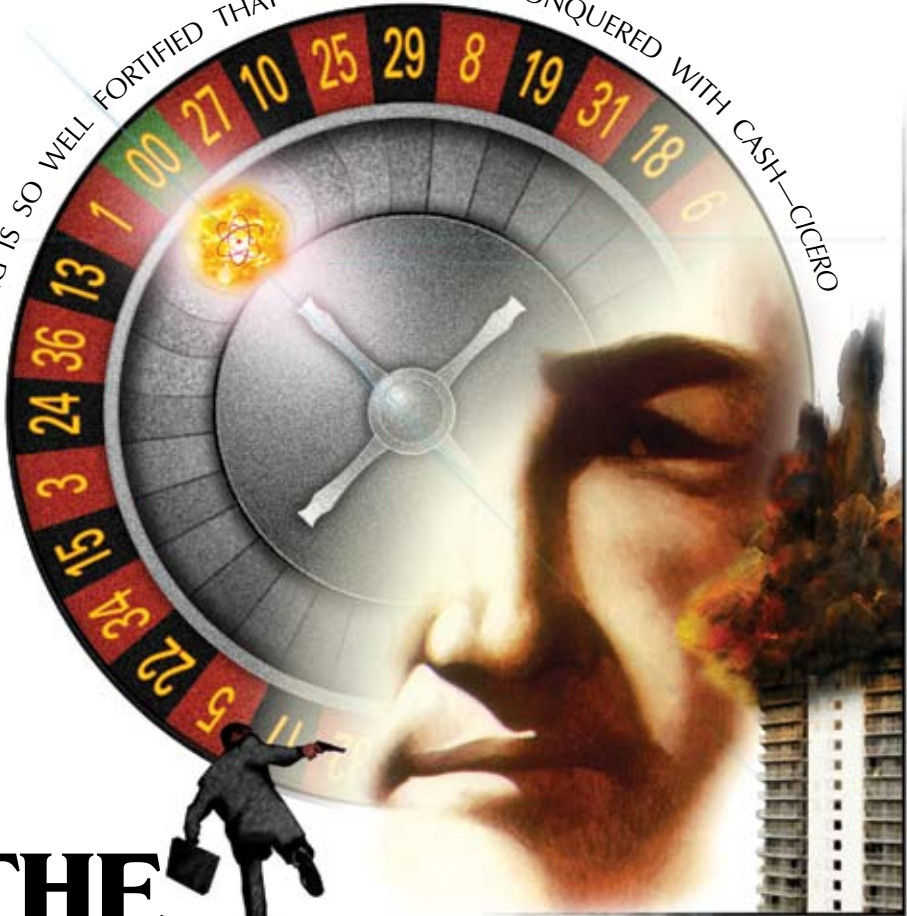


NOTHING IS SO WELL FORTIFIED THAT IT CANNOT BE CONQUERED WITH CASH—CICERO



# THE LAST DAYS OF LAS VEGAS

A NOVEL  
BY ROY HAYES

THE LAST DAYS OF LAS VEGAS  
NOTHING IS SO WELL FORTIFIED THAT IT CANNOT BE CONQUERED WITH CASH—CICERO  
ROY HAYES

*Solothurn*

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Thank you. Hope you enjoy the book.

rh

**Praise for *The Hungarian Game*:**

"Slam-bang ... witty ... cynical ... ironic ... sparkling ... dazzling ... gripping ... innovative ... fiendishly clever ... teases and entices you on ... Hayes keeps you guessing ... really something different"

With *The Last Days of Las Vegas*, we feel that Roy Hayes has surpassed his earlier work. An unpredictable thriller, this exciting new novel is filled with surprises and seasoned with sardonic observations. And, pleasing to relate, it's an adventure populated by characters so vivid they seem to step out of the story to make themselves at home in your memory.

Yet *The Last Days of Las Vegas* is nonetheless a thriller, with a tantalizing plot that keeps you turning the pages as you're pulled deeper and deeper into a labyrinth of deceit and manipulation, of murders of expedience and the cynical realities of politics and espionage.

**In Europe** a powerful military exile from Iraq pulls the strings of an international conspiracy that will return him as Iraq's new dictator. Fueled with billions of dollars from Saddam's looted fortune, the tentacles of his plot reach from his war-torn homeland to the flashy casinos of Las Vegas, and much of the world in between.

**In the Arctic Circle** a former Soviet intelligence operative recruits a nuclear technician.

**In Kuwait** a suicide pilot skims his explosives-laden plane low over the desert toward a 5-star luxury hotel.

**In Santa Barbara** a discarded espionage czar schemes to reënter the great game, while making an end run around America's traditional intell community.

(continued on back flap)

(continued from front flap)

**In a breakaway rogue nation** an international arms merchant sells RPGs, surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank charges, plastique explosives, and thousands of AK-47s to a shadowy Russian facilitator, for shipment to Iraq ... and Las Vegas.

**In Washington D.C.** senators, members of the House, lobbyists, and intelligence operatives cut deals to return the exiled Iraqi general to Baghdad as his nation's new strongman.

**In London** a billionaire Russian on the run from Moscow deludes himself that he is untouchable in his heavily-armored Bentley.

**In the Ukraine** two thick lead containers of lethal, highly-enriched nuclear materials are loaded onto an international flight, destined for Nevada.

**And ... in Las Vegas** a bungled assassination attempt propels a burned-out American intelligence operative into action. His name is Charles Remly—or perhaps it is not—and he reluctantly shoulders the assignment to keep Las Vegas from becoming a radioactive ghost town.

With its imaginative ploys and gambits, its sudden flashes of violence, and its complex, subtly revealed, breathtaking plot, *The Last Days of Las Vegas* is a summer "beach-read" thriller you'll want take home . . . to enjoy again in the chill of winter.

## ROY HAYES

is catching up on his reading in Las Vegas, where he lives with his memories and his intermittently affectionate cat e e cummings.

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# THE LAST DAYS OF LAS VEGAS

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## ROY HAYES

"Slam-bang ... cynical ... witty ... innovative ...  
ironic ... sparkling ... fiendishly clever."

Praise for *The Hungarian Game* by Roy Hayes:

**Publishers Weekly**—"Cryptic as they come, with layers of mystery unfolding gradually, this new spy thriller is really something different: a chess puzzle that teases and entices you on, with loads of action and appropriate amounts of sex, right up to the tough slam-bang finale."

**Chicago Daily News**—"Hayes' spy is a cross between James Bond and the cynical one who came in from the cold. He finds his time filled with budgets, and trying to figure out why a Hungarian official 'killed' during the 1956 revolution is still alive. You know the two paths are going to cross, but Hayes keeps you guessing."

**Los Angeles Times**—"The Hungarian Game leaves little time for contemplation as it whips the reader along over a sea of frothy witticisms."

**San Francisco Examiner**—"Hayes' star is now in the ascendancy ... an exciting espionage novel."

**Buffalo Evening News**—"Roy Hayes intertwines three hunts brilliantly and winds them up in a series of climaxes as smashing as any in contemporary action fiction. To this add an innovative style, irony, wit, strong and off-beat characters and snappy, crackling dialogue. *The Hungarian Game* is dazzling, and catapults its author squarely into the top ranks of thriller writers."

**Los Angeles Herald-Examiner**—"Here is intrigue and suspense at its best. Hayes writes with similes which crackle and dialogue that sparkles."

**San Diego Tribune**—"Hayes is currently basking in the literary limelight for *The Hungarian Game*, his first novel. His story is a gripping one, well seasoned with humor."

**Palo Alto Peninsula Living**—"Fiendishly clever, a puzzle book as well as a spy thriller. Hayes is a funny guy, and it shows through in what he writes."

Burned out and more cynical than ever,  
Roy Hayes's reluctant spy returns to the  
world of deceit and double-dealing in  
*The Last Days of Las Vegas*.

ISBN 978-0-615-28161-2 \$14.95

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PRAISE FOR *THE HUNGARIAN GAME* by ROY HAYES

“Cryptic as they come, with layers of mystery unfolding gradually, this new spy thriller is really something different: a chess puzzle that teases and entices you on, with loads of action and appropriate amounts of sex. It is not for those who have to have everything spelled out for them right away—the fun here is in figuring out just what the Hungarian Game consists of, as American intelligence agents, a hired killer, an ultra-right-wing millionaire, and a Hungarian secret agent once thought dead all surface near a California ski resort. Who is after whom, and why? Bit by bit we learn, right up to the tough slam-bang finale in which the pieces fit together at last and Remly, the American agent, has to reach a life and death decision regarding the ginger-haired girl with whom he has been having an affair.”

US: *Publishers Weekly*

“A lesson to the reviewer to keep an open mind when proffered apparently typical, overlong, American ‘agency’ books. This first novel is untypical: it is gay and clever and exciting, about, on the whole, reasonably pleasant and intelligent people. At the risk of being insulting, one can fairly say it reads British.”

UK: *The Times Literary Supplement*, London

“One begins to suspect that these antic dirty tricksters [in *The Hungarian Game*] are closer to the reality of the intelligence establishment—as exposed by the Watergate hearings—than all of their fictional forebears. But all of this is an afterthought; the novel itself leaves little time for contemplation as it whips the reader along over a sea of frothy witticisms. And the color and detail of the book’s Southern California locale are magnificent, reminiscent of Raymond Chandler but brought up to date.”

US: *Los Angeles Times*

“*The Hungarian Game* by Roy Hayes (Secker & Warburg) is an exciting and highly original American espionage novel.

“Mr. Hayes is a writer of mordant wit and impressive power.”

UK: *Surrey & Hampshire News*

“Too often spy novels are so convoluted and complex it’s impossible to tell the Good Guys from the Bad, or even what’s going on. Not so with *The Hungarian Game*. It’s intricate, tangled, and labyrinthine, but clarity and intelligibility never suffer.

“This is an extremely clever novel about a manhunt within a manhunt. While both the CIA and Soviet KGB are hunting in Southern California for a Hungarian secret police officer who was supposed to have died in his country’s 1956 revolution, the Hungarian is hunting documents which would unmask Red espionage apparatus here and in Europe. Simultaneously, a professional assassin is hunting an aging right-wing American millionaire whose senility and bankroll are being used by the back-from-the-dead Hungarian.

“Roy Hayes, advertising-executive-turned-storyteller, intertwines all three hunts brilliantly and winds them up in a series of climaxes as smashing as any in contemporary action fiction. To this add an innovative style, irony, wit, strong and offbeat characters and snappy, crackling dialogue.

“*The Hungarian Game* is dazzling cloak-and-dagger and catapults its author squarely into the top ranks of thriller writers.

US: *Buffalo Evening News*

“One of those fiendishly clever things ... a puzzle book as well as a spy thriller. Hayes is a funny guy, and it shows through in what he writes.”

US: *Palo Alto Peninsula Living*

“*The Hungarian Game* is a first novel by Roy Hayes, a lively blend of opulence and bureaucracy, with distinct whiffs of lechery and explosives. The action is swift and the wit is sharp.”

UK: *The Evening Post*, Bristol

“Hayes’ spy is a cross between James Bond and the cynical one who came in from the cold. He likes Havana cigars, big breasts and his Bentley. But he finds his time filled with budgets, little breasts and trying to figure out why a Hungarian official ‘killed’ during the 1956 revolution is still alive. Nicely interwoven is the story of a hit man hired to do a job on an eccentric millionaire. You know the two paths are going to cross, but Hayes keeps you guessing.”

US: *Chicago Daily News*

“Hayes’ spy and counter-spy characters make the Watergate break-in seem like a Sunday School picnic ... Here is intrigue and suspense at its best. Hayes writes with similes which crackle and dialogue that sparkles, and artfully taps the thinking processes of those about to kill or be killed.”

US: *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*

“Hayes is currently basking in the literary limelight for *The Hungarian Game*, his first novel. His story is a gripping one, well seasoned with humor, and contains some marvelous technical detail.”

US: *San Diego Tribune*

“A man who ought to be dead appears at an airport ticketing window, and the unexpected sight is more than enough to make a randy, expenses-fiddling American spy chaser abandon his girl and start a man hunt. Meanwhile, a sinister figure is booking into a luxury hotel in Hollywood and testing his room for bugs before he starts his murderous mission. All good rough fun.”

UK: *Manchester Evening News*





# The Last Days of Las Vegas

Roy Hayes

*The Last Days of Las Vegas* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, and locales are mentioned, they are used fictitiously and their inclusion is intended solely to provide a sense of verisimilitude. In the case of actual quotations by public figures, the quotes are verbatim, as stated by the named person, and are not the product of the author's imagination.

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As always, for Armineh and Hèlène.

## DISCLAIMER

It's been said that the novelist does not live in the real world, three-dimensional and subject to the laws of physics, but dwells instead in the cluttered chambers of his mind, where he shuffles about in his slippers raising dust and imagining people, events, whole continents ... illusions which he furiously scribbles onto sheets of paper.

What follows then is total fiction, having little to do with reality—a novelist's parallel universe, which must not be construed by the reader as representing fact, no matter how similar the two may seem here and there.

rh

*“Nihil tam munitum, quod non expugnari pecunia possit.”*

(Nothing is so well fortified that it cannot be conquered with cash.)

Cicero

— O N E —

I N T E L L

# I

*Pick 'em: Situation where either side  
has equal chance of winning or losing.*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

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. . . L A S   V E G A S

Charles Remly opened his eyes, not sure why—his hand moving to the spare pillow—then heard the telephone ring a second time and blinked himself awake and felt for his glasses on the nightstand, the phone ringing impatiently as Remly scanned the glowing clock and lifted the receiver: “It’s almost midnight, this better be good.”

A man’s voice, “Mr. Weatherstone?”

A mild jolt, he’d forgotten the last time he’d sweated ice, a single drop falling on the right lens just above the bifocal line.

The voice, “You there?”

Remly inhaled cautiously. “Sister Muffy-Ignatius Pre-School—*whom* do you wish to speak to?”

“Wait, the name I got, ‘Weatherstone,’ from the old days. ‘Carl Weatherstone.’ SoCal SubSection.”

Remly said, “No idea what you’re talking about,” though the truth of course was that SoCal SubSection had been gobbled up by the Cancer Ward over six years ago, two years and eight months before Remly opted for premature retirement—dates not easily forgotten.

“And Mr. Weaver,” the voice said. “And Basset.”

There were tissues on the night table, blue in a floral decorator box that almost matched the curtains. Remly got a tissue and wiped the sweat from his glasses.

“You there?”

Remly wiped his forehead. “I’m listening.”

“Basset and what’s-iz-name—Johnsomething. Frank? Frank Basset and that guy, the funny one, Johnsomething?”

Remly hesitated, thinking. Up on one elbow, looking down at the night-table, at the clock, reaching for the smart remark. Catching none, he asked, “Who are you?”

“Alfred Noles.”

“Wrong number.”

“Alf! Alf the magician! Locks and safes. The tumblers guy, remember? I done electronics for you guys, bridged a few microchips for Mr. Weaver

here and there, you remember.”

“I’m listening. Where did you get this number?”

“I collect stuff,” Alf said. “It don’t matter. Hey, couple hours ago, never guess who I seen. Here in Vegas, jeez, I thought I’d go through the roof.”

Remly waited, saying nothing. Finally, “I’m listening.”

“Alex Kurskov,” Alf said. “I seen him walkin inta La Fontaine. West entrance—the private one. Baccarat room.”

Kurskov—another deep inhale. Looking for something smart to say, finding nothing.

Other professionals at Dzerzhinsky Square had ordered vyshaya mera for Virginia’s ferrets around the globe, Kurskov liked to handle it himself, the muzzle of his Makarov at the back of the skull—what could you say about that?

Alf said, “You there?”

“Aleksandr Kurskov in Vegas,” Remly said. “Alive.”

“Playin baccarat? You *gotta* be alive, playin baccarat.”

“Funny,” Remly said, thinking, ‘Vyshaya mera,’ but with Kurskov kneeling, a gun at the back of his head: Kurskov had stood with Yazov, Kryuchkov, the other anti-Gorbachev coupsters in Moscow, August of ‘91. “Funny. I thought Yeltsin had him shot.”

“He’s playin *baccarat*, for cry eye.”

“Is he winning?”

“I din’t go in. They got a keeper, the west entrance. Only whales get in.”

“If you see him again, wish him luck. I need my sleep.”

“Hey, wait, this is Alex *Kurskov* I’m talkin.”

“You confirmed it? Asked for his driver’s license?”

“I know this guy, what he looks, same as twenny years back, y’know? Only kinda older like. Hair is thinnin out, but same kinda middle brown, now a lotta gray on the sides.”

“A million people look like a million other people.”

“Din’t I hafta do a wire on him, that Hanford Nuke place up in Washington state a couple times? Once out near Aberdeen—back east—your guy Mr. Weaver? He burns Kurskov’s pitcher inta my head. I hadda sleep with it. Wake up, there he is on the other pillow.”

“Okay,” Remly said. “Kurskov’s here. I’m supposed to care?”

“You better! He’s got a pitcher of you and what’s-iz-name, Johnsomething.”

‘Hello?’ Remly thought. He said, “What is this, a blackmail call?”

“*What?*”



“This picture you saw—we’re holding hands, Johnson and I?”

“Alex Kurskov has got a pitcher of you, he’s got a pitcher of Mr. Johnson, he’s got both your addresses on notepad sheets, I seen ‘em. Got you at twelve seventy-four Vita Buena, Mr. Johnson on Serenity View, no number.”

His address was right, but Eddy Johnson, also retired to Vegas, wasn’t on Serenity View, although he lived somewhere near it. “How did you see these pictures, these addresses?”

“This is like maybe nine I seen Alex-baby go in the whale door, maybe nine-thirty. I hang around La Fontaine, in the casino, I’m antsy, you know? Jazzed up. Somethin’s goin on here, I’m gonna be in on it. Maybe help you guys out.”

“Help us guys out.” Not a question, just flat.

“Like the old days, you know? So he comes outta the baccarat room into the casino like he’s the only guy there. Looks around like maybe someone might be sneakin up on him, but not ya know like he gives a crap about people around him, just bargain ahead. It’s nine forty-three—now I’m keepin notes, checkin my watch—and he goes like straight down that long hall they got at La Fontaine—the one to the garage?—and he goes into an elevator and I watch the needle. Stops at parkin level three, I go up to three, our boy Alex, he’s up the enda the ramp, one a them tan Lexus SUVs.”

“Wait,” Remly said. Getting the pad and pencil beside the phone on his night-stand. “Okay, talk to me.”

“So, Alex-baby is ...”

“No, first, let’s confirm your phone number.” Remly read it from the phone’s caller ID panel.

Alf said, “You got it—cell phone.”

“Address?”

“Mine?”

“Yours.”

“No fixed. I’m livin in the Tiltin Hilton.”

“You’re staying at the Hilton?”

“Tiltin Hilton. Big camper shell on my little Toyota pickup. Hardly able ta drive it around.”

“Where do you park it.”

“Where Metro ain’t.”

Kurskov’s hair color was what? Eyes? Alf didn’t know. Clothing details—color, fit? Shoes? “Just shoes, y’know, like you walk around in.” The Lexus: New? Color? Tan. Nevada license plate? Yeah, Alf gave the number. Who did Kurskov talk to? No one at all? Did he use a cell phone at any

time? Did Alf see him again after he left the garage? No idea where he went after that?

Remly said, “Now we come to it—how did you see my picture? Johnson’s. Our addresses.”

“Nah, first I gotta get outta there. Alex baby reaches into his Lexus, back seat, comes out with a carton a Marlboros, starts walkin at me, I don’t stop for no conversation. Make like I’m looking for my own car like.”

“But before you leave, you go over and ask Mr. Kurskov for any loose photos or addresses he might have on his person, that it?”

What Alf did, he went down to the La Fontaine’s novelty shop and bought a small flashlight. “I din’t have my tools with me, nothin.” And returned to parking level three to find the SUV still there, same place, no one around. Alf made a list of the stuff inside.

On the passenger floor a photo of Carl Weatherstone, thick head a dark brown hair. Remly didn’t comment that the hair was thinning and more gray than dark.

Photo of What’s-iz-name Johnson, full beard, stylish haircut, heavy lips, all prematurely gray.

“His lips are gray?”

Alf said, “Hair and beard.”

Paper clips on both pictures, something maybe like another little picture behind each one. Little lined paper with the address on Vita Buena taped onto Mr. Weatherstone’s picture, one just “Serenity View” taped onto Mr. Johnson’s picture.

Front floor, under driver’s seat, just the hint of a gunbutt stickin out.

Remly asked, “Revolver? Pistol?”

“Semi-auto, some kinda foreign, looks like. Little job, not Colt .45.”

Back seat and in the cargo, whole buncha Marlboro cartons. Eight cartons in the back seat, dozen or more in the cargo. “That’s real money, today’s prices. He oughta keep em covered up.”

Did Alf look under the Lexus? Were there any unusual wires or ... Alf hadn’t looked under the SUV. Anything on the dash or elsewhere inside that might indicate an after-market electronics device? Alf would go back and check that out.

“Anything else?”

“That ain’t enough?”

Remly asked, “Enough for what, Alf? Are you pitching me for money?”

Alf was silent and Remly wondered if the phone call had been more spontaneous than carefully thought-out, Alf speculating there was something in this for him but not entirely sure what.

Alf said, “I was thinkin you’d be grateful. Guy’s got your pitcher, got you on a hit list, right?”

“You’ve been watching too many movies, Alf. There aren’t any ‘hit lists’—not like what you have in mind. This isn’t Hollywood, it’s life.”

“So how come he’s got your pitcher? Johnson’s?”

“That’s something someone will have to look into.” What Remly would do, quite simply, was phone this information tomorrow morning to his old Field Officer from SoCal SubStation—the F.O.—also retired; certainly he wouldn’t give it to Ralph Braschler at the Cancer Ward. See if the F.O. thought it was worth sending to someone back in Virginia.

Alf said, “So hey, cut me in on the action, you and your friends make a play for Alex Kurskov. Set him up, stake him out, maybe need a good locks and tumblers man to look in on him.”

“Alf, let me put this to you clearly. I have no friends, it’s midnight, I really need my sleep. Good night and thanks for calling.”

“Hey, wait, *what are ya . . . ?*”

Remly pulled the handset from his ear.

“This is *Kurskov* I’m talkin!” Then quieter, but still loud, “How many of our guys he roll up?”

“Our guys?”

“Your guys. *Your* guys. How many your guys he put into body bags?”

“You’d have to call Payroll on that: Widows and Orphans desk.”

“You’re not interested?”

“Oh sure,” pronouncing it *shoo-werr*. “Deeply interested. I’m also re-tired. Right now I’m going back to sleep.”

“Look, what if I pop open the Lexus, get you more stuff.”

“Whatever you think is best, Alf. Thanks for calling, good night.”

“Hey, wait. Just a few ...”

“I need my sleep, Alf.”

“Hey ...”

“Good night.”

Remly took off his glasses as he dropped the phone, then reached under the spare pillow to assure himself the pistol was still there.

As Charles Remly ran his fingers over the pistol, a businesslike young man named Andrei sat with two others high above the Las Vegas Valley, smoking counterfeit Marlboros. They’d been given a Dodge Caravan for the assignment, had parked it on a gravel cutout of Serenity View Drive, the steep winding road that wanders absentmindedly off of Kyle Canyon up the flank of Mount Charleston. Below and beyond to the south-east were the lights

of the valley, a vast multicolor splotch shimmering in the blackness of desert—Las Vegas. Distant on the freeway to the south the headlights of cars streaming in from California like an endless neon centipede.

