mind. I feel honored that you thought I would find you out. I was only going to write an exposé about my experiences in that little town. Now you’ve handed me a much bigger story.”

“You won’t be writing either story, Mr. Preston. Once we launch, we’ll all be dead. Do you think we’d just sit here and let the SWAT teams move in? It will be painless, I assure you.”

“If that’s the case, why not just kill me now?”

“Because you can write *our* story from *our* viewpoint. I want to tell the world what happened here. Just before we launch, you’ll be allowed to send *our* story to your favorite editor. You will go out in a blaze of glory as a journalist.”

“And what if I refuse?”

“Then we will kill you. Simple as that.”

Preston was confined to a small room with a bathroom attached. It wasn’t a cell, but two burly Air Force guards stood just outside the door. Meals were brought to him.

Colonel Betancourt had provided a laptop. It wasn’t connected to anything. As the days passed, Betancourt would review what he’d written, and he was then taken to different parts of the underground cavern to meet people and learn about what they intended to do.

On the surface, the Air Force men and women seemed reasonable folks, but it didn’t take long to expose their fanatic mindsets. Linda Betancourt was the worst, of course. Moreover, she was worse than any editor he’d ever had. He felt like a ghostwriter writing for a megalomaniac.

“This is better,” she said on the fifth day. “You’re starting to see our point of view.” She stood, stretched, and then moved beside him at the little desk. He began to get nervous when she started rubbing his neck. “I knew you’d come around. I can be very persuasive, and right is on our side. You’re tense, Mr. Preston. Or, can I call you Mike now?”

“Maybe I’m tense because I’m afraid you’ll break my neck. You threatened to kill me, remember?”

She put a hand on his cheek. “I remember. Have you ever considered how difficult it is to be female and the highest ranking officer in a close-knit group?”

“Meaning that your male underlings would never take a pass at you? Yes, I have. It must be frustrating.” *Where is she going with this?*

“It’s more than frustrating. A woman has needs, you know.”

“That’s usually a man’s line. No way I’m going to sleep with you, Colonel.”

She stopped her caresses and cuffed him behind the ear. “That ends me being nice to you, Mr. Preston. Finish that article. It’s almost time.” She turned one final time, pointing an index finger at him. “I could have made your remaining hours the best of your life.”

She did an about face, walked out the door, and slammed it behind her.

Preston knew nothing about missile software or hardware. He knew something about electricity, though. Several times the guard who had accompanied him on his fact-finding trips around the site to gather information for his article had been called away long enough for him to reroute some wiring, randomly exchanging red with green and black in several places or just ripping the wires loose. He also left a few notes in Humvee glove compartments that said “Preston @ Minuteman silo.” It was about all he could do. He knew the Humvees were sometimes serviced by Abe, the friendly car mechanic who had worked on his car, but he didn’t have high hopes. When launch day came, the wiring changes might make a difference, though.

But they found some of his wiring changes. Betancourt had one of her apes beat the crap out of him in an attempt to make him tell exactly what he’d done, but he didn’t, mostly because he couldn’t remember.

“Leave him!” she said. “We’ll need to haul out all the old manuals and check everything. If he so much as whimpers, kill the SOB.”

Like a boxer on the mat, Preston sensed that conversation as a distant murmuring, but he understood. *Was groaning allowed?* He wasn’t about to move, that much was certain.

Someone must have picked him up later. He awoke in the bunk, knowing that there wasn’t any spot on his body that didn’t hurt. *So, why do I feel good about things? Oh yeah, I delayed the launch!* That meant he had more time to live.

The laptop and little desk had disappeared. He assumed that Betancourt was finishing the article. She’d changed it so much, she might as well. But he knew she’d be back. She would want the address of an editor. By that time it would be too late to pull a fast one and pretend SecDef or POTUS was his editor, for example—he didn’t have their addresses either. He needed another plan.

He wondered how the suicidal maniacs were going to pull off their final snuff act. Probably toxic gas in the air system after the launch. Somewhere in his roaming, a tech had explained that the air supply from above could be shut off and they would go on an internal supply so that they could be isolated from fallout. He had supposed the assumption was that, in a nuclear exchange, the Air Force would want the option of several salvos depending on an enemy’s response. That was just a guess—he didn’t know much about Minuteman tactics. But a sealed silo made a great tomb.

About the only thing he could do was curse at the Air Force for not vetting the personnel in the silos enough. How could they have missed these fanatics? Or, had they become fanatics on the job, cooped up in the silo? The answers didn't matter, of course. He was going to die.

Two days later there was an explosion. Preston thought the crazies had launched the missile. But he was wrong. After a bit, there was also the sound of a firefight right outside his door and then silence. He was about to go and peek into the corridor, when the door swung open. A commando leveled a gun at him. *Shit, not again!*

"Mike Preston?" He nodded, and the gun was lowered. "Please come with me."

Ten minutes later, he was on the surface. He spotted Betancourt, waved, and received a killing look. She was in handcuffs. Black soot was on her face and clothes. Her hair was frizzed.

"You OK?"

Preston turned toward the familiar voice. *Jenkins.*

"Well, hello, deputy. We meet again. I assume Abe the mechanic found my note."

"Notes. When the number reached three, he came to me. We started the ball rolling with the Pentagon. Of course, they took over the case. The Feds always do that. I'm not sure I wanted to be down inside there anyway. They had sarin gas canisters."

Preston nodded. "For the mass suicide after the launch. These guys make the least sane among us seem like Oliver Sacks."

"I have no idea who that is, Preston. Ready to go back to jail?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Jenkins laughed. "Yep. Of course. Judy wants to invite you to dinner. She has a sister she's trying to marry off. For some reason, Judy thinks you're husband material for her."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. In fact, my sister-in-law looks a bit like Betancourt."

"Hopefully a lot saner. Oh, what the hell? What's for dinner?"

"I'm throwing a few steaks on the ol' barbecue, and Judy and Gretchen will whip up the sides. Apple pie for dessert, of course."

"Sounds good. I haven't had a decent meal since you arrested me."

Sessions

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Session 1

“How do you feel about the shooting now?” said the shrink.

The police psychiatrist spoke in a whisper, making Gina Peralta wonder how she could hear the woman above the traffic noise just two stories below the window. The detective was standing behind the shrink’s desk chair. She spun and looked across the desk at the empty sofa and the shrink sitting in the armchair.

Gina was a large woman of Argentine descent; her inquisitor was an Asian-American doll in comparison. But the shrink could make Gina feel like Alice after eating the mushroom at times—shrinking, shrinking. She put her hands on the desk chair to steady herself.

“I’m coming to grips with it,” she said.

“Self-preservation justifies your actions, Gina. You know that.”

Platitudes. I’m tired of them all. “I know that from a logical point of view. My emotional problem is that I ended a person’s life.”

“Often there is a first time, especially in this city. You did what you had to do.”

“Are you implying I’ll become hardened to it? I don’t want to be.” Gina licked her lips. *I never want to reach that point!*

“No, but you’ll be better prepared, and you’ll come to terms with the bad memories.”

“Maybe I should have wrestled him for the baseball bat.”

“And maybe you’d be dead if you’d tried. From your partner’s description, this meth-head was out of his mind. The bat was as much a lethal weapon as your gun. With your wounds, I’m just amazed you got your shot off.”

Gina glanced at her right arm that was still in a sling. The PT sessions were worse than the shrink sessions. “Me too. But he was a big target. The shot using the left hand didn’t have to be accurate.”

“Come. Lie down again.” The shrink patted the couch. “Tell me about the nightmares.”

Gina returned to the sofa. “They’re all over the board. I’ve told you about some of them. Last night’s was like being in a parallel universe. My shot missed, and I watched that crazy bastard beat Jack Hershey and his daughter to death with my one good eye before I passed out.”

“It didn’t happen that way. You and your partner saved Jack and Carol.”

“Mick feels guilty about not arriving sooner. He had just come upstairs and saw the SOB go after me. He couldn’t shoot because Jack and Carol were in the line of fire. He might be more traumatized than I am. Dunno.”

“Maybe I should ask him to come see me too.”

Gina smiled. *Oh yeah, Mick would like that!* He had no use for shrinks. She had felt that way initially too, but now she wasn’t so sure.

“You’d have to work on him a bit. Maybe tell him it would help me?”

“A dual session? No, that doesn’t work. But that suggests a different excuse. I’ll tell him I want his input because he knows you well. That’s valid. He’s your partner.” She smiled at Gina. “Let’s go through the events again.”

“I’m tired of that.”

"I know. But clearly you're still thinking about choices. I want to convince you that you had no viable choices beyond the actions you took. What went down had to go down. The sooner you can live with that, the better off you'll be."

Session 2

"Did you say your goodbyes to Jack and Carol?" Gina nodded. "How do you feel about that?"

Gina thought about the shrink's question a moment. *How should a person feel when she knows she'll never see a loved one again?* "I think I envy them. In the witness protection program, they can start a new life and forget about all the horror that happened."

"That was compounded by our learning who the meth-head was," said the shrink. "Jack had a tough ride having to live through all that happened on that grand jury witness stand. Jack and Carol will never forget the horror that happened, though. Time will just dull the rawness of it. The little girl has a better chance of healing than the father. Seeing her mother doused with gasoline and lit on fire isn't something she'll forget soon, though."

"Jack might have problems even forgetting the trial," said Gina. "This case had more twists than I could have imagined. That crazy bastard was also a dealer. Who'd figure that?"

"I've heard that it's not that uncommon. What was weird was his being daddy's spoiled little boy, with daddy being a major player in organized crime. That connection should put that drug dealing daddy in jail for many years. One down and many to go, including the father, who has some serious legal problems now with his impending trial. We'll get him. How do you feel about that? Your shooting ended up doing society a world of good."

"I focus more on Jack and his kid. I love that man."

"And now you lose him to witness protection. You could marry him and just be a mother to Carol, you know."

"He asked me." Gina shed some tears. "I made a different choice. I want to return to active duty and continue my work cleaning up the streets. I think that's my calling."

"That's a valid choice. But is it the right choice for you? Marrying Jack and joining him and his daughter in witness protection would be another choice. Some might consider it an easier one. Are you sure you're OK with the choice you're making?"

"Not yet. I'm still torn. But saying goodbye to them sort of settles it, doesn't it?"

"I don't know. Let's explore your feelings a bit more. I have to OK your return to active duty. I'm not satisfied, so bear with me. Your wounds go far beyond a broken arm and several healed knife slashes."

"Are you going to start that psycho-babble about PTSD again?"

"Yes."

Russians

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Chapter One

Professor Boris Vashchenko left his desk chair and walked over to his office window, waiting to see Janet Connors as she left the building and entered the quad. *Beautiful and smart. She'll be successful in whatever career she chooses.* His student reminded him of Natasha, a musician he had dated in Moscow for a time. *I wonder what's become of her.* He was surprised he still cared.

Boris jerked when the shot rang out. Connors stumbled and fell. He rushed out of the office and downstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

On the way down, he thought about America's gun culture. Shootings had occurred at other universities. *Is Janet Connors a fanatic's victim?*

His afternoon office hours had come too soon. He heard the knock, looked at his watch, and sighed. He opened his office door.

"Hello, Ms. Connors. Please come in and take a seat."

Connors was the case of one calculus student where he could say his role as professor was largely superfluous but still made him feel that his efforts as a teacher of the next generation weren't wasted. *Why is it the best students come to my office hours more than those who really need help?* Talking to other professors, he had concluded that was a common phenomenon...and complaint.

"The bad ones don't give a rat's ass," his friend and colleague Gerry Grimes had told him. "You'll get used to it."

"What can I do for you today?" he said to his student.

"I'm having problems with Stokes' theorem," she said.

Boris smiled, recalling his problems with that same theorem so long ago. He had finally developed a gut feel for it in an applied physics course on fluid flow, and now appreciated its beauty through its generalizations to manifold theory.

"It's a tough one," he said. "You're familiar with the fundamental theorem of calculus: the integral of the derivative of a function over an interval is the difference in the values of the function at the endpoints of the interval?" She nodded. "Think of the endpoints as the boundary of the interval. Stokes' theorem just generalizes that to where we have a vector field and its curl, the 3D-cousin of the derivative."

She thought a few moments. He waited. "Hmm. That's not so mysterious anymore. The proof seems complicated, though."

"Powerful theorems often have complex proofs."

"Advanced algebra seems easier. I get group theory. Vector calculus seems geometrical but non-intuitive. Does anyone study it anymore?"

He nodded. "It's often used in applications, and academics use its generalizations in differential geometry. There's a famous book about gravity that's really a differential geometry textbook. I guess that's becoming more applied too, with space travel and detecting gravitational waves."

"You mean Einstein's General Theory?" He nodded again. "Wow! That's neat."

"I think so too."

She asked a few more questions and then left, leading to the present situation where he ran out the door into the quad.

Some students he had seen sitting on a bench in the quad had also heard the shot and seen Connors fall. They rushed toward her and arrived before Boris. The girl kneeling beside Connors had turned her over.

"Call 9-1-1," Boris told the boy. "Let me examine her," he said, kneeling on the other side of the girl. The bullet had entered the back side of the victim's forearm and continued on through, leaving a clean but bloody and ragged hole. He took out his handkerchief. "Press here," he told the girl.

He stood and looked back at his office building. Against the glare of the sun, he could see nothing. He took out his own cellphone and dialed campus police. "We have a shooter in Sullivan Quad. We've called 9-1-1, but you'll probably arrive sooner. The victim will need an ambulance. Can you close down this area? The shooter might be targeting us at this moment."

The campus cops were trained for these emergencies now. The dispatcher on the other end of the line promised to do her best.

"Let's carry her behind those trees," Boris told the boy.

Boris was surprised by how light Connors was. She looked like a porcelain angel as they laid her down on a grassy slope. Even her lips were pale.

At least she'll be shielded from a gunman on the roof.

The police shut down the entire campus. Agents from the FBI made an appearance after the ambulance left. Local cops and the local CSU were already on the scene, so the FBI left most of the crime scene work to them.

Boris and the two kids spent the rest of the afternoon answering questions. He left when the local cops fanned out to interview other students and faculty. The FBI left just before him, satisfied that this wasn't a federal problem.

"Guess I caused a lot of excitement," Janet Connors said, smiling at her visitor.

"That's one way of describing it, I suppose," said Boris. "How do you feel?"

"Still a bit sleepy. Guess they gave me something?"

He eyed the various IVs. "Who knows? You were in a bit of shock, I think. Did you talk to the police?"

"Not yet. The doctors wouldn't let them interrogate me."

"Good for them. Hopefully not an interrogation and just information gathering. Sara and Michael, the students who helped out, and I were grilled. I think the authorities are still talking to students, especially in the dorm directly across the quad from my office building, and to other faculty from the other offices, to determine if they saw anything. Many heard the shot."

"Whoever it was had a lousy aim," she said. "If I were the shooter, my target would be dead." He raised his eyebrows. "Just saying. I know a little about guns. My mother made me take courses and often took me to the range."

"The cops will ask you many questions, like, do you have any enemies, Ms. Connors?"

“Call me Jan. Maybe the guy I beat out for valedictorian?” She laughed. “Of course, I went to the prom with him, so he probably doesn’t fit the profile of an enemy or sniper. And he’s all the way across the country now, at Stanford.”

Boris nodded. “Are you in a dorm or apartment? Maybe a present or past roommate?”

“An apartment. Mary Sue and Vlad are my roommates. Mary Sue’s a music major and wouldn’t hurt a fly. Vlad’s a bit of a weird nerd. We call him Vlad the Impaler because he’s always reading vampire stories. Writes them too, but he knows computers backwards and forwards. Strange, huh? The three of us met our freshman year and hit it off. Mary Sue’s an African-American from Tupelo and Vlad’s from Saratoga.”

“Tupelo, Mississippi?” Jan nodded. “Saratoga, New York?”

“No, Saratoga, California. Silicon Valley, near San Jose. Kids go to school all over the place. Those who can, anyway.”

“Give the police that information. They’ll want to interview your roommates, more to ask them if they know anyone who might want to hurt you. You might not know you have enemies on campus, Ms.—er, Jan.”

“You’re being very helpful. Why?”

“This happened on my watch,” said Boris. “And you remind me of someone.” He looked at his watch. “I need to get going. I have an 8 a.m. class.” He wrote his cellphone number on a pad next to the hospital bed. “Call me if you need anything. You’ll probably feel better in the morning.”

In the hospital corridor outside the girl’s room, Boris stopped a moment and made a call. “This is Professor Vashchenko, Sergeant Fonseca. You said to call if I thought of something important. When I arrived at the hospital, I was surprised to see there’s no policeman on duty here. Don’t you think Ms. Connors deserves some protection? Her attack might be a personal one—a stalker, someone who identifies her with a woman who jilted him, whatever.”

“Leave the detective work to us, professor,” said the voice on the other end. “But I’ll check with the chief if we can send a uniform to the hospital. That’s not a bad idea. I’d rather keep Ms. Connors alive because I want to be able to interrogate her.”

“Don’t do it now. She needs her rest. I cut my visit short for that reason.”

“I understand she’s hot. You got a personal interest here, prof?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. She’s my best student!”

A bit after 2 a.m., there was a knock on Boris’s apartment door. It caused a bitter memory of when the FSB had come knocking one night. The chess master had told him it might happen. *You play chess with a guy and you’re Putin’s enemy!*

He rose, turned on lights, and found his bathrobe. He went to the door and looked through the peephole, seeing a rotund man in an old tan raincoat chewing a toothpick and holding up a badge. Boris opened the door but left the chain on.

“Detective Fonseca, Professor Wachanko. You talked to me. I need to talk to you.”

“At this hour? Very well. Can I examine your credentials?”

Fonseca handed the badge in, Boris examined them, and took off the chain. “Just call me Boris,” he said, opening the door wide. He figured the detective was almost illiterate and would never be able to pronounce his last name.

“Sure thing,” the detective said, sitting in a one of the matching wingchairs and crossing his legs, “if you call me Leo.” He smiled. “We got a problem, Boris.”

“Is Jan Connors OK?”

“Fine, far as I know. We have a uniform on duty at the hospital. One roomie is missing, though, and the other one is hysterical. Strange setup there, by the way. A bit kinky if you ask me.”

“A student with roommates? Why is that unusual?”

“Two gals and a guy. There used to be an old sitcom about that, called ‘Three’s Company,’ I think. You probably never saw it. Pretty clean by today’s standards. With today’s kids, we could be talking about a sex cult.”

“They’re students, but also adults free to make their own choices. Who’s missing and who’s hysterical?”

“Little black girl named Mary Sue is the hysterical one, saying the cops aren’t doing a damned thing, ‘fraid she’ll be next, bla-bla-bla. Some guy named Vladimir is the one missing. Your kind, prof.”

“My kind?”

“Russian. Vladimir Levitsky. Mary Sue hasn’t seen him since before the attack. I’m thinking he was the one who took the shot at your student. I’m also thinking he’s on his way back to Russia as we speak. We’re checking airports and other transportation hubs.”

“He’s from California. You might want to check for flights there too. Why would he want to kill Jan?”

“Maybe Mary Sue and Jan were a bit too kinky-close? Maybe he thought Jan spurned him, even if she didn’t? Maybe he wanted to impress Jodie Foster? You tell me.”

“I have nothing to add to those conjectures. I didn’t even understand one of them. Why are you here?”

“Playing Columbo? Another TV series. Not very up on pop culture, eh? Don’t ever go on Jeopardy.”

“And here I thought I spoke English well. I don’t think you answered my question. Why are you here?”

“Just noticed the address of your apartment is only three blocks from the weird trio’s. I’ll generalize my original question: do you have a thing going with any of them?”

“That’s such a stupid question that I shouldn’t even bother to answer it, but the answer is no, Leo, I don’t have any relationship with any of them.” He got up and started pacing. “I didn’t even know their apartment was three blocks away, but this is a university town—single professors and students who live off campus still find it convenient to be near their classes.” He paused and faced the smaller man. “I might have seen this Mary Sue and Vlad around, but I wouldn’t have known they were Connors’s roommates. I heard their names the first time today...” he looked at his watch...”yesterday. And Jan Connors is simply a student with a lot of promise.”

“Doesn’t Mr. Levitsky work in the same academic area as you?”

“Computer scientists use a different kind of math, Leo, not algebraic topology. Not even close.”

“You’re both Russians.”

“Levitsky is probably a naturalized or even natural-born citizen. Even his parents might be.”

“And do you resent that?”

“What?” Boris was astonished. “Why would I? In five years, I’ll take my citizenship test. I’m already an associate professor here. And mathematics respects no borders. My life is an open book.”

Fonseca smiled. “Yeah, but I can’t read it if it’s in Russian.” He stood. “If it’s any comfort, I believe you. And I apologize. I’m just doing my job.” He paused at the door. “By the way, did I say we found blood near Levitsky’s bed? There might be foul play. Place is such a mess that Mary Sue said neither she nor Jan Connors wanted to go inside. Takeout cartons and dirty clothes all over the place.” He shrugged. “Guess you have to be careful. You think you know someone, and they turn out to be slob. Mary Sue said neither she nor the girl had any idea he was that bad.” Fonseca looked around. “Now this place is pristine. You’d be the perfect man for my ex. G’night, Boris.”

After the cop left, Boris took two aspirins and tried to get some sleep. He couldn’t manage that until just before the alarm went off. *My next lecture is going to be a disaster!*

Chapter Two

The next morning Leo Fonseca was at the office. He studied the CSU’s photos of Vlad Levitsky’s bedroom, an idea forming. That roommate, Mary Sue, had said it was always a mess, but was it messier than it should be? The mattress on the single bed was crooked, but the bed was made. *Hiding the blood? Or looking underneath?* A few drawers in the old desk were half-opened, and memory sticks were scattered on the top amongst the takeout cartons. He picked up the phone.

“Mark, when you dusted the apartment, were there any prints in there beyond those of the three renters?”

Fonseca waited while Mark McNair, who worked in the crime lab, formed his thoughts. The guy was sharp but irritatingly slow in his speech patterns, some of that due to his Georgia upbringing, but mostly due to his reflective nature.

“No, sergeant, but the blood type is neither Mary Sue’s nor Jan’s. Don’t know about Levitsky’s, of course. There’s just one type not accounted for, though. We have DNA samples we’ll be checking, but that’s the same problem, unless we come up with four different people in that case.”

“Get to it then. I’m developing this theory that the room was tossed. I’ll be questioning Jan and Mary Sue, but Mary Sue already said they never went in there. If you find her DNA in there, she’s lying.”

“We do the best we can. This isn’t that old TV show, CSI, you know.”

“The Feds are involved. Pass on some of the lab work to them if you need to. ‘Course they’d probably take longer. Shit, do what’s best. I need results or this case will become just another cold one.”

“FYI: we have the shell and bullet.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we didn’t get any useful data from them. A bullet was found in a tree, likely the one that went through the victim’s arm. Can’t get anything except caliber, but we had that from the shell. I wanted to test the shell for fingerprints. Found only a bit of dust.”

“Powder? So what? Just give me the caliber.”

“Point twenty-two-long rim fire. Would have been hard to get a full print. The dust isn’t GSR, though. It’s probably the stuff used on those medical rubber gloves to keep the latex from sticking. Means the shooter was careful. Maybe a pro?”