The van faced downhill, the three men watching the moonlit road that climbed the mountainside from Las Vegas, Mount Charleston rising behind their rear bumper. To their right the cutout ended abruptly at a wall of road-sliced cliff, a small twisted pinetree gnarling horizontally from the granite. Across to their left a guardrail edged the roadway, separating the asphalt from a sheer 200-meter ravine. The white van was heavily dusted to kill the glossy paint, had some excellent NDOT insignia stickers on the doors—Nevada Department of Transportation—and official EX plates. And if by some freak of coincidence a cop came wandering up this desolate road and stopped to check them out ... what would happen would simply have to happen, it was part of the business.

The right sidedoors of the van were open but the courtesy light had been removed, the three men inside illuminated only by the moon and their glowing cigarettes. In a better light Andrei would have appeared almost oriental, a certain slant to his eyes despite their vivid blueness—a hint of the Crimea. They were supposed to be waiting silently, they were definitely not supposed to be smoking, but Andrei couldn't shut the huge man in the back seat up, nor could he listen to the man's grinding complaints without the comfort of a cigarette.

At this moment Georgi, enormous in the back seat, was saying, "Word is, the Colonel's got millions, *millions*, U.S. dollars. You got to make tricks in a goat shed to pull off this job?"

Andrei said, "I put together a good workshop, don't spit on ..."

Georgi, rolling over him: "Seven million USD Levanov owes to the Colonel. Eight million? He pay it off?"

Mikhail was beside Andrei, in the driver's seat. He said, "I heard that too, eight million U.S. dollars Nikita Olegeovich Levanov owes the Colonel. Sits there in London, big mansion, big billionaire, big oligark, no one touches him. Not even the Colonel, eh?"

"What is your point, exactly?" Andrei said.

Georgi said, "The Colonel lives like millionaire, sitting in his casino penthouse, where's the money from? How come he's not spending it on this operation? We get short-changed, have to play with home-made tricks from a goat shed?"

"Very good questions," Andrei said. "When we get back to town, come with me to the so-called 'penthouse.' Ask the Colonel your questions."

Mikhail said, "Word I get, someone big is bankrolling this thing—not

just this,” pointing down at the Dodge floorboards, “the whole fucking project. It’s not coming out of the Colonel’s pocket, fat Levanov the oligark still owes him, what I hear. So ... who’s the bank? What’s the big movie?”

“You want to come with me? Audit the Colonel’s books?”

Almost with a sigh Andrei thought how much better off he would be if that horse’s ass Gorbachev hadn’t loosened the Party’s iron grip. As an absolute, he wouldn’t be sitting here dealing patiently with a dim bulb like Georgi. If not for that idiot Gorbachev ...

In ‘91 when it all started falling apart Andrei was still a cadet at the Academy, four months shy of graduation, his future secure in the Crimea/Ukraine division. He was on the honors list, and despite his low birth was also on the fast-track to promotion, thanks to the connections of a distant uncle on his mother’s side, a former colonel-general at Dzerzhinsky Square.

On that day in August, to put an end to Gorbachev’s insane corruptions—“reforms” Gorbachev’s propagandists called them—Gorbachev himself was made redundant. Put under house arrest at his dacha by patriotic elements of the Service—of the Party and the Defense Department. Then, just as they neutralized him, the collapse. Everything going to hell. If not for that idiot Gorbachev, that fool Yeltsin ...

It had seemed wonderful in its early moments, Andrei waking and hearing that wiser heads had displaced Gorbachev and returned power to competent leaders. When the news broke he was in his room at the academy, scrambling into his bright parade uniform in the event the student body was called out for street duty.

His roommate Didi was not so enthusiastic. “Get out of that ridiculous costume, Andrei, it only makes you a better target.”

Andrei ignored the “ridiculous costume” part. He loved his smart cadet’s uniform; in certain vodka bars around the city it was a magnet for exotic liaisons, the quick and easy kind. Turning Didi’s argument around, Andrei said, “The end of Gorbachev, Didi, don’t you see it?”

“End of the great Union of Soviets, you mean,” Didi said. “I heard already that Yeltsin is barricaded in the White House, thousands pouring into the square screaming for him, waving flags. No hammers and sickles, my friend. Big Russian tri-colors.” Didi in rough trousers and an old-fashioned peasant blouse, ready to go out and vacuum up the street gossip. “If you insist on leaving the dorm, at least get into some work clothes. That operetta costume of yours is sure to get you torn to pieces by the mob in the square; they’re in no mood for *The Student Prince*.”

Two days and it was over, the heady enthusiasm of returning the country

to sanity gone. A new Russia was soon formed, smaller and weaker than any Russias of history—certainly smaller and weaker than the USSR had ever been, even in its infancy—that drunken blowhard Yeltsin at its head. And with this pathetic new Russia the Service was purged; first the patriots at the top were gotten rid of, some of them shot, then the non-Russians. It took a month or so for Yeltsin's thugs to get around to the Academy. When they did, Andrei, the Ukrainian—worse, the Crimean—was sent packing.

"Keeping your *Student Prince* uniforms?" Didi asked as Andrei jammed clothes and books into canvas bags and a cardboard suitcase. "Planning to troll for casual sex in Odessa's vodka bars?"

Andrei said, "It's straight to Kiev for me. Did you see the news, we're getting our own Service now, SBU—*Sluzhba Bespeky Ukrayiny*. In the same old offices in Kiev. They're going to need electronics techs, I'm signing up."

"*Stupid Bastards United*, you mean," Didi said. "I've gotten whispers from friends in the old Ninth Directorate in Kiev about the siloviki<sup>1</sup> who're building this new so-called Service. Local apparatchiks<sup>2</sup> and nomenklatura<sup>3</sup>, none of the discipline of Dzerzhinsky Square. Go and look, surely, but stay in touch, okay? You might want to pick up a little job now and then, I might have a little job to offer ... now and then."

Didi had been right of course. The newly-formed SBU was a nightmare, loaded with gangsters top to bottom. Andrei stayed less than a year, then was reduced to picking up odd jobs like this one, handouts from Didi, pious Didi—who was rumored to have chosen the Service over the Seminary only on the flip of a coin.

"... a goat shed," Georgi was saying. "No chance in hell your stuff is going to work."

"It will work," Andrei said, no emotion in his voice, nothing in his face, wishing very much that Georgi was the one they were disposing of, but giving Georgi only a blank page. "What we have here, typical American operative, retired and gone to seed. They are not like us, these Yanks. They retire, think it's all over, no more gun under the pillow while they sleep. No more razor nerves, ready to pounce or flee. They go soft."

"But if it *don't* ..." Georgi again.

It was getting to Mikhail too, obviously. He said, "Be a good soldier,

<sup>1</sup>Siloviki - "Men of force," from the Russian word for "force." Thuggish politicians and government employees formerly officers of Dzerzhinsky Square, police, or military.

<sup>2</sup>Aparatchik - Party functionary. A political hack or bureaucratic gate-blocker.

<sup>3</sup>Nomenklatura - Literally "list of names" (the "nomenclature" list). The Politburo's official list of names—people who constituted the ruling class in the Soviet Union and in Soviet-bloc countries, along with the appointees of those who were on the list. Only nomenklatura were allowed to work in government bureaucracies, or in managerial positions of state industries.

Georgi, and shut the fuck up, okay? Should've sent you to do the house job, all muscle and guns—let you go plinking away at the other Yank.”

Mikhail was big, but ... next to Georgi? Georgi was ... those trees in the California? The Sequoia giants? Georgi was more than big. The look on Georgi's face, Andrei guessed he wasn't used to taking crap from guys like Mikhail. But Mikhail was a nut case, not afraid of anyone—perfect guy for jobs like this.

Georgi, almost pouting: “I don't like it.”

“You don't have to fucking like it, okay?” Mikhail said. “Andrei does the thinking, okay?”

“It stinks,” Georgi said. “Too cute, it ain't gonna work, handmade tricks from a goat shed. What works—lay out a nailstrip, spray 'im with a subgun, he rolls by.”

A bright LED blinked in the plastic box that rested on the accessories hump between the two front seats. ‘A twinkle,’ Andrei thought. ‘Like Katinka the woodsprite.’

“There's the trip-wire,” Andrei said. “Cigarettes out.” He snubbed his cigarette into the ashtray, wishing the Colonel had given him budget for a GPS bumper beeper.

“Fuck you,” Georgi said, sucking deeply on his cigarette.

Mikhail, fearless and a little more crazy than was absolutely necessary, mashed his counterfeit Marlboro into the ashtray and reached to the back seat and grabbed Georgi's glowing cigarette, dropping it on the front floor and crushing it with his shoe, smiling all the time and looking directly into Georgi's face.

“The job,” Andrei said. “The job. This is business; pay attention, will you?” Lights bathed the road from beyond the downhill curve. “Is it him?”

Mikhail squinted out the open driver-side window, peering into the cool moonlit night where a set of headlights now appeared from around the downhill curve. “Silver Audi, no passenger. Probably him.”

“License?”

“Headlights, can't read it. But the timing's perfect—goes by here every Thursday night, this time. They should've given us a bumper beeper; but what the hell, I say let's do it.”

Andrei said, “Tip the can, Georgi.”

Georgi reached through the open sliding door, pulled the wood stick. “It's gonna be a fuckup, wait and see.”

“Pull again,” Mikhail said. “The bucket ain't tipping.”

Georgi said, “See?”

“Pull, goddammit!”

Georgi pulled again, now with energy.

“There it goes,” Mikhail said. “Nice oil spill. Pull again, get that fucking bucket outa the road.”

Georgi reeled in a good three meters of the wire.

Andrei squinted through the windshield at the road toward the headlights, counting “Two ... three ... four.” On “four” he pressed the red-tipped toggle on the plastic box.

Given a choice Charles Remly would have preferred a woman’s cheek on the other pillow to the gun he habitually kept under it. Unfortunately the choice had never been offered; he slept with a Heckler & Koch P7 snuggled beneath the spare pillow while waiting for something better to come along.

Before he retired Remly was in a profession that didn’t encourage openness, not at the level that welds bonds between man and woman. An early marriage producing an alienated son, an early divorce leaving him even more tight-lipped, particularly around women and especially when drunk, which he too often was in his post-divorce phase. It was about then that he had begun to believe quite strongly that there *was* such a thing as love. And true to his beliefs—and feeling you couldn’t get too much of a good thing—he fell in love over and over, to a degree that had him showing up at the office in last night’s shirt, heavily lipsticked around the collar, which prompted him to keep a fresh change of clothes in one of his secure filing cabinets. The young women were plentiful and available, all of them good company and scattered like flowers around Los Angeles, ready to be plucked. And never during this time did it come to him that he might someday want something more lasting.

Now retired to Las Vegas, Remly wondered where she was, that cheek for his other pillow. He’d met a few women here, bedded a couple of them, women in their middle-ish years, but none who fit his image of *woman*—flaunting herself in his mind’s eye—intelligent, amusing, maybe slightly honest, perhaps even a bit attractive but most of all available, which in Charles Remly’s obsolete code meant unmarried and otherwise unattached.

A depressing number of the women he’d met in Vegas were a species new to him—Fabulous Medical Makeovers—bland-faced and top-heavy, Botox and boob jobs their common denominators, along with a certain take-no-prisoners determination around the eyes.

Immediately after discovering the concept of Fabulous Medical Makeovers, he was struck by an even larger and more significant truth: Given his age and his interests, it was unlikely he would ever find her, that bewitchment of his imagination. Charles Remly had retired to a life of catching up



on his reading and restoring just one more—always just one more—old English motorcycle. And neither the sitting at home reading nor the restoration of his elderly Vincent seemed a powerful magnet for the woman of his dreams ... or for any woman, actually.

Still, although he would have removed the gun from his other pillow in a blink if she appeared, he would not have put it farther than a bedframe holster as he slept. The P7 was loaded with 9mm CorBon +P+ ammo, one in the chamber and thirteen in the magazine: Fourteen rounds of high-velocity, viciously expanding hollowpoints. A reassuring bedmate, even in retirement—a retirement that had so far been boringly and magnificently uneventful. Which is to say, exactly what Charles Remly had always planned it to be.

The only thing he hadn't planned on was that retirement would be thrust upon him, nor that it would be thrust so vigorously or so soon.

When he joined the firm, Remly imagined he would stay the full thirty years. But shortly after SoCal SubSection was gutted and merged into the Cancer Ward—and he learned that the wall behind the coffee machine had been bugged—he suspected he might be leaving sooner than he'd anticipated.

"It's not something I can put my finger on *exactly*," Ralph Braschler said to him early on, in that concerned and famously empathetic Ralph Braschler voice. "It's more a matter of *attitude* than of specific *issues*."

Remly asked, "Like jamming the coffee-machine mike with pepper spray?"

"That was you?"

Remly said, "It could have been someone else."

Even as it was happening, his retirement, Remly wasn't sure if he was being eased out the door or had developed a taste for defenestration—a figurative leap into the void through one of the Cancer Ward's highly reflective windows.

There had been other signposts along the way, like the going-away party that little Xavier threw for himself: "My screaming, kicking, clutching at the doorframe, Completely Unofficial Involuntary Resignation Dinner," as Xavier put it, spreading his arms as though invoking a revival meeting at the Greek Theater. Other premature retirees, elbowed out by Ralph Braschler and his Cancer Ward disciples, had gotten official farewells: A group dinner in one of Chez Martín's mini-banquet rooms, paid for out of the office's unmentionables fund—a ritual of hammered chicken, the presentation of a gold Cross pen, and Braschler's well-honed "the-firm-will-miss-you" speech, by then a model of sincerity and warmth.

Xavier, though, had been cast out without ceremony and declared untouchable, like a leper with open sores. Along with a few others from the old SoCal SubSection crowd, Remly went to Xavier's going-away party. The F.O. came, bearing apologies from his wife who had already planned a significant weekend with her cousins and three generations of their offspring in Montecito. Weaver's wife left early, dragging Weaver with her, obviously uncomfortable with Xavier's friends from outside the office. Later, though, Weaver blamed it on Xavier's T-shirt, which Xavier displayed by strip-teasing out of his jacket, necktie, and button-down shirt, while bumping and grinding on a table-top—a T-shirt that read "Choke 'em if they can't take a fuck."

Even before the revelation of the T-shirt—actually from the moment she entered—Hilda Weaver's face had become increasingly gray as she studied one after another of Xavier's male guests from outside the firm. As Remly sometimes explained him, "Xavier's a little light in his loafers." But compared to Xavier's smart male friends at his screaming-kicking-clutching dinner, Xavier could have been an endorsement for testosterone pills.

Frank and Grace Basset stayed to the hysterical end when Xavier, responding to the two liters of champagne punch he'd drunk, reclined face-first into the salad buffet for a nap ... scattering the endive and sending grape tomatoes like bloodshot eyeballs across the floor. The following Monday Remly learned that Basset had recruited three new investors for his warehouse project in Simi Valley from among Xavier's friends.

That same Monday morning Ralph Braschler had a little concerned-about-your-future-here chat with Remly. It was about Xavier's party—and about Remly's open exasperation that he had lost a first-rate talent scout.

Rather than sitting in one of the chairs facing Brasch's desk, Remly perched casually on a chair arm, hands in his pockets, legs outstretched.

Toward the beginning of their little chat Remly said, "Who else could have recruited so many ferrets in Russia's North Pacific fleet? Xavier *loves* big, manly, Slavic sailors ... and they often return the affection."

At another point Remly said, "Let's get real here. He was never a risk, always up-front about his sexuality; how were the boys from Dzerzhinsky Square going to blackmail him if there was nothing to hide?"

Braschler studied Remly's face, measuring his man as he crafted a response. "Maybe I didn't put it quite right," Brasch said, his tone quizzical and self-deprecating. "Maybe I should have said that Xavier's sexual preferences make him vulnerable to dangerous *liaisons* ... *liaisons* where the other party could manipulate him." Then, with an apologetic little smile, "Does that make sense?"

“None at all,” Remly said, stepping heavily on the tail of Ralph Braschler’s words. “Eldridge Eames, his greed-head wife pushes him over the edge. Worst one we’ve had—ever—and a blatant heterosexual. And he gutted us like a fish. Blew the firm’s networks from Odessa to Murmansk, got dozens of our ferrets and free-lancers killed. Vyshaya mera, *bang* through the back of the head, dozens of ‘em.” Then, racking his eyebrows up in imitation of Ralph Braschler, his expression filled with concern and empathy, “But, Brasch, the real question is ... how did you get hold of Xavier’s guest list? One of your personal ferrets at his little party? You wouldn’t be spying on us poor spooks, would you?”

Brasch continued smiling, now with an edge. “You’re skating on thin ice here, buddy boy.”

Remly said, “Or are you still vacuuming up coffee-machine chat from a mike in the wall?”

“Thin ice. You have a gift for speaking your mind. Risky—it could get you hurt.”

Inside a small metal box wired to the Audi’s underside, a solenoid would be picking up the radio signal from the sending unit in Andrei’s plastic box.

It was handmade, the whole system, both boxes, not like the sophisticated tricks he would have put together in the workshops of Dzerzhinsky Square, but it was good, very good. Andrei made it himself in the garage workroom of the house the Colonel had rented for them. He had tested it at a distance and behind metal plates, making sure it would react to radio signals in the worst conditions. He had painted the receiver box and the cannister a dull, camouflaged mottle of tan and rock-gray; the colors of the ravine across the way, which he had researched almost to the point of pathological compulsion.

The action was simple: The receiver solenoid would release a latch that held back a spring; the spring would drive a sharply-pointed rivet into a half-liter CO<sup>2</sup> cannister; freezing CO<sup>2</sup> would spray across the Audi’s rear brake lines, turning the fluid into unresponsive sludge, like a blood clot causing a heart attack, the way Andrei explained it to the Colonel. Then only the front wheels braking after the Audi hit the oil spill, and the car spinning out of control.

At least that was the theory.

“To be out of place is not necessarily  
to be out of power.”

Samuel Johnson

12<sup>th</sup>—13<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2003 . . .

. . . M A A S T R I C H T

“Five ... Million ... Dollars.” Talia said.

Like the tolling of a funeral bell, her voice—a sonorous contralto of grim reckoning. “Five.” ... (*bong*) ... “Million.” ... (*bong*) ... “American.” ... (*bong*) ... “Would you like to know what that is in guilders?”

“I know what it is in guilders, darling. You told me again this morning again.”

“As of this morning,” Talia said, “two million, three-hundred, ninety-nine thousand dollars remain. Out of the original five million. And today ...”

“And today ...” Ashor echoed; then the two of them in chorus, like a congregational response: “Another one thousand, three hundred, eight dollars,” in unison.

“American,” he added.

“American,” she agreed.

“Every day,” Ashor said.

“Every day. Annual out-of-pocket, three-hundred and sixty thousand U.S. dollars—plus the two hundred, thirty-two thousand, five hundred for court expenses, all those legal vultures in The Hague. And this is not counting the only-God-knows-how-much you send to Iraq for your charities. And God alone knows how much those lobbyist thieves in Washington DC get from you. Those broken-down colonels you’re supporting back home.”

Ashor looked at his old Longenes. Nasirpal should have been here by now.

Talia continuing, “We have spent over two million, six hundred thousand USD—and look at us. Living in a three-room flat. In this wet, freezing city. All this unspeakable blue Dutch tile.” She waived her arm at their small parlour-dining room, furnished in understuffed Netherlands moderne. “The *servants* had better quarters than this back home.”

Ashor said, “That was then. If we’d stayed, today I would be chained to a toilet in the executive suite of Abu Ghraib, U.S. soldiers shoving a broomstick up my anus, and you would be back in the village, watching the Kurds rape all of your cousins, perhaps you in the bargain. This,” he waived his

arm at the room, mimicking her, “this is our sanctuary.”

“Sanctuary, fine,” Talia said. “But not here. We must leave. Go somewhere we can live safely and *decently*, with what little is left of the money. Let the others look after themselves.”

“Darling ...”

“Forty-one dollars and fifty cents per hour,” she said, “above and beyond the interest money.”

“Darling ...”

“Every hour.”

“Dearest ...”

“Every day!”

“When the Americans capture the butcher ...” he began.

“When hell freezes over,” Talia’s funeral-bell contralto interrupted, “we will return in white linen robes and golden crowns. In the meantime we are going broke. At this rate we will return as beggars to Baghdad’s gates, clothed in rags. With luck you will become diseased and make a truly pathetic figure, huddled in a filthy dishadasha, your quivering palm out to all who pass.”

“Three million, five million, you won’t even remember it. How many times must I repeat? The accounts in Seychelles and Cyprus are nineteen billions.”

“You’re forgetting the linen robes and golden crowns. Nineteen billion dollars plus two robes, size optional, and two golden crowns—one size fits all. Here, of course, we live in truly decadent luxury. Three rooms, Ashor. Three tiny rooms.”

“Talia ...”

“And this *climate*!”

“Dearest ...”

“These Dutch don’t *sunburn*! They *rust*!”

“Darling ...”

“You must work on your drool. Drooling beggars really break their hearts.”

A brisk rapping at the door.

‘OhthankGod,’ Ashor thought, almost knocking over his chair as he rose from the table and hurried to answer it. Between table and door he thought, ‘The Lion of the Desert, castrated and caged by the female of the species.’

At the door Ashor paused, looked down to his shoes and up again, composing his face into a cool expression of command.

Opening the door he spoke surely, without emotion: “You’re late. Arvan with you?” Then, looking around Nasirpal, “Good. Come in Arvan. Rafiq?

Come in.”

The three carried large bundles of newspapers, and Nasirpal had a thick sheaf of print-outs from his computer.

“Shaku maku?” Ashor asked. “What juicy bits from home? Still nothing from the Kurds?”

“Still nothing, Papageneral,” Nasirpal said. “Last week, ten days, it’s like they got their tongues cut out. All the Kurd internet sites stopped posting new stuff, even the PUK<sup>1</sup>. ”

Ashor said, “You’ve phoned General Mihrivan at the KDP<sup>2</sup> in Erbil?”

“No one’s home. I took the trolley down to Heer, used a call box, phoned maybe a dozen friends, nothing.”

“Hmmm.”

“Maybe they’re taking a break.”

“Hmmm,” Ashor said again. He looked up and down the empty hall before closing the door behind Rafiq. “No ... no no no. Silence from a Kurd? No. Keep a close eye on the Kurd websites. They’re up to something. Telephone our Assyrian friends in Mosul, in Sinjar. See what the gossip is.”

“Will do, Papa. The others, they came through fine. We got bundles of good stuff out of Tikrit, Baghdad, Ad-Darraji down in Al-Qadisiya.”

Talia rose from the table; there were only four chairs around it.

“Tea,” Talia said. “I’ll make tea.”

Ashor said, “No. Coffee!”

The three younger men waited for Ashor to sit. Once seated he nodded; they joined him at the table.

“A lot of coffee,” Ashor said. “We have much to cook tonight.”

“Some good news, anyway,” Rafiq said. “Harun al-Asrag is off the map.”

Arvan giggled. “Way off!”

Nasirpal said, “A little messy, Papageneral. Would have been easier to take him in Al-Musayyib, but one of your charity trucks was there—food and clothing. We waited till his campaign cars were way up in Ba’qubah.”

Ashor wondered briefly how good the news really was. He said, “I saw it on Al-Jazeera. A lot of collateral when the bomb went off.”

Arvan giggled again.

Rafiq shrugged. “Twenty, thirty people maybe. Couldn’t be helped. The shaheed died in the blast too, so there’s no connection back to our facilitator.”

“It troubles me, though,” Ashor said, “the details.” He absently watched Talia trace her brass jasvah of coffee back and forth across the hot coils of

<sup>1</sup>PUK - Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

<sup>2</sup>KDP - Kurdish Democratic Party

the stove, bringing it to a near-boil. “How did Al-Jazeera get my name for their follow-on piece? You saw it?”

Nasirpal had. “It wasn’t much, Papa. Something like, ‘Harun al-Asrag out of the picture, only the exiled general Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi remains to heal the wounds between the factions.’ Something like that.”

“It was something too much,” Ashor said. Daphne Logan had told him to stay well under the journalists’ radar until after her boss was able to cook up an audience for him in Washington. She said they were positioning it as “Iraq Alternatives,” although at the moment it didn’t seem that anyone inside the beltway much cared about alternatives in Iraq. “Whatever you can do, keep me out of the press.”

Arvan said, “At least Harun is out of the news.”

“And some Baghdad blogger on the ‘net,” Nasirpal said, “trying to drum up support to bring you back home.”

“To put me on trial?” Ashor said.

“For reinstatement in the army—general staff. He makes a case, you were the only brass-hat that everyone trusted. Used that quote from Al-Jazeera—‘A man so uncorruptible, even *Saddam* trusted him.’ This blogger says, as things stand right now, the army stinks. Wants you back to clean it out.”

“Still too early for that. What can you do to get this blog erased?”

“Not easy.”

Ashor turned to Rafiq: “What can be done?”

Rafiq said, “Even if I can locate him, have him shot, the blog stays up.”

Ashor nodded, considering the alternatives. “Who reads these things?”

“Other bloggers,” Nasirpal said. “That’s about it.”

“Find out who he is, at least. When the time comes to activate the networks, he might be useful.”

Nasirpal made a note on his pad.

“You’re the only ‘wound-healer’ left,” Rafiq said. “I told the boys already, security status is now red alert. More than just Saddam after your hide, now we’ve got the people back home who don’t want the wounds to heal—these warring factions.”

“Coffee.” Talia brought a tray, four demitasse cups and the jasvah on it, a potholder draped over the jasvah’s long brass handle. “Careful, hot.”

With little Joseph tightly clutching two fingers of his left hand Ashor stepped into Eisenweg, looked up and down the narrow cobblestone street, both on his side and the other, then closed the heavy planked door behind him. A gray Dutch morning; river fog, cheerless Christmas bunting drooping from

the light standards. Evergreen wreaths sagging on doors along the way.

Arvan, Nasirpal, and Rafiq were in place across the cobblestone street from him and to his right and left down the block, which meant that the four others would be around all the corners in each direction. Eisenweg too narrow for motorcars, illegal for mopeds and motorbikes, two of the many reasons he'd chosen it for his temporary exile. His time of penance, really.

The climate and architecture were polar opposites of everything familiar, but the crowded narrow streets of the *kwartier* brought to mind the cramped alleyways of the student quarter when he was a kid in Baghdad, getting his first shoulderboards at National Military Institute. But the buildings here were of heavy graystone, raised with smug confidence during the Dutch Gothic period. For the children of his entourage, Maastricht and The Hague before it had been like stepping into the filmset of a fantasy movie.

The threat had diminished when this current war began, that much he conceded, but always there was the chance that Saddam's Mukhabarat was still hunting him, perhaps in The Hague—where they had tried for him twice—perhaps here in Maastricht. Nineteen billions American at stake, and he was the only surviving coded-keyholder besides Saddam; hard to imagine Saddam ending the chase. And now of course he was the sole remaining wound-healer, a prime target for anyone back home who would profit if the wounds continued festering.

Even with Saddam on the run, his Ba'athists gone underground, even then you stayed alert. For Ashor it had been a way of life, every breath since childhood as a foreigner in the ancient land of your own people. You stayed alert, kept your opinions to yourself. Kept your options open.

To little Joseph, Ashor said, "Why are we always looking out for bad men, darling?"

"So we can be growing old and not be getting kilded, Grampageneral," came Joseph's cheery little voice.

Grasping the child's wrist: "What do we do if we see bad men?"

Pulling against Ashor's grip, Joseph tried to dive into the pavement, his feet lifting and the boy swinging in Ashor's hand.

*"Hit the dirt!"* Joseph cried.

"Good, good," Ashor said, swinging the child by the hand and scanning the street around them. "You will make a fine soldier."

"Yes, Grampageneral," Joseph said, again trotting along on his own feet.

At the corner Joseph pulled to the left, but Ashor turned right, his eyes moving up and down the block as he hesitated, only briefly, then stepped forward briskly, pulling the child with him.



“No chockies for Grandmatalia?” Joseph asked.

“On the way back, darling,” Ashor said, scanning. Arvan and Rafiq were already moving down the block. Fadil and Tirigan would be padding up the parallel streets, playing catch-up, the two others hustling behind them.

Talia’s chocolates. Sweets for the Lioness of the Desert, fresh-made at Olivier Bonbons on Kesselskade. Poor woman, he must get chocolates for her, certainly. But first he would feed Garrett Alderson a few kibbles of sugar-coated poppycock, cooked up over small cups of sweetly bitter coffee last night with the boys.

Like his morning strolls with a four-year-old child, feeding half-baked caprices to Alderson was part of the process of getting himself back to Baghdad. A waiting game. Holding himself in place until he could hire Colonel Kurskov and nuke the Yanks’ playground. Send them a wake-up call that was not to be ignored.

Morning strolls, massaging Garrett Alderson and Jon Vanbastian, it all contributed to the larger fiction that he was an innocent man with nothing to hide and even less to fear. Risky work, but unavoidable if he was to astro-turf himself and return home.

And, what a thought! Like “GIGO<sup>1</sup>,” Alderson had also explained “astro-turf” to him early on. Only the Yanks could have dreamt it up: “Astro-turf” as a spin-meister’s verb, rather than a brand name for plastic grass.

Garrett Alderson, a stringer for the *International Herald Trib*, had defined GIGO and astroturfing for Ashor at a cocktail party in the flat of Ashor’s lawyer in The Hague—June of the year 1999, seven months after Ashor arrived with family and entourage from Baghdad by way of Abu Dhabi, Athens, Lisbon, and London. A victory party to celebrate the International Court’s dismissal of all war-crimes charges against him.

He had dealt with the European journalists immediately following the Court’s decision, calm and courteous in the face of their naked hatred during a post-verdict press conference. Screaming accusations at him in the form of questions. It was as though he had been found guilty of two crimes—the massacre of the Kurds and the bamboozling of the International Court of Justice.

Alderson though had been different—no extra-judicial guilty verdict. Recognizing Alderson as a potential conduit of propaganda, Ashor invited the overstuffed reporter to his lawyer’s party, where Alderson commented ironically on Ashor’s physical bearing: “You’re a chameleon, general. Slip

<sup>1</sup>GIGO - Like FIFO (First In First Out) and LIFO (Last In First Out), Garbage In Garbage Out was originally an accounting/computing acronym.

into anyone's shoes from along the Med; Greek trawler captain, slick Guinea lawyer. Or—what the hell—put you in a turban and flowing beard, you could lead prayers in Islamabad.”

“I’ll take the Med, thank you.” Ashor smiled—the studied, polite, non-committal expression he had developed early on as he climbed the hazardous military ladder. It was a gentle-natured look, diffident—a quiet smile that even the most cynical accepted as genuine.

Then, after another light sip from his glass of milky Pernod and water, Ashor added, “And have you noticed that all Iraqi ex-pats seem to have hairless faces? Whereas, back home, all *Iraqi* Iraqis have mustaches or beards? I wonder what we’re up to, we devious sons of the desert. Trying to blend in with our western masters, perhaps?”

“And witty, too, by God,” Alderson blurted, almost dropping his glass of Jim Beam as he snatched a badly-thumbed little notepad from his jacket. “You’re a real find, General dur-Shamshi.”

“No, just ‘Ashor,’ if you will,” Ashor said. “No more gold braid. Just ‘Ashor.’”

“And your English. You could pass for an American. Where did you pick it up?”

“A famous language school,” Ashor said. “It’s in Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow.”

“You’re a howl,” Alderson said. “But seriously, what next for you? Hooking up with one of the anti-Saddam exile groups?”

“Tell me, please—can you think of a single one whose leader hasn’t political ambitions in a post-Saddam Iraq?”

“Good point.”

“A single one who isn’t getting money from Washington or London? How much credence will they have, should they ever get back to Baghdad—all that infidel money lining their pockets?”

“Again, touché! Putting together your own organization then?”

“Why should I? As I keep saying, I have no political ambitions.”

Garrett Alderson was writing furiously in his little notepad.

Speaking slowly, so Alderson could record every word, Ashor said, “I love my homeland, I have no political ambitions, and I do not agree with the political agendas of these exile groups in the UK and US. And if you will look into my record, I have very few real enemies within Iraq, save for Saddam and a handful of his ultra-loyalists. Joining one of these anti-Saddam organizations, I would instantly inherit all of their enemies as well.”

“You don’t have *any* enemies in Iraq?”

“No one is completely without enemies, but go look into it, I invite you.

I have friends in every corner of Iraqi society—business, military, political, common people. I am only nominally a Christian, and for that many of my fellow Assyrians are unhappy with me, but none hate me. You will find I have no serious enemies among either Sunni or Shia. In fact, I am one of the few Iraqis who used to travel with impunity in both communities without bodyguards, save those that my hosts provided. And as for my Kurdish friends—were you in court these last months for their testimony? I have been a friend and defender of Kurdish interests, often at great personal risk. Why else would I take the chance to come directly here, to The Hague—to the International Court—and clear up these slanders against me?”

“So, what’s your bottom line? You want to return as Iraq’s savior? Some kind of Jesus figure?”

“As a man of little religion and no political ambitions whatsoever, I can only smile at your question. I find it very entertaining.”

“Good point.” Alderson retracted the lead in his pencil and pocketed his notepad. “Now, let *me* entertain *you*. Give you a backgrounder on some of the dips in the room.”

Ashor stopped Alderson with a wag of his finger. “Thank you, but I met most of the Embassy-Row personalities earlier. That was the purpose of this,” he opened his hand to the room, filled with elegant guests and turgid Dutch furniture. “To meet the social set, which is to say the political set here in The Hague. Even more than your own Washington, DC, this a single-industry town.”

“Tell me about it!”

“But over there,” Ashor said, “the three men laughing and drinking and talking? Away from the crowd? Those three I have not met.”

“Let me tell you, then ...”

“They are the spooks.”

Garrett Alderson looked as though he’d taken a blow between the shoulder blades. “How . . . ?”

“See how much they’re enjoying themselves. Everyone else here—everyone else from the diplomatic corps—is behaving so ... ever so *diplomatically*. But those three are actually having *fun*. I’m guessing that the one long overdue for a haircut is MI-6. The one with the overly fashionable eyeglass frames is Dzerzhinsky Square. And the one with the ostentatious wristwatch is the American Chief of Station for Intelligence, whatever his nominal cover at the legation. The French and Germans do not seem to be represented this evening.”

Alderson’s eyebrows shot up in astonishment, a trait that immediately endeared him to Ashor. “Yeah. Jon Vanbastian. Guy with the big Rolex—

24-karat Oyster Perpetual. He's our spook-in-residence. Took me months to dope out who was who. How did you spot them?"

"In every embassy," Ashor said, "it is the spooks who have the most fun. Who are the most comfortable in their skins. Superficially, they're not as well educated - fewer PhDs among them than among the foreign service types. But they're much much better informed, actually. They have bigger expense accounts and a well-developed sense of irony. They are not afraid of their ambassadors - who are anyway not their bosses. And they find the other spooks, even purported enemies - who are equally courageous, cynical, and funny - more entertaining than the dips from their own embassies. They therefore gravitate more toward their opposite numbers than toward their own countrymen." He waved at the crowded room. "Have you not noticed that flocking instinct of intell people?"

"Now that you mention it," Garrett Alderson said, again scribbling furiously in his tattered little notebook. "Now that you mention it!"

"Anything else you want to know," Ashor said with a teasing grin, "feel free to ask."

"Ashor ... my boy ... I have a feeling ... this is the beginning ... of a beautiful friendship."

And it *was* the beginning of a beautiful friendship, or so Ashor led Garrett Alderson to believe, as he cultivated Alderson in the months that followed, feeding him well-cooked tidbits of gossip and scandal, as well as plausible fictions dressed up as privileged intelligence reports from Mosul, Al-Basrah, and Baghdad.

Alderson's dispatches were sometimes picked up by the AP wire, and he quickly became a valuable conduit to the eyes and ears on the Hill and at Sixteen-Hundred Pennsylvania. Ashor understood that news items were like advertising, adding gloss and a certain credence to the material that he fed directly into the pipeline of the American intelligence service in Virginia, via Jon Vanbastian, whom he also began to cultivate.

"Shaku maku?" Vanbastian would ask as they sat shivering at a sidewalk café in The Hague, far from Embassy Row. "Another little insider fairytale for me ... hot from the warehouses of Mosul?"

To Vanbastian Ashor fed the serious intell, the best he could assemble, connecting otherwise scattered facts to create genuine intelligence and trying—sometimes through direct questions, more often through inference—to gauge how important he was becoming to Jon's masters in Virginia.

"Your people haven't heard this as yet?" he would ask. "I give you hard

intell from my people on the ground. Aren't your people back in Virginia picking this up from their in-country resources? Assuming of course that Virginia has any resources left on the ground."

"Dim crystal ball in Virginia. Needs a good polishing."

In the run-up to the war he told Vanbastian that no NBC would ever be found in Iraq, Vanbastian only shrugged.

"You don't seem surprised, Jon Vanbastian." Vanbastian shrugged again. Ashor asked, "So, your boys aren't the ones who are feeding GIGO about Nuclear-Bio-Chemical to State and the NSC?"

Vanbastian's eyebrows went up: "GIGO?"

"You know very well."

Jon Vanbastian grinned hugely, bright teeth in a deeply tanned face. "With you I am all ears, Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi. When you bring me tasty tidbits, I am all ears." He made a theatrical gesture of folding both of his gloved hands over his mouth. "All ears," mumbled through his gloves.

"Spooks," Ashor said. "No such thing as a dialogue with a spook, eh?"

"All ears," indistinct through the gloves.

"Only a monologue."

Yet, the truth was, Vanbastian responded eloquently if unintentionally to Ashor's gentle, innocent-seeming probes; his most obvious response when Ashor announced he was leaving The Hague for Maastricht.

Vanbastian snapped his attention to Ashor with a pursed expression, then as quickly looked away as though to compose himself. Studying the passing traffic he said, "You'll be staying in touch?" He seemed theatrically uninterested in hearing Ashor's answer.

"Why of course, Jon. I'll still have to visit The Hague now and then, and you have no idea how pleasant it is to have someone to speak to about my homeland."

After Ashor moved with his entourage, Jon Vanbastian traveled more and more often to Maastricht. And Ashor understood more and more that Vanbastian's people in Virginia were looking to Vanbastian—their man at the International Court in The Hague, who was not after all an Arabist—for intell on Iraq.

In Maastricht, after the war began and particularly after it began bogging down, Ashor probed Vanbastian about America's resolve to stay in Iraq. Did Washington really dream it could establish democratic governance in a country where "the rule of law" meant a granite fist in an iron glove? When, he often asked, would Washington settle for a less-than-democratic ruler—one who could stabilize Iraq and relieve America of the quagmire it had gotten into?

“You are losing people day after day to the resistance,” Ashor said. “To the ‘insurrection’ as you call it. How much longer will your government tolerate this?”

“You’d have to speak to someone at Sixteen Hundred about that, my friend.”

Ashor said, “The reality on the ground is that ‘democracy’ is a joke in that entire region—just wait until you see the election results. What you want is an Iraq that is a friend of the United States, instead of the theocratic battleground it’s fast becoming. A benign but strong government that offers security, not voting machines.”

“You angling for the job?”

Ashor dismissed the question with a small motion, like brushing away a fly. He said, “The American people. Why aren’t they in the streets, crying out for an end to it? This conflict is becoming like Vietnam, prolonged and unwinnable, yet I don’t see crowds of people picketing the White House.”

“Vietnam?” Vanbastian said. “Picket? Where are you coming from? No one back home cares if the troops are in Iraq, getting their brains blown out, or playing tennis at Fort Hood. ‘Cause that’s all they are—troops. Someone *else’s* kids. Used to be, except for politicians’ sons and other successful draft-dodgers, every red-blooded young American man was called up to serve his country. Then comes Vietnam—and Canada starts getting all these healthy young immigrants from south of the border. And a whole generation pours into the streets of America to test the flammability of their draft cards—and some guys inside the beltway say to each other, ‘Whoa, Bubba, this here ain’t workin.’ So they kill the draft and replace it with a hired army. Flash forward to Iraq. The American boys who’re dying there weren’t pressed into service, they’re just working stiffs. Joined up like applying for any other job—it’s just, this job is killing people. And maybe getting whacked yourself. And they *are* getting whacked, and yeah, it’s tragic. But what you see in the streets back home ain’t protesters but Hummers and BMWs and Lexuses—because in real terms the war hasn’t been brought home to Mr. and Ms. America. Nobody’s kid is getting drafted and sent home in a body bag. College boys ain’t streaming north into Canada to avoid doing their post-grad work in Faluja. Back in the States, no one—you’ll pardon my French—no one gives a shit. They just aren’t paying attention.”

“What will it take to make them, as you say, give a shit? Pay attention?”

Vanbastian said, “Same as anyone, you’ve gotta hit people where they live. This war?” He laughed, briefly and cynically. “A million miles away? Someone else’s boys? Tough luck, pal.”

“How long do you think your American countrymen put up with this?”

“For as long as they’re told to,” Vanbastian replied. “Maybe a couple years longer.”

It was not at all an answer that Ashor was pleased to hear.

Like Vanbastian, Garrett Alderson was a definite asset. In fact it was Alderson who suggested Ashor’s move from The Hague to Maastricht, Alderson’s own regional base, once the war-crimes charges were dropped. Alderson who helped find the modest quarters for Ashor’s own family and the families of the seven other men who had got out with him. Maastricht was hardly cheap, but The Hague had proved costly beyond his expectations. With only the income from his accounts in Seychelles and Cyprus it was difficult to keep eight complete households afloat here.

Then, too, Maastricht was a border town—a trolley ride to Belgium, a swift motor trip to Germany. For Ashor, as for all such exiles, unsure of the fidelity of their current hosts, border towns were the springboard to an impromptu divorce.

Garrett Alderson’s greatest contribution, though, had been a stroke of absolute serendipity—unintended by Alderson, completely unexpected by Ashor. It had come in a moment of drunken despair, when all of Alderson’s news outlets rejected one of his freelance op-ed essays.

Ashor had an appointment for afternoon coffee with the well-stuffed reporter. When he arrived he found Alderson slumped in a café chair, his collar open, necktie loose. A collection of small empty glasses on the table in front of him.

“Shaku maku?” Ashor said.

“Siddown siddown.” Alderson flapped a hand in the general direction of an empty chair.

‘Uh, oh!’ Ashor told himself as he sat. ‘No spoonfeeding today.’

“What are you drinking, Garrett?”

“Wormwood and gall,” Alderson replied.

“Special occasion?”

“Toastin th fuckn Press Lords’ toadies. Familiar with word ‘toady?’”

“Sycophant?”

“Zackly. Suckups! Toady-fuckn-istikul Press Lords’ toadies mud’n yer eye.” He emptied a half-full glass. “Greatess goddam op-ed piece ever wrote. Pulled out all th stops. Couldn’a done better if ... if ...” reaching “... if I’d done it myself, somethin. Wonnerful piece. Luminating. Wanna read rejekshns?” He padded about in his battered leather briefcase, brought up a handful of E-mail printouts.

“What was your essay about, Garrett?”

“Joe Amerkun’s respons t worl events. Try t write cogent essay on what averj Amerkun cn do t change worl. Here.” Again he rummaged about in his briefcase, emerging with another sheaf of papers. “Read em n weep.”

Ashor accepted the essay and skimmed the first two pages.

“This is quite wonderful, Garrett,” Ashor said. “Very insightful.”

“Bull-snot! Brockli! Here.” Alderson pawed through the rejection E-mails, selected one, and thrust it at Ashor. “Here.”

Date: 14 May 2003

From: r.dunnes@denverstarpress.com

Subject: “The World And The Common Man”

Wonderful think piece, Garrett. Best you’ve ever done.

Want to run it but Editorial Board says “broccoli.”

Can you give us some more feed from your nameless Iraqi source?

Last one about insurgents’ self-view as “patriots” a winner.

Sorry again.

Maybe next time?

Best,

Randy

“Broccoli?” Ashor said.

“Code word. Means readers don’ no way wanna hear bout it. From ole *New Yorker* cartoon: Wife, husbin, li’l girl at dinner table. Wife sez, ‘Eatcher er brockli, dear.’ Li’l girl sez, ‘I say it’s spinach and I say the hell with it.’ Brockli!”

“But—this is written for adults, Garrett.”

“No no no no no!” Alderson said. “You’re workn on assumphshun, dealin with mashoor aduls here. Not! Dealin with Joe Amerkun!”

Garrett Alderson shook his head violently. Ashor worried he would give himself a blinding headache.

“Editors way ahedda curve. Treat Joe Amerkun like six-year-old kid, only rashnul course, Ashor m’boy. Cool, innellekshl diskushn on merits of eating brockli? Madness! Joe Amerkun mind wanders. Very few things six-year-old kid responz to. What responz to? Ice cream! Big Bird! Toybox! Playground! Get kid’s attenshn? I’m talkin serious now. *Serious*, kay?” Leaning across the little round table, breathing alcoholic vapors into Ashor’s face. “Get kid’s attenshn? Burn down icecream plant, buttfuck Big Bird! Shit in kid’s toybox! *Nuke the kid’s playground!* Simple as zat. *Nuke the kid’s fuckn playground!*” A deep belch. “There you have it.” Another even deeper belch. “Uncle Garrett’s texbook, how t’ get Joe Amerkun’s tenshun.”

“Nuke the playground,” Ashor said softly, but Alderson had turned to summon the waiter for another drink and didn’t hear him.



Now, little Joseph clinging to his fingers, Ashor was on his way to morning coffee with Garrett Alderson. Chocolate-coated bonbons of baloney and tripe, with just a sprinkle of hard intell.

In the usual course of his walk, Ashor would not have glanced across Sintviktorstraat toward JetKaafie. Inside, it was a coffee-house-cum-cannabis venue. Outside, five tables under an awning. Ashor would not have noticed it except to scan it for threats, the JetKaafie crowd more interested in the hashish and marijuana inside than in kaafie and apfel vlaai out near the sidewalk. What attracted his attention this morning was the single outside patron in the chill morning air. Four of the tables were empty and uninviting, white-enamelled chairs tilted against them like skeletons at prayer. At the fifth was a man in a houndstooth crusher hat and heavy duffle coat, a bright wristwatch peeking from his left sleeve. Seeming absorbed by the local newspaper, a brass jasvah in the middle of the table, demitasse cup before him.