“With a laser sight, that kind of rifle is still deadly.” *Where was Jan Connors heading?* He’d have to ask her. *Maybe it wasn’t such a bad shot?* If she was returning to the apartment, had someone stopped her while others kidnapped Vlad and tossed his room? His theory had a lot of holes in it. It was mostly conjecture, only a possible scenario. He didn’t have any other, though. “Send those results to my smart phone. I’m off to see Janet Connors.”

“Hello, Ms. Connors, how are you feeling?” Fonseca flashed his badge. “Hi, Boris.”

“Better,” said Jan. “Let me warn you, I can’t help you very much. Someone was on the roof of the professor’s office building and took a shot at me when I came out. That’s all I know.”

“Lucky for you he was a terrible shot.” Fonseca pulled up a chair and sat beside Boris. “Did the prof tell you your roommate is missing?” She nodded. “Think he might have shot you?”

“Vlad? Whatever for? He’s awfully moody sometimes, but he’s not violent. Mary Sue, Vlad, and I became friends when we were first-year students. We do a lot of things together.”

“Like what?”

“Rock concerts, plays, soccer games, whatever. They’ve both been at my Mom’s house twice for barbecues.”

“That’s about one hundred miles away. Do you take the bus?”

“One time she picked us up. The other, we went by bus. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Yes, sergeant, you seem to be—how do you say it?—way out in left field,” said Boris.

“Do you have any idea why someone would be searching Vlad’s room? Or what they might be looking for?”

“His room’s always a mess. What could they possibly even find there?”

“Just answer the questions.”

“No, I have no idea. When did that happen?”

“Near as I can tell, about the same time you were shot. Were you heading back to the apartment after talking to Boris?”

She frowned. “Yes, I was. Again, what’s that got to do with anything?”

“A lot, if someone just wanted to keep you from interrupting that search.”

She thought a moment. “That would explain why I’m still alive...”

“Precisely. Like my little theory, professor?”

Boris shrugged. “It’s just as likely as any other having no correlation between the events.”

“What does that mean?” said Leo.

“He’s saying the events might not be related,” Jan said. “My shooter could just be a bad shot.”

“That would point to a disgruntled ex-boyfriend or something similar,” said the cop.

“Anyone like that in your past? A stalker maybe, or a perv sending you pornographic emails?”

Jan laughed. "Mary Sue says I scare off the boys. I'm tall to begin with, and she says men aren't attracted to smart women. I don't flaunt it, but everyone knows I do well in my classes, even here where they're far more difficult than in high school."

"What's Mary Sue's story? Does she have a thing for you?"

"Pardon? You mean romantic interest? That's so out of line I shouldn't answer—"

"You don't have to," said Boris.

Jan smiled at him. "But I will. Mary Sue and her soccer goalie are hot and heavy and can't wait for graduation when they can get married."

"What about Vlad? He's a bit weird. Does he have a girlfriend?"

"He's dated several girls on campus. Most of them have common interests. He's pulled overnights with one. They were designing some app. They've sold a few."

"Hmm. A likely excuse, but I'll accept that for the time being. Know who these girls are?"

"The app-girl is named Penny. That might be short for Penelope. I don't know the other girls' names. Mary Sue might."

Leo nodded. "I'll be talking to her next. For now, I'm going to assume your shooting, the tossing of Vlad's room, and his disappearance are all related. This campus is usually quiet compared to the surrounding community. It's too much coincidence to have these occurrences and not have them related."

"That could be an interesting line of investigation," said Boris. "You might be looking for someone from the surrounding community."

"Leave the detective work to me." But Fonseca winked at Boris. "But you're right. That's a possibility. And that would make my job very difficult."

Two days later, Boris was listening to a Beethoven string quartet while working through some complicated calculations. It was the first evening he hadn't gone to see Janet Connors at the hospital. She was now home and would start classes again, her arm in a sling earning her a sidekick who would take notes for her, write out homework, and take tests with her.

His ringtone interrupted his theorem proving.

"Professor?" Connors sounded like she was whispering.

"Jan? I can hardly hear you. Where are you?"

"In your apartment building's entrance hall. Someone's hurt Mary Sue!"

"What? Where is she?"

"Back in our apartment. Or the hospital. I ran out of the apartment and called 9-1-1. When I opened our door, I saw her on the floor. And someone was in her bedroom!"

"OK. Calm down. Can you take the elevator? I'm in 3G." Boris opened his door and waited for her. When the elevator door opened, he went to help her. She was bent over, the hand from the good arm on her knee for support. "You're out of breath."

"I ran all the way. That detective told us where you live. I just didn't know the apartment number."

"Why didn't you wait for the police?"

"Because someone was still in there! I told 9-1-1 that. I'm such a coward. I should have stayed to help Mary Sue."

"You might be dead now if you had done that. 9-1-1 will get the police there if you told the operator that someone was in your apartment. Considering your shoulder, I don't think you could have put up much of a fight. You did the right thing."

"I could have attacked the bastard with a kitchen knife!"

"Don't second guess this. What if that bastard had a gun? A knife wouldn't do much good."

"I could probably throw it faster than he could shoot."

He frowned. "Maybe you've seen too many thriller movies."

"You're probably right. A kitchen knife isn't very good for throwing anyway. Can I have some milk?"

Boris's kitchen window overlooked the street. He heard screeching brakes and car doors slam. He peered out just in time to see four men exit a black SUV. The streetlamp lighted their faces as they surveyed their surroundings. *Not cops. More like thugs.* The memory of that FSB invasion of his Moscow home resurfaced.

He put the milk carton back in the refrigerator and dashed back to Jan.

"We need to get out of here! Four guys are coming for you, and they don't look friendly."

They took the elevator down to the basement garage. Boris saw one thug was waiting for them. *They're pros, covering all exits. But what kind of pros?*

The element of surprise and Boris's quick reaction saved them. He knocked the gun out of the thug's hand before he could fire and smashed a fist into the thug's larynx with the other hand. The thug went down. Boris kicked him in the head for good measure.

"My car's the VW. Run for it!"

Boris had bought the little car used. It was a convertible and leaked a bit in the winter rain and snow, but he loved it. They were on the interstate in five minutes.

Jan seemed in shock. "Where-where did you learn to do that?"

Boris thought a moment. *What to tell her? I was once stupidly preparing to confront FSB agents the next time they came for me?* "I've studied self-defense. I had the advantage of surprise. I'm no James Bond."

"More like Matt Damon as Jason Bourne," said the girl with a nervous smile. "And you thought I was over the top about the knife-throwing?" She smoothed her hair a bit. "Am I supposed to have Franka Potente's role?"

"I'm not sure I understand, and it doesn't matter. We're not in a movie here, Jan. We have to figure out what's happening."

"We seem to be on the run. How are we going to find out anything by running? I notice you're not heading for the nearest precinct station."

"Something's not right here. I want to avoid Leo Fonseca and his ilk until we figure it out. Was one of those thugs searching Mary Sue's room?"

"Maybe. I don't know. The guy in there wasn't quiet by any means. I heard crashing noises. So, yes, probably? I wasn't there for more than a few seconds."

He nodded. "That's a pattern. They tossed Vlad's room, and now Mary Sue's. Yours might have been next. They're looking for something. Something Vlad had originally, but they've concluded that he doesn't have it now." He thought a moment. "Vlad might be dead."

They tortured him. When he stuck to his story, whatever it is, they tortured him some more. Until he died. They work that way.”

“They? Maybe in Russia, professor, but this is the U. S. of A. Things like that just don’t happen here.”

“Maybe they’re better at hiding their sins here.” He took an exit off the interstate. “We need to find you a safe place to stay.”

She eyed the road sign stating the distance to the marina as they sped by. “Matt Damon was on a boat in the opening scene. Guess you’re changing the order of the script.”

“Again, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but a colleague has a houseboat at the marina. He told me where I can find the key if I ever wanted to use it.”

“What happens if he’s home?”

“He’s married now. Doesn’t use it much because he lives elsewhere.”

Boris knew Gerry Grimes’s new wife had tried to convince him to sell the houseboat for the last two years. She probably guessed that the good-looking Grimes had taken women there. Boris smiled. *Maybe even his new wife before they were married?*

Chapter Three

Once inside the houseboat, Jan and Boris went around closing blinds and shutters. He turned on the old TV set. He left her watching, found a liquor stash with a few bottles that weren’t empty—*why keep the empty ones?*—and poured generous servings into some heavy water glasses he had rinsed out. He joined her on the sofa and handed her a glass.

“I’m not twenty-one.” He shrugged. She drank several swallows of the Canadian whiskey. “This is a nightmare. I’m wondering when I’ll wake up.”

“You’ll get through it. We’re going to—” She grabbed his arm and pointed. A red banner was displayed at the bottom of the screen that said “Breaking News.” He turned up the volume.

“Police are looking for assailants who put another coed in the hospital this evening. Viewers will recall that university student Janet Connors was shot on campus a few days ago. One of her roommates has been missing since then, and another roommate has been attacked and is in an induced coma. Police are looking for Ms. Connors. Two witnesses testify seeing her running through from her apartment building. They are looking for Ms. Connors and one of her math professors, Boris Vashchenko, who is also missing. A police spokesperson is saying that Dr. Vashchenko is a prime suspect.”

Jan and Boris traded glances but then continued to watch. When the TV station returned to its regular programming, Boris turned the TV off.

“That’s not why we’re here,” he said to Jan.

“I know that. The police probably just want the public to be on the lookout for us. I guess they won’t get much from poor Mary Sue for a while. At least she’s alive.”

“Because you called 9-1-1. They might soon figure out that you fled to my apartment, though, and start a search for my VW.”

“Is that why you parked it behind that warehouse?”

“Maybe. I was acting on instinct.” He took a long sip of his whiskey. He eyed the remaining amber liquid in the glass. “Not bad, considering. I’m not sure where or how to begin figuring out what’s going on.”

“That TV reporter didn’t mention the thugs. You’d think those witnesses would have seen them too.”

He smiled, found a pad, and wrote down a number. “The SUV’s plate. I memorized it. I’m calling Fonseca.”

“They can trace the call.”

“I’ve disabled everything trackable. Do you have a cellphone?”

“Back at the apartment, in my purse.”

“So not with you. This one will go overboard as soon as I finish the call.” He found Fonseca’s number. The call went to voicemail. “He’s probably at your apartment.” He held up a finger. “Hello. You might want to be looking for a black SUV with the following license plate number.” He read off the number and hung up.

He walked to a window that overlooked the brackish waters of the marina, opened it, and tossed the phone into the night. “If we have a chance, we’ll buy some of those cheap cellphones.”

“You’re good at this.”

“I don’t watch movies, but I read a lot. I figured out that you were talking about Ludlum’s book, by the way. It was written before cellphones existed, of course.”

“You mean *The Bourne Identity*?” He nodded. “I’ll have to read it. I only saw the movie.”

“I still don’t know who Franka Potente is, but you’re looking much better than you did after your ordeals. You’ve been through a lot. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Fonseca didn’t listen to the voicemail until he returned to the precinct. *Another witness?* The voice was low-pitched but sounded familiar. Anonymous callers to the police often tried to disguise their voices. Voice characteristics were as telling as fingerprints or DNA unless a scrambler was used, though, but the police had the same problem with them: unless you had another sample from the person speaking, with a known ID, nothing could be determined until after that person was found. CSU data often only helped in a trial.

Many times callers remained anonymous because they wanted to stay under the radar. If this one was using a cellphone, though, Fonseca knew he could get lucky. He made a call to his favorite CSI. “Mark, I need a trace on a call made to my cellphone.”

“I’ll be right up, sarge. I heard the news. Do you think the professor is a perv?”

“One theory at least, but in that case it’s hard to explain why that kid Vlad is missing.”

“Maybe unrelated.” *I heard that one before, from the alleged perv!* “How’s the victim doing?”

“Induced coma. Docs think she’ll be fine, though.”

And I’m not telling him that the beating was a slow one. Torture? No rape? That’s a strange perversion, if that’s what it is. He had the gut feeling, though, that Boris wasn’t guilty of anything besides being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He called DMV. When he hung up the phone, his puzzled expression had intensified. The plate corresponded to an eighty-five-year-old man in Camden, NJ. *That sounds like a cover!* That also meant the SUV either belonged to some acronym in the U.S. government or criminal elements like drug dealers, gun traffickers, and so forth. He sighed. *Why is life so difficult?*

He made another call. “Stella, I need some computer sleuthing from you. Call every government agency with local offices and see if the following SUV is owned by them.” He gave her the plate number. “Something’s awry here. I doubt that an octogenarian is driving an SUV, but you never know with the DMV. They still have deceased people driving.”

Stella laughed. “I’ll get right on it. Is this about that girl who was brutalized?”

“You got it. Right word too. This wasn’t just a crime of passion, by any means. Someone methodically tortured her and nearly killed her.”

In two hours’ time, he had answers from both Mark and Stella. The CSI couldn’t trace the phone. “Someone went to great efforts to make it untraceable,” said Mark, “which is a little suspicious. Most people are pretty careless about that and don’t bother much with personal security. The phone’s no longer on either.”

Stella’s answer was more troubling. “That SUV belonged to the Russian consulate in New York City. They reported it stolen just this morning.”

Great! More Russians! So why doesn’t it have diplomatic plates?

Fonseca smacked the top of his desk. *What had these kids become involved in? Is Boris Vashchenko a Russian spy?* It wasn’t a paranoid question anymore. Not too far west of them, in the city of Montclair, authorities had discovered a Russian spy ring, their members living under the radar as good, solid American suburbanites.

The new Russia was attacking America on all fronts, from seeking economic advantage through industrial spying, to trying to control the electoral process and attacking American athletes in retaliation for the 2016 doping scandal. Fonseca suspected it was all done to please that narcissistic Russian dictator. *Maybe even on his orders?*

That bit of conspiracy thinking didn’t help him do his job, though. He needed to figure what was going on and make some arrests. *And I sure hope diplomatic immunity doesn’t get in my way!*

Boris had caught a few Z’s on the couch while Jan slept in the double bed. She’d winked and said she wasn’t quite ready to jump into the complete Marie-role yet, but he’d never thought of taking advantage of her. He’d enjoyed the goodnight kiss on the cheek, though, remembering Natasha.

Jan was still sleeping, so he wrote her a note and went to look for breakfast. When he returned, she was in the shower. He whipped up scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee. The small refrigerator was now stocked.

Lost in one of Gerry’s old bathrobes, she eyed him over the coffee mug’s brim. “Why do I have the idea you’ve done this before? And I didn’t receive the night-before benefits.”

“Russian men can cook when they have to do so. We do just the basics. That’s about all anyone can do in Moscow. Only the oligarchs eat well. I’m not sure what you mean by benefits.”

She laughed. “Never mind. What’s today’s agenda? Did you buy hair dye and scissors to change my appearance?”

“Why would I want to change your appearance?”

“To hide from the bad guys.”

“You really have to start taking this more seriously. What we really need to do is channel Sherlock Holmes. Something is afoot, and I’m not sure that Detective Fonseca can figure it out.”

“Oh, so we’ll be like Remington Steele. You do look a bit like Pierce Brosnan. Smaller, maybe.”

“Again, I have no idea what you’re talking about. We know where Mary Sue is, and presumably she will have police protection, so she’s safe. We need to find Vlad. He can tell us what’s happening, I’m sure.”

“Good luck with that. He’s so spacey, I could hardly find a free memory stick on his desk. And he might be the cause of this whole mess, if Fonseca’s right about their keeping me from returning while they were searching his room.”

Boris thought a moment. “Did you say memory stick? Did you take one from his desk?”

“I didn’t have any left, and I needed one for a report. Our color printer was out of ink, so I had to print it in the IT center. I did that before I came to see you.”

“Do you still have the stick?”

“It just has my report on it. ‘An Analysis of Pre-War Japan’s Economy.’ I guess it’s in my purse.”

“Which is back in your apartment. We’ll make a trip there tonight.”

“What if the cops are still there?”

“They might have police tape or something, but I bet they’ll be through with their forensics work. We’ll park down the street and check it out.”

“I might like to have my purse, but I think you’re wasting your time with the memory stick.”

“You’re sure there’s nothing else on it?”

“Just the usual stuff they sometimes put on to set things up and make it easier to use. They’re so cheap now, I don’t pay attention to those freebies anymore. I put a file with a few kilobytes on an eight-gig stick and then toss it. I guess that’s why I always run out.”

He nodded. “We won’t know until we take a close look.”

Boris could see the wheels turning. *Always thinking, calculating. This is one smart woman.*

“Why wouldn’t they just gather up all Vlad’s stuff?”

“They might have been in a hurry, not knowing if your sniper would keep you from going home. They took Vlad instead.”

“Where is all that stuff now?”

“At the precinct station, I’m sure. They’ll be combing through all his emails and so forth to see if he had any threats. Yours and Mary Sue’s too, I suppose. The police are often methodical and thorough even if ineffectual.”

Fonseca peered over Stella’s shoulder. “Got anything for me, sweetheart?”

“Nothing your wife would be happy with, sergeant.” She buttoned her sweater. “Cold in here, isn’t it?”

“Hey, I might be old, but I’m not dead. Sorry.” He took a seat and smiled. “When are you going to marry that jerk?”

“That’s none of your business, but I won’t marry him until I know he can hold down a job for more than a few months.” He nodded. “And I don’t have much, except that we’re missing a computer.”

“What’s that mean?”

"The computer we have from Vlad's room is an old one. Hardly anything on it except for some great old video games. He wrote some of them, by the way. The machine has a pretty good graphics card driving a pretty good CRT, but I don't think it was his main toy."

"He had more than one?"

"Maybe three or more. These guys buy them and keep them around. Even the old parts. Small wonder he had the biggest room."

"You think someone stole his pet machine?"

"I'd bet on it."

"That might mean that they're looking for computer files or something."

"Or something. If he blabbed to other game developers, one might have wanted to steal his code. You just never know."

"I think this is a lot more than another nerd stealing his code." Fonseca did a drumbeat with his fingers on a portion of Stella's desk. "But I have to cover all the bases. Do we have someone here with a connection to that community?"

"You're looking at her. Or, at least her tits."

Fonseca blushed. "Please don't tell my ex-wife. She caught me ogling Pam at the Christmas party and would have divorced me all over again if she could."

Stella smiled. "She married an Italian. What does she expect?"

"Do I have a bad rep?" said Fonseca.

"You're better than most cops around here. That's one of Jimmy's positive qualities. He's more of a hip man."

"OK, I think we're getting a wee bit too explicit."

"Take it as camaraderie, sergeant. This is a tough case."

"Don't I know it? I thought I was a good reader of body language, but I might be wrong. Maybe that professor is a perv and much more. He might be a sadistic torturer and murderer."

"Then you'd better collar him."

"Back to the missing computer. The professor or whoever didn't find what he needed, so they came back and went after Mary Sue. They might still be back. I'm putting two detectives on surveillance."

Stella nodded.

Chapter Four

Boris tapped on the VW passenger's window. Jan rolled it down. "There are two detectives staking out your apartment. They're so obvious even I could spot them. Here's what we're going to do."

She got out and walked in the direction he had come from. He got in the VW and passed her. As he passed the patrol car, he slowed down and turned off his headlights. As he figured, that attracted the cops' attention. He sped up and they pursued with siren and flashing lights.

He knew the neighborhood better than they did. He let them follow for about ten blocks, making numerous lefts and rights, and then turned into an alley that had an entrance into a convenience store's lot, drove through another complex's lot, and waited in the shadows behind the apartment building for five minutes between two dumpsters. The sound of the siren faded into the distance.

He then took a much straighter route back to Jan's apartment and picked her up.

"It's still in my purse," she said, waving the large bag. "There's so much stuff in there, including a couple of old lighters, that they'd only find it if it bit them on the nose."

"Do you smoke?"

"Are you kidding? I used them to light birthday candles for my many cousins. They've been in there for a while. Do you smoke? If so, what?"

"Years ago I used to smoke a pipe to look sophisticated," he said with a smile. "Pipe tobacco, nothing else. Muscovites back then abused alcohol more than drugs, but I think that might be changing. I never wanted to do any damage to my brain. It's all I have going for me."

"You have a lot more than brains going for you, Boris."

He felt the blush creeping up his neck. "Now we need a computer. I suggest the IT center. It's open 24/7."

"We might need some time. Do you have a laptop at home? It looks like the cops took all of ours from the apartment."

"Wait a sec. I have a solution." He used the car phone to dial a number.

"You're using my old houseboat as a hideaway, aren't you," said a gravelly voice.

"Gerry, I'm innocent of anything you've heard from the cops."

"Figured as much. They never even interviewed me. 'Course, I was at that boring conference when all that exciting shit went down. I only saw the news on my laptop. Are you having a fucking orgy on my boat with that leggy redhead? You'd better clean up things when you're done."

Boris's original blush, once dimming, now blossomed again. "She's in the car with me, Gerry, and we're not doing anything like you're saying. She's in trouble, and I'm helping."

"I bet. I know how that consoling gambit goes. A knight in shining armor to save a damsel in distress? That's as good as shtick as any to get into a woman's pants."

"Will you stop? I need to borrow your laptop. Can we come by tomorrow morning for coffee?"

"Sure. Cindy will be working and the kids will be in school. I don't have a class until ten, so I might still be in pajamas."

"We'll be there at eight."

"You're not going to put a virus on my machine, are you?"

"Do you use it for anything besides porn?"

"I don't do that anymore. With Cindy, I don't need more stimulation, if you know what I mean. Bring your student along, though, so I can talk to her about the birds and the bees."

"We won't be talking about that!" said Jan. "I expect you to be on your best behavior."

"Wow! OK. Hard to do that in PJs. But lighten up, sweetheart."

"I know your reputation," Jan said. "That's why I'm waiting to take differential equations until next semester when Professor Srivastava is teaching it, not you."

"Gerry's a lot of talk," said Boris on the way back to the houseboat, "but he's a good friend."

"Yes, I figure he's a lot of bark and no bite. Otherwise, he wouldn't have married. Speaking of which, why aren't you married, Boris?"

"Long story. Young love gone bad. Let's not discuss it."

“OK,” she said. “Just in case, I expect you to protect me from Professor Grimes tomorrow morning.”

He spent some restless hours going over what he knew about the case. He decided Fonseca’s theory was gelling. Someone had kept Jan from returning to her apartment. That someone had kidnapped Vlad Levitsky and had returned again to search the apartment more and torture Mary Sue to discover what she knew. The memory stick fit well into that theory. But what was on it? Who would torture Mary Sue and maybe murder Vlad over a video game? It must be something else.

Sometime near dawn he fell asleep on the old couch. He awoke to the aroma of fresh coffee. Jan was in the shower. He just made toast this time.

They arrived at Gerry’s a bit after eight. He lived farther away from the university in a nice split level. It had lots of room and a huge mortgage, but new wife Cindy was a lawyer who made about three times what Gerry did, even though he was a full professor.

Boris parked next to a playground, and they walked through alleys to Gerry’s backyard. He opened the backdoor for them. He eyed Jan.

“Are you still a minor?” he said to Jan.