The sun was dulled by the overcast. A sharp cold bite to the air, harsh in the throat. The man at the table under the drooping awning not looking up from his *Mestreech Gazeta*, Ashor pausing to stare across at him.

‘Good news?’ Ashor wondered. No—bad. Good news traveled fast. People got the good news to you by phone. ‘Bad news, they want to see your eyes while they tell it to you. Hold your wrist to feel your pulse.’ They wanted to savor the moment; a warm feeling in the gut, watching you bleed.

Ashor scooped up Joseph and crossed the street, hurrying to get through the light traffic, then put the boy down on the pavement at the far curb. At the end of the sidewalk ahead of him and at the end of the block behind him, Arvan and Rafiq also crossed.

“A long way to travel for morning coffee,” Ashor said.

“Coffee-readers in The Hague out on strike,” said Jon Vanbastian, looking up from his newspaper, then back into it again. “Join me?”

“’Tis real humanity to hide strong truths  
from tender ears.”

Lord Shaftsbury

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

The silver Audi rolled smoothly up Serenity View across the oil slick, no problem, while Andrei continued counting, “... six ... seven ...” Mikhail opening his door, Georgi leaning forward in the rear seat to look through the windshield and saying, “Goat-shed crap, it ain’t working.” Mikhail, one foot out, saying in a reasonable voice, “Shut the fuck up,” while Andrei continued “... eight ... *now!*” and Mikhail stepping briskly into the middle of the road, squinting into the Audi’s headlights and waiving his arms while Andrei said, “Holy Father in heaven *here he comes!*”

The silver Audi began spinning, brakes locked up in front but nothing on the rears, all four tires slicked with oil, and to Andrei it looked as though it was skidding directly at their van.

Mikhail said “Oh shit” as he scrambled arms flailing to get out of the road and away from the van. “Over the edge, pig-head. *Over the edge!*”

But miraculously, it seemed to Andrei, the car spun past them to bang sharply into the road-sliced face of the cliff with a *whumpf!* then tumbled once, back into the road, rolling sideways across from them and bouncing into the roadway guardrail, then through and over it, sounding like a galvanized garbage can clattering downstairs as it jounced into the ravine.

Andrei tripped the blue toggle on his plastic control box. Beneath the Audi a second solenoid would respond, he hoped, releasing the wire that held the metal box and CO<sup>2</sup> cannister to the car’s underside. A whisper of dust floated up from the ravine, a final distant metallic *whumpkh* as the Audi smashed to a stop, then a cloud of dust rising, heavy in the cold moonlight.

When Charles Remly’s retirement came it was not entirely voluntary, but neither was it a thing he strongly resisted. Unlike Xavier—whose Screaming Kicking Clutching resignation dinner had become the stuff of legend—Remly had few regrets about parting from the firm, and none whatsoever about escaping from the Cancer Ward.

Toward the end, the F.O.—also under Ralph Braschler’s thumb and by

then himself at risk—counselled, “If it is your ambition to achieve a premature retirement, you are doing admirably. Admirably.”

This had been in the library of the F.O.’s massive home in Hancock Park, the F.O. with a glass of Grand Armagnac and a cigar, Remly sipping tea from a rococo Meissen cup, all gold wreaths and unrealistic blossoms. It was one of those soft Sundays in June, only slightly fogged over, that send some Southern Californians to the beach and drive others to throw open their windows—though in this room the windows, backed by hardboard, remained sealed, the drapes perpetually shut.

“What am I supposed to do?” Remly asked. “Lie doggo, pretend it’s all a bad dream? Delude myself it’ll be over when I wake up? Brasch is an advance man for our esteemed Director, and our esteemed Director could model reversible windbreakers, the way he keeps turning his coat. The last administration says, ‘Slash budgets, we need a surplus in the piggy bank.’ So the Director cuts our humint resources to the bone. It’s only four months since this new bunch moved into Sixteen Hundred and the mantra from Virginia is, ‘No uncomfortable news from the hinterland. Everything to be written up in a way that endorses Sixteen Hundred’s world-view.’ Four months! We’ve stopped sending in the good stuff, the real stuff. Our soothsayers back in Virginia are getting pure bullshit from satellite offices, and they’re buffing it into highly refined *merde de le taureau* for the president’s morning briefing papers. This last report of mine that Brasch kicked back to my desk, you know what he wants?”

“Whether or not I am privy to Ralph Braschler’s desires is immaterial,” the F.O. said. “What *is* material is that you find a way to re-write your report so that Brasch’s feathers are soothed ... while at the same time insinuating the truths you wish to expose.”

“My ferret isn’t insinuating anything. A double-A reliable source, political officer inside Russia’s Northern Nuclear Fleet. Sends his reports through my cutout in Severo-Kuril’sk, one of Xavier’s tasty finds—and not a double, feeding us gobbledygook. The ferret says, his last home leave in Moscow he read a Dzerzhinsky Square white paper that confirms everything we’ve said so far, but the White House somehow seems to be missing: Iraq has zero nuclear capability. You saw the product. My source says he read three full pages straight from Dzerzhinsky Square, complete with an authenticating watermark that showed clearly in the photocopy. Unlike us, the Ruskies have real people on the ground in Baghdad, honest humint resources, and they report no nuclear capability. None, nyet, nein, nada—*insinuate?*”

The F.O. contemplated Remly for a long silent moment. When he spoke his voice was quiet but academic, as though reporting a tragedy to the be-

reaved survivors: “There was a time when self-deception was the exclusive provenance of Sixteen Hundred and the Hill. Virginia was immune. Even our intell-gathering soulmates at Foggy Bottom were realists; they sent sometimes painful truths to the National Security Council and ultimately the president’s desk.”

“Do I really need this?” Remly said. “I’m pretty sharp on paleolithic history.”

“The current administration has pre-empted Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon has pre-empted its own self. All intell from State and DOD now filters through a mob of political commissars that the president’s functionaries have installed. Everything is scrubbed and edited to conform to our president’s rather limited understanding of the world. And the gossip from my friends in Virginia ...”

“Your old-boy network,” Remly interrupted.

“Let’s drop the word ‘old’ from that, shall we? The chat I’ve received has been consistent from one person to the next: DOD—already the recipient of over eighty percent of the famous black budget for intelligence—has had its allowance increased almost exponentially, while our own stream of coppers is being choked to a trickle. With these new funds the Pentagon is expanding its intell capability, hiring on spooks for three newly-developed sections; sections that compete directly with us. The administration has also put a political officer in charge of State’s intell service. A few good people have already deserted Foggy Bottom, others have been thrown out bodily. Which brings us to us.”

“And I thought we’d never get here. Have introductions been made?”

The F.O. smiled patiently; he had known Remly for a long time. “On a regular basis, the vice-president now slips away from inside the beltway and visits our hallowed Campus in Virginia, the better to scrub up the product before it goes into the morning briefing books.”

“You’re kidding.”

“When, tell me, have I attempted to amuse when speaking of our sacred trade?” No answer came, the F.O. continued, “Never previously has this happened, never. And with these little visits the Veep sends a message that reverberates throughout the entire Campus: ‘Our beloved president cries bitter tears when his world-view is contradicted by facts!’”

The F.O. paused to sip from his glass of armagnac, then struck a match, paused to let the sulphur burn off, and warmed the tip of his Montecristo, which had gone cold as he spoke. A puff, another sip of brandy, he said, “Can you now fully grasp the reason why you are going to soften your report ... and soothe Mr. Braschler’s feathers?”

With that they sat silently, contemplating each other like bronze Buddhas.

Remly turned and absently surveyed the F.O.'s elegant library, every wall covered floor to ceiling with shelves, the shelves crowded with leather-bound volumes. The F.O. and his wife came from old money; the enormous house in Hancock Park had been his father's and his father's before him, her estate on a hillside in Montecito had been acquired by one of her great grandfathers, a cattle and railroad speculator who was rumored to have imported Chinese slave-labor for the laying of track up and down the coast. There was a smell of money here, and of power—a continuum of generations who had prospered because they understood exactly how much they could steal without getting their hands amputated.

Remly finished his tea. He turned the porcelain cup over, as though appraising its markings for auction, then returned it to the perfect circle of improbable flowers and a garish gilt wreath that decorated the saucer. He looked again around the walls, wondering if the F.O. had actually read all of these books, shelf upon shelf of them, a sort of literary wallpaper. Perhaps they'd been inherited as well.

At last turning his gaze on the F.O. Remly said, "My feeling is ... John seven, thirty-two."

The F.O. sat in silence, waiting for it.

"'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' Right there on the lobby wall, first thing that hits you when you walk into the Old HQ building on the Campus."

The F.O. remained mute, an absent puff at his cigar, almost as though he was witnessing the future through a rent in the fabric of time, already knowing what would follow, both Remly's words and their aftermath.

Remly said, "I'm not revising the report. Maybe I'll go down to the comm room and scramble it to Virginia myself, unedited and true to the source."

Nine days later he had a new gold pen and was negotiating with Payroll as to how and where to send his pension checks. And in what name.

In his haphazard preparations for retirement he had overlooked one detail—that over the course of twenty-five years, leading a life of subterfuge and deceit, he had succeeded in losing his identity. When he left California he had more bank accounts and credit cards in his various worknames than in the name to which he'd been born, and it came to him that he had even misplaced his original and very authentic Social Security card. The firm's cobblers had re-created him with a dozen different covers, however—including Sosh numbers, passports, licenses, a multitude of supporting docu-

ments—which he had conveniently neglected to return, but instead kept in his gun safe against the day he might have to go to ground ex-officio.

Finally, facing the prospect of applying for a Nevada driver's license and a concealed-carry permit, he settled on his most familiar cover name, Charles Remington Remly, and gave it to all who inquired of him in his newly-adopted home state.

“Georgi get the bucket,” Mikhail said. He stepped back into the road to scan for oncoming cars, up-hill or down. “Move your feet, Georgi, *move move move*!” Then, as Andrei trotted across the narrow mountain road, Mikhail called, “It’s not burning?”

“Only in the American movies,” Andrei called back. “Burn every time. Explode, big fireball ... mushroom cloud. It is all the special effects.” He looked into the ravine, bathing it with his flashlight, cutting through the dust cloud. The Audi was on a broad ledge near the bottom—stopped by a tree, now in splinters—crushed flat and lying on its roof, both rear wheels still spinning. Andrei twisted the flashlight to focus tighter on the car. An arm, bent in all the wrong places, hung loosely and unmoving from the narrow slit that was once the driver’s window. Not a twitch. In his time Andrei had seen enough of them, this one was beyond help.

No sign of the radio-solenoid squib on the undercarriage or near the car. Andrei surveyed the ravine with his flashlight up and down, side to side; nothing, the ravine a rockslide top to bottom. A few pine trees growing horizontally on the sides right and left, one badly broken by the Audi’s descent.

“CO<sup>2</sup> can?” Mikhail shouted.

“Gone,” Andrei called back as he returned across the road. There had been a small avalanche of rocks and boulders in the ravine, piled against the uphill side of the Audi. Anyone winching the car out would make an even worse mess of it, deeper cover for the heavily-camouflaged CO<sup>2</sup> cannister and electronics box.

Mikhail: “Georgi, get up here. Move move move!”

Once they were in the van, Mikhail rolling slowly down across the oil slick, passing it, they lit fresh cigarettes. Beyond the slick Andrei took out his phone, flipped it open and looked at it, nothing more, looking at it and lightly rubbing his head with his fingertips. His hair was short, early gray. Andrei took off his glasses and rubbed his nose, the glasses rimless with small rectangular lenses; ‘businesslike,’ he thought of them. Professional. His hair soft yet bristly under his fingertips. Businesslike.

“No getting around it,” Mikhail said. “He’ll be waiting.”

Andrei looked across Mikhail, out the window at Las Vegas glowing in the valley, wondering where, indeed, the Colonel's money was coming from and why they were on such a tight budget when the Colonel lived in the shadow of the penthouse at the casino La Fontaine. While he was giving himself the luxury of wondering, he also wondered if London would be his next stop, dealing with Levanov, who was commonly believed to owe the Colonel seven or eight millions American, which he would probably never pay.

'Money money money,' Andrei thought. As pious Didi once put it: "It is both our cross and Our Savior."

Mikhail said, "He's gonna be expecting it. You know what a shit he is for punctuality."

Andrei hooked the glasses over his ears and very slowly tapped at the phone keypad, as a starving man might nibble at a rancid apple. He wished that Didi was here to buffer the communications. No one, not even crazy Mikhail, wanted to deal with the Colonel. No one. Except maybe Didi—that priest in wolf's clothing. Didi the Confessor.

The ringing in his ear stopped, but no sound from the other end.

"This is Andrei. It's done."

"Code, please." Soft, that voice. Elaborately patient. Deceptively courteous.

Andrei said, "Sorry ... mountain view calling in."

"Sorry?"

"I meant to say, 'Mountain view calling in.'"

"You say it's done. You confirmed he is disposed of?"

"Wasn't possible to go down, take a pulse. But I'm sure he's dead, yes." Thinking, 'I know my business, you son of a whore.'

"You confirmed this." It was not a question.

"It would have taken another thirty minutes to climb down and back. It was not secure to do so, always the possibility of traffic."

"If he is not disposed of ..." The tone soft, almost gentle, trailing off.

"He is dead, I guarantee it. The other boys finish off the one in the house?"

"Do your assignment, don't concern yourself with others. Get back immediately, give me a report in person. Georgi work out all right?"

Looking at Georgi, who was once more sucking deeply on a counterfeit Marlboro in the back seat, Andrei said, "I will make the report in person." A click in his ear, the line dead, he snapped the phone shut.

Following Alf's call Remly slept only lightly, waking at the first warning

beep of the secondary security box and slapping it quiet, then reaching for his glasses on the nightstand. Weaver's LED readout showed that something had crossed the driveway sensor at the street, then stopped on or near the mid-drive sensor. Other LEDs showed movement from the mid-drive across the river-pebble landscaping to the kitchen door.

Remly grabbed the P7 from under the spare pillow, squeezing it tightly to cock it. Rolling out of bed.

Dressed only in his eyeglasses he moved quickly to the window, opening a slim crack in the drapes.

In the dry, clear, coldly-moonlit desert night a light-colored Chevy 4-door was parked midway in the drive, aiming out at the street. Both of the passenger-side doors were open, but the interior light was off. Someone behind the wheel, a wisp of fume from its tail pipe—the car idling, both doors on the driver's side closed.

"Hel-lo," Remly said softly to himself. "Company?"



“As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so  
is good news from a far country.”

*Proverbs, xxv, 25*

13<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2003 . . .

. . . M A A S T R I C H T

In the middle of the table a brass jasvah of foamy black coffee, in front of Jon Vanbastian a demitasse cup and saucer, the cup half full. Opposite on the table a demitasse cup overturned on its saucer. Vanbastian's face buried deep in his *Mestreech Gazeta*.

Ashor tilted back a chair for little Joseph and motioned with his chin for the boy to sit, then seated himself, righting the empty cup and pouring thick coffee from the jasvah.

A young woman emerged from the cannabis café, shivering in a black skirt and white blouse, asking in English what else was wanted. She extracted a pencil from her frizzy hair to modify the charge slip as Ashor ordered milk and a cherry Mestreech vlaai for the boy, and a fresh jasvah of coffee and another demitasse set.

Vanbastian remained silent, mining his newspaper.

“She doesn't realize she's freezing?” Ashor asked.

Vanbastian spoke without looking up. “Delusional. Stoned out on that cloud of second-hand maryjane in there.”

When the shivering waitress brought their order, Ashor poured some of the heavy coffee into Joseph's glass of milk, then filled the boy's demitasse with coffee-milk.

“Thank you, Grampageneral,” Joseph said.

Vanbastian looked up from his newspaper: “Does the boy understand English?”

“Assyrian Aramaic, and of course Iraqi Arabic. He's picked up some Nederlands, in this thick Mestreechs dialect.”

“So, shaku maku?” Vanbastian asked. “Any hot news for me from the whorehouses of Mosul?” But if his question was meant to amuse, his face put the lie to it—Jon's expression, Ashor thought, was that of a parent whose forbearance had evaporated, baiting his son to talk himself deeper into trouble.

In the four years of their acquaintance Ashor had studied Jon Vanbastian as a primatologist might a rare species of forest ape, marking Vanbastian's body language when he spoke of subjects close to his heart, as

opposed to his posture when he was throwing sand in Ashor's eyes. Ashor made special note of the way Vanbastian formed his inquiries—whether as tentative comments followed by an “eh?” or direct questions that begged an answer, or even as blunt, challenging statements that all but demanded contradiction; idiosyncrasies catalogued in the resource bin at the back of Ashor's mind, to be called forth when Ashor sought the truth behind Jon Vanbastian's bluff, charming façade.

This morning, though, there seemed to be no nuances, just naked irritation without condiments, Vanbastian's message anger perhaps, or possibly frustration.

Ashor willed himself to relax into his chair, and from a lifetime of self-control found the right expression of patience and mildly interested curiosity. He said, “Nothing verifiable, Jon, no ... nothing new since we spoke two weeks ago.”

“Nothing at all from your Kurds?”

“What is it, Jon? Is something wrong?”

“Wrong?” Vanbastian said. And that sudden, dazzling grin of his—those bright teeth—with not a hint of humor behind it. “‘Wrong’ is a subjective term, my friend. The objective term is, we won't be seeing each other again, I think.”

At which Ashor relaxed and released his own smile, a genuine one. “Why, Jon, you make it sound like a bill of divorce.”

Vanbastian grinned even larger and, if it was possible, more hollowly. “You've run out of cred, my friend.”

“And shall we guess that you also have lost credibility in the process? I mean, credibility among your soothsayers in Virginia, since your contact here in Maastricht has run out of cred?”

Vanbastian's forced beneficence withered as he responded with a decidedly sour look.

Ashor began, “Jon, I'm not sure ...”

“And there's the problem, isn't it? That you're not sure.”

“It's not mechanical engineering, Jon, you know that. Intell can't be quantified and measured like ball-bearings with a micrometer. My modest little group of contacts can hardly match the capital that you and your friends in Virginia have invested in Iraq. Yet, haven't I given you valid information that goes beyond what your in-country people are providing?”

“Blips,” Vanbastian said. He flicked his fingers across his sleeve, as though brushing away a bug. “Blips don't add up.”

“Blips? When Virginia sends you back to me more and more often?”

“It's the big ones that count. The big intell coups ... the big intell *fail-*

ures.”

Ashor sat quietly, waiting for Vanbastian to run the course of his act. Jon had assumed façades previously, but none as theatrical as this. Ashor imagined that if he responded again it would only prolong the drama.

“Nothing at all from your Kurd pals?” Vanbastian said. “Silent Kurds. Hard to believe, isn’t it?”

Ashor sat.

Glancing briefly at his big Rolex, then again fixing his sour gaze on Ashor’s face, Vanbastian asked, “Nothing from your sources about us capturing the Ace of Spades in about eight or nine hours?”

At first Ashor was too stunned to think, saying only, “Eight or nine hours from now?”

“From now.” Vanbastian tapped his watch with a manicured nail, as if sounding it to see if the gold was false. “The army grabs him like a rat in a hole. Your contacts haven’t given you a heads-up?”

The full realization of Jon’s words struck deep. Ashor felt his skin go cold as he papered his face with the well-rehearsed clinical expression to cover his pallor, feeling the sharp chill air against his teeth in a mouth gone suddenly dry. He sniffed vaguely. He scratched the tip of his nose. He asked, “Why, Jon, will you now?” Then, still cool, “How marvelous for you. Where do you intend to find him?”

With unusual intensity Jon Vanbastian measured the quadrants of Ashor’s face, as though trying to read a badly-drawn map, hoping to find the road to some hidden but very important place. Finding nothing, he nodded curtly. “Keep this under your hat or you may get a bullet through it, okay? We’re waiting for the capture, then CentCom in Baghdad contacts Sixteen Hundred and the President authorizes the CPA to release the news. You don’t know nuttin’, okay?”

Ashor nodded.

“You’ll eventually get this from your Kurdish contacts anyway, so I’m not telling tales out of school: The Kurds grabbed Saddam. They’ve been holding him since a week from last Thursday.”

Pausing a moment to think, Ashor said, “That would be the fourth. Tell me this—will Saddam be able to communicate directly with the outside world, once he’s in the hands of your military.”

At this Vanbastian barked a laugh, once and without guile, like a dog come suddenly awake. “Communicate? From a cell inside an isolation block inside a nameless fort somewhere in Iraq? *Communicate?*”

Later Ashor would recall how badly he had slipped, and how Jon Vanbastian had overlooked his gaffe: Rather than reacting to the strange news

that the Kurds had captured Saddam, he'd thought only about the money, wanting to know if Saddam would still be able to access the banks, continuing his periodic, coded lock on the accounts. Nineteen billion dollars! Ashor wanting to leap from the table and rush back to the flat. One lunar cycle from the fourth ... twenty eight days plus four equaled thirty-two, less thirty one—New Year's day! On what day of the week would that fall? Would the second be on a weekend, and the banks in the Seychelles closed? The ones in Cyprus? Nineteen billion dollars. He would continue making and changing his own voice-lock passwords weekly until January, when he would fly to the Seychelles and Cyprus to re-write the conditions of deposit, placing them solely in his own control.

Vanbastian said, "They've been casting dice over Saddam, the last twenty-four hours."

Ashor snapped back to the present: "Casting dice?"

"The Kurds've got him on a cocktail of barbiturates and tranquilizers. One bunch wants to strangle Saddam and hang him naked and upside down on a phone pole outside Tikrit. The Kurd leadership prevailed, they're turning him over to our military guys on the ground. They've got Saddam so doped up he must think he's already in paradise, bugging the famous virgins. Now they're giving the sonofabitch to us, drugged and dumped in a covered foxhole. Farmyard outside a village called al-Dwar ..."

"I know al-Dwar," Ashor interrupted. "Near Saddam's home, Tikrit."

"And you didn't have a clue it was going down? Thanks a lot, pal."

"I'm always honest with you, Jon. I didn't have a clue on this one. It's entirely possible the Kurds got him by accident—they've been quiet for the last week; I imagine it's because they've been holding Saddam. But before that, no hint of anything big in the works."

Vanbastian tilted his head, a skeptical look, unhappy with Ashor's explanation and obviously displeased with his own news. "The guys in our mil are already moving. They should quote-discover-close-quote Saddam sometime after dinner."

Ashor consulted his old Longenes: How much longer could he ignore Garrett Alderson? He said, "You got this from Virginia—from the Kurdish Working Group at your Iraq Desk?"

Vanbastian remained bitterly silent.

Ashor persisted, "Who finds the Ace of Spades? Your boys too, or just the military?"

"It's strictly a military op," Vanbastian said, not happily.

"But I imagine your soothsayers have a working relationship with the Kurds, eh? You'll get a piece of the credit?"

Vanbastian said, “Supposedly the gen is coming from a lot of military interrogations over the past couple weeks. No Kurds mentioned, it’s all just brilliant detective work by the mil. And my people in Virginia are asking me how much intell you’ve been getting from the Kurds and passing on to CentCom in Baghdad.”