“I’m nineteen, Professor Grimes. I’m an adult, and I’m asking for your help.”

“Sure thing, sweetheart. Let’s go to my *sanctum sanctorum* where I solve the mathematical mysteries of the Universe.” They followed him into the basement. “I’ll have to go onto the house wi-fi if you want internet connections.”

“We just want to look at what’s on this memory stick,” said Jan, handing it to him.

“Mind if I run it through a virus tester?”

“I did that at the IT center before I printed my report. It’s required. So it’s not necessary here.”

“Let’s look at it then.”

“You see,” said Jan, “just my report.”

“Let’s see what’s in that folder of user goodies,” said Boris.

Gerry opened the folder. “There’s another folder in here with a title that’s just a bunch of random letters and numbers. I’m leery about opening it.”

“The IT center said there’s no virus,” said Boris, “so click away.”

Gerry did just that. “Looks like Excel files—at least, that’s the extension—but the contents are all encrypted. We probably need a key to decrypt them.” Gerry looked up at Jan and Boris, who were looking over his shoulder. “I’m not enough of a techie to do that.”

“Let me try,” said Jan. She exchanged places with Jerry. She pounded keys for a bit. The file she was working on became legible. “Vlad used one of the most common encryption schemes.” She opened one of the now decrypted Excel files. “That looks like the Cyrillic alphabet.”

“It’s Russian,” said Boris. “Names and telephone numbers. The area codes are all U.S. At least, there’s no international prefix.”

“So, what do we have? A list of invitees to a Russian birthday party or wedding?” Gerry looked at Boris. “This is pretty weird.”

“Vlad knew Russian,” said Jan. “He could easily understand these spreadsheets.”

Boris was pacing now. “I hope Vlad’s name isn’t anywhere in these files,” he said. “I recognize one name there on the screen.” He reached over Jan and pointed to the name. “The uncle of the FSB agent who interrogated me in Moscow. That agent bragged about his important connections.”

"You're kidding," said Gerry. "That's too much coincidence. What do we have, a list of Russian agents, then?"

"Yes, in a way. I'm afraid it's a list of Russian spies. Vlad having this list either means he's one too, or he came upon this list somehow and the Russians want it back, for obvious reasons."

"That's a lot of illogical paranoia," said Gerry. "I told you awhile back that you should forget all that bad stuff in Moscow. Hell, man, you're going to apply for citizenship soon. You'll never find a woman living in your past like that. Any woman would think you're a wacko."

Jan grabbed Boris's hand and glared at Gerry. "That's a bit harsh. What Boris said explains everything."

Boris was now white. "We have to get out of here," he said.

The VW made record time back to the houseboat, but Boris saw red lights reflecting off the marina's fog and slammed on the brakes. "The cops are at the houseboat. They might be already sending other patrol cars to Gerry's house."

"Where can we go?" said Jan.

"This will all go away if we make the spreadsheets public," said Boris, doing a three-point and heading away from the marina.

"Won't the thugs be out for revenge in that case?" said Jan. "Plutonium-tipped umbrellas and all that. I'll have to have every latté I buy chemically analyzed."

"You have a point. I should rephrase what I said. We need some balance here, and we can achieve it by letting U.S. authorities have these spreadsheets. And, for our security, I'd make copies of that stick. Right now, I'm calling Fonseca." He dialed the detective's cellphone. "A good morning to you, sergeant."

"Where are you, professor? You're in big trouble. I think some of your compatriots are after you."

"Was the houseboat tossed too?"

"You bet, and that plate number belongs to an SUV owned by the Russian Consulate. Using plates that aren't diplomatic gives me acid reflux."

"They'll deny everything, I'm sure. Meet us at the McDonald's by the university. Bring your favorite FBI agent."

"I don't have any favorite FBI agents," said Fonseca with a growl.

"Bring one of them who's with you now then." Boris corrected his route and headed for the university. "Everything's on a memory stick we'll give to the agent." After Boris signed off, they rode in high-voltage silence for a moment.

"There's a strip mall next to the McDonald's," Jan said. "Let me off there, and I'll make some copies. I know the owner of the little computer repair shop."

"It had better be fast. I'm sure Fonseca and friend are on the way, maybe with every cop and federal agent in the city. Only the saints know where the Russians are."

"Sounds like Fonseca was doing some sleuthing," she said with a smile. "You don't like him, do you?"

"Let's say I'm prejudiced against authority figures."

There were a few customers at the McDonald's eating their fast food breakfasts. Boris ordered two coffees, and they found a booth for four. Jan picked up the morning newspaper a previous customer had left on her seat. She looked at the front page, reversed the paper, and shoved it over to Boris.

"We're famous!"

"'Professor and Student Newest Victims of Campus Violence?' At least they don't say we're criminals."

"In the first paragraph, it says we're wanted for questioning about the brutal attack on Mary Sue and the disappearance of Vlad. I bet—hey!"

Two men had joined them. Neither was Fonseca.

"You two will come with us," said Boris's seat partner. He felt the muzzle of the gun in his ribs. He glanced at the hot coffee. "Don't even think about it, professor. You'll be dead before your hand reaches the cup. You're a bit too fast with those hands, but I'm not as careless as Igor was."

"No chance for suing McDonald's over serving coffee that's too hot either," said the thug next to Jan with a grin. "We're going to take a little ride."

They were ushered out to the black SUV. It now had no plates at all.

"We would have given you the memory stick," said Boris. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"That's what we wanted," said the thug who was driving. "Things are a bit more complicated now. We're trying to avoid an international incident."

"There wasn't that much fallout about those Montclair agents, even though Russia never even denied they were agents."

"True. This is a little different."

"Because the number of spies is so large," said Jan.

"You're too smart for your own good," said the other thug. "Your friend was too."

"Vlad? What have you done to him?"

"Maybe he's writing code up there," said the thug, pointing to the SUV's roof. "Let's say he didn't cooperate and paid the price. I'm sure you two will be more cooperative, but that won't matter. You're not a popular fellow at FSB, professor."

"What? I've done nothing to Russia since I came to this country. I never did anything there either. The FSB practices guilt by association."

"Maybe. That's the Russian way. At least, guilty until proven innocent, which worked for you, so you shouldn't complain. But it doesn't look good you're involved in this now." He shrugged. "'Course, we're not FSB nor SVR, so I don't care much about your past sins."

"It's all my fault," said Jan. "I'm his student."

"Oh, we know all about you, Ms. Connors, and your beautiful mother."

"My mother? What does she have to do with anything? Keep her out of this."

Boris was deep in concentration, his thoughts speeding along at a kilometer per minute. One, it was clear that the stick wouldn't be their ticket to freedom. Two, it was certain the thugs were going to kill them. And three, his new country needed to know about the vast network of Russian spies in its midst. Of course, after number two, nothing would matter to Jan and him.

Chapter Five

Fonseca watched another black SUV pull in behind the VW. He left the McDonald's and approached the car.

"Sergeant Fonseca," he said, offering his hand.

The man behind the wheel shook it. "Special Agent Morales. Anita called us from the houseboat. Don't tell me we're too late."

"The professor's car is still here. They're not. Waitress said they left with two thugs. Her word, not mine. She thought that our two on the run didn't want to go with them. Said they left in an SUV. Probably the one we've been looking for." He patted the agent's vehicle. "Hard to tell the bad guys from the good when you use the same kind of car."

"Have you searched the VW?" said the woman sitting next to Morales.

"And you are?"

"Never mind. Just search the damn car."

"I'd rather wait for my CSU colleague. He gets mad when I muck up a crime scene."

"There's no time for that, detective. Help him, Eddie."

"She sure has a broom handle up her ass," Fonseca said when they were inside the VW. He'd taken the rear of the car, Morales the front.

The FBI agent made no comment. "These might be significant," the agent said, holding up two memory sticks a few seconds later. "Keep searching. We have a laptop aboard. I'll see what's on these."

"Gee, aren't we high tech." But Fonseca remained in the VW. He already had the backseat up.

A bit later, the woman's voice called to him.

"This is what we need, so let's go after the Russians."

OK. That's confirmed. The Russians are the bad guys. And that doesn't include the professor. "How do we do that? Travel back in time to when they were kidnapping the professor and the girl?"

"I'll consider that a feeble attempt at humor. Our helicopter has already spotted their SUV. We only have to drive there. Can you call for backup? I'd much rather keep a low profile here."

"Yes, ma'am. Your wish is my command."

"Our home away from home," said one thug, pushing Jan and Boris into the motel room. "It's a bit tacky and we have to listen to people humping at all hours of the day and night—the walls are thin—but the price is right, and the cops don't come here except to do the same thing."

Jan picked herself up from the floor. "I don't see Vlad."

"You won't. Never again." He held out his hand. "The USB stick, please."

She gave him the stick. "It's all in Russian. We don't know what's on it."

"Maybe you don't, but the professor does, and I'm sure you also have the general idea."

"Kind of sloppy of you," said Boris, "to let a kid hack into your computers."

"Not as sloppy as that kid trying to blackmail us," said the other thug.

"What?" said Jan. "Why would Vlad do that?"

“He had a gambling problem. He was an online gambling addict and was deep in debt. He saw his chance and took it. I’d probably do the same if I thought I could get away with it. But he didn’t, and here we are.” He tossed the stick into the air and then caught it. “Now you’re going to tell us where the copies are.”

“We didn’t make any copies,” said Boris.

“We’ll confirm that. Let’s start with Ms. Connors.” He went to Jan and ran his finger along a cheek. “We’re good at this. Call it S&M, if you like. Does that turn you on?” She spit in his face and the thug slapped her. “Oh, you’re a feisty one. Sexy and smart. I’m sure you’ll enjoy watching this, professor. It will be your turn next, of course.”

“And I’ll handle that,” said the other thug. “We’ll confirm whether you made more copies soon enough.”

“Hypothetically, let’s suppose we did,” said Boris. “Suppose we told you where they were. What then?”

The thug shrugged. “You’d just die sooner. Less painful for you, no fun for us. Maybe you want a piece of this little ass?” He jerked a thumb toward Jan. “We can all have a turn if you do.”

The second thug laughed. He had removed his belt and was whipping the buckle end around. Jan’s eyes followed the buckle.

When the man stopped and began to lower his pants, Boris grabbed for the nearest thug’s gun. At the same time, he kicked at a knee. He couldn’t control the gun, though.

Jan had reacted too. Taking advantage of her assailant’s distraction, she pushed him. He tripped over the pants that were now at his ankles.

Boris’s opponent recovered and parried with a sharp jab. Boris blocked the blow with his arm but felt intense pain and then numbness. The thug followed with a cross to the chin. Boris went down, the thug recovered his gun, and waved it between Jan and Boris.

“Forget the sex games, Anton! We need to resolve this.” He went to Jan and put the muzzle of his gun at her temple. “I’ll blow her brains all over this room unless you tell us where the copies are.”

“Go ahead and try it,” said Boris, holding up the gun’s clip. “Sure you have a bullet in the chamber?”

The thug examined the gun to check. In that moment, the motel room’s front window shattered, two shots were heard, and blood and brains were sprayed all over Jan. She sank to her knees.

“Jan!” Boris rushed to her and was relieved to see her sobbing. She wasn’t dead. The two Russian thugs were. But her injured shoulder was bleeding again.

The motel room’s door turned into splinters. Fonseca walked in, gun ready.

“Didn’t take long for that agent to read the sticks in your VW’s glove compartment, Boris,” he said with a smile. He holstered his gun. “How’s it feel to be an American hero?”

Boris tossed him the clip from the gun. “I was pretty sure there wasn’t a chambered bullet, but not 100% certain, so don’t ever tell me. Or Jan. Thanks for joining the party.”

“I heard part of the discussion. Would you have told him where the other sticks were?”

“Of course. To save her, at least temporarily. It was a game of poker where I didn’t even know what cards I held. We also didn’t know how else to get the copies of the sticks to you. Whether we died or not, we wanted the authorities to have them.”

“I’m glad they kicked you out of Russia, Boris.”

"I left on my own accord, but it took only one FSB interrogation over a chess game to decide to do that."

"My mother is a bit intense," Jan said as Boris parked in front of her mother's house. "So are her friends."

"She didn't seem to be too popular with those two Russian thugs. What's that about?"

"Darned if I know. She worked in the State Department after Dad died. Maybe something happened overseas? She was stationed in Moscow once."

"Were you with her at her diplomatic posts?"

"Yes, until she retired. There are Army brats and so forth who grow up on military bases. I grew up in various countries as a diplomatic brat, going to private schools with other diplomats' kids. I didn't see much of my mother, although she was into quality time with me when we were together. I probably have seen more parks and things to entertain kids in more countries than just about anyone my age." She hooked her good arm in his. "You might be considered the guest of honor in this crowd. Shall we?"

Jan pushed the doorbell and a woman who was an older version of Jan opened the door. "Professor Vashchenko, meet my Mom, Caitlin Connors. Mom, my vector calculus professor."

"I'm afraid we'll both have to repeat the course," said Boris. "We took the rest of the semester off."

"Welcome to our home," said Mrs. Connors in Russian. "Follow me and I will introduce you to the other guests."

Later, Boris dragged Jan away from a literary discussion. One of Jan's uncles barbecued burgers under the supervision of the Spanish and Italian consuls who already had a bit too much of the excellent French wine and were discussing irony in Rabelais and Voltaire's works.

"This is a strange crowd. Diplomats, the head of the NYC FBI office, the ex-Homeland Security Secretary—what gives?"

She shrugged. "Just some old friends she's acquired over a lifetime of diplomatic service. They're her friends, not mine. Have you had to tell our story multiple times?"

"Not once. We've chatted about pop culture—the Spanish consul doesn't like Bob Dylan, for example—the stock market, soccer. You name it. But not about Russian spies."

She winked. "They might know more about it than we do. I wish Fonseca were here."

"I thanked him profusely. He might be a slob, but he's a pro at what he does. You seem to be looking for him. Did you expect him?"

"No. I was expecting Brian. He said he'd be down this weekend, so I invited him."

"A romantic interest?" said Boris, with a wink.

"I wish. He's good-looking but gay. And he owes me fifty bucks. He borrowed it for a Mets ticket. I'm going to ask Mom to talk to his parents. I want to take you to a nice dinner when we get back."

"There's no need to do that. Take Mary Sue. She'll be out of the hospital soon and deserves it."

Jan laughed. "Maybe a double date, then. She could set me up." She kissed him on the cheek. "I seem to only fall for older men."

"I think I qualify as much older," he said with a smile.

“Come on, let’s go shoot some pool in the basement. I can manage without this sling long enough to get in a few games.”

Boris had to learn the rules and a bit of the technique. After starting the second game, Caitlin Connors joined them.

“You two are probably bored.” She handed Boris a Corona. “Why don’t you go bring down a plate of those empanadas, Jan? I need to discuss something with Boris.”

Jan looked from Boris to her mother. “Sure. With chimichurri?”

“But of course.”

Boris took a seat next to Jan’s mother.

“You have a very intelligent daughter, Mrs. Connors.”

“Not many men consider her brains her most positive attribute. She’s had some problems in the romance department. Men still want trophy wives. Women’s lib has its ups and downs. We seem to be in a down period. Besides the trophy-wife syndrome, men also feel insecure around smart women. Of course, you had the opposite experience.”

“What do you mean?” Boris was becoming a bit nervous.

Caitlin Connors put her hand on Boris’s. “Relax, Boris. First, I want to thank you for taking care of my little girl. Second, I know all about your experience with Natasha. Betrayal is an ugly thing.”

“I shouldn’t talk about that.”

“I don’t expect you too.” She smiled. “Some women have secrets. Some women have agendas. Some women have peculiar loyalties they call patriotism. And powerful men can encourage women to do many things that ruin others’ lives...and their own.”

“I don’t know what happened to Natasha to make her change.”

“She could have been a legitimate member of the opposition, and someone turned her. The irony is that she thought you were too, so she used you. All past history now.” She paused a moment. “I understand you’re going for tenure. Are you happy here in our country, Boris?”

“As much as can be expected. There are a few things missing. At my age, it’s difficult to find someone to share my life with.”

“I hope you don’t think Jan is that person.”

“I never said she was. And, if she thinks differently, it’s news to me. She’s just a very smart student who makes the teaching part of my job seem worthwhile.”

She thought a bit. “That’s comforting.” She patted his hand. “I’ll always love my Daniel, but I’m looking for someone too. He’d want that, but frankly I didn’t have the time until now. Same problem as Jan, too.” She removed her hand and reached into her cleavage. Pulling out a business card, she handed it to him and smiled. “Call me if you’re ever in Washington. Anytime. And I make many trips back here too. May I call you?”

He nodded. “Just what do you do, Mrs. Connors? I thought you were retired.”

“Call me Caitlin. That’s the only name on the card, along with my cellphone number. And I can’t tell you exactly what I do, but no, I’m not retired. Call me a part-time government consultant.”

Broken Lives

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Max Phillips put his cellphone back in his pocket. *Judy can be really annoying!*

He knew his younger sister meant well, but the invitation to join him for a sail was for her and her husband, Mark. Now she was playing matchmaker and bringing along a female friend of hers!

He glanced around the sailboat. He'd have to clean up *Wave Rider* now. It was good enough for Judy and Mark, but he didn't know how Judy's friend would react. *Is Judy setting me up with a blind date?* He decided he should have said no and save himself a lot of trouble.

After returning from Afghanistan to his divorce, he had bought *Wave Rider*. Weekends on the water seemed therapeutic, and his shrink encouraged them. His job had always been stressful, but at least it had waited for him when his National Guard unit went overseas. His wife hadn't. There had been trouble before he left, though. He knew it wasn't easy to be married to a cop.

He decided he needed to get some more food and drinks along with tidying up the boat. Sailing with a complete stranger with unknown expectations didn't appeal to him, but he supposed that Eileen Barrows was OK if she was Judy's friend. It would still be awkward.

Curly greeted him at the little convenience store in the strip mall not far from the docks.

"Heading out for another day on the water?"

"You've got it. I need to replenish the supplies a bit. I'll need an extra lifejacket. Judy's bringing a friend."

"Moe will have that next door. Is the friend male or female?"

"Female." He saw Curly's raised eyebrows. "Yeah, she might be setting me up. She has this idea that I need a woman in my life. Been there, done that."

"What about that partner of yours?"

"Helen? She's happily married to a great guy. One of our MEs."

"Didn't know that. You went sailing alone with her the other day."

Max frowned. "You're looking for a scandal, aren't you? I ride alone with her in a squad car too. I'm good friends with her husband. You're like the media, man, looking to dredge up dirt."

Curly raised his hands in protest. "Not me, man. Just sayin'. Some people might think it was strange."

"Yeah, some people. Are you all out of those sea-salt potato chips?"

"I'm due for a shipment today. I'll order more. They sell well."

"I get them for Judy. She seems to think NaCl from sea salt is better than table salt. Buys water in bottles too. I've stopped arguing about it."

"I'm not going to argue about it either. I make more money off both."

Max just had time to store the supplies and clean up the boat before Judy, Mark, and Judy's friend, Eileen Barrows came onboard.

"Mark and I will get us out of the harbor while you two organize some refreshments," Max said.

"Hey, I thought I was going to practice my sailing skills," said Eileen.

"Mark and I will organize the refreshments," said Judy with a smile.

Gee, thanks. Max nodded at Eileen. "OK, sailor. Let's get to it."

She hauled up the anchor and Max started the tiny engine that would take them out to the bay. Once past the entrance to the harbor, they raised the sails.

"You can take the helm," he said, taking one of the deck chairs.

She took over and seemed to enjoy the sun and stiff breeze ruffling her short reddish brown hair. Max eyed her. She didn't have potential as a pinup or model, but she had that clean, all-American look that would turn heads in the city. And, even better, she didn't have that come-hither look and swinging hips that characterized his ex.

OK, that's the physical part. Do we have anything in common? "How did you meet Judy?"

"We're both RNs. She took me under her wing when I started at the hospital. I'd been a housewife for a while, so it was good to have someone do that."

"And your husband?"

She frowned. "Three tours. I lost him on the last one."

Oh, shit! A military wife. Just what I need. "I was over there too. It was hell."

"For Bart too. And for the families who stay at home. I guess I was lucky in a sense. I don't have to be a single mom. Thank goodness I had my degree before we got married. It gave me something to fall back on."

"And your sailing skills? When did you learn those?"

"I've been sailing since I was three. It's in my blood. I always wanted a sailboat. This is a nice one."

"Wave Rider's not the fastest there is, but she does a good job. She helps me stay sane."

She nodded and spun the large wheel.

Because they had planned for the entire day and the weather was good, they went farther from shore than normal before tacking, lowering enough sail, and coming to a near standstill for an early lunch.

"Avocado, bacon, and chicken," Mark said. "Curly's getting fancy."

"You and Judy would get baloney and cheese, but *Wave Rider* has a guest sailor today," said Max.

"In other words, Eileen, don't get spoiled by this sumptuous feast. Max is one frugal SOB."

"That's Sailor on Board," said Max with a smile. "And Eileen can show you two how it's done. She's got me beat."

"Your praise will get you nowhere, captain. I'm in love with *Wave Rider*."

"That boat's coming awfully fast toward us," said Judy, pointing starboard.

"Rich kids in daddy's motorboat," said Max, standing.

He could see that there were four people in the boat. He waved his arms, but the boat kept coming. At the very last moment it circled *Wave Rider*, sending the four of them into the drink with its prodigious wake.

He reached the surface first and saw two men jump into his sailboat.

"Throw us some lines," he called out to the two left in the motorboat as he swam toward his three companions. When he saw them turn guns on them, he yelled "Dive!"

That wasn't easy with a life vest on. By the time he surfaced again, the motorboat had attached to the side of the sailboat. He saw the four men transferring boxes from the motorboat to *Wave Rider*.

He looked around. Judy was floating in water stained with her blood. Mark was swimming toward her. Eileen was fifty feet away, swimming toward all three.

The foursome joined up.

"Shoulder wound," Eileen diagnosed. "She'll be OK." She stripped off her blouse. "Help me make some strips. We have to stop the bleeding or every shark between Miami Beach and Nassau will be here in a feeding frenzy."

Max noticed Judy's pallor. "We need to get her to a hospital."

"Fat chance of that," said Mark. "They're stealing your sailboat."

"They're doing more than that," said Max. "Cover your heads."

There was a boom! and the motorboat blew into pieces. Debris rained down on them, pieces of the outboard motor nearly hitting Max.

Fury and futility hit him instead.

Circling with arms linked, they had moved away from the explosion site and Judy's blood in the water, the unwounded helping the wounded.

"Did they think they killed us all?" said Eileen.

"I think they were drug runners," said Max, "and they were focused on stealing *Wave Rider* and getting rid of the motorboat."

"Meaning it was a liability. Maybe the Coast Guard had it in their sights?" Eileen looked around the circle of faces.

"Let's hope so. And hope that they send someone to investigate." Mark looked at Max. "What are we going to do in the meantime?"

"Eileen and I are swimming back to the debris field. There are some large floating pieces we can hold onto. Stay with Judy."

"Bet you didn't expect this kind of fun," Max said to Eileen as he brought her a large piece of the motorboat's hull for her to hold onto.

They had already picked up several other pieces.

"I'm usually taking care of disaster victims, not being one of them. Those bastards are the scum of the Earth!"

"Won't get any argument from me. I already promised myself to live long enough to bring them to justice. Hopefully in a firefight where I can blow them away."

"I won't tell anyone, that's for sure."

"Why don't you take these over to Judy and Mark to give him some relief? I'll collect some more pieces and join you."

At the end of an hour, they had a makeshift raft bound together by belts and bras. Judy sprawled on one end and the other three took turns resting on the other.

"The current will carry us farther from shore," said Eileen.

“Let me see if the cellphone is functional. It’s supposed to be waterproof, but you never know in saltwater.” Max had left it tucked into Judy’s waistband. It was his turn beside her, so he tried 9-1-1. “No reception. And it will only get worse. And we’re going to run out of bandages.”

“I can make a poultice out of seaweed,” said Eileen. “Grab it if you see some, guys. My shift. I’ll take a look at the wound.”

Max slipped into the water. Mark and he helped Eileen up.

“If you know the direction of the shore, we can start pushing the raft toward it,” said Mark. “Maybe we could get into cellphone range.”

“We’re probably miles farther out, but let’s do it, big guy,” said Max.

They were soon so tired that all they could do was hang onto the raft.

Night came. The moon was new but the stars shone brightly in the inky sky. The phosphorescent tips of the waves added a bit more light.

“This would be romantic,” Judy said to Mark, who was now beside her on the raft, “if we weren’t in such a fix. What are we going to do?”

“Wait for morning, when Mark and I start pushing again,” said Max. “For now, we have to rest. One of us needs to stay awake to make sure we stay together. Also, if a cruise ship is spotted, to give a shout.”

“Lot of good a cruise ship would do,” said Eileen. “They’d never see us.”

“Mark, show her the flare gun.” He did. “There’s a chance it might work. I found it in the debris field. It won’t do any good unless someone’s close by, of course.”

“So, the watch list is among us three. I’ll go first. One of you guys rest. I’m betting you’ll both need energy for a long swim tomorrow.”

The sun was just deciding to make its appearance when Mark spotted the cruise ship. Max managed to get into a kneeling position on the unstable raft, raise the flare gun, and shoot. The projectile rose to its max altitude and the flare went off, momentarily creating its own dawn.

Max shook Ensign Thomas’s hand. “Good to see you again.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” said his new friend. “I hear everyone is OK, and your sister will have a speedy recovery. Feel like giving me a blow by blow account.”

Max began describing their ordeal while Thomas took notes. “I’m thinking they were running drugs and you guys had them in your sights.”

“You’re thinking right. Our cutter lost the motorboat—it’s just too fast and too small—but we sent word ahead. They had nowhere to go. Your sailboat saved their asses.”

“Not for long,” said Max with a growl. “You can look the other way when I find them.”

“Leave it alone, Max. Let us do our job.”

“I second that,” said Eileen. She was dressed in a hospital robe. All three of them were, with Judy in a hospital bed. “Let’s just count ourselves lucky. That cruise ship was delayed a bit by a squall.”

“You did a good job with Max’s sister,” said the ensign.

“Don’t change the subject,” said Max. “I expect you to keep me informed about this case.”

“Nothing doing. But can any of you remember what the traffickers looked like?”

Mark had joined the group. He shook his head. “Judy was the nearest, which is why the SOB hit her, I guess. What about you, Max? You have a marksman’s eyes.”

Max started rattling off a description that ended up sounding so generic that it was probably useless. “The common characteristic is that they were all short, about five-six or seven, I’m guessing, because I had the *Wave Rider* to gauge their size.”

“We’ll be lucky to find the boat,” said Thomas, “and, if we do, the traffickers will probably be long gone.”

“Where’d you detect them?” said Max.

“About a third of the way from the West End of Grand Bahama to West Palm Beach. The E-2C caught their wake and a spotter zoomed in. Our cutter was on patrol just north of that trajectory.”

“Meaning they originated somewhere in the Bahamas, I suppose.”

“They probably do that trip several times a week,” said Eileen. “You guys should stop them.”

“It’s still a big ocean,” said Thomas with a shrug. “We have the slug that was in Judy. It’s from an H&K we think. That’s unusual, and it might help.” He pointed a slim finger toward Max. “And you stay out of it, my friend.”

“Maybe,” said Max. “Right now I’m in recovery mode. After talking with Judy, I suggest the three of us go for a beer.”

“I’ll pass,” said Mark. “I’ll keep my wife company.”

“I can understand that,” said Max.

Eileen nodded.

“I can understand your desire for revenge,” Eileen said, drawing a sad face in the moisture from the beer mug that was on the table. “I wanted to go overseas and find the savage dogs that killed my husband.” She put her hand on Max’s. “But no one died in this case.”

“Someone could have. The bastards have no respect for human life. ‘Savage dogs’ is too nice a description.”

They lapsed into silence for a while, nursing their beers.

“Let’s change the subject,” Max finally said. “I understand you work in the ER.”

“It gets tough,” Eileen said, “especially when you’re trying to save the life of a gang member, cop killer, or wife murderer.”

“I can empathize with that. Cops are in a tough spot too, thinking twice about using deadly force. I suppose that’s a good thing—innocent until proven guilty and all that—but we’re making split-second decisions that can mean the difference between life and death. The new cameras help, of course. But it’s also hard not to have public appreciation for what we’re trying to do. Ever just want to let someone die, someone who deserves it?”

She shrugged. “Not my call. I’d probably save the life of a terrorist even though I knew he shot my husband. That’s just the way I am. I can’t let my emotions get in the way.”

“Same here. Thomas thinks I want to kill those bastards. I just want to catch them and send them away for a long time. I’d also like to put them out of business.”

“Are you narcotics, homicide, or what?”

“SVU. Recently promoted, if you can call it that. An old cop retired, so I went from uniform to detective. Some of the cases...” His voice trailed off and he took another sip of beer.

“My mother doesn’t understand me. She and Dad are peach farmers in Georgia. They live sheltered lives and can’t understand my calling.”

“I guess that’s the nice way to understand how my ex feels,” said Max with a shrug. He smiled. “She’s dating an accountant now. No military, no cop for her. I probably didn’t pay enough attention to her needs. And I get in black moods sometimes.”

“PTSD?”

“Maybe. Maybe from my work here as much as from over there. But I don’t think so. There’s nothing cheery about my life right now. Judy and Mark try to make me come back into the light. Their intentions are good, but they’re mostly annoying.”

“Like coming up with this terrible blind date?”

He laughed. “Yeah, that was a bit annoying, but it’s become more interesting even with our near-death experiences. I like you a lot. I’m just not sure if I’m ready for another relationship.”

“Then we can just stay friends. I’m sort of in the same place.” She eyed him over the rim of her mug. “I can’t imagine anyone in my bed but Bart.”

“We found your boat,” said Ensign Thomas over the phone. “It was adrift in one of the canals. As soon as DEA forensics is done with it, you can come get it.”

“Any idea when? I could use some respite from this damn job.”

“Did you get that case where the guy killed his wife and children?”

“Yeah. We cornered him. The bastard surrendered. ‘Course will be a waste of the court’s time. And she had a restraining order on him, damn it!”

“Not worth the paper it’s on,” said Thomas.

“Any clues about our four pirates?”

“Not yet. DNA and printing takes a while. FBI isn’t CSI. The case is basically the DEA’s now. My job is done.”

“Who’s the contact at the FBI?”

“Marlena Montes. I spoke to her about you. She’ll keep you up to date if you stay out of it. Get in the DEA’s way, and all bets are off.”

“Thanks for the warning,” said Max with a groan. “I want to see those guys in jail. Think they can get the needle for attempted murder?”

“Probably not. The federal DA will probably give them a deal. I wouldn’t mind knowing who their bosses are.”

“I’m willing to bet you already do, or the DEA knows. Catching them in the act is always the problem.”

“I have to go. You take care. Take that redhead Eileen out to dinner. That’ll take your mind off this. I heard your sister’s out of the hospital. You’re all alive, which is a minor miracle.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure and go to mass this Sunday.”

"You seem distracted," Eileen told Max. "Why'd you ask me out if you're off in some dark place?"

"Advice from Ensign Thomas," said Max. "Sounded good at the time. I was thinking of Afghanistan. I had to shoot a kid over there, you know. He was ready to shoot me, but still, he probably wasn't more than twelve or thirteen."

"What kind of people make a kid fight for them?" said Eileen.

"Human beings that don't deserve to be called that. Fanatics. Savage animals. And that's being nice and not using swear words in a public setting." He took a sip of wine. "Sorry I'm such a bum date. I had good intentions. I like you a lot."

"Maybe that's just a reaction from what we've been through?"

"Afghanistan?" She shook her head. "Thinking we were going to drown?" She nodded. "I don't think so. I liked you from the moment you took the helm of *Wave Rider*. You're focused and in control." He smiled. "And a hell lot prettier than the captain!" She blushed, reminding him of her family's business with the two Georgia peaches on each cheek. "When I get her back, we'll go for a sail, just you and me." He thought a moment. "Not too far from shore this time."

"I'd like that. It'll be a long time before I can afford my own sailboat."

He winked. "Maybe you won't have to buy one for a while."

The phone rang. Max awoke and stared at the clock. 3:11 A.M. *What the hell?*

"Bret Hall, DEA here. You Max Phillips?"

"Since I was born. What's up?"

"We're interrogating a guy who has prints matching some on your boat. I'd like you to come in and watch, to see if you recognize him."

"Probably not, but I'm willing to come in. Where are you?"

Hall gave him the address.

Max dressed, deep in thought. He knew this was really a tremendous favor from the Feds. Marlena Montes and Ensign Thomas had probably put in a good word for him.

After going through the protocols upon arriving at the DEA office, he was shown into the observation area for the interrogation room, where he met Hall in person. He jerked a thumb toward the one-way window. "There's your guy, Mickey Roberts. Do you recognize him?"

"Hard to say. All four guys were similar looking. Not too tall, short-cropped hair, either very tanned or dark complexion. You shouldn't consider me an eyewitness, though. What about the other three?"

Hall shrugged. "They're dead. We had a bit of an old western-style shootout, I'm afraid. Cathouse in Little Havana. Mickey here said they ganged up on the owner when one of the girls stole some money. Owner had some thugs backing him up, so big mistake." Hall smiled. "Police were called by one of the girls, and we were called in because of the reports that Mickey and friends were high on meth. Welcome to our world, Sergeant Phillips."

"We probably know some of those girls in SVU," Max said. "Are you going to interrogate this bozo?"

Hall nodded. "I've got an OK to make a deal if he gives up the big guy. Think I'll be lucky?"

"Guess it depends on whether the big guy can get to Mickey afterwards. If Mickey even thinks he can, you won't get anything—not even name, rank, or serial number."

"I'll do my best," said Hall.

Mickey did well up to a point, not going for the offered deal. But Hall wasn't through. "You know, you're in big trouble. We have your prints from a nice little sailboat called *Wave Rider*. There's drug residue all over the boat. Guess you and your buddies were sampling some of the merchandise."

"Don't know what you're talking about," Mickey said. "I've never been on a sailboat."

"The forensics don't lie. So we have you for trafficking as well. In addition, the owner of that boat is behind that window there and he's identified you. That's attempted murder, because you tried to kill him and his friends. Still not interested in my deal?"

Mickey shrugged. "I want a lawyer now. Then we'll talk about a deal."

Hall shoved a phone toward the trafficker. "Make your call. I'll go take a pee."

"That was a bit of a stretch," said Max when Hall rejoined him.

"He doesn't know that. Besides, you did sort of identify him. Not too tall, short-cropped hair, either very tanned or dark complexion. Works for me."

"Guess that's why you guys make the big bucks. What happens next?"

"I'm betting the lawyer will advise Mickey to accept the deal, and we'll get the boss he knows. Unfortunately, there are probably others. The battle never ends."

"Three out of four ain't bad," said Max.

"You're looking good," he said with a smile. "I was going to call you when I got my boat back. It'll be any day now. I suppose Judy filled you in on recent events."

Eileen had called Max and invited him to beers and burgers.

"She did. You're looking terrible. Are you still stressed out over our little adventure?"

"That's an understatement. Like I told the DEA guy, three out of four is good, but I'd sure like them to nab the boss. Let's go back to you looking good. You haven't got another man in your life now, have you?"

"Except for some interns who think nurses who have lost their husbands are fresh prey, no." She smiled. "I guess I'm being forward by calling you."

"I'll take forward, ma'am. I'm just a shy cop who's probably better at sailing."

"Would you like me to go beyond forward?" She reached across the table and touched his cheek. "I like you a lot, Max Phillips. Right now I can't say much more than that."

"Maybe talking's overrated. Your place or mine?"

She blushed. "Talk about being forward. My mother warned me about men like you."

He shrugged. "I like you a lot too. A woman and a man do certain things together when they like each other a lot. Case closed."

"That's a bit primitive. Where are the flowers and candy?"

"We're too old for that. Of course, technically I'm still married."

"Catholic?"

"Once upon a time. Once my ex marries her accountant, all bets are off, I guess."

"That's good. I'll take a raincheck on the flowers and candy and invite you for coffee at my apartment. There I have some stronger stuff than beer we can add to the coffee. But I have

some information for you. One of the three perps died under my watch in the ICU after surgery.” Max’s eyebrows raised. “I knew you’d be interested, and I’ll probably regret telling you this. Ricardo Ruiz is their boss.”

“You asked him?”

“And he answered. I might have pretended I was an angel.”

“You are an angel. Did you tell the DEA?”

“Your friend Hall. I’m not sure they’ll act on it, though, which is why I’m telling you.”

“Why wouldn’t they act on it?”

“Because they don’t have enough to go after him.”

He nodded. “They have to make a case. I don’t.”

“You do too. You’re a cop.”

He nodded again. “I have my case. Ricardo Ruiz is the man responsible for nearly killing us.”

“Don’t do anything rash.”

“I never do.”

Max had heard about Ricardo Ruiz. He was a player in southern Florida nightlife. His SVU suspected him of human trafficking and child pornography videos. Bunco had their eyes on him for illegal gambling in his night clubs. Max wasn’t too surprised that Ruiz was also involved in drug trafficking.

He was waiting for the man in the alley behind one of those nightclubs. Around 3 a.m. Ricardo came out, a young lady with silicone implants on each arm, three bodyguards, and a driver. He knew they all had enough to drink to slow their reactions. *Piece of cake!*

He stepped out of the shadows, just a homeless drunk stumbling his way back to his cardboard abode. The three bodyguards were still outside the limo. He took them out with tasers, opened the rear door, and tossed one of the girls out. Sliding into her place, he covered Ruiz.

He gave the address of an old warehouse to the driver. “Take us there or your boss dies, then you,” he told the astonished thug. His gun was pointing at Ruiz’s temple.

It was a short trip, but long enough for a conversation.

“You’re a dead man,” said Ruiz. Max noted the nervous tick. “Even if you kill me, you’re a dead man. And what’s your beef?”

“Mickey and his three friends,” said Max. “Threatening me and my friends. Pirating our sailboat. Leaving us for dead. Any of that ring a bell?”

“No. I don’t know anyone named Mickey.” But the man was perspiring now, and it was cool in the car.

“One of Mickey’s friends gave you up as he lay dying in the ICU. We’ll consider that a confession. You’re Catholic, right?” The barrel of the gun now pointed at the gold cross on a chain around the man’s neck. “Maybe you want to make a confession too before I kill you?”

“You’re crazy. I have nothing to do with what you described.”

“Just the GM of the ball club, right? When the team loses big, the GM gets fired. I figure no one will find your rotting body in the warehouse for days. Just the beginning of your trip into Hell, of course.”

“Look. What do you want? I can give you a hundred grand for your troubles.”

“That’s probably chicken feed compared to what you rake in from all your enterprises,” said Max. “No, Señor Ruiz, I want to kill you. Driver, stop at the next corner. Get out, honey.” He waved his gun at the second girl. “You don’t want to see this.”

Max felt bad leaving the girl in a seedy neighborhood that early in the morning, but he didn’t want any witnesses.

One nugget Max had panned from his conversation with Hall was the location of a warehouse owned by Ruiz that they suspected was used for more than his import-export business. Checking with his narc cop buddies, they concurred. A few raids had only shown legit merchandise. He considered he was ahead in the race between him and the DEA now. One man can work more efficiently.

If there was illegal merchandise in the warehouse, all the better, but Max didn’t care. By exacting his revenge in Ruiz’s domain, it would add insult to injury. He knew all denizens of the underworld were narcissistic bastards once they tasted power.

He waved Ruiz and the driver into the warehouse. He had the driver put zip ties on Ruiz’s hands and feet, and then Max did the same for the driver.

“Seems like you’re going to a lot of trouble if you just wanted to kill me.”

Max shrugged. “It’s your warehouse. It’s an appropriate mausoleum, don’t you think?” He pulled out a third crate and sat on it, facing the two. “Shall we flip a coin to see who goes first?”

“I’m just his driver,” said the other man with a scowl. “I’ve got family.”

“What kind of respect will they have for you when they discover you’re an accomplice of this *hijo de puta*.” Max had figured out that the driver was Hispanic like Ruiz. Unlike certain politicians, in Florida or otherwise, he had nothing against Hispanics, but he thought it was nice to try to speak their language. “‘*Papa fue un bastardo*’ will be your kids’ show-and-tell tomorrow in school.” He turned to Ruiz. “It’s not hot in here, Ruiz. Why are you sweating?”

“*Eres un loco*,” Ruiz said.

“Crazy enough to plan my revenge. You bet.” He approached Ruiz and put the barrel of his gun on the bridge of the nose. “Don’t worry. It will be fast. How many people have you killed, by the way?”

“None of your business.” Ruiz was cross-eyed now, looking at the barrel.

“In a way, that’s correct. They’re your past and hopefully there is a Hell where you’ll pay for their deaths. Me, I live in the present.” He started to walk away, and then spun and fired.

Outside the warehouse, Max used his burn phone to call 9-1-1 and report gunshots at the warehouse. “You might want to inform Agent Hall at the local DEA office.” He hung up, tossed the phone to the concrete, and smashed it with his foot.

“We’ve got all kinds of illegal goodies,” said Hall’s forensics expert.

The DEA agent smiled. He knew who the mysterious informant was, not that he would try to prove it. *Way to go, Max. But why didn’t you kill the bastard?*

Ruiz was having trouble breathing on the EMTs' gurney. Hall also knew the wound so close to the heart was in exactly in the same place Max's sister's wound had been. *Street justice. I still would have killed the jerk.*

"Keep cuffs on him even in the hospital," he told his people standing beside the gurney. "We'll be bringing multiple charges against him, I'm sure."

"What about the driver?"

"Get him into a johnny and out of those soiled pants before he stinks up the whole place."

"Was it OK?" Max rolled off Eileen. "I'm a bit out of practice."

"It's a good start," she said, showing her Georgia-peach cheeks. "I tried to call you last night. I wanted to come over."

"I had a case I was working on. Besides, my place is a mess. Yours is nicer. Can I move in?"

"There you are, being forward again. Let's not rush this."

"I'll take it slower the next time," he said with a laugh.

Siege

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"Who wants the story?"

Marguerite Favreau raised her hand. So did three others attending the meeting.

The ezine's editor studied his group of volunteers. "This isn't an easy assignment. Let's hear ideas from the volunteers."

Marguerite went first. There were a few backup assignments on her list, but this one had caught her attention. Roger Montgomery was an enigma, a mercenary who had retired and disappeared. No one even had a good picture of him, but he had been a player in a number of the world's trouble spots.

"I'll find him and interview him by discovering his whereabouts through his mother."

"That's interesting. He's not a young man. Is his mother still alive?"

"Eleanor Montgomery is a rich widow who is a snowbird, living on her estate outside of New York City during summer months and the Caribbean in the winter."

"That in itself is an interesting fact. You could slant your article on how and why her son became a merc if he came from a rich family."

Marguerite nodded. "I'd want to get that from him too. Mothers can perceive things differently than their sons."

"Point taken. It's winter now. Maybe you just want a Caribbean vacation?"

"Not necessarily. She's visiting with a friend over Christmas right here in Paris."

"A French friend, perhaps a paramour?"

"Privileged information, but not a paramour unless she's lesbian." There were chuckles.

"Do I have the assignment?"

"Let me hear the others first."

The others had nothing more than what one could get surfing the internet. Marguerite got the assignment.

"You move in interesting circles," Madame Montgomery said to Marguerite, studying her over the rim of her teacup. "Anyone that knows Sophie is special. How did you meet her?"

"I bought a small painting from her and we chatted. She wondered how I could purchase an expensive objet d'art. When I told her I was an independently wealthy journalist who freelanced for the love of it, she said I was like your son. You're visiting Sophie's mother now, so the connections were there. I'm sorry if I'm intruding on your privacy."

"Was Sophie trying to be a matchmaker?"

Marguerite blushed. "Why do you ask?"

"Because she knows my son is a confirmed bachelor. He dated occasionally, and Sophie went out with him several times when he accompanied my husband and me to Paris as a teenager, but now he's somewhat of a recluse. The girl thinks a woman would help him settle down. So does Mathilde."

Eleanor had refused to meet in her friend's apartment, respecting her privacy, so they had met at a small café on the Left Bank.

“Did you meet with me just out of curiosity?” Eleanor nodded. “I don’t think there’s anything out of the ordinary for a rich woman wanting to prove herself by making her own way and having a career. I chose journalism. Why is that curious?”

“Oh, I don’t care about that. You see, I have an exceptional son, but I always wanted an exceptional daughter too. Journalism never occurred to me. Lawyer, doctor, scientist, maybe. Roger made a choice that seems very strange, even stranger than journalism, though. I never knew many details about that choice until lately.”

“Do you see him often?”

Eleanor licked latte foam from her upper lip. “Probably more than he likes. But don’t think you’ll get to him through me. I value his privacy much more than Mathilde and Sophie’s.”

“*Tres bien*. What about answering a few questions about him?”

“I’d rather get to know you better first.”

At the end of the meeting, Madame Montgomery had learned more about Marguerite Favreau than Marguerite had learned about Roger Montgomery. The only new fact she learned was that he had been a Ranger in Afghanistan, and that had been a slipup. *Is it natural for a Ranger to become a mercenary*, Marguerite asked herself.

Marguerite learned from Sophie that Eleanor Montgomery was next bound for the Caribbean. Because she had no idea where son Roger was hiding, she decided to tail the mother. *What had Roger done that made him into a recluse?*

While she waited, she did her best to find his U.S. Army records. She did so the old-fashioned way, calling in favors. Research for an article on women in the military had forced her to cultivate numerous contacts in the American military and NATO. People were circumspect, but she confirmed that Roger Montgomery had been a Ranger on Special Ops assignments, mostly in the Middle East. What those assignments had been were a mystery, of course; the tight security lid implied they weren’t trivial, though.

Roger Montgomery was now thirty-eight and had spent ten years as a mercenary in Africa. There wasn’t much on that either, but no African government considered him a criminal, so that wasn’t surprising. Interpol and French authorities had nothing on the man, but one contact recognized the name.