Here then was the basis of Vanbastian’s anger—feigned or not—and judging from the American’s acerbic expression Ashor extrapolated a complex of other conclusions as well. Ashor said, “And how, I wonder, did your people in Virginia get this message? From the Pentagon? Your friends in Virginia have been using my information to contradict DOD for the last four years—solid intelligence from Iraq, which I imagine irritates the Pentagon’s spooks no end, especially DOD’s political functionaries, who were hired specifically to refute Virginia’s intell and analysis. My guess ... someone from DOD phoned someone at Virginia and rubbed his nose in this, yes?”

“I’m not privy to that.”

“Then Virginia called you and read you off, so now you’ve come down to Maastricht to write me off. Basic reading and writing, yes? Please tell your friends in Virginia that I have never passed any information of any sort to CentCom—that I will continue avoiding them. After what your military has done to my homeland it is quite improbable that I should do otherwise. Anything that CentCom gets about Kurd operations comes directly from the Kurds themselves.”

Jon Vanbastian’s face disbelieving, a cool blue stare that said nothing but told everything.

Little Joseph held out his demitasse cup for more. Ashor tipped some of the milk-coffee mix into it, and the boy sipped at his cup, rolling the drink in his mouth as he had seen his elders do; pursing his lips into a thoughtful pout, nodding wisely. Good coffee. Two more outside tables had been taken, now the third, the shivering waitress coming to get their orders.

Ashor moved his chair closer to Vanbastian: “And why, I keep wondering, are you sitting with me here in Maastricht, giving me advance news of Saddam’s capture, if Virginia intends to drop me? Obviously you’ve been scoping my movements, or how would you know to place yourself in my path of a Saturday morning?”

“In your path?” Vanbastian’s theatrical anger broke, and he drew in his chin to make an expression of profound ignorance and innocence. It was as though a wall had collapsed, the real Jon Vanbastian stepping through the rubble of his discarded façade. “My friend, *you* crossed the street to come talk to *me*.”

“Sure, Jon, sure. It becomes more and more obvious that you are pre-

paring me for something with your stick and carrot act. First you write me off over my lapse regarding the Kurds catching Saddam, now you revert to type, making jokes. What is it you have in mind for me? Are you preparing me like a lamb for sheering? Or am I to be butchered into shish-kebab?"

Vanbastian said, "No one's writing you off, not at all. I have an idea, a chance to do something decent—and make a lot of money in the process."

"Make a lot of money." Ashor struggled to keep the irony from his voice. "I'm certain it beats being cut into shish-kebab, making a lot of money. And I would love to hear about it, though I'm not so sure about doing something decent. But I have a date for coffee with a friend and have already kept him waiting far too long." Ashor rose and motioned to Joseph, who slipped off his chair, reaching with his toes to meet the paving. "If you will wait for me in the park, we can talk about your idea in about an hour, no later." Ashor brought out his wallet and peeled off guilders. "My treat, Jon. You won't want this on your expense account—the place is a notorious drugs den."

Vanbastian stood and dropped more money on the table. "It's extra for the middle-east coffee."

Ashor said, "Come walk with me. And for heaven sake, no more pulling that long face. It's turning out a beautiful day, people in the streets, look around you. A festive season." With a small gesture, lifting his chin, Ashor indicated the growing crowd that spilled from the sidewalk out into the narrow, cobblestone street. On the other side, tall stone buildings. Colorful flags slapping above blossom-filled flower boxes. It was getting on nine o'clock, the clouds breaking and the sun blinking between them now and then, but the air still cold. People pouring in, the streets of the *kwartier* would be jammed by lunchtime.

But for its namesake treaty which chartered the European Union, Maastricht would be a footnote of history. Yet the Mestreechers carry their anonymity lightly. In a town of grim, heavy architecture, they have created a seductive sprawl of museums and restaurants, of galleries and boutiques and concert spaces. And so it was that on this cold Saturday in mid-December, despite the snapping wind and a sky that threatened rain, the sidewalks and bridges of Maastricht were quickly filling with tourists and Christmas shoppers, Jon Philip Vanbastian and Ashor al-Tigris *dur-Shamshi* in their midst.

Still wondering about the root of Vanbastian's theatrical attempts to manipulate him, Ashor had already compartmented his curiosity, only concerning himself with priorities as they talked. Neither then nor later did he see this day as a turning point in his life, any more than he had thought of

Garrett Alderson's revelation of nuking America's playground as a turning point, or the complicated extraction of his family and entourage from Baghdad as a turning point, and it would have surprised him had someone suggested any such significance. To Ashor life was only a series of options and actions, and while this day would be unusually full of both he didn't consider memorializing it in any way.

Vanbastian was content to walk in silence, and Joseph skipped along, clutching two fingers of Ashor's left hand. Rafiq and Arvan were across the street, discretely pacing them, and Ashor and Vanbastian moved through the crowd without speaking until they came to the crossing of Sintviktorsstraat and Jodyberginweg, where Ashor stopped and pointed.

"Down there, Jon, then turn when you see the river. Waterpoortpark. I'll meet you in one hour, latest."

Vanbastian said, "I'll start the charcoal."

"I'm sorry?"

"For the shish-kebab."

Unlike Jon Vanbastian, Garrett Alderson was an easy read, everything about him as vivid as a clearance-sale broadside. When Ashor apologized for his tardiness, "A minor crisis with the wife, I'm sure you understand," Alderson, a bachelor, nodded empathetically. "Know what you mean, know what you mean."

Ashor would also have to leave shortly, chocolates for his wife from Olivier Bonbons, Alderson commiserating with more empathetic nods.

He fed Alderson the gossip he'd cooked with the boys last night, though unadorned with his usual grace notes on Iraqi idiosyncrasies. Alderson scribbled hurryscurry in a much-thumbed notepad. As Ashor wound down his chat he recognized an opportunity to begin the second phase of his campaign.

"There is one more item, Garrett—a troubling development." Ashor waited for Alderson to finish writing and look up, attentive and focused. "I have word of a new resistance group forming in Iraq, well financed and more professionally organized than any of the others."

Alderson brightened, his pencil again poised over the lined pad. "Name? location?"

"My people on the ground don't have all the details as yet, except that this new group was responsible for yesterday's suicide bombing in the street market at Ba'qubah."

"Ba'qubah? Didn't catch anything on CNN," Alderson said.

"Lost in all the other bombings in Iraq yesterday, I imagine. Al-Jazeera

had full coverage. Harun al-Asrag was the target.”

“Fellow you had such high hopes for?”

“The very one,” Ashor said. He inhaled deeply, cooling his emotions, shaking his head over the tragedy. “A terrible blow to Iraqi moderates. Harun was the one man who could pull all the major warring factions together and get them to focus on rebuilding the country.”

Alderson asked, “When can you get me details on this new terror group? Leadership, agenda, current activities?”

“Soon,” Ashor said, “soon. You know I’ll bring it to you first, Garrett. Don’t I always?”

Saturday, a day for anarchy, half a dozen young men and one young woman at two tables that flanked the path toward the entrance of Waterpoortpark, making placards for their weekly protest; the students well-scrubbed as the Dutch all seemed to be, but looking fashionably grubby in their worn jeans and military fatigues. They smiled, nodding cheery good-mornings first to Rafiq then to Ashor and the child as they entered the park, Ashor wondering which of them would enter law, which would turn to science or business, and which would stay the course, anarchists to the end, moving to Amsterdam where they would live in a squat and tithe their welfare stipend for art supplies to make their weekly protest posters.

“Makes you want to go over and fix their spelling, doesn’t it?” Jon Vanbastian said.

Three of the signs were done, propped against a tree. The front one read AMERICA AUT UF IRAQ. Last week it was globalization.

“And it’s always in English, isn’t it?” Vanbastian said. “Think they’re doing this for U.S. consumption maybe?”

Ashor had joined Vanbastian at the last concrete picnic table before the river, the fog misting across it. At the next table Rafiq began telling a story from his vast collection of folk legends, little Joseph listening wide-eyed. At the table beyond that Arvan and Fadil sat, looking thoroughly unpleasant, no decent Mestreecher would occupy an empty table near them. Tirigan and Govan stuck close to the entrance, suspiciously eyeing the anarchists, while Nasirpal and Bagir had magically disappeared, though certain to re-materialize if they were needed.

“Your offer,” Ashor said. “Money and an opportunity to do something decent, you said?” He watched Vanbastian closely, gauging his body language.

With a smallish guilty look, Vanbastian said, “Okay, maybe not so much doing good as doing well. I’ve been called back to the Campus, Ashor.”



“Virginia,” Ashor said.

“In Moscow terms—Dzerzhinsky Square terms—that would mean I was going to get vyshaya mera. A bullet in the back of the head.”

“And in Virginia’s terms?”

“I’ll get the rubber key.”

“Sorry?”

“The moral equivalent of getting shot. I’ll be offered a chance to take early retirement ... otherwise they’ll post me to west Africa until my mandatory retirement falls due.”

“All because they think I’ve been passing intell to CentCom.”

“That’s at the center of it, yeah.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, Jon,” Ashor said, and he was.

“Which brings up this,” Vanbastian said. He leaned closer across the concrete table, his arms folded in front of him, a conspiratorial posture intensely candid and intimate, Ashor recognizing it as prelude to one of Vanbastian’s illusionist performances. “Ashor, my friend, there is a ton of money to be made in contracting and consulting.”

“And you want to start your own consultancy, perhaps inside the beltway.”

“You got it.”

“And me?”

“Partner. Middle-east, specializing in Iraq.”

“And your clients—government or private enterprise?”

“Whoever.”

“You mean, whoever shows up with cash.”

Vanbastian shrugged elaborately.

“And my salary?”

“Piece of the action. I’m thinking four hundred thousand just for starters.

“Four hundred thousand just for starters.” Ashor pursed his lips and nodded seriously, as though in judgement of good coffee. “A princely sum,” he said with not a trace of irony.

“This is only a beginning, you understand. I’ve already gotten a few things rolling. Friends. Want to go in with me. They say the potential is for tens of millions within a couple years, given the right clientele.”

“From whoever shows up with cash—petrochemical consortiums for the news on Iraq, I imagine.”

“Money doesn’t have a conscience.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Ashor conceded, thinking of the accounts in Cypress and Seychelles. The sign at the front of the young anarchists’ stack

now read AMERICA EQALS FASHIST and Ashor wondered ‘As compared to whom?’ He said, “Jon, I have to tell you the truth, as always. I can’t let myself get connected to an American enterprise. You’ve seen what happens to the Iraqis who’ve done that. They lose all semblance of cred back home.”

“Unbelievable. You’re not planning on returning, are you?”

“Yes, I’d love to go home again. You tell me that Saddam is no longer a player. And there have been voices in Iraq calling for my return.”

Vanbastian went silent, withdrawing into himself, and Ashor imagined him turning his options over in his mind. It would be good, Ashor thought, to stop Jon before he settled on any of the alternatives he was dreaming up.

Ashor folded his arms and leaned on the concrete table in a conspiratorial mirror of Vanbastian’s pose and said, “At least, thank God, Virginia and Washington—parts of Maryland, I imagine—they cover a vast amount of territory?”

“How’s that?”

“I mean, it’s not as though you were getting eased out of a job in some incestuous, gossipy little village, where everyone would natter about you.”

“You trying to be funny?” Vanbastian unfolded his arms, pulled back. Braced his hands flat on the cold table.

“All that large area, hundreds of thousands of hectares, I’m sure the word won’t get round that you’ve started up your consultancy in desperation after getting—do they still call it ‘getting the boot?’”

“I don’t need this.”

“I’m sure the word won’t get out, Jon. It’s a long way from inside the beltway to the Campus up in Virginia, isn’t it?”

“Drop it, will you?”

Now, having established that he was singing from his own libretto, Ashor softened his line and began working Vanbastian around, reminiscing about his own days in the army—worse, God knew, after it became Saddam’s army. That would have been the coup in seventy-nine when Ashor had been into his shoulderboards for about twelve years. Saddam also purged Ba’ath that year, four hundred party members executed. Reminiscing about *not* being a Ba’athist and the rewards of speaking honestly in a citadel built on lies ... the unmarked lime pits.

And Vanbastian buying none of it, “I don’t have time for a bull session, my friend,” leaning back from the table, stiff-arming it. “If you don’t want a piece of the action, I’m outta here.”

“Stay a moment, Jon. You’ll leave the table with money in your pocket.”

In empathetic tones Ashor confided that he had a good idea what Jon was facing in Virginia, and especially inside the beltway. Even here in Maastricht, from reading the U.S. press, it had been obvious—the frustrations of Jon's friends in Virginia. Vanbastian remained silent, verging on surly, while Ashor continued speaking in fatherly tones. Although he had been giving Jon critical intell from Iraq, Ashor continued—and though Jon's friends kept sending him back for more—this material seemed never to have been officially acknowledged, nor to have resulted in any U.S. policy shifts.

At this Vanbastian responded, bitterly, “Mission accomplished.” He turned, looking almost with empathy at the anarchists at the far end of the park. “Jesus, mission accomplished! With their flag lapel pins and smiley buttons ...”

“Drinking the Koolaid,” Ashor interrupted.

“Yeah. Belly up to the barrel, boys. Ignore those corpses, have a cup of Koolaid—have faith in what I tell you. Mission accomplished! The war's slam-dunking! We're turning it around! Real progress! Hell,” Vanbastian indicated the anarchists, “maybe *they're* the ones who've got it right.” Then directly to Ashor, “So where's the money in my pocket, eh?”

“What if I increased my intelligence network within Iraq, Jon? Quadrupled it, actually—more, even. What if you had *exclusive* access to this?”

“From my new posting in west Africa? You're kidding.”

“From inside the Campus,” Ashor said.

“You're *dreaming*.”

Ashor said, “I've seen bits of my intelligence showing up in the press.”

Vanbastian was silent, measuring Ashor, still cool. But in Jon's brief sideways glance Ashor recognized something—Vanbastian considering his options while hiding behind his conspicuous outward signals, which after all were only a form of street theater.

“Am I wrong? Haven't I been seeing some of my material in the *Post*, after it's been glaringly ignored by the thugs inside the beltway and the Koolaid drinkers at the Campus?”

“Yeah, okay, *Washington Post*. The top floor at the Campus gets the word from Sixteen Hundred, spikes your hot input about Iraq. I know some guys around the headquarters building myself, I pass your intell to them—they slip it over the transom to the *Post*.”

“Your ‘guys,’” Ashor said. “Are these ‘guys’ on your Iraq Desk? Or ... who exactly are you forwarding my material to in Virginia?”

“Now you're getting personal, my friend.” Jon seemed to be loosening up, no longer stiff-arming the table. “That's privileged, you're not cleared.”

“You want me to be your partner,” Ashor said. “But you don’t want me to know anything. Is that it?”

“Hey, look ...”

“How about a ring in my nose. Would that make it more convenient for you, Jon?”

Vanbastian grinned raffishly. “What I like about you, Ashor, you’re not afraid to belly-flop into the shark tank.”

“Your guys—whoever, wherever—they’re slipping my intelligence, via your reports, over the transom to the *Post*. So tell me this, Jon: Have any of your guys gotten one of those famous rubber keys as reward for their indiscretions?”

Now Vanbastian grinned hugely. “Are you going where I think you’re going?”

Ashor asked, “No one posted to west Africa for the duration?”

“Not everyone at the Campus has drunk the Koolaid.”

“And these people—your ‘guys’—they’re a strong enough faction that they haven’t got punished by the Koolaid-drinking bunch? A ‘truth faction,’ let’s call these friends of yours. A few even in offices on the top floor?”

“I didn’t say nuttin’, okay?”

Ashor said, “Your secret is safe with me, John. But give me a little more. This truth faction of yours ... do you see them often? Socialize with them when you go on leave? Tight as a tick with them, so to speak?”

“You’re telling me I oughta network more?”

“If they’ve avoided the falling axe, slipping material out of Virginia’s Campus for public consumption, after all ...”

Ashor let the words hang while Vanbastian thought about it.

Ashor said, “Imagine, if you will, that you return to the arms of your friends—your ‘truth faction’ in Virginia. Imagine that I am able to forward even more and better intell to you. That you take retirement later rather than sooner. Imagine that.”

“More and better intell,” Vanbastian said. “Imagine that.”

“Imagine how this would affect your career track inside the Campus. How much more valuable your consultancy would be, were you to retire later—at the peak of your career—rather than now, as an alternative to a posting in west Africa.”

Vanbastian looked toward Rafiq and little Joseph, then to the anarchists near the entrance, something obviously brewing in his mind. Returning his gaze to Ashor he sucked on his teeth and asked, “What’s in it for you, my friend? What’s your payback?”

Ashor said, “Rather than ‘payback,’ let’s talk about the grim future of

Iraq. Washington had no functioning plan for the occupation of Iraq, and it still has no exit strategy.”

“Not my problem. Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon were supposed to be responsible for that.”

“‘Supposed to be’ isn’t ‘is,’ Jon. Hasn’t anyone back in Washington considered what will happen if an ugly, unexpected crisis materializes elsewhere—and the U.S. has to pull its troops and its mercenary contractors out of Iraq to engage this new threat? What then?”

“An unlikely scenario,” Vanbastian said, his smile ironic. “Interesting, but unlikely.”

“Still, try to imagine it Jon—the resulting power vacuum in Iraq. Rival factions, rival theocracies, everyone shooting it out. The civil authority as it now stands couldn’t deal with the anarchy, and the military as now constituted would begin eating its own guts as soldiers began shooting at each other, depending on which mullah they were listening to.”

Vanbastian said, “Sounds about right to me.”

“But, imagine if America endorsed a strong military leader there. Imagine a firm hand on the reins of power, someone who could end the chaos. A military leader who was a good friend to both Virginia and Washington.”

Jon Vanbastian imagined it silently as he contemplated Ashor, and Ashor for his part remained quiet also, letting Vanbastian think.

“A good friend to Virginia,” Vanbastian said at last. “Maybe a guy who’s so incorruptible that even Saddam trusted him?”

“You’ve been surfing the Iraqi blogs, I see.”

“And you’re thinking of going home to Baghdad.”

Ashor said, “But only when the planets are in alignment.”

“Some constellation of heavenly bodies in Washington and Virginia?”

“And certain conditions in Iraq itself,” Ashor added. “Though surely you and your friends in Virginia could help smooth the way.”

“So you’re looking to reshape American policy.”

“Don’t I wish I could! No—not policy, Jon. Just a hand of friendship. Does this trouble you and your friends in Virginia?”

“And you know what Sixteen Hundred’s gonna say about that.”

“What if I had a champion or two on the Hill? Would Virginia pass an off-the-record endorsement of me to some of its friends in Congress, if certain representatives and senators asked about me?”

Vanbastian thought about it, and Ashor, closely watching him, caught a wolfish glint of ambition in Vanbastian’s eyes.

“No promises,” Vanbastian said at last. “It’s an idea, and I can float it as an idea, but—sitting *here*? Sitting here I wouldn’t promise you the sun will

rise tomorrow.”

“That’s good enough, Jon,” Ashor said, thinking, ‘Good enough for now.’ Later would be an entirely different matter.

“It’s a deal, then. More and better intell? Starting when?”

“Not immediately, and not from here, Jon. For some time my wife has been unhappy with our situation in Maastricht, and I am moving my household and entourage to a warmer climate.”

“Baghdad?” Vanbastian asked.

“Europe—Lisbon, very likely, as a stepping stone to return home. But if we continue, from here forward I will refuse to be seen with anyone from your side. All communications to be at arms length.”

“‘Greatly expanded network,’” Vanbastian said. “‘Why now, Ashor? Because Saddam is history?’”

“Jon, perhaps I should not give you this, not just as yet, but I have already gotten news from a few of my people in Iraq that there are elements who want to bring this war home to you.”

“Bring it home to me?” Vanbastian leaned away from the table and looked into his lap, as though a grenade was about to explode in his crotch.

“A new group, Jund al-Iraq—it translates as ‘Iraq Commando,’ or ‘Iraq Fighting Group.’ They seem to be developing muscle inside of Iraq—money and contacts. They are not a great force yet, not like the religious militias, but they seem to be well-focused and quite professional. Already they’ve killed Harun al-Asrag.”

Vanbastian said, “The Ba’qubah bomb, street market. I caught it on Al-Jazeera.” He reached into his heavy coat to bring out a small digital notepad. “‘Jund al-Iraq’ you say?” Ashor nodded, and Vanbastian tapped notes on his keyboard. “They did the Ba’qubah bomb? You’re sure?” Another nod, Vanbastian tapped more.

Ashor said, “After this they plan more, but nothing small like the Ba’qubah suicide mess. They propose to export the war—that is their stated purpose at any rate. ‘Taking the war to the enemy,’ as your Mr. President says. First to your allies in the region, eventually to your motherland. To the United States of America.”

“More terrorist attacks?”

“I don’t have any real details, Jon, and I won’t go further into this until I have them. Only generally can I say that my people have uncovered Jund al-Iraq, and this group seems determined to expand the war beyond Iraq’s borders. Tell your soothsayers, ‘Jund al-Iraq.’ They wish to bring the war home to you.”

“More middle-east fantasies,” Vanbastian said. “Conspiracies and a

thousand nights and a night ... and all of it running through your fingers like sand when you try to grasp it.”

‘Funny,’ Ashor thought as he read Jon’s posture. ‘You speak with cynical coolness, Jon, but your hands give you away, both of them flat on the table, as though you hope to grasp some kind of reassuring solidity. Funny.’

“Think what you will, Jon,” Ashor rose from the picnic bench. “The ball is in your court. And now you’ll have to excuse me, I wish to get chocolates for my wife and must hurry.”

As Ashor left, Joseph fell in beside him and Rafiq followed, then Arvan and Fadil, and they walked past the anarchist students, who looked up as though seeking encouragement from these older men, middle-eastern from the look of them. The irony of the moment was not lost on Ashor: His surreptitious meeting with Vanbastian, where he hoped to quietly negotiate the fate of a nation, as against the outrageous street-theater of the kids, which they hoped would set the world afire but which realistically would be forgotten seconds after the last images faded from television screens.

The anarchists had done their final poster, leaned it against the picnic table, and were gathering up their paint pots. The placard read, AMERICA THINKS IT IS GOD.

Ashor approved of their spelling as well.

Beyond the entrance to Waterpoortpark and onto the street, then beyond even that, Ashor looking around to see that his close-in entourage was in place. He released Joseph’s little hand to dig a leatherbound notepad and gold pen from his trouser pocket. In it he scribbled in Aramaic, “get boxes for packing not a word not to rafiq not to your wife not to your mother not to anybody we leave in four weeks maybe five who knows where aleksandr kurskov is if you know where he can be reached phone him from a call box no cells no shortwave do not talk straight just tell him his friend from nineveh will call later about the important assignment we discussed”

With a jerk of the chin toward Rafiq, then another movement of the chin at the end of the block and a pointing finger at the sidewalk in front of him, Ashor indicated that he wanted Nasirpal to come to him.

When Nasirpal came, Ashor put the slip of paper into his hand, folding Nasirpal’s fingers around it. “Read this. Talk to no one about this, understand me? No one. Find Colonel Kurskov, call him right away.”

*Gutshot: Card that must be drawn  
to complete an inside straight.*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

Charles Remly sometimes wondered if Weaver hadn't gone over the top with his retirement gift of a dual security system—Weaver, the F.O. and Basset, a few others chipping in for it. Now standing naked at the curtain—a Chevy 4-door in his drive, interior lights jammed off, engine idling and both passenger doors open—Remly imagined the alarms might have been the the smart thing after all.