“Roger Montgomery? Yeah, I recognize the name. He was a merc in Africa. If he was doing anything illegal there, we don’t know about it. But we don’t know a lot of things. He could be smuggling guns to ISIS as far as I know.”

A DGS contact suggested she check with American organizations like the ATF, CIA, DHS, and FBI. She didn’t have the contacts there. The lack of information just increased the mystery. *What did he do and why is he no longer doing it?* Privacy was one thing, but was she endangering the man by making inquiries? As often happened, her journalistic instincts fought with her understanding that people just want to be left alone sometimes. As usual, the journalistic instincts won because she knew that at the end she didn’t have to write the story. That had happened on two occasion, once with a concert pianist and another time with priest.

Eleanor Montgomery’s trail led to Nassau, The Bahamas.

“We have a visitor.”

Roger Montgomery laid down his poker hand and took the glasses from Ben. He scanned the ocean. “A woman. It looks like she’s in trouble. Something with the motor.”

“Do we save her butt?”

Roger shrugged. “You can. Get Helen to go with you. I’ll go up to the house and warn my mother. I’ll then hide out in the guest bungalow. None of you have ever heard of Roger Montgomery.”

“That’s a hard lie to substantiate with your mother here.”

“Recently. You haven’t seen me in years. I’m still in Africa for all you know.”

It was Ben’s turn to shrug. “Your call, Captain. Go tell your mother and send my wife down. She’s a looker, by the way. Tell Helen to bring a beach robe too.”

“Because she’s topless?”

“Because your mother’s here. I don’t give a fuck. Neither does Helen.”

“Point taken. But mother’s not an old prude, you know.”

“Helen thinks so. Different generations. Get moving. The tide will be going out soon.”

Eleanor Montgomery hardly recognized Marguerite. Auburn curls had become straight black hair. Winter clothes in Paris had become borrowed shorts and bikini bra. She pretended she didn’t know the girl.

“Some cables were bad,” said Ben after Helen, Ben’s wife, led her to one of the guest rooms. “I don’t know if we have replacements here. I’ll have to check the workshop.”

“When’s Enrique due with groceries?”

“Three days from now. I’m a bit leery about fixing the boat and turning her loose, though. There’s a storm brewing. It’s a tropical depression now, but it could become a hurricane. That little boat’s not fit for a high sea state.”

“What’s her story?”

“She’s one of those ezine reporters looking for an interview with Johnny Depp.”

“She’s a bit off course, then,” said Eleanor with a smile. “And Johnny’s probably off making a film somewhere, maybe another one of those pirate comedies.”

“I think they’re intended to be serious.”

“Jack Sparrow is as serious as Tonto,” said Eleanor. “I’ll eat with Roger tonight. Our visitor can eat with Helen and you. She doesn’t know I’m here, does she?”

“Not likely.”

“See about fixing her boat and get rid of her as soon as possible. Let her weather the storm on Johnny Depp’s island, not ours.”

Ben raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“It’s kind of lonely around here,” said Marguerite.

Ben looked up from his bouillabaisse and smiled at Helen.

“We’re just caretakers for the owners,” Helen said. “The family’s not here very often.”

“Nice to have your own personal resort the rest of the time.”

"It's a big place to maintain," said Ben. "We don't have much time to enjoy it, if that's what you mean." He watched her break off a piece of bread and dip it into the soup. *A simple girl, really, at home anywhere.* He smiled.

"Will you be able to fix my boat?"

"Tomorrow will tell. You were taking a chance going to sea in such a small one. There's a storm brewing."

"I thought I'd make the island well before that. I drifted forever."

She maintains the lie well. "Do you have sailing experience?"

"Not with sailboats. That's why I rented a motorboat."

"I understand Mr. Depp's island has tight security. Why did you think you could even approach his house?"

"Just hoping to catch him in a good mood, I guess."

"He wouldn't be likely to be in a good mood if you disturb his privacy," said Helen.

"You're not a stalker, are you?"

"Do you want to see my press ID?"

"Helen has a crush on Mr. Depp," said Ben. "Ever since she saw him in some movie set in London about vampires."

Helen blushed. "He's earned his privacy," she said. "Australia treated him badly in regards to those two dogs."

"Oh, please, he and his wife deserved that," said Ben. "You can't go about the world breaking other country's laws."

"The pets must have been frightened."

Ben saw Marguerite smile at Helen's comment. *I wonder why Eleanor dislikes her so much.*

The next morning Ben was late to breakfast. "Boat's fixed," he said, taking his place at the table. "Wires were frayed and shorted out. I stripped off the old insulation and replaced it with duct tape. It should hold long enough to return to Nassau."

"I'm still going to Johnny Depp's island."

"Little Halls Pond Cay is too far. You'll just beat the storm back to Nassau if you leave right after breakfast."

Helen shook her head. "She won't make even that. She'll have to ride out the storm with us. I saw the news while I was cooking. It's heading right for us and might be a hurricane by the time it gets here."

"Damn global warming heats up the water too fast now," said Ben, shaking his head. "Even if it doesn't become a hurricane because it's so early, you can't chance it with that small boat. I'm sorry."

Marguerite looked from one to the other. "I'd love to stay, but I feel I'm abusing your hospitality. Is there a closer island with a hotel?"

"Your best bet is here on dry land," said Ben. "You can earn you keep by helping us prepare for the storm. Are you good with a hammer and saw?"

"I can pound a nail in crooked with the best of them," Marguerite said with a smile. "Where do we start?"

When Ben was heading for a shed for more plywood, he saw Eleanor motion to him. He turned the corner of the guest house and found her holding three cables. They looked new.

"Where'd you find those? I looked in the workshop."

"Her luggage. She staged the whole thing. When I met her in Paris, I knew she wouldn't give up. She followed me, Ben."

"You think she's a danger?"

"Only if she leads someone to my son."

"I'd better discuss it with Roger," said Ben. "You're blowing this out of proportion. She's just a nosy reporter looking for a story. Maybe she had settled for Johnny Depp."

Eleanor waved the cables. "Don't be naive!"

"I can't let you three do all the work," said Roger, eying the dark clouds that were approaching and the crashing waves. "The computer doesn't show a whole lot of rotation, but it will pound us even if it's just a tropical storm. This place is too valuable to leave things to chance."

Ben nodded. "You'd better come meet Marguerite, then."

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Eleanor. "I'll help prepare for the storm."

"You can hardly lift a hammer, mother," said Roger. "Butt out, for God's sake. And, if you're worried about her getting a story, forget about it. But we need all four of us to board the place up. I want to do the outbuildings too. You just never know."

"OK, but make up some story. You were sleeping off some binge-drinking or something."

"That doesn't save much face. And were you drinking with me?"

Ben laughed and Eleanor scowled at him. Turning to her son, she said, "I was out of sorts with a migraine. I'd never drink that much."

"Not now, anyway," said Roger with a smile.

Introductions were cursory. Helen went along with their stories without missing a beat. The four continued the storm preparations with Eleanor's supervision.

"She owns the place," said Roger. "Rather, my father did. She protects it as much as she thinks she protects me."

He held the large piece of plywood cut to fit into the window frame so that Marguerite could nail it in.

"I have similar family issues," she said. "I lost my virginity just to spite my domineering mother."

"Teenage rebellion, I suppose?"

"Third year of private boarding school in England. Money isn't necessarily the key to happiness."

The rain hit just after dinner. They were ready for it.

"You play beautifully," said Helen.

Marguerite finished the Chopin Nocturne and reached for her wine glass. She saw Roger look up from his book. "Many years of private lessons, but I'm very rusty. That piece isn't stormy enough, though."

"What about the *Fantaisie-Impromptu*?" said Roger. "That gets the old blood flowing."

"Rainbows come after the storm," said Eleanor with a frown.

Ben entered at that moment. "We have problems," he said, removing his slicker, and shaking it off on the porch. He closed the door and turned to them. "There's a large boat approaching. I spotted the running lights."

Roger grabbed the binoculars and headed for the door. "They're close. What fools to be out on these seas tonight. It's a good size boat, but they'll still have to come in. What's wrong, mother?"

Eleanor was glaring at Marguerite, still seated at the piano. "You little fool! You led them right to Roger."

"Maybe not," said Roger, putting down the binoculars. "I'm thinking these are drug smugglers looking for a safe haven from the storm. They have quite a cargo covered with tarps."

Both Eleanor and Marguerite blanched. "Will they attack us?" said Marguerite.

"They won't want to leave witnesses," said Roger. "Ben, let's break out some heavy artillery. We'd better be prepared."

Ben nodded and left the room. He soon returned with four long guns, two automatic rifles and two shotguns, and five pistols, three automatics and two revolvers. He also had a duffel bag of ammo.

"Are those legal?" said Marguerite, peering over Ben's shoulder as he laid out the arsenal.

Roger approached the other side of the table. "What the island governments don't know won't matter," he said. "Who wants what?"

"Give me a pistol," said Eleanor.

"OK, but you're staying here with Helen and Marguerite. She'll be the last line of defense. Marguerite, have you ever shot a gun?"

She smiled. "Yes, and I don't intend to be the helpless guest. You two take the AR-15's and two pistols. We'll split the rest. And I'm going with you. I'm assuming you're taking the fight to them."

Roger smiled. "You're not reacting to my mother's ill-conceived remark, are you?"

"No, but I can have Ben and your backs out there. You can't go prancing down to the pier. They'll mow you down. Is there a way down in back of the cay?"

"There is," said Ben, nodding at Roger. "We might be able to surprise them."

"Hadn't you better determine that they mean us harm?" said Eleanor.

"You can be writing them a note on your fancy stationery, mother," said Roger. "When we get closer, I'll try to confirm their cargo is drugs. Does that suit you?"

"You always had an attitude," said Eleanor. "Go ahead. Get all three of you killed. Helen and I will be radioing for help in the meantime."

"That's a good idea," said Marguerite.

"The nearest police will take an hour to get here," said Ben. "That might be enough time if we can slow them down, Roger."

"I'm not counting on the police," said Roger, "except for taking away the body bags." Marguerite and Ben looked at each other. "Let's go."

The three threaded their way single file along a narrow and steep trail that began two miles in back of the guest house. The general trend was down through rocks, shale, and sand. As they approached the pounding surf, the going became slippery. With a lower center of mass, Marguerite had the least problem maintaining her footing, but none of them could move fast.

"We have to move about the same distance back around to get to the pier," said Ben, his yell almost lost in the wind's howl.

They were now knee deep on the average fighting undertow. Marguerite imagined it to be like moving through molasses, except the water pushed and grabbed with the waves.

"We're here," Ben finally announced. "Around this ledge is the pier."

"Let me reconnoiter," said Roger, moving ahead and taking a quick look at the pier.

"How many?" said Marguerite.

Roger put an index finger to his lips. Marguerite knew that meant that if Ben and he could hear her, the visitors might too. She nodded. He turned back to the scene to study the situation for a moment, then retreated to where the two were standing. He held up four fingers, patted his AR-15 four times. Marguerite shuddered. They had more firepower.

Ben traded his AR-15 for Marguerite's rifle and raised an eyebrow toward Roger, who nodded. Ben moved forward, found a place to steady himself in the swirling waters, and rested the rifle against the ledge. His first shot killed one of their enemy, but a second only wounded. Seeing the other two head for cover on their boat, he waved them forward and motioned everyone to fan out.

Marguerite felt the adrenalin surge but took the far flank and moved toward the pier with the other two. The wounded man struggled to his feet and took aim at Ben, but Roger put him down with his AR-15. Shots were fired from the boat's cabin. The three hit the ground. Roger made like a traffic cop with his hand and moved forward belly first. At the pier he crouched and continued forward until he was next to the boat's side. He waved a hand. Ben kneeled and began to fire into the cabin. Marguerite followed his cue. They hit the ground again when the drug runners fired back.

What's the plan? Ben and Roger seem to have some sort of ESP? When the firing from the boat stopped, Roger put his AR-15 over the edge of the boat's deck and sprayed the entire cabin. He then dropped down again.

No more gunfire, just the sound of pounding surf.

"What's that?" said Eleanor.

Helen pushed back the curtains. "The wind's rattling everything."

"No, I heard gunfire. Oh God! They're going to be killed."

"I didn't hear anything. Ben and Roger can handle themselves."

"That Marguerite will get in their way," said Eleanor.

"You're being unfair to her, Eleanor. Did you notice the chemistry? Didn't you see the light in those cold, blue eyes when she was playing Chopin? That's the beginning of love, old woman. Get with the program."

"Lust, maybe. Roger can't really relate to women. He can't make a commitment."

"Yes, Ben's told me he has those problems. Ever think you're the cause of them?"

“Why? Because I love my son?”

“No, because you smother your son. In spite of that, he wants you around.”

“I never—” Eleanor stopped when Helen put a finger to her lips. “What is it?” she said in a whisper.

“Let me check the backdoor,” Helen said in an even lower whisper.

Helen went into the kitchen, checked the door, and pushed back curtains to peer into the storm. What she’d heard wasn’t produced by storm winds striking the old mansion. But she saw nothing, shrugged, and turned to go back just as Eleanor screamed.

Just as she entered the front room again, lightning flashed, revealing Eleanor and an assailant’s silhouettes. Eleanor was in her rocker, trying to find her gun; the drug runner was coming at her with a machete. Helen yelled, making the scumbag pivot and turn toward her. He dropped the machete and went for his own weapon. Too late. The shotgun blast shredded his body.

“Are you all right, Eleanor?” Helen said after making sure the man was dead.

“I’m bleeding. You fool! I was in your line of fire.”

Helen smiled. “Those specks are his blood, old woman. He was coming at me even as he went for his gun. His body shielded you. CSIs call it blood spatter.”

“OK. Get me a washcloth from the kitchen then.” She stood and kicked at the cadaver. “What a disgusting man! He smells like feces.”

“Standard cadaveric release. There will be urine too. Come, let’s go into the kitchen. We’ll deal with the body later.”

The tropical storm was losing its bite as they gathered around the kitchen table. They had agreed to put the bodies in the shed for the authorities. They’d also have to figure out what to do with the boat and its cargo.

“I don’t get it,” said Marguerite. “We took out five drug runners! Five ordinary people. That’s incredible.”

Helen poured more tea for the four of them but smiled at Ben and Roger.

“I guess it’s time to come clean,” said Roger, returning her smile. “Our dainty Helen here was a New York City cop at one time before she met Ben in a hospital. He was in a wheelchair recuperating and whistled at her when she went to interrogate a rape victim.”

“You wouldn’t believe what a romantic he is,” said Helen with a smile, winking at her husband. “Ben was in Special Ops with Roger before he started working undercover in Africa.”

“Undercover?” said Marguerite. “I thought he was a mercenary.”

Roger shrugged. “That was the cover. I was a CIA operative at that time. Ben and I served together in the Middle East, by the way. Helen and Ben seemed like logical people to take care of our little cay here when neither my mother nor I are here.”

“Even gentle souls can be violent people,” said Eleanor. She glared at her son. “They might have just surrendered, you know.”

“Do you think your attacker was going to surrender?” said Helen. “They were going to protect their shipment at all cost and eliminate any witnesses in the process. People out sailing run into these thugs all the time. The authorities find enough boats floating aimlessly to know what the *modus operandi* is.”

Eleanor's rebuttal was a simple glare. They all stared into their teacups for a few moments.

"So I'm the novice here," said Marguerite with a smile.

"You handled yourself rather well, I'm told," said Eleanor, "so don't think that."

"Why, mother, am I seeing a softer side?" said Roger.

"I had a little chat with Helen," said Eleanor, brushing her disheveled white bangs from her eyes. "You'd better marry this little trollop. She's probably my last chance for some grandchildren."

"Mother!"

Marguerite blushed and Helen and Ben smiled.

"Will you write my story?" said Roger.

Marguerite stopped putting suntan lotion on and tried to see beyond his dark glasses. She was used to that naked body now, its scars and lean muscles and its ability for tender caresses.

"No, but I think Sophie is right."

"Sophie? Mathilde's daughter?"

"And my friend. She said you need a woman to settle down. I'd add that you need one to complete your life. If you hide from the world, you need company. A man in solitary confinement can go crazy."

"There's always my mother," he said with a smile. "And Ben and Helen."

"Are they sufficient?"

He sat, leaned over, and kissed her. "No, they're not, you little trollop."

The Hippocratic Oath

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The nurse poured some coffee and watched the ER doctor. He was scribbling on a paper napkin with one of the cheap pens the hospital provided.

"You still trying to be a poet, honey?"

Colin Murphy glanced at the ER nurse and smiled. "You think I'm wasting my time?"

Beatrice Jones thought a moment. "I'm thinking you're probably a better ER doctor than poet, no offense intended."

"No offense taken, but you only see me in the one activity. How do you know I can't write poetry? I've won some contests."

"Do tell? And how drunk were you, old Irishman?"

"I'm going easy on the liquor. It won't bring Chen back."

"Who's Chen?"

"A cop I know from a few years ago. Dao-Ming Chen. We're still friends."

"And you thought it was more than that?"

"Maybe she did too. Sometimes it just doesn't work out."

"Tell me about it."

Murphy knew Jones was in the process of divorcing husband number three. She was forceful and had a strong personality, but he thought she deserved better luck with men.

The red light in the break room started to oscillate.

"Duty calls," said Beatrice.

Murphy stuffed the napkin into a pants pocket and followed her out.

The patient was an older man. The EMTs had resuscitated him twice with the paddles already. Beatrice hooked him up to the monitors. Murphy didn't like the EKG.

"Call cardiology. This guy's going into cardiac arrest again!"

They applied the paddles one more time before Andy Gianopoulos, the heart surgeon on call, appeared.

"I'm guessing a bypass is required," said Murphy.

"No guessing about it," said Gianopoulos, reading the record and the instruments. "I need an OR," he said to a nurse. "Right now!"

The old man seemed spry for three a.m. Murphy wondered what he'd be like when he was fifty.

"Where are you going?" Murphy said to Beatrice.

"Accident victims coming in," she said, tapping her earpiece. "Duty calls."

"Shit," said Andy. "Help me get this man into the elevator. The ORs are going to fill up. We need to beat them to the punch. Probably only a bunch of drunk kids anyway."

The smile didn't seem to mitigate Andy's put down of the Hippocratic Oath in Murphy's mind. *Does it matter whether they're drunk?*

He did the heavy hauling. They were soon guiding the gurney into an OR.

"Scrub down," said Andy. "I'm going to need some help."

"I should call and make sure they don't need help in the ER," said Murphy.

"Don't dawdle. Nurse! Get us an anesthesiologist. Pronto!"

The ER was in good hands, so Murphy joined Gianopoulos in the scrubdown routine.

"First heart surgery?"

"No, but I'm not doing any cutting, right?" said Murphy.

"Clamping and manipulating, that's all. I'd prefer to do an angioplasty first, but this old man's probably been living the good life too long."

"Do you know him?"

"Ha, you live in New York City and don't know the mobster, Julio Grasso? He's probably killed more men than you'll ever save in that stinking ER. Women too, I'll bet." Gianopoulos studied the younger man's face. "I know what you're thinking: why bother? Yeah, it's tempting, but we take a Hippocratic Oath, right? This surgery will really stretch it, but there it is. Ready?"

Murphy nodded.

The chief OR nurse had put on Andy's favorite music. Murphy recognized the classic rock of the group *Queen*. He didn't mind. He was focused on the job at hand.

About halfway into the surgery, Gianopoulos stopped. His hand was trembling.

"Holy shit!" he said, clutching his chest. He sunk to his knees and then went face down.

"Get a replacement from cardiology and a nurse from ER," Murphy said to the anesthesiologist.

She shook her head. "Not possible. He was the only one on call present in the hospital. No one will get here in time to finish. You're going to have to substitute."

Murphy frowned. *Again, why bother?* The gangster would die. Bad things happen in the OR.

"I'm not a heart surgeon, for Christ's sake!"

"I'll back you up," she said. "I can clamp and do other things while doing the usual monitoring. We have to try to save this bastard."

"You know who he is?"

"So what? We treat them all the same here."

Murphy looked up at the ceiling. *What would his murdered sister Maura tell him to do? What would Chen expect?* Chen, of all people, might want him to let the mobster die. *No, she wouldn't. She wasn't like that. Neither was his sister.*

He knew he had the theoretical background. He was going to specialize in cardiology before he decided for the ER and had scrubbed into many operations. Theory and practice are two different things, though. All he could do was try.

He had already started and doing well when two ER nurses came for Gianopoulos. *Good luck, Andy. You sure left me knee deep in shit.*

"I suppose that this old man will sue me if he survives," said Murphy. "Things are looking good. You can unclamp now."

"Looks good to me," said the anesthesiologist, "but what do I know? Dr. Franz is next door. He can help sew him back up. We'll need staples."

Murphy nodded. A nurse wiped his brow for the last time. He was tired.

The next afternoon Murphy visited two patients. Gianopoulous was on blood thinner and scheduled for an angioplasty.

"Sorry about that," he said, flashing a gold-toothed smile. "You always tell patients to eat right and get good exercise. I guess I should practice what I preach."

"Maybe you need to return to a Mediterranean diet," said Murphy. "How do you feel?"

"Not bad, considering. Looks like I can avoid surgery via the angioplasty. Old age sucks. I knew something wasn't right when that hand started to tremble. I have the steadiest hands in the OR."

"You'll be back there before you know it," said Murphy. *Or maybe not.* But his friend and mentor could have a long career away from the OR as an ordinary cardiologist looking after sick patients.

The next visit was with Julio Grasso. The old man reached out to shake Murphy's hand.

"I heard it was a little busy last night," said Grasso. "Thanks for saving me. My family thanks you too."

"Your immediate family or extended family?" said Murphy.

"Both, but not other families," said Grasso with a wink. "I guess you've brushed up on my sordid past. At least, some people think it's sordid. My nieces and nephews just think of me as *Zio* Julio."

"Do you have children?"

"A boy. He's a bit of a problem. Teenagers, you know. Thinks he should be able to drive the Ferrari at fourteen. As if anyone wants to drive in Manhattan."

Murphy smiled. In spite of his biases, he was liking the old man. He checked the readouts.

"I'm turning you over to one of our cardiologists as soon as I can," said Murphy. "I'm glad to see you're feeling better. You're a survivor."

"In the ambulance, I was thinking of that Dylan Thomas poem. I wasn't going down without a fight."

"Rage, rage, at the dying of the light.' It saved my ass once too."

"You'll have to tell me that story sometime," said Grasso, "over a good single malt."

"If it's Irish whiskey, I'm game. See you around, Mr. Grasso."

"*Ciao*," said the mobster.

Note from Steve: Colin Murphy also appeared in mystery/thriller *The Midas Bomb*, the first book in the "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco Series."

A Nation of Immigrants

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Alicia Castro-Grant unlocked the passenger's door at the repair shop. Her tall and lanky adopted son, Jimmy, struggled into the small SUV.

"Thanks for picking me up, Alicia."

She smiled, although it always bothered her that Jimmy never called her Mom. She felt like she was his mother, ever since Peter and she had adopted the kid. Of course, he didn't call Peter Dad either.

"Do you have the estimate for the insurance company?" she asked. He dug it out of a shirt pocket—a legal-sized page folded enough to fit in the star athlete's pocket. "Unfold it for me. We'll run it by to the insurance company on the way home."

Jimmy, one of the most careful drivers she knew, had been T-boned at a Las Vegas intersection by a drunken tourist in a rental car. His car had come just under the price for a complete totaling. Alicia hoped it would be OK after the costly repairs, all paid for by the drunk's insurance company. In the interim, she would have to be a soccer mom again. *Rather, basketball mom, considering Jimmy's major sport.* He was so good that he had won a full scholarship to UCLA. *That helps on the household finances,* she thought. They still owed the kid a nice dinner in celebration.

During the drive home, Jimmy talked basketball. He was addicted. Not a bad thing, considering the dark days he had lived through when his mother had passed. Focusing on the traffic, Alicia kept the conversation going by interjecting a question from time to time. It didn't take much stimulus.

She hated the outside of their house. You could never keep a good lawn in Las Vegas. The soil was so bad that plants couldn't thrive anyway, even with fertilizer. The Grant family had given up trying. Alicia grew some flowers and vegetables in a small greenhouse and left it at that. That was more than most people managed.

"That's strange," said Jimmy as they approached the house. She tried to see what caught his attention. "The front door's ajar. Do you think Peter's home?"

"More than likely, David came home from school and left the door open." She pulled into the driveway, dismounted, and unholstered her gun, feeling nervous in spite of her assurances to Jimmy. "Stay here."

Peter had adopted David too, Alicia's biological son from a previous marriage. He got along well with both boys. He wasn't much of a jock, but went to all their sporting events and cheered them on. And they loved going camping, something Alicia also enjoyed.

She pushed open the door slightly and saw the backpack and blood. She walked around that section of the living room rug and called out her son's name. No answer.

She backed out of the house, bumped into someone, and swung around with gun raised.

"Shit! I told you to stay in the car."

"What's going on?" said Jimmy.

"Something's happened to David. Call 9-1-1. I need the cops ASAP. I'll call Peter. This is now a crime scene."

“Why don’t you do something?” said Jimmy.

He was speaking to Peter. Alicia and Peter sat at opposite ends of the dining room table. Jimmy was pacing.

“We need to let the authorities do their job,” said Peter. “They’re not new to this, right Alicia?”

She was still stunned by the events occurring in their peaceful little household, but she heard Peter’s voice—it only seemed miles away. “Yeah, I guess. Sheriff’s deputies have an APB out for the entire county and the FBI is trying to come up with a motive and a profile.”

“But everyone’s just sitting around doing nothing! I don’t care about profiles. David’s injured. That’s his blood there on the rug.”

Alicia didn’t look over her shoulder at the rug. CSIs were still milling around. She knew techs were also installing equipment in case a ransom call was made. FBI agents and Sheriff’s deputies were meeting in the kitchen. She could hear their quiet voices as they tried to make sense out of what happened.

“It has to be related to your job,” said Peter.

“Why my job? You handle money matters for a major casino. Maybe it’s your job.” She shook her head. “Sorry. I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m reacting emotionally and not thinking well.”

“Well, I can’t sit around here and do nothing,” said Jimmy. He stormed out the front door, a door that was still ajar, a grim reminder of how it all began.

“Should I go after him?” said Peter.

“He’ll discover soon enough that he’s just as helpless as we are. Leave him be. This is probably bringing up lots of bad memories for the kid.”

Peter nodded.

There were no calls, only a false alarm when Jimmy’s girlfriend called.

“We’d like you to go into your office, Ms. Castro,” said Derek Miller, the FBI lead on the case. “One of our agents will accompany you. We’d like the two of you to go over your past cases. Think you can do that? Your husband can take care of things here.”

“As long as your agent drives me,” said Alicia. “I’d be a public menace driving in my present state.”

Miller nodded. “Willie here will accompany you. I’ve already explained to her what we need. She’s one of our best profilers and might see something you don’t.”

Alicia gazed up at the tall woman who looked to be right out of college. “She’ll have to sign a waiver. Our files are strictly confidential too. We deal with some delicate cases.”

Willie and Miller both nodded.

“Our number one problem right now is figuring out what the motive is for your son’s kidnapping,” said Miller. “The Sheriff’s deputies are still conjecturing that your son barged in on a home invasion. We don’t think so. That wouldn’t explain his kidnapping. Moreover, you and your husband claim there’s nothing missing.”

“There’s not much to steal,” said Alicia. “One big screen TV and some laptops. We don’t spend a lot on luxury items. My husband’s coffee bean grinder is our only nod to luxury.”

Miller smiled. "I gathered that. Saving for college, right?"

"Jimmy, our oldest, has a sports scholarship at UCLA. That helps a lot but will still stretch the budget. David—" Her voice caught. "—David likes his sports, but he's not very good at them, probably not good enough for a sports scholarship. Maybe an academic one that will help a bit. It's tough."

"I know," said Miller. "I have two daughters at UNLV. We've always had mac and cheese as a common menu item." He laughed. "Don't worry. We'll get David back."

"Thank you for assuming he's still alive. I wish I had evidence for that." *And, if he's alive, what's the motive?* As Peter had said, at least the FBI was asking the right questions. She needed some answers.

For the first time in years, Jimmy found his past useful. His birth mother, Daniela Ortiz, was an ATF agent who fell into a trap constructed by a murderous Mexican cartel leader, dying in an attempt to do his bidding in order to save Jimmy's grandmother, who now lived in LA. He had led an uncontrolled life that had only been reined in by the grandmother, but she wasn't able to stop him from making friends on the street.

He parked in front of the run-down house, slid out of Peter's little FIAT, and made sure the boys in the front yard saw his empty hands.

"Oscar here?" he asked.

A muscle-bound boy in a stained sleeveless undershirt and low-slung jeans approached the picket fence that once had been white. "Who's asking?"

"Jimmy Ortiz. He knows me."

"Does he now?" He laughed and said back over his shoulder, "Oscar knows Jimmy. Ain't that something!"

He reached across the fence and grabbed Jimmy by the throat. "But Miguel don't know you, see, and I'm the one out here. I don't like assholes who dude up like rich white kids, you know."

"*Alto, pendejo!*" A voice from the porch told Miguel to stop. "*Dejalo entrar,*" a boy almost as tall as Jimmy said, meaning, "Let him in."

Miguel let Jimmy go, pirouetted, and made a sweeping motion with his left hand after opening the gate. "Guess you do know, Oscar," he said with a laugh.

Jimmy looked daggers at him but went up the steps, rubbing his neck. Oscar shook his hand.

"*Hace mucho tiempo,*" he said, meaning, "It's been a long time."

"I need a favor," Jimmy said, hoping the others wouldn't understand the English so his conversation could be semi-private at least.

"Come inside," said Oscar.

They entered. Oscar waved a hand and two young girls disappeared. He plopped down in a stuffed chair that had seen better days.

"You owe me one, you know," said Jimmy.

Before his mother's death, even before basketball, Oscar was caught shoplifting. Jimmy was his alibi, and the case was dismissed. Jimmy made his friend promise to stop, but Oscar became a gang member, ran drugs for the dealers that supplied rich tourists, and moved up in the gang's hierarchy.

“That was a long time ago, bro, but I’ll concede the point. Heard you’d gone straight as straight can be and you’re one big swingin’ dick on the basketball court now.”

Jimmy smiled. “Not literally. I only have one girlfriend.”

Oscar shrugged. “They’re gang, and they’re useful.” He winked. “For many things. So, what’s the favor?”

Jimmy explained his situation. “Somewhere, someone knows why David was kidnapped. I need to find that someone.”

“So, I repeat, what’s the favor? Want me to find him and kill him?”

“No, just find him. I’ll take it from there.”

“I’ll give you a free piece of advice. Your new *mamacita* is a Fed, and the Feds are handling this. I think you’re in way over your head. I don’t want to get involved with no Feds either. Half the time, I’ve got DEA on my case. Don’t need no more.”

“I just need information. You can keep it quiet. I’m just asking you to tell the gang to keep their eyes and ears open.”

“They don’t like Feds either,” said Oscar.

“I’ll deal with the Feds,” said Jimmy. “But you guys go places I can’t. You might hear or see something useful.”

“Suppose this is some payback to your *mamacita*?” said Oscar. “I bet she’s caught plenty of illegals.”

“She’s more often occupied with stopping human trafficking,” said Jimmy. “Half the girls working the streets here are illegals, supplied by cartels and other assholes south of the border.”

“Tell her I wish her good luck on that,” said Oscar. “As long as there’s demand, someone provides the supply. It’s called capitalism, bro.”

“You aren’t involved in that, are you?”

“Shit no! I’ve got—whacha call them? Scruples? The cartels just supply my stuff. Got some cool meth yesterday. Want some? It’s selling like hotcakes.”

“No thanks. Will you do me the favor?”

“It’s not high on my priority list, but I do owe you. ‘Course, some cops might say you did me no favor by alibiing for me. Maybe if I’d serve some juvy time, I’d turned out to be a good boy, right?” Jimmy frowned. “OK, *estoy tomando el pelo*,” said Oscar, meaning, “I’m just kidding.” “I’ll talk to the gang. Got a phone where I can reach you?”

Jimmy gave Oscar his cell phone number.

Willie gave Alicia her mug and started sipping her own coffee. “Just like the home office brew. It’s horrible.”

“We call it full octane,” said Alicia. They had taken a break from studying Alicia’s old cases. “What’s with the nickname?”

“Way back in grade school I became tired of kids asking, ‘Wilma, where’s Fred?’ so I began insisting that people call me Willie. After a few skirmishes, both boys and girls accepted the idea.”

“You’re tall and rangy. Ever play basketball?”

"No, but I was the best spiker on both my high school and college volleyball teams. I heard your other kid is quite the player, though. I was brought in from Chicago, so I'm not up on local sports trivia." She looked at the screen. "Any other candidates?"

Alicia slid back through the icons of a few files and enlarged one. "We have a list of seven so far, but I keep coming back to this one."

"Yeah, I remember that one. Ugly little SOB, isn't he?"

"He threatened to kill me if he ever made it back to this country," said Alicia. "The Sheriff's department collared him because someone OD'd on heroin and the junky's girlfriend testified against this little shit. I was brought into the case because he was also involved in human trafficking. He had no papers, so it was an easy case to make for deportation."

"You think he might be back in the country?" said Willie.

"Could be. But why would he go after David instead of me?"

"Maybe he's getting at you through David. I like that theory, in fact, although it could match up with any of these jerks." Alicia frowned. "I don't mean 'like' in the sense of a Facebook 'like.' I mean, it's a possibility. You didn't receive a direct threat from the others in your list, right?"

"No, just general rants against our unfair system."

"It must be hard. Most immigrants, illegal or otherwise, are just here doing what everyone else wants to do—have a decent job, feed their family, and give their kids a decent life down the road."

"That's my take, too. Beyond my pay grade to try to have fairer laws that recognize special circumstances. My son Jimmy's grandmother was almost deported. My defending her was frowned upon by some of the biggies."

"I'd guess Grandma isn't exactly a cartel member," said Willie with a chuckle. "Let's get back to Miller with this. I'll bet the Sheriff's office has some informants who will know if Bernardo Gil is back in town. I'd doubt he's able to stay away from the only trade he knows."

Alicia nodded and grabbed her purse to follow Willie back to the parking garage.

Jimmy was sitting in a 24/7 diner sipping a diet Coke when his cell phone rang.

"Some dude named Bernardo Gil has your brother." It was Oscar's voice. He gave an address. "Be careful, *hombre*. I've heard of this dirt-bag. He'd kill his mother for her gold fillings."

"Don't worry. I'll go armed. Any intel on why he's doing this?"

"I don't know. Word is that the guy's a meth-head now. Maybe he's just crazy. I'd bet it has something to do with your *mamacita*, though. Be careful."

"Thanks, Oscar, we're even now."

"You'd better believe it. If this douchebag ever learns you got your info from me, I'm toast."

"What? And with all those muscle-bound gorillas you pal around with as bodyguards?"

"They can't shoot worth anything. This dude is lethal. Good ties with a cartel. Word is that your *mamacita* had something to do with busting one of them a while ago. Maybe this is all traceable to them?"

"I don't care what the reasons are. They're not acceptable. And David's innocent of all that."

“OK. Don’t know if I’d go out on a limb like that for a stepbrother, but that’s your problem.”

There was a click. Jimmy listened to a dial tone.

A half hour later he was sitting in front of an abandoned factory on the outskirts of Vegas. He had come through abandoned neighborhoods too, houses belonging once to people caught by the near depression and bank foreclosures. It didn’t look like Detroit—not yet. *And yet, Vegas is one of the fastest growing housing markets in the U.S.*, thought Jimmy. *How can that be?*

He was a quick thinker on the basketball court, but he recognized he was out of his comfort zone as he sat in the car trying to put a plan together. *How do I approach the warehouse? How do I make sure David survives?* It had occurred to him to at least call Alicia or Peter and tell them what he was doing. But everyone was probably still sitting back in the house, just waiting for the kidnapper to come to them. Jimmy liked to be proactive.

“We’ve received a tip,” said Miller, waving a slip of paper. “Bernardo Gil has been dealing meth from an old warehouse out in the burbs. Let’s go, ladies.”

“That’s Peter’s car,” said Alicia as they approached the warehouse. Miller stopped behind the FIAT. “He’s not in it! Gil has him too!”

“Calm down,” said Miller. He began giving orders to two SWAT teams to surround the warehouse.

“I think I understand this guy,” said Willy. “Let me go in alone and talk to him.”

“No way,” said Miller. “We don’t know anything about the situation.” He turned around when he heard the car door close. “Stop her!” But Alicia was running toward the warehouse. “Shit, she doesn’t even have her weapon or a vest.” He gave orders for the front SWAT team to stop the ICE agent.

But Alicia was already pulling the sliding door open. A hand appeared, grabbed her arm, and jerked her inside. The door slid shut.

“Sorry, Derek,” said the SWAT team leader.

“She’s fast,” said Miller, shaking his head.

It wasn’t anyone’s fault. Alicia Castro was a desperate mother. He had a premonition that this was going to end badly. *Maybe Gil had been hoping for something like this?*

Alicia tried to crawl away from Gil. He had held her and used the gun to pistol-whip her. After pushing her to the floor, he stood over her, legs spread, like a triumphant gladiator. She wiped blood away from her torn cheek and lip.

“My, my, this is getting better all the time,” he said. His eyes were bloodshot. With his evil smirk and white skin, he looked like some kind of monster, albeit a small one.

Aren’t some of the most vicious animals small? She managed to sit.

“You have me. Let my boys go.”

“Well, well, motherly love at its best. The bitch wolf protecting its pups.” Gil squatted and pointed the gun toward her face. “Given the circumstances, I could just put a bullet in your head and call it a day. The cartel might even give me a reward. But that’s too easy, isn’t it?”

"Let my boys go. You can do anything to me you want."

"Whoopee! Your old man not fucking you enough, bitch? You just going to adopt other brats because he shoots blanks?"

She spit in his direction. "I won't even respond to that question."

He stood, went to her, and slapped her, aiming for the wounded part of her face. She winced and reached for him, but he backed away, laughing.

"I'll take that as a yes, then. You should have stayed with your first mate, she-wolf. At least he was a man. I hated his guts too, but he's more like me." Gil puffed out his chest. "We're both macho types who can't stand meddlesome women."

He waved the gun toward David and Jimmy, who were tied up and silenced with duct tape. They were sitting on old crates. Alicia saw fear in David's eyes. She only saw hate in Jimmy's. And frustration.

"Here's what we're going to do, bitch." Gil pulled two vials and a needle out of the pocket of his leather jacket.

There was a sound at a side window. Gil and Alicia both looked. He took a shot.

"Brought the whole wolf pack, huh?" he said. "No matter. I'll continue. This isn't heroin you can get on the street. It's the really good stuff. You have to be careful and not OD on it. But I'm not going to be careful with your two brats here. You see, Agent Castro, they're going to die from a drug overdose. And you're going to watch them die!" He laughed and took another shot at a sound farther back in the warehouse. "Persistent, aren't they?"

"You won't get out of here alive," said Alicia.

"I'm a dead man anyway. Oscar Cifuentes and his gang are after me. I stiffed them and resold their junk to some other dealers. The cartel's furious with Cifuentes, thinking he owes them money. Ain't that a hoot!"

Alicia saw Jimmy's wide eyes. *So that was how he found this place. Cifuentes had used him! He probably prefers the Feds do his dirty work—it's revenge, all the same.*

"You don't have to do this. We can protect you from the cartel and the gang."

"Don't think so. That didn't work well with your real mom, did it?" The last question was directed to Jimmy.

But he knows that situation was different, thought Alicia. They used Daniela Ortiz as a tool, blackmailing her by holding her mother. There had been no question about protecting Daniela from the cartel.

Two more shots. On the second, Alicia heard an oof! Hopefully the SWAT team member was hit in his protective vest and not something vital. But she was worried. People outside were getting into position for an all-out assault. The worry was that her boys would be caught in a crossfire.

"Please, no!" She watched Gil plunge the needle into David, reload, and then into Jimmy.

"Sweet justice," said Gil. "Now, watch them die!"

Anita heard a sound from far back in the dark recesses of the old warehouse, away from the blackened but broken windows that let in some light. There was a brrrrt! from an automatic that spun Gil around. Before he went down, Alicia saw the line of bullet holes across his chest spouting blood.

"Now we're really even, Jimmy" said a voice from the darkness.

Alicia heard footsteps scurrying away.

David and Jimmy shared a room. They were still groggy, but the new OD antidote had taken effect. Several FBI agents had been carrying it. Alicia and Peter were talking to Derek Miller in the corridor. The boys were being guarded by Sheriff's deputies.

"Near as we can figure, the Cifuentes gang had their revenge," said Miller. "You three are lucky. The Sheriff's deputies tell me they don't usually leave witnesses. Willie thinks they were the ones who tipped us off about the warehouse. They wanted us to take care of Gil, I guess, from what you told us, Alicia."

"Pretty clever," said Peter. Alicia glared at him. "I mean, for gang members. They're probably laughing about pulling one over on the Feds."

"But we didn't kill Gil," said Miller. "I guess they wanted to make sure he would die."

Alicia turned and watched her boys. Jimmy stirred a little. They'd soon be watching TV. She'd have to remember to bring in their laptops on her next visit. With their homework assignments.

She'd also have to remember to ask Jimmy sometime what Oscar Cifuentes had meant. There was no hurry.

Note from Steve: Alicia Castro also appeared in the thriller *Angels Need Not Apply*, the second book in the "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco Series."

Forced Retirement

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Ortiz performed the countdown with his fingers—one, two, three. On three, the leader and another member of the SWAT team used their battering ram to crash through the door. A firefight ensued with the three dealers. High-grade heroin dust filled the air as their suspects overturned their work table and started firing. Two were taken out by return fire, but the woman, running in a crouch and using a large frying pan to shield her head, made it into the bedroom, Ruiz in pursuit.

“Stop, or I’ll shoot!”

Ortiz had no intention of shooting her in the back as she struggled to open the window that led to the fire escape. There were cops in the alley below who’d collar her easily enough. But she turned and pointed her gun at him.

He reacted by instinct upon seeing the weapon, moving to the side and firing before she could. His bullet smashed into her jaw, and the frying pan broke through the window, followed by her body.

He rushed to the window and looked down at the dead body. *Shit! We needed one of them alive for questioning.*

NYPD needed to know where the influx of high-grade stuff on the streets originated. The original source didn’t matter, but they wanted the middlemen suppliers. They figured it was a Mexican cartel, but which one?

“You OK, Ortiz?” He turned around. The SWAT team leader was taking his helmet off. “You hit?”

“No, I beat her shot, but I never wanted to kill her. We have no one to question now.”

“No skin off my nose,” the other said. “I look at my own kids and wonder how many people’s kids’ OD deaths these bastards are responsible for. We’ll get their suppliers eventually.”

“It’s nice to hear some optimism,” said Ortiz.

He didn’t have kids, but he understood the man’s point of view.

“I’ll need your gun and badge,” said the Captain.

Ortiz frowned. “What for? Did you ask for the shields and weapons of the SWAT team members?”

“Different situation. Your shooting is being investigated. SOP, Ortiz.”

“Because I’m a plainclothes narc? Yeah, I know, SOP. For how long?”

“Maybe a day or two. From your story, which the CSU and ME will corroborate, I’m sure, there should be no problem except paperwork.” The Captain smiled. “You deserve a day or two off anyway. Good job.”

“We don’t have anyone left to question,” said Ortiz, “so it’s not such a good job in my opinion.”

“Maybe next time,” said the Captain. “I’d rather the dealers die than cops, my friend.”

Ortiz nodded. Two days wasn’t much. Maybe he’d schedule a quick overnight at the New Jersey Shore with Brenda Sue.

But the getaway didn't occur. He was helping Brenda Sue put together beach equipment when his cell phone rang.

"We have a problem," said the Captain.

Dao-Ming Chen glanced over at her partner, who was taking advantage of tablet computing by relaxing in his desk chair, tablet on his lap, feet on top of the desk. A bit slovenly in his habits, he still always showed up in the precinct with a tie. But the shoes always looked tired and dusty. *No wonder. New York cops probably walk more than most, especially the uniformed ones.*

Her phone rang. She recognized the voice.

"Hiya, ex-partner. Got a minute?" Rafael Ortiz' face looked older than she remembered. She could see lines in that face even in the tiny screen of the phone. "Figured you could help me out here."

"Are you in trouble, Rafael?"

"Nothing I don't deserve, maybe. I should have let the woman shoot me. I need a good lawyer. Remembered you had a pretty good one with that little dust-up you had awhile back. Our union lawyers don't give me a great deal of confidence."

She smiled. What Ortiz called a dust-up was the case where she'd been accused of murdering a U.S. Senator. *Maybe he hasn't lost his sense of humor.* She saw Rollie Castilblanco looking her way, eyebrows raised. *Sixth sense. The man senses trouble.*

"I can give you her name. " She did. "What's the problem?"

"Some femme fatale with smack dust for makeup leveled a gun at me. I shot her. They can't find the gun." He explained what had happened in more detail.

"So, Internal Affairs is hounding you?"

"That's the nice word for it, I guess. I'm guilty until proven innocent. You know that gig."

"Anything Rollie or I can do?"

"Not really. If they don't find her gun, me and my lawyer are going to have to become very creative."

"Because you're friends with Chen, I'll give you a reduced rate, Mr. Ortiz, but I still don't come as cheap as your union lawyers. You understand that."

"That's OK. I can tap into some IRAs I have, sell the holdings in my Schwab account, or trade in my car." He smiled. "I'm not destitute."

"So, let's go over the details of the shooting."

Jing-Wei Liu decided she liked Rafael Ortiz, even if he was a bit rough around the edges. He was a more compact version of Chen's partner. She'd called Chen before taking Ortiz' case, trying to get some background on the ex-partner. He didn't seem like someone who would shoot a perp without reason. She smiled at Ortiz across the conference table.

“Sure. I remember you from Chen’s case.” Big Tiny, the ME, sighed with pleasure at his sip of caffeine-and-chocolate-powered large-size coffee. “I’d offer you one of these, but the coffee house is two blocks away. I guess you could hit it on the way back to your office.”