Slowly letting the drape back, quickly to the bed. Sitting on the edge, dropping the P7 onto a pillow. Reaching for his Wranglers and deck shoes. Taking off his glasses and slipping into a loose T-shirt.

His glasses back on his face, he retrieved the pistol, again squeezing the grip. Moving quickly to the open bedroom door, the front porch lamp sending soft indirect light through the fan-shaped transom window above the front doors and down the hallway. No one in the hall. Someone out there beyond the hall, waiting?

Helping himself to the stereo?

The house alarm was programmed to give a 30-second warning on the front door and on the laundry-room door that connected to the garage. Long enough for him to get in and disarm the system. The sensors for the windows and on the other doors that led directly outside were programmed for immediate response, setting off sirens and flashing strobe-lights inside and out. But there had been no warning. No alarm.

A brief scraping noise. 'Imagination,' he told himself. 'Getting old. Scare easily.' But there was a scrape again, and a clink, and then silence.

Remly looked back to the nightstand, at the LED indicator on the house alarm controller.

Nothing.

Moving quickly back to the nightstand he grabbed his earplugs and turned both alarm controllers face down under his pillow to kill the LEDs, then pulled the cord of the glowing clock from the wall. He jammed the plugs into his ears, briefly wished he'd had black sweatpants and black shoes, maybe a black knit cap, with his gear on the floor.

As he started again toward the bedroom door with the P7 he saw a flick



of shadow along the hallway—someone moving from the kitchen across the entry toward the hall, betrayed by the dimly gleaming porchlight.

Funny how the instincts remained—all of that largely-useless training—but the panic needle went off the paper when you got older. This one like nothing ever before. Pulse racing, and the familiar pain toward the upper-middle of his spine that meant the left chamber of his heart wasn't getting enough blood because of the ischemia. Thinking maybe he should go for it, the operation. Heart surgery, angioplasty, maybe a bypass. The embarrassment of the news getting back to the others from the Cancer Ward—he'd killed two intruders but dropped dead of a heart attack. Wishing he'd had the operation last year.

His hands wet, the P7 suddenly heavy, almost too heavy to lift. His face and feet freezing. 'I'm retired, dammit.' He wiped his right hand on his sweater and re-positioned the black P7 in it, jamming it into the web of his thumb and folding his left hand around his right, shooter's grip. 'Too old for this.' Then, 'Why me?' almost laughing aloud. 'I'm *retired* for Godsake.'

Sweat rolling down his back—gun still two-handed shooter-ready, knees melting—slipping along the wall to get behind the armoire. Reaching around and opening the armoire, swinging the rosewood door wide. From here he was hidden from both the window and the bedroom door, but could watch the bedroom door through the hinged gap of the open armoire door.

A shadow moved into the doorway, dimly seen. Then another, both in black—black gloves and black balaclavas over their faces. From their silhouettes, both male.

Ninjas? 'They're not here for the stereo.' But not laughing, the pain in his spine drilling through his body as his heart pounded and sweat washed across his face. Was he going to be killed for some long-forgotten project?

Quickly through the door, two black shadows, slipping one to each side, out of the light. Entry-men call doorways "the kill zone." Professionals get out of the kill zone quickly. The one to the left holding something long and dull. The right one pointing one hand toward the bed; when he turned on the flash it was like sudden noontime sun. A faceful of it, Remly would have been blinded.

The one to the left had already leveled his shotgun at the empty bed when Remly squeezed off a round at the flashlight man through the gap of the armoire door—*plonk!* the shot blunt and muted through Remly's earplugs—dropping the man to his knees and the flash turning off as it fell from his hand, while Remly also dropped and the man's partner wheeled and blew the armoire door spinning off its hinges—*whunnkk!* through the earplugs.

JANUARY 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

“George, you never cease to amaze me.”

George Granter had heard this from Tim Wilkerson before and imagined he would hear it again and ignored Tim Wilkerson, concentrating on the telephone console that he was tethered to by way of a headset.

“I’ll be right with you,” he said into line three. “I need a couple seconds to think about that.” Punching the line three hold button.

Nine outside lines, four illuminated, dealing with them one at a time, plus the conversation with Wilkerson, rolling from one to the other and putting each on hold as he thought the issue through, even while speaking to the next person.

Now all the lines were on hold.

“What’s the issue with cash flow?” Granter asked Wilkerson. “Where’s our crossover to get some pony-up for the bank?”

“Not huge,” Wilkerson said. “Another one-eighty-five boost covers the payment, we’ll need a four-fifty cushion after that as a carry-up into next month. It’s all just skin-of-the-teeth, really. Beer money. This month was only six million seven, down a tick. Next quarter is always above the break-even with maybe a little comfort margin.”

Granter nodded and held up a finger, punched line two on the telephone console.

“Ginger, darling, thanks for holding, sugar, what’s up, I put three other people on hold to talk to you, my CFO is standing in front of my desk with a bomb in his hands.”

“I have a very very lonely clit,” Ginger said.

“And a very very tasty one,” Granter said.

“*Why* couldn’t you make it?”

“‘Money answereth all things,’ darling. La Fontaine calleth and I answereth, ‘Here am I, Lord.’ Tim and I had a prayer meeting with the floor-men and food staff at the end of the shift yesterday.”

“Money problems?” she asked.

“Not at all,” he said. “Just a new plan Tim has for squeezing more nectar out of the blossoms. We got done, I couldn’t make it to Summerlin, darling—I told you that last night. Not going there and fun with you and getting enough sleep and getting back here through the usual Spaghetti Bowl and

Rainbow Curve jam-ups in time for the morning revenues review.”

“Put me into a suite, then.”

“We do go through that, don’t we darling? Arm’s length from the hotel until Elizabeth’s lawyer gets her into court for the closing papers. We can romp anywhere else around town, but she still has emotional issues about La Fontaine. Once the final papers are finally finally final ... finally ... you move into the penthouse with me. You know that.”

Before she could stretch the conversation out he said, “I will knock off early today, that’s an absolute promise, and we will go out tonight and drool money all over Summerlin, okay?”

“Is that an absolute prom- . . . ?”

“I have to get off the line, darling. I have an unhappy CFO in front of me and three hot lines on phone. Love you love you love you.” He made a wet kissing sound and punched the line two disconnect before she could speak again.

Punching line three he said, “I don’t get it. When we bought Joeburg-Nevada you said it was a can of worms but there weren’t any snakes in it.”

“George, honestly, the firm went over the original Federal BLM<sup>1</sup> and Nevada BOM<sup>2</sup> papers thoroughly, then I personally vetted them myself before okaying them. Eleven abandoned, but no dangerous mines according to both BLM and the state’s Bureau of Mines. All safety regulations had been met. This is a new finding that Mines is pulling on us. We have to upgrade the safety issues on four of the Lincoln County abandons or they’re going to start fining us as of next week. On a per diem basis.”

“You say it’s going to take two-thirty-five to get it done?”

“Or as much as five-fifty, we have to work on the state’s timetable. If we can do it at a reasonable pace, I understand we can get it done for under half that. But there’s not a bank anywhere is gonna lend against the upgrades.”

“Give me another second to think about it,” he said, punching the hold button on line three then the talk button on line one.

“Aside from a stipulation in the final decree that I am to be castrated and that my stomach is to be roasted in hell, what else does she want?” he said. “A monthly allowance at the level she’s talking is out of the question. The pre-nup covers that, so the question is—what is it that Elizabeth really wants? What is it she’s trying to *do* at this point? What does Schneider say?”

“He’s confused, too,” Aaron said. “He thinks maybe it’s emotional. Oth-

<sup>1</sup>BLM - Bureau of Land Management (Federal)

<sup>2</sup>BOM - Bureau of Mines (Nevada)

erwise he's confused."

"Okay, here's my take: Elizabeth is dragging this out because she doesn't want to let go of what she thinks we used to have. Wants to continue owning a piece of me. What I suggest is this. Tell Schneider to tell her that I will donate a two-acre Elizabeth Collins Public Playground near her place in Anthem. That puts something on the ground that she can see and touch and it looks like some kind of eternal bond between the two of us and it gets her off my neck, but the donation is a charitable deduction for La Fontaine. But tell Schneider this—whether she takes the park or tells me to go fuck myself, if she continues this crap about a big-ticket monthly allowance or any other bullshit vigorish above and beyond the pre-nup, I will pound her into the earth and salt it. Okay?"

Without waiting for an answer he punched line three again.

"How many days do we have? You say 'as of next week.' Seven full days?"

"No, only five. They act on Wednesday."

"Have you fine-toothed the BLM regulations on abandoneds?"

"No, George. No, I honestly haven't."

"Get your paralegal to go over BLM regs with a magnifying glass. Pay her overtime, have her work over the weekend. Federal pre-empts state on this, right?"

"Yes. I'll get on that right away."

"If we can stonewall BOM on that—on Federal pre-emption—it'll give us a cushion to fix the problem on our own schedule. Save a bundle."

Granter punched line three off and turned to Tim Wilkerson again.

"Your two o'clock is here," Marlene said on the speaker intercom.

"Apologize to him for me and ask him to wait just ten minutes," Granter said. Then to Wilkerson, "I have a whale problem on line four. Can we give a credit up-creep to ..." He pushed line four and asked, "The name is what?"

"Wang," Larry said.

"Wang," George Granter said to Wilkerson.

"Which Wang?" Tim Wilkerson said. "Something like twenty million of 'em."

"Which Wang?" Granter repeated.

"The Singapore Wang," Larry said. "Wang Liu Zhong."

"The Singapore Wang," Granter said to Tim Wilkerson. "Wang Liu Zhong."

"What's his line?"

Granter said, "Larry says three-fifty, and he's into it up to his double

chin. Wants another two-fifty bump, putting him at six.”

“Baccarat?”

Granter nodded.

“No bump.” Wilkerson shook his head curtly. “I remember this guy. Six, seven years back, Mirage had a nightmare getting him to settle when he got into them for a lousy two-fifty. Now he wants over a half-million line from us? Don’t do it, George.”

Granter punched the line four hold button, then began thinking aloud: “Years ago, they’d’ve cut off his line, killed him at every other casino in town until he ponied up. Now? Vegas isn’t the center of the universe any more. We can’t afford to alienate him. He’ll get a hair up his ass, cop a walk from his marker and take his action to Moscow or Kiev or Macao. But we can’t give him more credit and let him lose even bigger; that would send him to welsher city even faster. We’d never see him again.”

He fell silent and looked at the wall beyond Wilkerson. When he bought La Fontaine he left the original decor intact, worrying about the expense. The office was larger than any rational executive would need, but this was the domain of a casino boss, not a rational executive, and it reeked of money ... money badly spent. The gilt-splattered mirror along the far wall behind the wetbar hid a concealed door into a bedroom-bath suite, and the wall-paper was reddish-purple with gold stripes, not his taste but almost livable-with. The furniture was oversized, making the huge office seem smaller, the woods stained a dark muddy-mahogany-cum-walnut, the entire room dark ... dark fabrics, dark woods, dark wallpaper, dark paint—all with a hazy reddish overtone of Alexandrian decadence. Like everything else he’d seen in Vegas, it was too dark, too big, too new, too *faux-mediterranean*. Homes looking like hotel lobbies, offices like furniture store displays. Given a choice he would have taken mobster-boss gold-lame glitz over this pretentious muddle.

His first day behind the desk he had Marlene call maintenance and get brighter bulbs for the recessed ceiling lights and all the lamps.

‘This is where I am,’ he thought. ‘This business, this casino, this room. I am the Boy Wonder of the Chicago Merc Exchange, retired. Currently the Boy Wonder of Las Vegas. *Go for it.*’

Pushing line four alive again he said, “Larry, we are going to cold deck Mr. Wang. Who’s croupier?”

“The callman’s Jack Pinoch,” Larry said.

“A good mechanic?”

“No, sir.”

“Who’s the whale boss?”

“James is the ladderman right now. Just beginning his shift.”

“James okay for running a cooler?”

“Very reliable, sir. He’ll work with it.”

“Any mechanics available? Anyone on the floor?”

“I’ve got a couple guys could do it. They’re on the main floor.”

“Good with their hands?”

“Brilliant, sir.”

“Bring one of the mechanics in to shill the game right now. Keep him banking. Get in another shill to be the player, but not the other mechanic. How far into the shift?”

“Twenty. This is a hot table so I’m hourly-ing the crew. Forty on, twenty off. Another twenty to go.”

“Next shift, put in the other mechanic as croupier. Got that?”

“No problem.”

“Bump Mr. Wang another hundred-fifty credit. That puts him up to half a million even. He wins for a while. Get his boodle up to a hundred, then finish him two-thirty down. Let me know when he’s ripe and I’ll come downstairs and work him for the payment.”

“Yes, sir.”

George Granter peeled off the headset and rubbed his eyes with his fingertips.

“George, you never cease to amaze me.”

“Cash flow,” Granter said. “Timmy, I’m sucked dry. I’ve run out of solutions. Go back to your office, think creatively, then come back to me in another hour. Do something that will keep us comfortable for two weeks, and I’ll build on that or add on another idea to get us into the next quarter. That’s all we need, into next quarter.”

Tim Wilkerson nodded.

“So what can you tell me about an Alex ...” Granter looked at his appointment pad. “About an Aleksandr Kurskov? Anything?”

“Sorry, George, never heard of him.”

“Okay. Thanks, Timmy.”

As Tim Wilkerson turned and walked to the door, George Granter punched wearily at the intercom button.

“Marlene, I’ll see Mr. Kurskov now.”

As the spinning door of the armoire hit the wall, Remly put two hollow-points into the center of the shotgun man's body—*plonkplonk!*—dropping him to one knee.

The flash man staggered to his feet, now without his flash, and shouted something almost-Russian as he ran for the door and Remly squeezed another round *plonk!* into the flash man's center mass. Shooters' earplugs shut out deafening pistol retorts while letting normal sounds pass through, and yet the man's words had not come through clearly: Russian perhaps, Slavic certainly ... but not lucid.

The shooter was up and Remly swiveling the pistol at him but he dodged left and right and went through the door after his partner. As the two ran down the hall Remly gave each of them a single shot *plonk!* and *plonk!* now aiming at their heads, and slipped fully behind the armoire again.

He heard them running on rubber soles, the kitchen door banging open against the doorstep but the alarm not going off.

It was like walking in the rain, his sweater and pants soaked and sticking to him coldly as he went to the window, and his glasses slipping down on his nose. No matter how deeply he inhaled there wasn't enough air in the room and the pain in his back drilled forward through his heart; he pressed the heel of his left hand to the joining of his ribs to still it, wishing he'd gotten the operation last year. The P7 like a bag of cement in his other quivering hand.

At the window again he thumbed back the drape, this time not carefully, the fabric fluttering at his touch like a crippled butterfly.

Two black-clad figures shot into view at a dead run from the corner of the house, skidding into the open doors of the pale Chevy. As they ran and as they jammed into the car and as the Chevy accelerated down the short drive Remly fanned through the familiar *go-no-go* checklist, an instinct burned into his mind early on during Crisis-Response drill back at the Farm in Virginia:

Shoot them ... *No-go* ... the double-paned window.

Open window, shoot ... *No-go* ... a fleeting vision of them already in the car before he could open the window and get off a round through the

screen.

Open window, shoot car ... *No-go* ... a 9mm pistol round wouldn't stop the car, would only add to the noise at this address. He didn't want Metro to come visiting.

He watched them corner out of the drive on two wheels and fishtail down the street, still without lights.

Slowly down the hallway, his back sliding against the wall and the H&K P7 tightly packaged close to his gut in both hands, ready to shoot or to thrust and shoot, but *shoot* the operative activity. A shotgun on the hall carpeting, about where they would have been when he sent two head-shots after them. Remly squatted to reach for it, sliding down the wall, snapping his focus right and left as he pumped it dry.

Would there be a third man? Another shotgun?

He added to his new list: Black gloves, black balaclava, PIR sensors for the security system. Let him know who was moving where, if anyone got inside again.

Remly pocketed the shotshells and went through his house, the P7 in one hand, drying himself with a T-shirt he'd dropped in the living-room two days ago, checking room by room, his hands vibrating as he forced himself to breathe deeply and evenly. He took off his glasses briefly to wipe the bridge of his nose and above his ears where his eyeglass temple pieces had rested.

All of it was supposed to be behind him, the real world, he only wanted to get back to his boring life: Retirement—not assassination, Moscow Style. Not an attack on a player who'd only worked the soft side of the street.

But this was the real world and with it his training had also surfaced, however slow-rising it may have seemed. He cleared the rooms meticulously, recalling the voice of Terry Jackson, Hell Week coach and chief diaper-changer at the Farm early in Remly's training: "Who would you guess is in that room?"

They were in the funhouse.

"I'm keeping an open mind," Remly replied.

"Smart-assing isn't an option. Who's in there? Baader-Meinhoff? Red Brigade? Black September? White supremacists?"

"Let's pick Red Brigade."

"And how do you propose to clear the room?"

"Or perhaps not?"

"Or perhaps not," Terry conceded.

Remly wanted to say he would make a tactical advance to the rear, get



out of the funhouse and back to his car where he could phone 911 and request a SWAT team from the local police: He knew that no one had ever lived through a room-clearing drill at the Farm's funhouse. Lacking the option of a wisecrack, he countered, "Would I have anything but a pistol in a scenario like this?"

Terry's face went fox-like, his eyes narrowing: "Let's say you have. Frags and flash-bangs. Magnesium flares."

'A trap within a trap,' Remly thought. "If I throw in a frag, what? Do they have hostages?"

"No," the reply almost too quick.

"I'll frag them."

"Only *one* hostage. The National Security Advisor."

"The flash-bang," Remly said.

"They'll pull the pins on their own frag grenades. Suicide out the whole room, National Security Advisor included."

"The flare is in a Verry gun. I carry over a chair, stand on it, peek into the top of the doorframe and shoot the flare through the window. While they're turning to look out the window, I drop low and pick them off."

It was an improbably creative gambit and he could see that Terry liked it, crinkles at the corners of Terry's eyes and bright spots in the irises, but it was a no-go nonetheless, and Remly knew it; he was dead and the rest of the class was toast as well, it had been foreordained.

Though he knew his own house blind and could have navigated it with a bag over his head, there were hiding places room by room where ambushes could easily be laid. He turned off the front porch light, plunging the house deeper into darkness, and cleared the rooms by scanning high and entering low, throwing in found objects as distractions, understanding room by room that the fish-tailing Chevy had carried off all of them—a three-man team, no more.

Back down the hallway, wiping his face and neck, he picked up the abandoned shotgun, a Mossberg 16. Big enough to kill, small enough to keep the recoil manageable. Why had the shooter dropped it ... clumsy? Or Moscow Style?

Even so, "They're good," spoken softly. They had gotten in without tripping the house alarm. But why had the shooter dropped the shotgun? Of course Moscow Style—and of course Kurskov.

At the kitchen door, about to close it, Remly saw the extra piece of moulding. They had put a magnetic strip along the kitchen door frame to jam the alarm. The strip was self-taping and went along the moulding on the latch-side and across the top. Slipping the lock and opening the door, which

contained a small magnet, hadn't released the normally-closed switch in the doorframe because their taped-on magnetic strip held the sensor switch closed.

"They're very good," Charles Remly said, still softly.

But in the larger scheme of things good wasn't enough.

"I'm lucky," now clearly spoken.

In this town lucky beat good every time.

In southern Nevada it gets to 130 degrees in the direct summer sun and black ice coats the streets in winter; newer houses double- and triple-insulated against the climate, the insulation overkill keeping out the neighbors' stereo as well. That morning Charles Remly understood that it also kept his neighbors from hearing shotgun and 9mm blasts in his own home: His insulation keeping the sound in, the neighbors' insulation keeping it out.

He changed into dry clothes and jammed a fresh magazine of CorBon hollowpoints into the H&K. The hands on the bedside clock were frozen at 1:08, when he'd pulled its plug from the wall. He left the clock as it was to mark the time later when he made notes. The armoire door was a wreck, the shirts on the window side of it seasoned with pepperpot holes.

His first four rounds—the body shots—had landed, but the two head shots had missed, had gone through the drywall along the hallway, probably through another wall or two and into the ceiling. No blood, no spent hollowpoints on the floor—just his shell casings. The actual bullets would have stuck in his visitors' Kevlar body armor.

The dropped flashlight was a shooter's special, blinding, a momentary button so it could be thumbed on just briefly. What had he spoken, the flash man? Russian? Slavic, Remly was sure of that. The dropped gun was Moscow Style: Hundreds of murders there, the last few years, Mafiya goons didn't cling to their weapons—guns were cheap, getting away was the issue.

Aleksandr Kurskov.

Still the question ... *why?*

Kurskov was the genesis—what was the motive? Kurskov and he had never competed on any issue. Had never met. Mentally rolling through the pages of his CV, he recalled only a few times he'd been in the same general area as Kurskov—four at most—and he doubted that Aleksandr Kurskov had ever seen his face.

'Bringing us back to here and now,' he thought. *Why?*

Revenge? Who would count him a threat?—to the degree that a costly three-man team would be sent to erase him? No one.

Nor could he think of any sensitive intell that he had—nothing that hadn't already gone to the soothsayers in Virginia—that would make him ripe for elimination. And if he had nothing of consequence to reveal, it made no sense that someone would want to shut him up.

Not revenge, not to silence him. Back to square one.

Remly wanted only to vegetate in his comfortable retirement, and his response to this call from the past was not so much fear or even concern, but unqualified resentment.

He rolled the *go-no-go* options over in his head:

Sleep ... *no-go*.

Leave town, find a hotel somewhere ... *no-go*. What he wanted, he wanted to kill someone, simple as that. Unrealistic maybe, but there it was.

Contact Weaver, upgrade the security ... *no-go*. Not yet. It was still oh-dark-hundred. Call Weaver after the sun came up.

Contact Braschler at the Cancer Ward ... *no-go*. Not a chance.

Contact the F.O... . *no-go*. Call after talking to Weaver. After the F.O. finished his breakfast.

Call Alf ... *no-go* ... then with a cold flash in his stomach and something sour coming up in his throat ... *Eddy!*

He tried Eddy Johnson's cellphone number, but got the voicemail and rang off without leaving a message.

He looked at his phone for a difficult minute, then hit Eddy's home number on the speed dialer.

Karen's voice: "Eddy?"

Remly said, "Karen? Ohmigawd, sorry, did I wake you?"

She said, "Charley?"

"Insomnia for some reason," Remly said. "I pushed the wrong speed-dial button, was trying to call ..."

"I thought you were Eddy."

He paused appropriately, counting 'one, two,' and said, "Eddy's not home yet?"

"It's bingo night," Karen said. "He works late, bingo nights. Lots of old folks, he personally suppers his guys securing the parking lots, the garage. Old folks and bingo money, it's like throwing chum to those lowlifes on Boulder Highway."

"What time's he usually home, bingo nights?"

"Way before this. I mean, maybe midnight, never later than twelve-thirty."

"Have you thought of calling Metro?"

“Oh, hell, they won’t give a crap. I thought maybe I’d get in the car.”

“Eddy’s heart’s okay, isn’t it?”

“I thought maybe he might’ve had a collision on the mountain. You know Eddy, he’d walk home before he’d call for help.”

“I think you should phone the casino, have someone call Metro from there. The cops’ll listen to someone from the casino.”

“Maybe I will. I’ll take the phone with me. I’ll call the casino if I can’t find him.”

“Let me know what happens, Karen, okay? You’ve got me worried.”