“I might.” She sniffed. The odors in the room were more conducive to drinking embalming liquid. She glanced at the three bodies under plastic sheets and shuddered. *Interesting profession; interesting man.* Big Tiny reminded her of that Boston nose tackle Vince Wilfork—she loved him. “I just to want to ask a few questions.”

“Maybe I can anticipate some,” said Big Tiny, taking another sip. “Rafael definitely plugged her with her facing him. That’s consistent with his story. She probably turned to shoot, frying pan in one hand, gun in the other.”

“What was the frying pan for?”

“SWAT guys testified she was using it to protect her face. Maybe a bit narcissistic, huh?”

“Not my call. Probably not yours either. I guess I can call you as a witness if needs be.”

“You probably should consider me a hostile one,” said Big Tiny, “because of my job. But that’s just semantics. I tell no lies and let the medical evidence speak for itself.” He frowned. “I’m guessing the broad was high on speed or meth, just from her eyes. I need to do a whole tox report on her.”

“Is she here?”

“Her body is,” said Big Tiny with a smile. “Second corpse over. I’m always the man in demand in New York City. Want to see her?”

“I’d rather not. Do we have a name?”

Big Tiny gave her the name—Linda Robertson. “She has a rap sheet longer than *War and Peace*.”

“That’s only a small text file in today’s pic and video world,” said Jing-Wei.

The ME nodded.

Dave Riley, the CSU leader, handed the coffee cup to Jing-Wei. She looked at the oil slick on the surface and her stomach churned. After Big Tiny’s lab, it wasn’t what her stomach needed, but it was probably cheaper than the ME’s. She should have hit his coffee house.

“I can’t imagine where the gun went. The cops in the alley saw the frying pan fly out first, then the body, but they didn’t see a gun. They knew not to move the body, but we didn’t find it on her or beneath her. The SWAT members never saw it, by the way. The other two had multiple weapons.”

“Ortiz said he won the gun battle, firing first, so there wouldn’t be any shells. But did you go over that bedroom thoroughly.”

He frowned. “I know my job. I learned my trade in Philly and now have the respect of the NYPD. I resent the implication.”

“My, aren’t we huffy? I’m Ortiz’ lawyer. It’s a reasonable question.”

“So, he’s too good for a union lawyer? Wish I had his deep pockets? I wonder where all that money came from.”

“And I resent that implication,” said Jing-Wei. “I guess it’s like Ortiz says. He’s guilty until proven innocent. Or, is everyone in NYPD afraid of IA?”

"I don't care about IA. I only care what the evidence tells me. There's no gun, so it tells me that Ortiz shot an unarmed woman. Case closed. And that's the way IA will present it. Tell Ortiz to enjoy his retirement. He's got the years and, if he needs work to pay off your exorbitant fees, he can become a private dick. That's the way it works everywhere."

Unfortunately, that's true, thought Jing-Wei. "I can tell you don't like me, so let's keep this professional. If you have any ideas about where that gun disappeared to, please let me know."

"I'll do that, but I'm not going to spend a lot of time thinking about it. I'm way too busy."

Even to help a fellow cop, added the lawyer.

"We have your statement," said one of the IA agents, looking from Ortiz to Jing-Wei. "Do you have anything to add?" The cop and his lawyer both shook heads in the negative. The agent closed his folder and glanced at his companion. He turned back to face them with a frown on his face. "Considering your record, Rafael, I hate to do this, but we have to move forward with an arraignment and trial. You're suspended indefinitely until we get through that process."

"Figures," said Ortiz. "You do your job and get slammed for it. Just call me Dirty Harry, I guess. Are we through?"

"For now. You know you can't abandon the New York City area."

"What about the Jersey Shore? Maybe I want to party a bit at the Stone Pony or ride the roller coaster at Wildwood."

"Tri-state area is the limit. And make sure your lawyer knows where to find you. Sorry about this."

"Yeah, I see the tears," said Ortiz with a growl.

"So, where do we stand?" said Ortiz.

Jing-Wei thought a few beats. "I'm not going to kid you. This is tough. In spite of Big Tiny's testimony, not finding the gun is critical. I guess they did ballistics on yours and proved your gun killed Linda Robertson, right?"

He frowned. "How would I know? I guess they'd need that. The CSU boys know their stuff."

"I'll check. I think you should just cool it for a few days. No telling how long they'll wait for the arraignment, and then there's the wait for the trial. Justice moves slow. That could work in your favor."

"If you can call it justice. I swear I saw a gun. You believe me, right?"

"It doesn't matter what I believe as your lawyer, but if it makes you feel any better, yes. You said the gun was a Glock 9 mm, like standard police issue?" He nodded. "Great gun, that one. I have one myself. A girl can't be too careful in New York City."

"Do you carry?"

"I'm not saying. People will even mug you here to steal your gun, you know."

He nodded.

That evening, Jing-Wei watched a scary movie. She didn't even know the title, but it was a classic and it relaxed her. She read mystery and suspense and watched those kind of movies. *Fits the profession, I guess.*

She found the wine, cheese, and crackers. *Nothing like a sharp cheddar.* She smiled as her bird fluttered from her shoulder to her lap and picked at the crumbs. *At least somebody benefits from my sloppiness when I'm on a case.*

She was about to take another sip, but her hand holding the wine glass stopped in mid-trajectory. The scene in the movie showed the serial killer looking into a cracked mirror. The bloodshot eyes and unshaven and acne-scarred face stared back at him as he gave himself the finger. She laughed, killed the sound, and picked up the phone.

"Can I ask the court's indulgence and request help from one of the bailiffs, please?"

The judge considered. "This is only an arraignment, Counselor Liu. I don't need any theatrics. Save them for the trial."

"A bit of theatrics that will maybe shed a lot of light on this case." She nodded to the grand jury. "We don't want to waste any more of your time, your honor, or theirs. This case needn't go to trial. I will prove Mr. Ortiz indeed saw Ms. Robertson with a gun."

The judge thought a few beats and then nodded to one of the bailiffs standing at one of the exits to the court room. "Mr. Fulton, if you'd be so kind."

Jing-Wei positioned the man in front of the judge's dais and handed the bailiff a shiny new frying pan. "Mr. Ortiz, is the pan similar to the one Ms. Robertson was holding."

"Pretty much," said Ortiz with a bored shrug but wondering if his lawyer had lost her mind. "I don't know much about frying pans. I don't cook."

There were chuckles from a few grand jury members. Most of them were just as bored, especially the ones who thought that even the results of the trial were predictable: just another case of NYPD excesses. The IA was always busy.

"Now, Mr. Ortiz, can you take this toy gun and stand in front of the bailiff at about the distance you were from Ms. Robertson?"

Ortiz looked at the judge. The judge smiled and nodded. Ortiz wondered if the judge was just getting his chuckles for the day. He moved to about ten feet from the bailiff.

"I'd ask Mr. Fulton to raise that pan a bit, maybe covering half his chin." The bailiff complied. "That's fine. Now, Mr. Ortiz, crouch a bit, and from your perspective, what do you see?"

Ortiz crouched and then smiled. "The reflection of the toy gun!"

"You have testified under oath that Ms. Robertson's gun looked like a standard police issue Glock 9 mm, correct?" Ortiz nodded, now standing, gun at his side, but still smiling.

"Isn't that the kind of gun you carry?" Again, Ortiz nodded.

"I rest my case your honor."

The grand jury, considering there was reasonable doubt that there would be no conviction if the case went to trial, found in favor of the defendant.

“Guess I won’t have to retire after all,” said Ortiz afterward in the hall outside the court room. “That was brilliant. Great detective work. No one ever considered that possibility.”

“I did,” said Jing-Wei. “I’m always amazed about what a little bit of cabernet and cheddar will do to stimulate my intuition.”

The IA agent stopped to shake Ortiz’ hand. “I’m glad that worked out for you, Rafael. This is the most unusual case I’ve ever worked on. Congrats to you too, counselor.”

“We still need to catch the suppliers,” said Ortiz.

“There’s time for that now,” said Jing-Wei, touching his arm. “Right now there’s a higher priority. Give Chen and Castilblanco a call and let’s go celebrate at Sardi’s upstairs.”

Ortiz looked at his watch. “Mind if I call Brenda Sue? She’ll be off duty in ten minutes. She’s a nurse at New York Presbyterian.”

Jing-Wei nodded. *What the hell? The good guys are always taken.*

Note: Rafael Ortiz and Jing-Wei Liu first appeared in *The Midas Bomb* and *Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder*, books one and two in the “Detectives Chen and Castilblanco Series.” The lawyer has also been in several other novels in that series.

The Profiler

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Virginia Morgan cracked open the door. The man standing there put away the badge he had shown her through the peephole.

"I'm retired, so I hope this is a fucking social call!"

The badge said his name was Arthur Newcastle. It looked authentic. Her hand behind her back still held a Glock.

"More than social," said Newcastle.

Geez, this guy's tall. Maybe two meters. Looks like an NBA star, and handsome too. "I guess I can let you in." She opened the door wider. Didn't show the gun. The agent had to stoop to enter. "Have a seat. Need some coffee?"

He drank it black. She loaded hers with cream and sugar. It was her third of the day, and she had progressed from black to loaded. Whiskey would be added after dinner, maybe with a touch of ReddiWhip.

"I hope this isn't about an old case," she said after handing him his mug and sitting down across from him. The gun was stored in the pocket of her bathrobe, ready just in case. *He fills up the whole damn sofa!*

"No, but you've profiled some similar cases. We need some help with a new one."

"You telling me with all the people you now have profiling, you can't come up with one for a current case? I was good, but I'm sure you have better now. Are psych grads that bad these days?"

He seemed embarrassed, but a sip of coffee stopped his bouncing knee. *Newbie. He's scared of me. Kind of in awe too. That's interesting.*

"How long you been out of the Academy, Arthur?"

"Three years, counting two years in training as a profiler. And you can call me Art. By the way, I was a psych major." He smiled a bit.

"Of course you were. Well, Art, if you're a profiler, why aren't you profiling? Or, didn't you hear me say I'm retired. I have been for some time. Except for a little hiatus that I can't talk about, I've had a quiet retirement. I'd like to keep it that way."

"This case would be more exciting than playing Bingo at the clubhouse," said Art.

That does it! "I'll have you know, I don't sit around on my ass. I'm a lot more active than most of your active agents. I'm just doing things I want to do now. Like going to Nepal in a month to climb Everest, for example. The bucket for my bucket list is big." She stared at him until his discomfort showed. "And I could probably take you in a fair fight—certainly, in an unfair one. So don't go flinging insults around like you have your eye on the Director's chair."

"I apologize. I had no idea. I guess I'm wasting my time here."

"Finish your damn coffee. You have that much time to tell me about the case."

Morgan felt like a new hire in her blue power suit and spiffy hairdo. Even with the bad night's sleep in her hotel, she felt energetic. Newcastle had been convincing, but the man giving the Power Point presentation about the serial killer was going to put her to sleep with his monotone voice, unless she did something. She raised her hand.

“Yes, Virginia.”

Sure, buster, look at me like I’m dog shit, just an old bitch you need to tolerate because the boys upstairs insist on it. She smiled.

“Dr. Peterson, that’s the worst pile of horse manure I’ve come across in any briefing. You’re ramming this perp into some convenient theoretical and Freudian cubbyholes. Did you get your PhD in Vienna?” Harold Peterson, a senior profiler on the task force, turned beet red. *Anger or embarrassment? Did it matter?* She continued. “It’s clear that this is a new MO for a serial killer, if we can call it a single MO. Each murder is different. The only similarity between the cases is the entry into a person’s house who lives alone and the time spent in the kitchen before the murder.”

“So, how would you explain his actions?”

“First of all, dipshit, it’s clear that it’s a woman.” There were some gasps. “That’s obvious to me, but I could be mistaken. I’m a bit rusty, you know, thanks to the government. But ask yourself: would a man spend any time in a kitchen? In one case, the perp made hot chocolate, for God’s sake! In another, the perp snarfed down half a gallon of ice cream—correction, frozen yoghurt.”

Peterson smiled. “OK, suppose she’s a woman. Why is she doing this?”

“Domestic issues. Can you show that video clip again?” The AV operator cycled back some slides and clicked on the embedded video. A security camera had captured the grainy image of a figure running. It lasted five seconds. “Did anyone notice the gait?” No one had. “The person is favoring the right leg. The right shoulder droops too.”

“So what?” said Peterson.

“You’re looking for a woman who’s abused, either past or present,” said Morgan. “This person needs help. Every murder screams to me that she’s looking for a home where she’s safe. The chocolate, the ice cream, putting out a place setting, mopping the floor when she spills something—it all adds up to domestic abuse. Let me see the map again.”

The AV fast forwarded to the slide with the map that showed the locations of the murders. It was a wide area scattered with murder scenes from the Gaithersburg suburbs of DC to inside the beltway. Eleven victims so far—a variety of ages and sexes, all people living alone in a house.

“If you connect the farthest out to the closest in and then draw the perpendicular bisector to that line, I’d bet you’re close to where she lives. You need to check with local PDs for abuse reports, but she might be a closet victim, suffering in silence.”

“How do we find her then?” said Newcastle.

She smiled at him, noting that he was obviously impressed.

“That’s not my problem. But you have your profile.”

Morgan was packing up to flee to her hotel and a deserved rest when Peterson approached her borrowed desk.

“That was quite a performance,” he said. “I’m thinking we made a mistake letting you retire.”

“Don’t flatter me, Harold. I could be one-eighty off on this one, and I’m the first to admit it. Your profile just didn’t fit all the facts. Mine does. That doesn’t mean I’m right.”

“But I see I was wrong, and I apologize. Why did you retire? Because of what happened?”

“You get tired. I had a long career. Even after all the trouble I had with the government, I thought about returning. First, I was locked away and doped out of my mind. Then I was almost killed. But the escape and subsequent events were still an adrenaline rush. But I had a new husband I wanted to enjoy being with for a time. With him gone, I’ve combined our bucket lists. I owe him that much.”

“Thank you for being so candid. Can I take you to dinner?”

“I’m at the Hilton in Crystal City. I’d like to go there and veg if you don’t mind.”

“Tomorrow then?”

“Why? I embarrassed you.”

Peterson rubbed his chin. “You’re an interesting woman with an interesting mind. From what I’ve read, we share some common interests—fine dining, hiking, music. I’d like you to become a permanent consultant so we can see more of each other.”

“You’re making a job offer?”

“After what I saw today, I’d be a fool not to. The Director agrees.”

“I only have a temporary clearance,” she said. “They killed my old one when I retired and made me persona non grata until all the dust surrounding Remington’s assassination attempt settled down.” She put a hand to her mouth, realizing that she’d disobeyed a gag order.

He laughed. “I know all about that case, so don’t worry. Not exactly a profiling, but a job well done, by the way. The clearance will become permanent, of course.” He tapped his head. “I’m afraid you’ll have more secrets in that old head. After today, no one should be worried about you having dementia.”

“I’d prefer that we don’t discuss those events over dinner,” she said.

“Good. We’ll discuss dinner logistics after tomorrow’s brainstorming.” He offered his hand. “It will be a pleasure to get to know you better. I always admired your work.”

In the parking garage, Victoria Morgan sat in her rental car and wondered about Harold Peterson’s agenda. He was twenty years younger. *It couldn’t be romantic, could it? Am I going to become a reluctant cougar?*

That night there was another murder. This one occurred in Chevy Chase. A prominent scientist from the University of Maryland, a widower, was found on his deck. His steaks were burned. They had cooked until the tank ran out of gas.

Morgan declined the invitation to ride out with Peterson. She wanted to stay at HQ and think about the case. Even with her profile, which she still stuck by, she felt something was missing.

Peterson returned after lunch and found Morgan in the conference room, focused on her laptop screen.

“I left the CSU out there. They’re looking for anything that will help us, but the COD is clear—multiple stabs in the back with a steak knife.”

“She just grabs whatever’s convenient,” said Morgan, “but my profile is still valid. I bet the house was nice and homey.”

“More so than you’d expect. The man’s wife just passed last year. He hadn’t touched much in the house. Probably wasn’t over the loss of his wife.”

She snapped her fingers. "That's what I'm missing! Call it loss or jealousy, this person was abused, is no longer, but wants what other people have, even if living alone."

"That's a stretch." He looked doubtful.

"No, it makes sense. It's the motive. She's striking out at people who have successfully adapted to living alone." Morgan thought a moment. "I could be wrong. I always say that. All the profiling experience in the world can't predict a statistical outlier. Profiles are only best guesses, the answer to: Given this set of incomplete data, what fits?" She thought a moment. "Is there a way to check missing person reports?"

"Sure, especially older ones. Local cops could be handling the recent ones."

"Here's the idea: we look at those in the area where our murders have occurred."

It took nearly an hour. Newcastle threw himself into the problem. One case stood out because it was so close to the intersection of the cross Morgan had indicated before.

"What's the situation with that one?"

"Missing husband. He disappeared just before our first murder. The police didn't have much luck with the case. The woman is in a state of shock, hardly coherent most of the time. That's the police report anyway. Almost a cold case now."

Peterson was reading from the file displayed on the large screen at the front of the room. *Good eyes. I can't read the damn thing.*

"Do the police suspect foul play?" said Morgan.

"In what sense? That she offed the husband? Profile says she's a little mousy. I doubt it."

"I mean, do they have concrete evidence to eliminate her as a POI?" Peterson shook his head. "You need new glasses, Virginia. The cops conjecture her man just abandoned her."

"That wouldn't be enough to flip her out necessarily. I think we'd better pay her a visit."

Peterson didn't have any desire to return to suburbia. He didn't seem to buy the addendum to her profile either. She decided to go alone.

When she pulled into the driveway, she was sure. Elaine Whittaker was the serial killer. She rang the bell.

"Mrs. Whittaker, my name is Virginia Morgan. I consult for the FBI." She flashed her creds. "Can I come in?"

"I guess." She was dressed in sweats, sneakers, and headband. *A jogger? Going out or coming in?* If the latter, it had been some time ago.

They sat opposite each other in the small, cluttered living room. There were old papers stacked around. Also some books. Morgan saw some headlines in the old papers referring to the murders. One of the books was Virginia's. *Interesting, but not damning.*

"Is this about my husband? Have you found him? He's dead, isn't he?"

"We don't know that exactly, but it looks like it might be the case. I'm new on the case and need some background. Where did you meet him?"

Morgan watched the body language. Facial twinges and hand-wringing could be caused by many things. Even the flipping of the hair. But a vacant stare into some other dimension said something else.

"I was a checker at CVS. He asked me out. He was nice at first."

At first. Yellow caution light.

“He bought this house for us. I can’t say we ever managed to make it a home though.”
A house, not a home. Red light. “I wanted a home so much. I wish he were here so I could tell him that.”

She rose, smiled, and walked to the fireplace. Morgan wondered if it was functional. It had the usual fireplace tools. Whittaker placed her hands on the mantle as if she needed support.

“I thought he was the one, you know. And then he goes and leaves me.”

She caught Morgan unprepared. The fireplace iron came crashing down on her so fast that she only had time to raise her arm. Morgan fell to the floor from the force of the blow and resulting pain. Whittaker stood over her, now holding the iron like a spear with both hands, ready to stab the agent. Morgan swung her legs, kicking Whittaker’s out from under her.

A clumsy and painful roll to her side brought Morgan close to the coffee table. She used it to push herself up with her left arm. She knew the right was broken. She fumbled for her gun. As the crazed woman lunged at her brandishing the iron that had become a deadly weapon, Morgan managed to control her weapon with her good hand and pull the trigger.

The bullet hit Whittaker in the shoulder and the iron went flying, crashing into the bay window and into some shrubs in front of the house. She grabbed her shoulder and sunk to the floor.

“He beat me, he beat me!”

Morgan managed to holster her gun and found her cuffs. “I know, honey.”

“She was really the victim, you know,” she told Peterson that night at dinner.

“That’s one way to look at it,” said Peterson. He had already apologized for not believing Morgan and failing to send someone along with her to interview Whittaker. “We found her husband’s remains in a trash can buried in the back yard. She’d filled it with lime to cut down the smell. With the earth and lime, the dogs didn’t pick up any scent.” He smiled. “I guess you solved all the serial killings and the case of the missing husband too. Better batting average than a major leaguer on steroids. Really makes the Director’s and my argument easy. We want you back full time.”

Morgan raised her injured arm in its sling a bit. “I don’t know. Consulting might be my schtick. I don’t know if I could go back to full time.”

“You don’t have to decide now. Give the arm some time too. Let’s talk about more pleasant things. They have a great production of *Fiddler on the Roof* going on now at the Arena Stage. I have two tickets for Saturday night.”

Morgan considered. *Sure, why not?* She looked briefly skyward and winked. She knew the spirit of her husband was up there somewhere, smiling. *Just don’t come back to haunt me, honey!*

Note from Steve: Virginia Morgan also appeared in the sci-fi thriller *The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan*.

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Jay Sandoval often reminisced while she ran. Her life with Boston cop Chris Tanner had turned out better than she hoped. Chris was still only a detective, albeit a successful one, but he had turned down two promotions, not wanting to be chained to a desk. They had their little house in Medford, bordering on the Fells, her usual choice as a jogging spot. Their two adopted kids were doing well in school and the oldest would enter kindergarten in the fall.

All the turmoil associated with the cloned children had subsided as far as she knew. Their good friend, Kalidas Metropolis, was busy at the Center taking care of them; they'd soon be released into the government's witness protection program. The cover-up, engineered by the government, would be complete.

Jay's career as a reporter was on hold; she had left the ezine to raise their kids. Between birthday parties, after-school sports, and clubs, she was busy. *But I'm bored!*

She didn't want to return to those dangerous times. Her contact with their friends from then reduced to emails and Christmas cards for the most part, although she liked to talk to Metropolis on the phone. *Maybe adrenalin surges are habit forming? I need more excitement.*

She often ran with her eyes on the ground. In the Fells, roots and weed clumps often invaded the trails. She had broken an ankle skiing and didn't want to repeat that experience. Because of that, she didn't see the body until she almost tripped on it.

If I were dumping a body here, I wouldn't do it in the middle of a trail! Hands on hips, she caught her breath, took off her sweatband, and used it to wipe her face. There were marshlands, expanses of tall grass, and many small copses of trees spread across the Fells, considered one of Boston's lungs. They would all make better places to dump a body.

She walked around to cool off, but then returned to the body and knelt down. *Why am I so calm?* The victim, a woman, was dressed in a slinky, black nightclub gown, complete with sequins and a Hollywood slash up one leg to show thigh. Rings were on a few fingers, and a long, gold necklace that plunged into her cleavage looked like it had just been taken out of the jewelry chest. *Or, bank vault?*

Cause of death was obvious. Probably any of the three gaping wounds, two in the stomach and one just below the left breast, would kill anyone with time, although the one to the heart was probably an instantaneous deathblow. Blood had coagulated and dried around the wounds—not much. Jay imagined the chest cavity was filled with old blood.

The victim was young, maybe twenty- to thirty-years-old. Jay found her cell phone, dialed, and smiled when Chris' face appeared.

"The kids?"

Chris Tanner was kneeling by the body. "I left them with Mrs. Feinmann, who surely will make them behave with a plate of cookies. ME and forensics will be here soon."