“Yeah, I’ll have Eddy call when I find him.”

Remly returned to the kitchen, thinking about Eddy and thinking, ‘Kevlar skivvies.’ Then aloud, counting them off on his fingers, “Shoes, pants, sweater, gloves, balaclava, all black. PIR sensors for the security system, Kevlar body armor.” Then adding, “Mechanical switches, replace the magnetic ones.”

It was still dark when he made coffee and put a croissant into the toaster oven and the kitchen wall-phone rang ... Karen? He looked at the phone—Alf’s cell number on the caller ID panel—let it ring again, then, lifting it: “What is it now, Alf?”

“This is Detective Sergeant Rick Butzek of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. Can you tell me who I am speaking to, sir?”

Remly stared at his telephone, thinking, ‘Lewis Carroll? Franz Kafka?’

“Sir?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Sir, if you decline to identify yourself, I can pull up your name and address through the phone company, no problem.”

“Where did you get this number?”

“Sir, I am calling from a cell phone by pressing the re-dial button for last number called. The phone belonged to one Alfred John Noles.”

Belonged—there was a deep resonance in that word, in its past tense. Kafka, then.

Remly asked, “You with homicide?”

“Yes sir, that is correct.”

“Let me do this, Sergeant. Let me call Metro and check you out. You’re for real, I’ll call you back on Mr. Noles’s cell. Richard Butzek, right?”

“I look forward to hearing from you.”

“To the very last, he had a kind of idea; that, namely, of *la carrière ouverte aux talents*—the tools to him that can handle them.”

John Gibson Lockhart (referring to Napoleon Bonaparte)

## SUMMER 2004 . . .

## . . . L I S B O N

When Daphne Logan landed the job she phoned her dad to let him know she was on her way.

Her dad said, “Danzigger the lobbyist?”

“Public relations actually, Daddy. Graphics.”

“Otherwise known as ‘selling out.’”

Daphne said, “Selling out is when you trade your principals for money.”

“So what do you call going to work for a lobbyist?”

“I’d call ...”

“Degree in photo-journalism, great portfolio. Big feature spread you shot—that tornado, touched down in Schiller Park?”

“I call it, ‘Living in the real world,’ Daddy. The reality of inside-the-Beltway. I thought maybe you’d be happy for me.”

Daphne had answered the ad, left her book for Mr. Danziger, mostly the recent photos, plus the fantastic tornado spread, which had gotten printed above the fold in the Sunday *Chicago Tribune* while she was still in her freshman year. When she came back the next day she was introduced to Mr. Danziger who told her she had the job, at which point Daphne asked, “What job? I mean, who exactly am I supposed to photograph for you? Clients?”

Mr. Danziger had an infectious “Who ... me?” kind of grin. No, he explained, it wasn’t as though Chas Danziger & Assoc wanted her to take puff-and-buff client photos. No, that was already handled inside the shop—his Munchkins were pretty good at shooting smiling heads. Mr. Danziger called them that, “my Munchkins.” Mr. Danziger told Daphne, “What I need, Ms. Logan, is a graphics person. An image visualizer.” It was more visual *staging* he wanted.

He said, “God knows we *try* to be a good friend of the press, but the press isn’t always *our* good friend. They’ll take photos, nostril shots, make the client look like an idiot; ask questions your *mother* wouldn’t want you to answer. What we need is a guy who—or a *female* guy—who can pull all the elements together. Create visual communications that sell the *idea*.” The

best venue, proper clothing, even the client's facial expressions and hand gestures. "Make the photo op so juicy, the reporters can't get any questions in after we've sold 'em the client's message." Looking through her book, he got the feeling she had a kind-of glandular instinct for composition and staging.

Daphne said, "Like not having the client show up in diamonds and Armani at a poverty center."

Mr. Danziger gave her his big schoolboy grin.

She said, "Like finding cute little ragamuffins for the client to hug, he's reviewing a disaster area."

"I love it," Mr. Danziger said.

"Setting it up so the photogs've got only one or two possible angles to shoot from, and we make sure the background is appropriate to the message, and we've got control of the lighting."

"You see?" Mr. Danziger said. "You're already there. A regular Mike Deaver."

Daphne said, "I'm sorry?"

"Michael Deaver?" he said.

She shook her head and Mr. Danziger smiled hugely, almost a laugh. He smiled a lot, in fact. Later someone told her it was "the Killer-Street smile."

Mr. Danziger's suit, understated bankers' stripes, perfectly tailored—no puckering at the shoulder seams; his shirt, discrete CD on each French cuff; his Italian silk necktie perfectly knotted. Even his manicure was better than hers. Smooth.

She'd arrived.

That was twelve years ago.

Nine years ago she stopped going home to Chicago for the holidays, which made sense because home wasn't Chicago anyway, it was a micro-condo she could almost afford in Silver Spring.

Seven years ago, the last time she called her dad, he said something like, "Bribe any interesting politicians lately?" She never could remember exactly what he'd said, but it was something like that, bribing politicians. She didn't answer. She could hear him inhaling, imagined him blowing out cigarette smoke. Saw him with his tube around his ears, curving under his nose, the oxygen nibs in his nostrils. "You there?" her dad said.

Daphne said "No" and put down the phone and went out and bought herself a good dinner at the Monocle.

In July of '99 Daphne was sent to The Hague to meet a new client, who turned out to be such a sweetie that she got herself posted to him full-time

when he moved his entourage to Lisbon and the account expanded into a major income center for Chas Danziger & Assoc, by which time Daphne was an account supervisor—"Perception Manager" Chaz called it—and Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi became her product. She was to control everything—grooming Ashor and buffing him, and packaging him to the American people.

Ashor's confidence in the Portuguese postal system was slight at best, his faith in the Spanish post hardly more substantial. He was equally confident that other national mail services between Lisbon and The Hague, though they might reliably put his correspondence through, would delay his communication by twenty-four hours—time enough for their security services to flap the envelope and read his message. In January, four days after settling into a complex of suites at Hôtel Lisboa Do Rei he sent Nasirpal to The Hague with an envelope addressed to Hon. Jon Vanbastian, Commercial Attaché, U.S. Consulate, The Hague, Netherlands, sidemarked PERSONAL PLEASE FORWARD.

Nasirpal left it with the U.S. Marine at the gate.

Within the envelope a sheet of Lisboa Do Rei letterhead carried a simple message: "In residence, Suite B-1425."

Twelve days later a pleasant young man from the U.S. Chancery on Avenida das Forças Armadas arrived at Lisboa Do Rei's front desk with a sealed message for Mr. dur-Shamshi.

That afternoon Ashor dispatched Nasirpal to Infante Doce in the Chiado to pick up fresh chocolates for Talia.

Nasirpal returned with a celestially decorated confectioner's box and a small unadorned carton in which a satellite scrambler phone was nested among polystyrene peanuts. The scrambler's speed-dial menu had only the one number, no name attached ... nor any name really necessary.

Although there was no indication of the location of the phone that Ashor was speed-dialing, it soon became obvious that Jon Vanbastian along with his own satellite scrambler had been posted back to their mutual headquarters ... the implications of this constructing in Ashor's mind a bridge from Lisbon to Baghdad, a bridge with girders and struts firmly grounded in Virginia. Jon Vanbastian, fluent in Nederlands and Flemish but unversed in middle-east affairs, now sat at a desk at his agency's Campus, absorbing intell from an Iraqi exile. And based on Vanbastian's increasingly detailed questions and demands, Ashor concluded that Jon's masters increasingly lusted after the material that Ashor sent in greater quantity and more specific detail.

In the beginning their relationship was as casual as the afterglow of a warmed-over love affair. “Shaku maku?” Vanbastian would answer when Ashor called. “Hot news for me from the whorehouses of Mosul?” And from the day the satellite scrambler arrived into the middle of February, Ashor gave Vanbastian tidbits of news. Ashor then went mute for nearly seven weeks, explaining that he was expanding his networks.

Ashor remained in Lisbon, dispatching Rafiq and Govan to Iraq with a number of artistic passports and travel permits. The two went in via well-established trade routes—which is to say the traditional smugglers’ trails—by way of Jordan. Rafiq and Govan were without credit cards, paying cash in the form of American hundred-dollar bills for all of their needs—the cash also accepted, and eagerly, by Ashor’s old connections, connections renewed by Rafiq and Govan as they traveled. Their money notwithstanding, they weren’t robbed but indeed were protected and passed on from one group to another, moving with impunity through areas that were wisely avoided by government troops and American military.

The men they contacted had once been woven into the fabric of Iraq’s political and military establishments, many of them in civil service rôles. Most among them were now either without power or were powerful only in small ways, at the fringes of any established order. Some still functioned, though in much-reduced circumstances: A former army colonel directing traffic in al-Hillah; two petroleum engineers now oil-field roustabouts; an air traffic controller driving a suicide taxi down the corridor from the Green Zone to Baghdad International; a former hotel manager currently mopping barracks floors at the U.S. Army Forward Operating Base near Ar-Ramadi. Others were the human detritus of the invasion, who had once formed the core of Iraqi infrastructure: A doctor whose hospital had been looted into an empty shell—even the walls ripped out to get at the copper plumbing and electrical conduit; a once-distinguished publisher now reduced to counterfeiting identity documents; a ground-water recharge hydrologist whose previous membership in Ba’ath precluded any contribution in the new Iraq, however desperately his services were needed; plus a handful of only-occasionally employed civil engineers in a remarkably uncivil nation ... a nation whose rebuilding had been coöpted by an American firm that was, to all appearances, connected at the hip to someone very high in the U.S. government.

There was even a little tailor in a back alley off of Jordan Street, in Baghdad’s Hamra quarter, who once made clothing for movers and shakers in the upscale Mansur district during Saddam’s time, now patching suits and dresses—and stitching up false military and national police uniforms



for gangsters and insurgent groups.

And each of these men, particularly a group of forcibly-retired general staff officers, was connected to dozens of other professionals throughout the country—some similarly-dispossessed, others still serving in the government—thus spreading Ashor’s web to every corner of Iraq, a web capable of staffing an alternate government at a moment’s notice, given the right political climate and America’s blessing.

To the men they contacted, Rafiq and Govan gave small tokens of respect in the way of cash, ten of the hundred-dollar notes to each ... plus a message from Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi that any information they could provide—on almost any topic of current interest—would be gratefully received and that, later, their loyalty would be even more richly rewarded, once Ashor returned to a position of power in his homeland.

As to the countryside ... Rafiq sent several of his cousins, dressed in dishdashas and keffiyehs, to humbly petition scores of regional sheikhs at their weekly majlises. The cousins, all Muslims like Rafiq, though measurably more devout, made a simple request of each sheikh: Would this honored chieftain of a clan long-blessed by God hear the petition of Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi, of the Christian Assyrians in the north, when General Ashor returned to Iraq and sat beside the sheikh to discuss the possibility of an alliance? No specifics were given regarding Ashor’s possible petition of alliance, only the hope that the noble sheikh would open his weekly audience to the Assyrian dur-Shamshi, and hear him out.

The cousins’ visits to the majlises were not unexpected: In Iraq the current news is not best gotten from the radio or internet blogs but is passed along by word of mouth. The greeting “shaku maku?”—literally “what news?”—is not an Arabic greeting but a phrase from the ancient Babylonian, dating back some 3,000 years, and is peculiar only to Iraq, where it is not taken casually, as “what’s new?” might be in the west: It is answered with specific news and gossip. Though fraught with error, the street journalism of *shaku maku?* is often more accurate and always more timely than anything from the formal press, and the news of Ashor’s spreading alliances in the country had preceded Rafiq’s cousins, so that the sheikhs were not only aware of Ashor, but actually waited in curious anticipation for the cousins. Without exception the sheikhs answered yes, they would gladly hear the petition of Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi, the Assyrian from the north. And would give him the full hospitality and security of their clans.

On their return, Rafiq reported that the potential of the patriotic resistance had hardly been tapped. He laughed and said, “This ‘insurgency,’ the Yanks

call it.” As he had seen it on the ground, there were tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands of men—who would quickly join the resistance and fight the American forces if only they were given a sign, perhaps an attack on U.S. soil—Iraq-sponsored, as opposed to an attack by those Saudi Arabs, or by some religious front.

And had Jund al-Iraq come up in the conversations that Rafiq had listened to?

“Yes, General,” Rafiq responded. “Not often, but enough: Jund has been heard of. A dozen or so men asked if I’d heard the shaku maku of the street about them, and if there was any way they could contact Jund and join up.”

“And, your overall impression then?” Ashor asked.

Rafiq said, “It’s a fruit ripe for plucking, sir. If the next event doesn’t energize them, the one in America certainly will. I see the resistance attacking the Yanks in every quarter. I see the Yanks badly outnumbered—they will need five hundred thousand more troops, just to defend their current positions, once the resistance expands.”

Even an increase of a hundred thousand men would strain the Americans to the breaking point, Ashor imagined. Where would they pull them from? And if yet further encouragement was given to the resistance, would the Americans need more than a half-million extra troops in Iraq? It would be interesting to see how the Yanks held together at home, should they try to re-establish their military draft. Or would they in their wisdom choose to support a strong government in Baghdad, heavily connected to the military, and then gracefully withdraw altogether from Iraq?

As Ashor’s networks within Iraq grew—and they grew measurably, even blossomed, as he fertilized them with money—he was obliged to expand his entourage as well. An old college classmate of Nasirpal’s arrived and took charge of the growing in-country contacts in a computer database; clerical support were hired on to administer non-classified materials. Garrett Alderson now had a secretary, and Daphne Logan acquired an executive assistant, a copywriter, and a young woman—perhaps a researcher—whose function Ashor never fully understood.

By which point he had rented the entire 12th floor of *Hôtel Lisboa Do Rei* for his family, entourage, and staff. And had turned the suite across from his and Talia’s into a private office.

At one point in late spring—about the time the migrating flamingos in the estuary began swarming edgily, thinking to fly north—Garrett said to Ashor, “Beginning to look like Campaign Central around here, all these

Friends-Of-Ashor in Iraq. You planning to run for office?”

Ashor laughed easily and said, “Anyone who runs for elective office in Iraq is either a villain or a complete fool. The winners who hope to govern will soon be castrated by the reality of the situation; other winners who care not about governance will loot my country’s wealth, whether as actual cash or in the form of assets—heavy equipment, guns, and other valuables. And anyone who runs and loses will have succeeded only in defining himself as a loser, should any future opportunities arise.”

“Quote you on that?” Garrett said.

“Only if I get to shoot you after,” Ashor said, again with an easy smile. “No, you should understand by now that hard truths are always off the record.”

The next day, having mulled their conversation over, Garrett came back to Ashor and said, “Your military expertise, your talent for handling people—you’d be a natural to go back and get established in the army’s general staff.”

Ashor replied, “That’s certainly something to think about, isn’t it?”

More than anyone it was Daphne Logan who recognized Ashor’s qualities of leadership, qualities that by all logic should have driven him back to a position of power in Baghdad, willing or not. She reported to Chaz that Ashor seemed somehow a man at the tipping point of a decision, one that would pain him no matter which way he fell. Her portfolio of clients prior to Ashor had been minor industrial interests—American Machine Tool Association, U.S. Bindery & Stamping Conference, Oceanographic Surveyors of the Eastern Seaboard—none of whom had a core message of any particular gravity, all of them massaged into happy clienthood with sophisticated spin on relatively banal issues. Once she got herself assigned full-time to Ashor, however, she was confronted more and more with the need for cosmos-shaking releases, articles, and position papers, her biggest coup the article that she’d sweet-talked Garrett into ghosting for Ashor’s by-line, soon to be published in *Foreign Affairs*. The piece was titled “‘Law of Return’ Needed in Iraq,” addressing the exclusion of a vast pool of non-criminal former Ba’athists who’d been frozen out of Iraq’s current government and security forces.

And yet, despite a growing chorus of voices in Iraq calling for him to return, Ashor was not in any outward manner preparing himself for a homecoming. In their offices in *Hôtel Lisboa Do Rei*, Ashor now and then had meetings with other ex-military men from the Iraqi diaspora, both the European exiles and refugees from Syria, Jordan, and the gulf states. From

unintentional inference and from small hints, Daphne guessed that some of the generals and colonels that Ashor welcomed were from Iraq itself.

Despite the meetings, and despite his obvious desire to return to Baghdad, Ashor retained the air of a man waiting for some great event. The closest analogy she could think of was something she'd seen on one of the cable channels—that muscular surfer in Hawaii with the extraordinarily large surfboard, waiting with a certain grim eagerness for a tsunami that would generate a giant wave. Though of course, in Ashor's case, there was a significant difference, in that the surfer—unlike Ashor—was oblivious about the thousands of lives that would be lost in such a disaster, focusing only on the opportunity for a gargantuan wave. Quite the opposite of the surfer, Ashor showed in all things a deep and genuine concern for others, both those around him and those distant.

For his part, if he'd been asked, Ashor would have said he felt less like a heroic surfer and more like a juggler, keeping his many obligations in the air at all times.

Talia was kept busy, and more importantly happy, with her ambitious quest for a real estate empire in Lisboa Occidental.

Colonel Kurskov's plan was in the startup phase, funded by Ashor with an open checkbook in seed money and the promise of a final payoff of one hundred million to Kurskov after all expenses.

Nasirpal and Rafiq were advancing with their recruitment of shaheeds for Kurskov's project, and with the preparatory wake-up call that was to take place in Kuwait.

And from his expanded in-country assets, Ashor gave ever more practical intell to Jon Vanbastian. Among Ashor's news items during the spring and summer seasons were warnings of impending attacks against both Iraqi and American targets, particularly the pipeline bombings of June, immediately following the abrupt departure of the Coalition Provisional Authority, as well as a heads-up about the suicide truck-bomb that was to have destroyed the central police station in Tikrit—an event happily interdicted by Virginia's Iraqi contacts, based on Ashor's information.

Throughout this hard news Ashor interwove hints of Jund al-Iraq—nothing to quicken anyone's pulse in Virginia, to be sure, but fleeting glimpses of a threat that moved quietly and ominously through the shadows.

“Danger will wink on opportunity.”  
John Milton

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . M U R M A N S K

When Didi was a boy, in the summer Papa would take the family to Arkhangelsk to visit Auntie Nadja.

One year Papa took them up to Murmansk first so they could watch the sun go round and round in the sky. It was interesting seeing the sun do that—never setting, only making a fat circle overhead—but Murmansk was ugly and Didi was happy to go back down to Arkhangelsk for Nadja Georgievna’s sushki and bubliki.

Arkhangelsk was cold but beautiful, an ancient Russian city filled with thrilling architectural absurdities. Murmansk on the other hand was cold and ugly: Ugly buildings, ugly horsecarts, ugly Hero Worker posters, a city only one year old when the Union of Socialist Soviets was born. Not a Russian city at all, no Russian architecture, only the style of the Soviet Proletarian period when everything was ugly—cities, cars, women, neckties, dogs, cats, toasters, everything.

As a reasonably pious man, certainly as a thinking person, he’d always been troubled by the chasm of difference between socialist ideals and Soviet results. Often wondered if socialism might have been workable if Russia hadn’t canceled its centuries-old contract with God. He knew from his own experience that a world without God was an earthly equivalent of hell.

Even now, in the post-Soviet era of oligarki, that truth was evident, Russia a society without God’s guidance, no one knowing what was around the corner. People wondering if tomorrow would dump a chamberpot full of slops onto their heads. Stepping outside one day and seeing that the world they’d lived in for the last couple of months had collapsed—again. New banks, new businesses, then the banks disappearing and the business bosses leaving the country with the federal economic-crimes cops on their heels. Long queues of depositors at the banks, trying to get their money out even after they’d been told that the money was gone and the doors chained, even then still waiting to get inside. Waiting to be told that they’d just got screwed out of everything they had. Again.

He had come to believe that in a world without God’s signature there were only wolves and sheep. Hell on earth—especially for the sheep.

Traveling now to Murmansk, Didi came the long slow way, taking the train from Moscow to Vologda, shoving cash for his one-way ticket through the grated station window. Again the train from Vologda to Arkhangelsk, and again rubles stuffed through a window grate. Finally in Arkhangelsk he bought a one-way to Murmansk, cash. There were direct flights from Moscow, everything logged and registered at AeroFlot. Everything known, revealed to Dzerzhinsky Square. He took plenty to read on the train. His bible of course. A stack of magazines, his tattered copy of *The Trial Begins* in case the magazines became a bore.

September, dimmer and colder and wetter with each change of train, farther and farther north, the landscape turning to blued steel varnished with gray fogtones; trees standing dead or disappeared like political enemies around the factories whose encircling earth had been poisoned by the industries from which no one in sight profited—the money from the Soviet People’s Industries having gone to Moscow, there apparently having been no real People in the outer reaches of the great Soviet.

Beyond Arkhangelsk, wet fog, now a constant drizzle, condensing into rainshowers, then drizzling again. At Murmansk train station the electric bus into town, and Murmansk as he remembered it from his boyhood, but now with trees and flowers and shrubbery. Now with fresh pastel paint on the butt-ugly blocks of Soviet-Hero flats, the buildings still ugly but now also gaudy, like pathetic whores in their heaviest cosmetics hustling concert-goers around the Kirov on opening night.

The electric bus going up Kominternna, turning down Karla Marksa—the Hill of Fools beyond—crossing Prospekt Lenina: Marxist arteries branching out of the cold Soviet heart of Murmansk, no matter the political climate in Moscow. And perched atop the hill beyond the harbor not Christ in Concrete but the monolithic giant Alyosha—the Unknown Soviet Soldier in concrete, taller and if it was possible uglier than any building in town—looking down impassively on the electric bus as it continued toward Polarni Zori. No street signs, only street names painted on corner buildings now and then.

From his book-heavy travel bag Didi took his old Dzerzhinsky Square map—still more accurate than the new maps they were publishing—and began counting the streets, pulling the overhead cord finally and getting off. Looking around the intersection, then up at the street names painted on buildings, then nodding.

The blocks of flats up and down Krikorovskayia were all the same, noth-

ing different, though each had been painted a different pastel shade; lime and peach and pink and powderblue. Big colorful ugly cement shoeboxes in the gray drizzle, surrounded by narrow moats of dirt in which nothing grew.

Seven apartment buildings down he stopped at Krikorovskayia 53—the building painted shocking tangerine, recently applied—and pushed the electric button for Apartment 1132. Waiting. Looking at the muscular front door, also recently painted; white, but without having got its old coats of peeling red and green paint scraped off, the door like a big package from Father Winter that had been dropped into the snow, the curling red and green peeping through the fresh white paint.

“Yes?” The voice a dying seagull in the speaker grille.

“Yuri?” he said into the grille. “It’s Didi.”

“Didi?”

“Yes.”

“Didi!”

“Only in town for a couple hours. Business.”

“*Didi! Didi!*”

“Come on down. Let’s go have a drink, talk.”

“*Didi!* No no. Come on up, cozy here, the radiator is working today.”

The doorlock buzzed.

“I don’t want to bother your missus.”

“Shit, she fucked off last year. Ran out on me.”

“You’re alone?”

“Yeah. I got a girl, a welder down at Atomstroyeksport, but she works weekends, don’t get off until late tonight. Come on up. I got a bottle. Local stuff but good.”

The doorlock buzzed again and Didi pushed through.