Jay felt uncomfortable in the Tyvek booties and latex gloves. They didn't exactly go with the running clothes. Chris was in bermudas, T-shirt, and boat shoes he used for work around the house. The shoes were set off to the side; his booties were on bare feet.

He had snapped several pictures; they were waiting for the police computer to make an ID. "I don't recognize this woman, but I never read the society sections of Boston Globe Online. Any ideas?"

"Only that it wasn't a mugging. A mugger would be after the bling. This is something else."

"Agreed. When the ME and CSU arrive, we should go home and clean up. I'll be able to do more at the Precinct."

"Agreed," she said, mimicking his voice. "Isn't this exciting?"

He stared at her. "Unusual, I'd say. How many times have you run here without coming across a body? But why exciting?"

"I was just thinking back to the times with Kalidas Metropolis and the rest of the gang. They were dangerous but exciting times."

"Forget about it. You're a mom now." He looked back toward the houses on the horizon. "Speaking of which, I hope our people hurry, 'cause I'm not sure Mrs. Feinmann will have enough cookies, and they'll give the hellions a sugar high."

After Chris left for the Precinct, Jay called Mrs. Murphy, another neighbor who looked after their kids more than Mrs. Feinmann. Mrs. Murphy was taking her own grandson to the zoo and, yes, she'd love to take Jay's kids too. Jay waved as the old electric SUV pulled away with two rows of filled carseats. *They'll be home before Chris even knows*, she thought. She went back inside and sat down at the computer.

"I'm working on a story," she typed. She waited, went and poured coffee, fought the urge to eat a snack, and returned. Still no reply. Ben Ito, now managing editor of *Crime Fighters Ezine*, was probably not in the office. She was about to log off from her ezine account, which she had kept unbeknownst to Chris, when Ben replied.

"Good Lord, is that you? How's tricks, Mrs. Tanner?"

"Stow the crap and listen up." She quickly described the body and where she found it. "I want this story."

"There's some clutter about it on the scramblers, but it's just breaking. I'll put out a bulletin with your by-line. Welcome back, I think. Does Chris know about this?"

"He's working on the cop end of things. I can sleuth around where he can't."

"What about the kids?"

"At the zoo with the baby sitter for the day. You see, I recognized the woman."

"And you didn't tell the police AKA your husband?"

"They and he'll find out soon enough. I'll have my story by then."

"And can you tell me who she is?"

"Not on your life. It's my story. Bye now."

Jay smiled. She knew it was only a temporary fix, but she could feel the adrenalin flowing. She backed Chris' little hydrogen roadster out of the garage and tore down the street, leaving rubber on the pavement.

"Mr. Cavanaugh, please," Jay said to the aide. She flashed her ezine reporter's ID. "Jay Sandoval, from *Crime Fighters Ezine*."

"Mr. Cavanaugh doesn't have time for the paparazzi," said the aide.

"Tell him I found his dead daughter," she said.

The aide's jaw dropped. "Just a minute." Her patience wore thin with the wait, but he returned. "Come this way." He showed her into a large study that looked like something from 19th century England. Wood bookcases and old books weren't unusual among Boston's old, wealthy families. She wondered if it was all for show. *Who reads leather-bound books anymore? Who even reads paper books anymore?*

But Cavanaugh is Irish mob.

A white-haired man dressed in guayabera, jeans, and sandals was sitting at a modern desk that was bigger than most dining tables. All the drawers were on one side, and wooden filing cabinets stood behind him like they were silent bodyguards. *Fungus in the toenails.* It was a common affliction among people who couldn't afford full medical. *Maybe Cavanaugh just doesn't care. He certainly has the money for the best treatment possible.*

He motioned for her to sit down.

"Miss Sandoval is it?" She didn't correct him. It was better to keep Chris out of this. "There must be some mistake. My daughter's at Wellesley as we speak."

"Call her then," Jay said.

Cavanaugh shrugged and dialed, spoke curtly, and handed the phone to Jay, who maintained a straight face even though she was surprised. The face belonging to the dead body filled the phone's tiny screen, only this body was alive.

"What's this all about? I have a class in five minutes!"

"Maybe an error," said Jay. She handed the phone back to Cavanaugh. He said a few words that sounded fatherly and hung up. "She doesn't have a twin sister, does she?"

Cavanaugh's laugh was booming—and slightly insulting. "You people are all alike. Maybe this dead woman looked like my daughter a bit, but you people will jump to any conclusion to file a story."

"I saw your daughter in an internet video. She was wearing exactly that dress and bling and was having a great time at a Boston night club."

"There are still many Irish in the Boston area, Miss Sandoval, and there are certain ethnic similarities. Many people don't look as distinctive as you do."

"That sounds a bit racist," she said.

"Take it as you wish, but people have doppelgangers. Leave this to the police. Let them do their job. Aren't you married to a cop, by the way?"

After leaving the mansion, Jay sat in her car and thought. *One, Cavanaugh or his aide researched me even before I went into the study—very fast work!* She smiled. The internet made such things too easy. *Second, by his body language, especially in the eyes, Jay knew the old man was hiding something.*

She dialed Chris' precinct.

"I can see where you are, you know," said her husband. "Where are the kids?" She explained. "Cavanaugh's estate isn't exactly a safe place to be, you know."

"He wouldn't do anything in broad daylight. Besides, Ben knows I'm here."

Chris groaned. Secretly, he was happy his wife was back on the beat. She had seemed bored and out of sorts lately.

"Have they ID'd the body?"

"No, but blood type and DNA don't match Cavanaugh's daughter, if that's what you're asking."

"Impossible. I know it's her. You should ask for a blood sample from the woman at Wellesley I talked to."

"Considering the resemblance, I can probably do that. Would it make you happier? You don't have a story, Jay."

"OK, so who's the woman? She's all over the internet in videos taken at Boston night spots."

"We're working on that," said Chris. "We're doing our jobs, Jay. Be home for the kids when they get back." He hung up.

Jay frowned. *Did he think that pursuing the story was too dangerous? Or, did he think I've lost my touch and should stick to being a mother?*

She looked at her watch. She had one more stop to make. At this time of day, the return trip to Boston and on to downtown didn't take long. She went to the door and knocked on the plate glass in spite of the closed sign. A striking older woman with a tad too much makeup opened the door.

"I need to speak with someone who was here last night," said Jay, flashing the *Crime Fighters* ID.

"That'd be me. What do you want?"

"I just want to ask a few questions."

The woman shrugged and stepped aside. Jay followed her back to the bar.

"We open at six," said the bartender, continuing her task of hanging long-stem wine glasses into racks above the bar, "but I was here last night, like I said. Am I going to be on *Crime Fighters*?"

Jay smiled at the woman. Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame had never touched her. She had agreed with Pierce Hamilton, National Security Adviser to President Fulton, that the scandal about the clone children should never be made public. But people still wanted those fifteen minutes.

"Sure. I'll come back with a videocam tech maybe." She snapped several pictures with her phone. "But stills work too." She paged to a previous set of photos. "Know this woman?"

"Sure. That's Sheila Cavanaugh. She's a regular. We get a few Wellesley coeds here all the time. Maybe looking for Harvard studs, even though Wellesley now has male students? We're an upscale club. Drinking, dancing, and flirting among the beautiful people of our fair city."

"What hour did she leave last night?"

"Her bodyguard hefted her over his shoulder to take her home. She had finally passed out. She was right here at the bar several times, throwing down Irish whiskey like it was going out of style. She was screaming a lot of nonsense."

"Like what?"

“One thing she said a lot was that Daddy’s going to burn in hell for this. I feel for the old man. He’s received a bum wrap from the media, not to mention the authorities. She’s been uncontrollable for years.”

Once on the street, Jay began to curse. The meter had expired. She had a ticket.

She sat in the car, thinking about what the bartender had said, when her phone rang.

“You might be on to something,” said Chris. “The blood and DNA records in the FBI database were hacked. The records of every two-bit lowlife Bostonian were changed, including Cavanaugh’s and his entire family. Somebody paid a lot of money to have some serious hacking done.”

“How is that possible?” she asked.

“Not my expertise. Who am I, Mr. Snowden?”

“Who’s that?” Chris had a habit of bringing up law enforcement trivia. It would never be a subject on a newsnet game show, but it was always honest trivia when she bothered to check it out. “Never mind. So, do you agree with me that the body was really Sheila Cavanaugh?”

“Didn’t say that. I’m saying the police have an interesting case to pursue that Mrs. Tanner should stay out of. Like I said, Mr. Cavanaugh’s not a nice man.”

“It won’t do any good to obtain blood or DNA samples from the Wellesley woman, you know.”

“What do you suggest? I’m at a loss.”

“Let me think about it. I’ll call you back.”

What the hell’s going on? She turned when there was a tapping sound on her side window. She stared into the barrel of a gun. The left hand of the person indicated she was to roll down the window. It was Cavanaugh’s aide.

She was blindfolded and taken to a place with echoes. *An empty building?* She heard a heavy door slide open. *Maybe a garage or warehouse?*

“Kill the blindfold and gag.” She recognized Cavanaugh’s voice even before her eyes could adjust to the bright light. Sheila Cavanaugh was standing behind him. “I need to know how much the police know.”

She rolled her tongue between teeth and lips to produce some saliva. The gag had left her mouth dry. “I’m sure they’ll want to question the woman standing behind you. She’s not Sheila.”

He laughed. “Oh, but she is. In my line of business, I make strange friends. One friend, for a fee, provides spare body parts. I’m on my second liver and third kidney. And please, no jokes about drunken Irishmen.”

Jay gasped. “She’s a clone!”

He nodded. “Another service my friend provided.” Jay could tell Cavanaugh was almost bragging now. “Why make money if you can’t spend it, right?” He took out a Glock and used the barrel to caress Jay’s cheek. “Now, little snoop, how much do the police know?”

“I’m just a reporter. How could I know?”

“Because you’re a reporter, a damn good one in your day. And your husband is a cop, a damn good one then and now. You just couldn’t leave this alone, right? You were looking for scandal, right?”

“I just wanted to know why Sheila Cavanaugh was dead. The story’s always in the why. But now I know why. You committed some crime that even shocked your own daughter. With her partying, it was too much a risk, right? Now the story will be about what kind of crime shocks a woman who’s a mobster’s daughter.”

He clubbed her with the barrel of the gun, opening a gash over her right eyebrow. “The stupid bitch has been out of control for a long time, but this was the last straw.” He nodded to the clone. “She’s more docile, brainwashed or something to do exactly what I want her to do. My friend is a real clever guy, you see.”

He handed the clone the gun. “Shoot her. The police know nothing. We’ll toss the body into the harbor with a few concrete blocks attached.”

Jay grimaced as the clone pointed the gun at her. *Now it’s an overdose on adrenalin!* But then the aim swung in a different direction. The clone shot Cavanaugh and his aide.

“Mr. Cavanaugh’s friend thought Mr. Cavanaugh’s usefulness was over.” She put the barrel in her mouth and pulled the trigger one more time.

“I don’t get it,” said Chris as he massaged Jay’s feet. It was two days later. They had just tucked the kids in. “What was the agenda?”

“Did you find out what Cavanaugh did that shocked his daughter so much?”

“Yeah, thanks to ICE. It’s a theory, anyway. Cavanaugh was branching out into human trafficking.”

Jay nodded. “Sheila apparently reached her limit with that added to all the other stuff. Apparently, the new business appalled her. At least her death wasn’t completely senseless. Will this crush the new line of business?”

“I’m more worried about Cavanaugh’s friend. He’s still active, probably with an assumed name.”

Jay nodded, knowing who he was talking about. “I’m going to have to warn Kalidas Metropolis and the others.”

“Are you putting any of that into your story?” said Chris.

“Not the last. We’re under a gag order, remember?”

Note from Steve: Jay and Chris appear in the sci-fi thriller *Full Medical*, the first book in the “Clones and Mutants Trilogy.”

Channeling Idi Amin

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Denise Dupont knew she looked stunning but felt groped. The dictator's eyes were all over her. *Part of the job.* He flashed a toothy smile. She smiled back.

She was dressed in a flowing gown, its multiple hues like a neon sign in Paris inviting the fat man to dine on her. The native headwear and large golden earrings topped her off, but Samuel Chibuzo wasn't looking at the top. Spike heels made her as tall as any man in the ballroom, but he wasn't admiring those either.

God, he's repugnant!

The self-declared Black Pope and leader of the Christian Brotherhood of West Africa, Royal and Divine Monarch and President of the Federal and Independent Republic of West Africa, and chief and principal shaman of three major tribes in the country, already had eleven wives and twenty-three children. She was trying to tempt him enough so that he wanted to make her number twelve.

It doesn't look that hard.

He was waddling toward her like a retired Sumo wrestler high on pot. Even with air conditioning, the African leader perspired.

The moment of truth approaches.

Rumors had it that Samuel Chibuzo ate his enemies. Dupont didn't know about that. Her CIA briefing hadn't talked about dietary predilections.

After parachuting onto a soccer field in the capital's suburbs, it had taken only two days to find the reporter. That woman now sat tied in a chair in Dupont's downtown hotel room, guarded by a local CIA operative. Even with the gag, Dupont was able to copy the woman's face enough to match the poor quality passport photo. She would attend the ball as Katrina Opeyemi, reporter for ANN, or the African News Nexus, an internet ezine that carried news about the continent and the world.

She had no weapons except her hands and feet. That would be enough if she could get close to Chibuzo. He wasn't the target per se, just an inconvenient and bloated obstacle standing in her way. His humble abode, the rest of the Black Pope's Palace, was the target.

"Miss Opeyemi? Might I have a word?"

She inclined her head to the dictator. "Mr. Chibuzo. Or, should I say, Your Excellency, Mr. President, or King Samuel?"

"I'm a humble man, and your humble servant. Just call me Samuel."

What a charming ogre! "You probably think I'm here for an interview."

"Are you? You're rather famous, you know, but you look a bit different than you do on streaming video. Whatever." He waved a hand as if he were slapping away bad thoughts. "I would love to give you an interview in my private chambers."

"I received an invitation for this ball months ago and planned a vacation trip here in order to attend," she said. "Tonight I'm not a reporter, just a reveler, enjoying fine music, food, and drink."

"You have an English accent. Were you educated in the United Kingdom?"

“In London.” She hooked her arm in his. “In lieu of an interview, would you like to show me around your palace? It seems like an art museum, it’s so sumptuous.”

He was a full two meters tall and probably weighed more than he appeared to weigh because of his height. He leaned into her a bit and she refrained from drawing away from his perspiring shoulder. He raised his right hand. Servants appeared immediately.

“Bring Miss Opeyemi a glass of your best champagne and some of that imported caviar,” he ordered. They sped off to do his bidding. “They will take care of you. Ask that man over there to show you to my chambers after the ball ends at midnight.” He indicated a tall, slender man dressed in white who was checking invitations. “He’s my aide.”

An aide who also heads up palace security. That was in her briefing.

She had been in this game so long that she no longer even had an adrenalin rush. *What happens at midnight is under my control.* But then she smiled. *Unless Cinderella loses more than her slipper.*

Samuel Chibuzo’s grandfather, the first Black Pope, had become famous for decreeing homosexuality punishable by death. His official reasoning, although not original on the African continent, had been simple but incorrect—homosexuality was sin and AIDS was the punishment for that sin. The real reason was also simple—a successful dictator needs a class of people to serve as scapegoats, a distraction from all the ills incurred during his rule. His citizens were so busy pursuing homosexuals that they tended to focus only on that and forgot about hunger, famine, and oppression. When he became Black Pope, he even blessed that persecution as God’s work. Son Samuel had continued God’s work.

Dupont was a bit more enlightened. She swung both ways, sometimes as part of her work, but mostly because she was looking for that certain someone, male or female, who would be her soul mate. Part of her past was associated with thwarting some business adventures of an otherwise successful sociopath. She didn’t know much about the pair involved in that gig, Kalidas Metropolis and Sara Holiday, but still admired them—they seemed to have what she was looking for.

I’m damn sure I won’t find it in Samuel Chibuzo.

Her real name wasn’t Denise Dupont, of course, any more than it was Katrina Opeyemi. In her line of work, names were irrelevant. She took many names, played many roles. Denise Dupont was a useful alias, especially when she spoke French—that name was on her French passport. Denise Bridges was on her English passport. Daniela Ponte was on her American.

The aide was British. *A white man serving a black, which probably means he’s an ex-mercenary.* Fortunately, he didn’t know her. She didn’t know him either, only of him. Her briefing.

He led her up one of the spiral staircases, the one on the right. Both had multiple landings where one could observe fine suits of armor or glass cases with old military uniforms. She felt like she was in an English castle.

“You must feel at home here, Mr. Adams.”

"Mr. Chibuzo is a good employer," said Gerald Adams, the lanky head of Chibuzo's security.

"That's not what I meant." At the next landing, she gestured to the case filled with old guns. "The décor is very English."

"Africa had to struggle to shake off the yoke of the British Empire. It's ironic, I suppose, that some leaders value the trappings of English aristocracy."

"I take it you don't."

"I pay little attention to history. I live for the now and try to plan for the future. That seems more practical." At the top of the stairs, they stopped in front of two broad doors. Adams opened one. "Please, make yourself at home. The President will be with you shortly."

Dupont entered a sumptuous Victorian style library with lots of wood bookshelves, accessible with ladders on wheels, and many leather-bound tomes. She walked to one case and removed a first edition of a Dickens novel. *The first edition in book form*, she reminded herself. Many Dickens' works were serialized novels before appearing in book form. At least, she thought that was the case.

She opened the book and saw the scrawled dedication from Dickens to the Duchess of something or other. *A diplomat's wife perhaps?* She hefted the book. The leather probably added a pound or two, but this tome would make a good doorstop. *Or, a weapon!* She smiled at that idea. But the plan wasn't to kill Chibuzo. She had another job to do.

"Besides being a beautiful woman, I see you have a taste for the finer things in life," said Chibuzo, entering from a side door to the study. "Would you like a sherry, my dear?"

The seduction dance began. When he handed her the glass, it was with the right hand. The left caressed her cheek. "I'm so glad we met this evening. Your beauty graces my humble abode."

She swirled to one side and took a personal tour around the library, figuring the dictator would prefer to feast on her with his eyes rather than make any exertion to follow her. The briefing said that he was incurably lazy—a hedonist who thought a woman's place in life was to please him in every way, including taking the lead sexually. She'd use that against him.

As she toured, she hid the fact that she emptied her glass in a planter. She wanted to avoid becoming tipsy and preferred that the Black Pope become drunk instead. She suspected the drink was drugged anyway.

"Shall I pour myself another one?" she said, as she approached the ornate liquor cabinet.

"Please. Be my guest. Bring me another too, if it's convenient."

The sherry was in a crystal decanter. She would have to guess the provenance.

She sipped at her second glass, deciding the whole bottle wouldn't be drugged. *Excellent.* She drugged his glass to speed things up. "It's quite good. Let me guess." She rattled it off, including the year. "Am I correct?"

"My dear, how would I know? Be assured that it's the very best. I only purchase exquisite sherry."

She sat in the wing chair across from him. "Looks like we're not going to take that tour. I wanted to see the royal bed chambers."

He leered at her. "That's a bit direct. Do I excite you?"

"You're growing on me. I find you exotic and mysterious."

"That's supposed to be my line." His speech was now slurred. "But come, I will show you the bedroom wing. It's rather large due to my extended family, but my own bedroom is modest."

The leer had changed to a look of lecherous desire. Dupont, dressed only in undergarments, rubbed the huge man's back.

"You must relax, Your Excellency. You're too tense." She watched the stirrings under the man's enormous striped boxers. *He really needs to lose some weight and ingest more little pills than sherry.* She smiled. Of course, HQ's other little pill didn't help his attempts at full erection.

The Black Pope didn't make it. He collapsed on the floor. She used her strong arms to soften the fall, checked his pulse, and shook her head. *Stupid bastard. Did he really believe I was interested in him?*

She quickly dressed, converting her gown into a simple dress using an invisible hem and her high heels into flats by unscrewing the spikes. She was ready to move.

It wasn't hard to find the third wife. Even in sleep, Dupont recognized the face. She jostled the woman. She woke with a start, but a finger to the lips quieted her.

"I've come to get you out."

"I won't go without my children," the woman said, matching the whisper.

Dupont sighed. *Not in the briefing, guys!* "OK. Where are they?"

"In the nursery. Another wing. Follow me."

Three children, a girl and two boys, were delighted to go on an adventure with their mother. Their bedclothes reminded Dupont of *Peter Pan*. The girl looked like a black Wendy; the boys, a black John and Michael. The Darlings were overdressed for the hot climate awaiting them outside, but Dupont could do nothing about that.

The five of them found their way downstairs and into the kitchen, where there was supposed to be a service door. She no longer trusted the briefing though. *As usual, I'll have to be creative if it's not there.*

Dupont entered the kitchen and stopped cold. Adams covered her with an automatic.

"I saw what was happening on one of the closed circuit surveillance cameras and decided to take care of it myself."

"Do you even care why I'm doing this?"

"My guess is that wife number three is becoming tired of our great leader. Somehow, she sent a message to the American embassy that she was willing to exchange detailed information on Mr. Chibuzo's plans, information she probably gathered from pillow talk. The old bastard brags a lot, especially when he's going at it with one of the wives. How am I doing?"

"Very well. It apparently doesn't bother you that those plans involve terrorist attacks and invading neighboring countries? I can save thousands of lives."

He laughed. "Hell no. That's just more money for me."

"And why didn't you just shoot me?"

"And alarm the little tykes? What kind of savage old curmudgeon do you think I am?"

"So, what now?"

"You'll allow me to tie you up. Eventually I'll make you disappear. Quietly." He smiled. "You're not Opeyemi, are you?"

She shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"Keep the children out," said Adams.

Wife number three had entered the kitchen behind Dupont. Her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped when she saw the gun.

“You should stay out too,” said Dupont.

She then felt the handle of the large knife in her right hand. It was hard to test its balance with just one hand, though.

“Mind if we sit down?” she said.

“I’d prefer it, as a matter of fact. I’ll tie you to a chair.” In the hand not holding the gun, he showed a braided rope. “Woven surgical Kevlar and Teflon. No one gets out of this. Maybe I’ll use it for a garrote later on.”

She reached for a chair with her left hand and threw the knife with the right. It wasn’t a good throw, but it hit Adams in his bony shoulder, slicing into muscle and ligaments before falling to the floor. He tried to shift the gun to his other hand. He didn’t make it in time. She broke his larynx and finished him with the kitchen knife.

She recovered the gun and knife and turned to wife number three.

“Get the children. Try not to let them see Adams’ body. There will be a car waiting to take you to the Embassy.”

Wife number three, a huge smile on her face, nodded.

Dupont rubbed her fist. If Chibuzo survived coming events, she might be back for him. That made her smile.

Note from Steve: Denise Dupont also appears in the sci-fi thriller *Evil Agenda*, second book in the “Clones and Mutants Trilogy.”

Note from Steve: You have just finished the short story collection *Crime, Mystery, and Thrills*. I hope you enjoyed it. We know it's hard to write a review of a collection, but if you can, or at least mention it to friends, please do so.

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About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.