The lift doors wheezing apart; down the dim hall, stale tobacco smoke in his nose. Fermenting carpet. Yuri at the open door to his flat, an empty glass in one hand and an open bottle in the other, his arms outstretched like an iconic Jesus awaiting nails.

“*Dmitri!*”

“Zdravstvuyte, Yuri! Privet!”

“*Dmitri Dmitrievich!*”

“Kak dela? *Good* seeing you.”

“*Dmitri Dmitrievich Dmitrovsky!*”

“For heaven’s sake Yuri, *don’t drop that bottle!*”

Didi dumped his bookbag and his dripping hooded duffle and they em-

braced powerfully, like always, each trying to squeeze the other until his eyeballs popped out of his face.

"You smell like turpentine," Didi said. "What the heck you drinking?"

"Come in, come in. Turpentine? Painting the place. Hey, you like it?"

Didi unlaced his boots, put them in the metal pan inside the door, slipped into a set of guest slippers. Yuri's flat was newly painted and papered; the paint subdued, the color of new-laid eggshell, the paper a twining-ivy pattern.

"It's beautiful. You're an artist."

"You look astonished."

"No no, I would expect nothing less. It's beautiful."

"My girl, the welder, she does the papering, I paint. We're doing the furniture, too. Look! The cloth." Yuri kicked a roll of fabric from a tattered chair and sat, pouring from the bottle into the empty glass. "From a French pattern! My cousin sends it from Odessa. Genuine counterfeit French *Toile de Jouy*." He held the glass to Didi.

"It's beautiful. Beautiful. Looks like you got a good one, finally."

"Finally!" Yuri agreed. "She's a real peach! Now all we need is money. Sit, sit, you can't drink standing. How's your family?"

Didi told him, catching Yuri up, only sipping lightly from the thick-walled heavy glass filled to its chipped brim with what Yuri called "The Local." He was working some political connections to get his girl into Moscow Polytechnic, he told Yuri. The boy into Sukurov Pedagogical Military Institute in Volgograd.

"A happy family man," Yuri said. "God how I envy you!"

"Sure," Didi said. "Now all I need is money."

"Shit, money, it's always the same, isn't it? How come you didn't get to be an oligark?"

"I should have come here and borrowed twenty million USD from you? To buy a ticket onto Yeltsin's gravy train?"

"Shit, I'd've given it to you in a blink."

"And I would do the same for you, Yuri Gennadievich. In a blink."

Yuri laughed, spilling his drink, then flopped his free hand out, palm up, fingers greedily spread. "In a blink?"

Didi slipped a fat envelope from his jacket and slapped it onto Yuri's outstretched hand. "In a blink!"

"What's this?"

"Find out." Then, as Yuri ripped into the envelope, Didi said, "You still handling radionuclides for the Northern Fleet?"

"Jesus!" New rubles spilled from the envelope. "What is this?"



“You still doing radionuclides?”

“Yeah yeah. The nuke icebreakers, the nuke subs. I’m the Assistant-Chief ‘Hot Stuff’ guy at the yard now.”

“You got any vacation time coming up soon?”

“Sure sure. I work all the time to get some money ahead. Never take vacations, never get any money ahead.” Yuri waved the envelope at Didi, spraying rubles onto the carpet. “What’s this about?”

“You remember your work at Kalin reactor? You still feel comfortable with enriched fuel rods?”

“What you got in mind?”

“Still feel comfortable with them?”

“Sure sure. Every day me and the boys pull ‘em out and wrap ‘em up nice and cozy and put ‘em to bed, that’s my job.”

“I mean, think you’d feel comfortable putting together a little bundle of them? Getting them up to critical mass?”

“Shit! That’s stuff you *never* forget! Didn’t I graduate Makarov Pedagogical? What you got in mind?”

“How about dealing with other hot stuff? Strontium-90, maybe cesium-137?”

Yuri now became calm, dead calm, the calmness of a man entering a tiger’s cage. “Where does this go, Didi, this talk? You don’t need this work for yourself. Someone I know?”

“One of our mutual friends.”

“Your old boss?”

Didi was silent.

“The Colonel?” Yuri asked. “Still working for him, then?”

Didi nodded.

“*Colonel Kurskov!*”

Didi put a finger beside his nose. “You can get your throat cut talking too loud; surely you know that!”

“Where’s this conversation going?”

“How interested are you, my dear friend? You tell me how far you want to go to put something into the bank for your old age, then I tell you maybe a little more.”

“I would walk from here to the fucking North Pole in my bare fucking feet to make some real money. *Big* money.”

“Set off a little Chernobyl scenario, maybe?”

“Sure I would. Depends on the money, but sure. Sure I would. What’s my paycheck? What’s the actual rubles?”

“No rubles,” Didi said. He tapped the envelope, now loosely held in

Yuri's hand. "This is just expenses, getting you rolling. The paycheck is in USD—United States dollars."

"How much? How many thousands?"

"You can't even count that high," Didi said.

Yuri waited.

Didi said, "Eighty-five thousand U.S. dollars. It's not negotiable, it's take it or screw it, no bargaining."

Yuri smiled hugely and whistled. "So where is the party? Chechen-In-gush?"

"Where are you?" Didi asked. "In the boat with me? Or just thinking about it?"

"I'm in the boat! I'm in the boat! I could buy a big heavy trawler here, that kind of money. Two—*three!* So where's the party? Grozny?"

Didi shook his head. "The city of the sinning," he said.

"What?!" A laugh, then, "*Which* city of the sinning? Thousands of 'em—all over the world."

"Las Vegas," Didi said.

"*My God!*" Yuri bounded from his fraying chair and half-danced, half-jumped, rubles flying wildly about him as he waved the envelope. "*Las Vegas! The titty-girls! The slots-machines! It's like a dream!*"

"Calm down, my friend. This is all work. All in the desert."

"No slots-machines? No titty-girls?"

"Only if I am with you. Only if you behave."

"Oh my God! Like a *dream!*"

“Las Vegas Violent Crime  
Declining, Federal Stats Claim.”  
News Headline

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S   V E G A S

Reality is negotiable, or so Remly was given to understand his first week on the Campus in Virginia. By the time he retired and moved to Las Vegas he concluded that reality was merely optional, and Vegas did nothing to disabuse him of the idea. As he drove into town in the early morning darkness, the Strip’s fantasy architecture and electronic billboards glared brightly along the freeway—Las Vegas less a city than a page from a comic book. His hands trembled on the steering wheel, he forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply. He turned off the freeway onto Las Vegas Boulevard, heading south toward Fremont, thinking ‘Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas.’ Seeing a post-Soviet goon in every shadow.

“You can’t ID him for us then,” the detective in the sportcoat said as he handed back Remly’s driver’s license. Sergeant Butzek had the perfect detective’s face, open and empty like a new house for sale, inviting you to come in and unpack your soul.

“*He called me,*” Remly said, pointing at the plastic sheet under the lights then tapping his chest. “First time I knew he existed.”

“This Noles, I run him ... Noles, Alfred John ... interesting guy. Priors in California, Washington state, New Jersey, Virginia—B and E, safe cracking. Looks like heavy stuff, he gets off light every time. Maybe he’s got juice? Here he gets knocked only once, opened a slot, had some electronic stuff, looks like he was getting ready to play games with the payoff system. He gets six months at Sandy Valley, about right for the tumble.” Homicide Sergeant Butzek had a button on his sportcoat—a green top hat centered on a green shamrock, superscripted I GAVE. He cocked his head just slightly to one side and seemed almost, but not quite, to lean forward, a nice guy hoping Remly would help him. “And he calls you at . . . ?” He looked intently at his notepad as though he couldn’t read his own writing.

“Are you taping this, Sergeant? Never know what little slip you might miss.”

“Oh I don’t think you’ll make any little slips Mr. Remly.” Like an old friend, genuinely interested in hearing Remly’s story. He asked, “You said

he called at midnight?”

“A little before. I don’t have digital clock, I couldn’t tell you exactly. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes before twelve.”

“Ten, fifteen minutes before twelve. And the reason for his midnight call was ...” The encouraging little tilt of the head and a look of pleasant anticipation, as though he expected Remly to offer him a small gift; milk and cookies, nothing ostentatious.

Remly said, “I really wish I could help you. I got the feeling he was down on his luck, wanted to borrow money. A hot tip on something, I wasn’t listening closely, you can imagine. A call from a stranger, that time of night. I brushed him off before he had a chance to say much.”

“At midnight? He calls you at midnight with a hot tip?”

“Informants aren’t rational—you’re probably one up on me there.”

Looking at his notes and nodding his head, Butzek said, “Let’s go over this, then. You never met this guy ...” a nod “... no idea who he is ...” another nod “... but he calls you ...” another nod “... at midnight ...” another nod “... just to borrow money against ...” now nodding and blinking dramatically “... against some undisclosed hot tip.” Butzek looked up, confusion in his face. “That the way it was?”

“He had my phone number from another retired security guy from GSA, a friend of mine, he doesn’t live in Vegas. I’m the one Alf calls.”

“Name and place of residence of the other security person?”

“I can’t give you that, privacy and security considerations, you can appreciate that,” Remly said. “Write this down, the number for my office, okay? I retired in ‘01, but they’ll remember me. Any other names you want, you’ll have to clear through channels.”

He gave Butzek the commercial cover phone number—it would be picked up by the cover office at the Cancer Ward: “General Services Agency, how may I direct your call?” Butzek would get handed off to one of the obfuscation artists.

Butzek wrote down the number. “No indication what this ‘hot tip’ might have been.”

“I couldn’t honestly say. A horse? A fixed game? I’m not a gambler, I don’t know how these people operate.”

Now the police sergeant studied Remly’s face without irony. “Frankly speaking you look like a sack of shit, Mr. Remly. Went back to sleep after you hung up? Or have you been awake all this time,” checking his watch, “three hours now. Busy doing something?”

They were at the edge of a field of shin-high weeds in a vacant lot at the wrong end of Fremont, as though there could have been a right end. The

lot was anchored at one side by a combo liquor and check-cashing store, a boarded-up one-storey building at the other. No more than a man's length into the weeds Alf Noles's small body was growing cold under a white plastic sheet, the sheet sending up points of glitter in response to the searing blue-white lights of an emergency services van that had run up the curb and onto the chipped sidewalk. Remly and Butzek were surrounded by the official busy-ness that accompanies brutal death, wrenching it from its private tragedy and pitching it headlong into bureaucratic drama. Dark blue uniforms and yellow tape keeping back the few tattered night people; Rick Butzek and another sportcoated detective from homicide; a technician and a sleepy-eyed photographer from Forensic; the coroner's men waiting in their van for Forensic to finish their academic studies in the weeds; the lighting van. It was like a variety show, Remly idly thought. They all had different acts, they joined together for a coordinated performance when a venue came up, then parted when the show was over.

To the sergeant Remly said, "I've been under a lot of pressure recently, I imagine it's starting to show in my face." Pointing at the white plastic sheet in the weeds. "Nothing to do with this, though. He was shot? Back of the head? Through the torso—center of body mass?"

Butzek said, "You're interested. Now *that's* interesting."

"Not interested, just curious."

Butzek looked at him, an invitation to say more.

Remly remained silent.

Butzek said, "I wonder why you say he was shot. You know how many ways there are of killing a person? I could keep you up all night, what I've seen."

"I didn't say, I was asking. Your guys with the cameras and plastic bags, they look like they're searching for something—shell casings?" Then, quickly, before Butzek could respond, Remly said, "This isn't my area, violent crime. We investigated major contract fraud. Murder we would have farmed out to the local police."

Butzek accepted it. "They never know what they'll find." A lift of the head toward the Forensic men who walked carefully through the weeds. "It's like basic science, no idea what they're looking for until they stumble onto it."

Remly returned to his needs: "He was shot?"

Butzek gave him a brief nod.

Remly's phone tingged, the opening notes of Satie's *Gymnopédie*, Eddy Johnson's caller ID on the screen. Remly inhaled deeply.

"Going to answer it?" the sergeant asked.

Without responding Remly folded the phone and pocketed it.

Butzek checked his watch. "You're a popular guy, Mr. Remly."

Remly lifted his chin at Alf's body under the sheets. "Where was he shot?"

Rick Butzek said straight-faced, "In the vacant lot."

Remly closed his eyes and opened them again.

"Two in the back." Butzek reached around to touch himself on the spine. "Our boy Alf falls down, three in the head." He tapped his right temple with his pencil.

"Major caliber?"

"Twenty-two, it looks like."

"Robbery?"

"You're interested in this. I wonder why."

"Only curious, remember? You wake me up, drag me out of bed to drive down here and give you a statement? I shouldn't be curious?"

Butzek measured Remly in silence, then, "You're quick on your feet, Mr. Remly, I'll give you that. Quick for a guy who looks like a sack of shit. Let's say 'robbery.' His pockets are turned out, nothing in them when we get here. His shirt ripped open, body turned over and over like someone patted him down, okay?"

"But it could have been someone else, not the shooter, tumbling him, is that it?" Remly asked.

"*Real* quick."

"I used to investigate things a lot more complicated than this in my previous life."

Butzek accepted it, pointing across the lot to an alley. "The fresh knocked-down weeds, he comes in from there, he's running we guess, and it looks like he's followed by one or two other people, but not more than two. They put a couple rounds in his back in the middle of the lot, he loses his cell phone over there," Butzek pointed, "makes it to here before he collapses. They shoot him again bang bang bang in the head. No one around to see it—the night crawlers come out after we show up with the lights." He tipped his pencil at the people behind the yellow tape.

"Then it would be the shooter who tosses his pockets."

"Way I see it. But what's he got, this little guy, this two-bitter? What I want to know, could this be GSA related?"

Remly laughed loudly enough for Butzek's partner to look up from his post at their plainwrap Ford where he was busy looking bored, leaning on the open door and holding a microphone at the end of a coiled black wire. "The major thieves we went after, they'd retire to their private islands in

the Caribbean and thumb their noses at us. These were men who bought and sold politicians, that was their MO. Killing people, that's for gangsters." While he spoke, he traced back from Alf's body to where the weeds met the alley. Dimly in the alley beyond the ring of blue-white light was an overturned garbage can beside a line of debris that would have been dumped from it. He said, "I can't think of a single instance where I dealt with someone who could have ended up face down in a vacant lot." And this was as truthful as anything he had ever said to any cop, before that or after.

*"Charley Charley it's Eddy he's dead!"* A choke, gagging, almost as though she was throwing up. *"Oh God oh God Charley Eddy oh God! His car. His beautiful car! Oh God he loved that Audi! The way home, over the edge, oh God oh Jesus Charley call me! Call me I need someone please please call me!"*

Serenity View, he remembered, was on Eddy's way home.

He touched SAVE and folded the phone and returned it to his pocket. The professional in him had been awakened and he had already compartmentalized Eddy, and by extension Karen.

He did three double-backs and pulled over once to look up at a street sign, not to elude anyone, just checking to see if someone was in fact following him: In the trade, trying to lose a shadow was an indication you had something to hide—and a guarantee that very soon your shadows would multiply like your sins. Once he felt reasonably secure that no one was on him he parked at an all-night liquor store on Stewart, two blocks up from Fremont, locking and alarming his Isuzu pickup and walking back to the alley that led to the weedy vacant lot with its yellow quarantine tape and blazing lights. Away from him down the alley at the lot, a single uniformed cop on watch at the back end of the action, oblivious to the tipped garbage can. No need to sift through the garbage that had been tumbled from the can, it had already been combed through.

*You there? 'I'm listening,' Never guess who I seen.* But for Alf it hadn't been vyshaya mera—making an example of him—just simple killing, like janitorial work. What had he gotten that they wanted back?

*What if I pop open the Lexus, get you more stuff?*

*'Whatever you think is best, Alf.'*

Remly turned and back-tracked, imagining where Alf and his chasers might have come from. La Fontaine was to the west, on Fremont. He headed there through another empty lot beside yet another abandoned building, scanning left and right, and saw a dumpster in a halo of garbage behind the boarded-up building. They hadn't found it on him, obviously, whatever they

were after, else why the overturned garbage can at the edge of the lot where they caught up with Alf? Why the skimmed dumpster?

*Guy's got your pitcher, got you on a hit list, right?* At the time skeptical. *He's got a pitcher of Mr. Johnson.* The memory caught him off guard. He stopped, wanted to yell, maybe punch a wall, but didn't.

Down another alley toward Fremont, this end of it like a post-apocalyptic city, no one but him on the sidewalk, no traffic in the street, an all-night sawdust joint aglow but no cars in its narrow parking strip. A public litter bin tipped over at the corner of Fremont and 8th, but tipped over facing north, up 8th. Remly turned up 8th. At the corner of Olsen he hesitated and looked west toward La Fontaine at the far end of the Fremont Street Experience. This would have been a long run for Alf and his chasers. Alf wouldn't have gone through the Experience, even at this time of morning. Security would have stopped him, a running man, giving the hitters time to get arm's length from him. North, then, to Olsen. And east to 8th.

Remly turned west on Olsen, another tipped wire litter bin and a pawn shop with a window banner that promised FULL VALUE LOANS, EASY REPAY. 'And no questions asked,' Remly added. Beside the shop a narrow alley, no more than a walkway, but down it a garbage can, upright, and beyond the can a litter of cardboard cartons that seemed to be climbing a block wall. He went to the garbage can as though drawn by a promise of redemption ... if only he could find Alf's holy grail.

Remly tipped the can and squatted to poke through its spilled contents, thinking, 'I should have brought gloves.' But who could have predicted? And a mental note: 'Buy a couple boxes of disposables. One in the pickup, one for the house.'

*"Hey!"*

Remly rose abruptly to a defensive crouch, his hand flying to his Galco kidney holster, then relaxed. Rising from the rubble of cardboard boxes, up on one elbow, a ragged man.

Again, *"Hey!"* the derelict now aiming a palsied finter at the unrewarding trash around Remly's feet. *"Bon appetit!"*

Remly walked back to the sidewalk.

*"Hey! Hey—we reserve the right to serve refuse to anyone!"*

Laughter and a fit of coughing followed him as he turned to walk west again on Olsen. At the end of the block there was a wire litter bin that hadn't been tipped. 'Bingo!' he thought as he dipped into it, smelling scotch whiskey, the *bingo* a plastic WalMart shopping bag, dripping, half torn in a nest of bottle shards, Usher's Green Stripe. And cuddling next to the broken whiskey bottle a soaked-through Marlboro carton, ripped open, and three damp packs of cigarettes. Nothing in the litter bin to have broken



the bottle, though. He raised his eyes to the security-shuttered thrift shop, looking down the wall to a light splash mark elbow high about two of his body-lengths away.

Reconstructing it Remly saw Alf running, smashing his WalMart bag against the wall to break the bottle, dumping the bag in the wire bin. Giving them something. Slowing them down. Remly wondered if there had been more Marlboros in the bin, rescued by Alf's pursuers. But Alf had something else as well, something that made them go dumpster-diving after they shot him.

Remly took the broken bits held together by the Usher's label, along with the carton and three packs of cigarettes, rolling them in the torn WalMart bag, started again down Olsen toward the Fremont Street Experience. But between the *bingo* litter bin and La Fontaine there was nothing. One more tipped can, nothing. He returned, slowly, thinking.

*No fixed address.*

Pushing up his glasses, retracing his steps, passing the *bingo* litter basket, he looked right and left as though he was trying to create a parking spot through force of will. *Where Metro ain't.* And there it was, on the other side of Olsen, on the corner, its entrance on the cross-street, \$5.00-A-DAY \* 24-HR SECURITY CAMERAS. And backed up to the concrete pylons and heavy chain of the parking lot a small, weather-worn Toyota pickup with an oversized camper that listed sadly to the right.

When he returned in his own pickup, parking at the far end of the block, Remly pulled on the soft canvas hat he kept ready on the seat, a concession to the Las Vegas sun, and pocketed the small flashlight, a screwdriver, and pliers from the hang-on pouch on the seat. At the parking lot he pulled the hat low over his eyes and kept his gaze downward, so he wasn't a face to the cameras but only a body with a hat as he stepped over the chain and alongside the Toyota.

'He wouldn't have gone inside, they were on him. Even after the diversion, he wouldn't have had enough time.' Remly dropped to his hands and did a reverse push-up, slowly lowering his stomach to the asphalt. In the dim light of his small flashlight a plastic WalMart bag bulged under the Toyota's driveshaft. He pulled it to him, stood, and without looking into the bag jimmied the screwdriver into the camper's aluminum door, at the latch. Remly hesitated. Alarm? He looked up and down the block, wondering how quickly this ghost-town street would come to life. 'Go for it!' Twisting and levering the screwdriver. The thin door opened without trouble and he was quickly inside—the door closed behind him—spreading the shopping bag to consider his newly-acquired treasure.

“Le patriotisme est une espèce de religion;  
c’est l’oeuf d’où vont éclore les guerres.”

(Patriotism is a species of religion; it is the  
egg from which wars are hatched.)

Guy de Maupassant

SUMMER 2004 . . .

. . . L I S B O N

What Ashor had asked for—in general terms and in seeming innocence—was any recently published opinion poll regarding America’s enthusiasm for the war in Iraq, particularly about the public’s continuing support in the event of further and greater violence. He was naturally anxious about security there, he confessed, and especially worried as regarded the safety of his charity trucks, one of which had recently gone missing after delivering grain and cooking oil to a village outside of Khānaqin. And in the event that he opened an office in Baghdad, with the idea of spending time there, he was concerned for his safety and the security of his family and entourage. As it was currently constituted, the government in Baghdad had neither the cohesion nor the muscle to suppress the country’s broad range of violence without U.S. forces on the ground.

He asked, “How strong is America’s will to stay the course? Have there been any public opinion polls recently? Anything to support increased American troop levels if, God forbid, the violence gets even worse?” Or would there be a public outcry for disengagement if some Iraq-related crisis reared its head?

Daphne and Garrett responded much as Ashor predicted. Daphne—at heart a publicist, playing to her client—got back to Ashor that same day, saying she’d downloaded an opinion poll from the *International Herald Trib.* Told of Daphne’s find, the stout newspaperman said he’d seen the poll and he thought it was okay for wrapping fish.

Garrett was a journalist and whatever his other faults a good one, skepticism and a refusal to ride the obvious his most significant traits. And it was this instinct in Garrett—this drive to dig and probe—that Ashor was counting on; that and the competitive rancor between journalist and press agent.

After dismissing the poll that Daphne had found, Garrett asked, “So how much more violence you want?” Ashor laughed—not entirely because it was a laugh that Garrett had been playing for, but in greater part because Garrett had taken the bait and would be volunteering answers to questions

that Ashor couldn't have openly asked. Garrett went on, "What kind of uptick in violence. And where?"

Repressing another laugh Ashor said, "Why, Garrett, I hadn't actually thought it through as completely as you have. I—well—I suppose it could be any kind of uptick you care to imagine, as long as it specifically related to Iraq. And in any place where it would test the American public's will to keep U.S. troops in Iraq."

"Gloves off, boss?"

"I'm not exactly sure what you mean," Ashor said, though in fact he couldn't have been more sure.

"You want to know *all* the risk factors, Uncle Sammy's commitment to sticking it out? Keeping up the security in Iraq?"

"Well, of course, Garrett."

"Everything's on the table then—gloves off—right?" Garrett repeated. "Every possible scenario."

"Yes, every kind of 'scenario' as you put it."

"That's a pretty broad palette, boss," Garrett said. "Good chance you ain't going to like the answers, I start digging up dirt."

"I trust your instincts to get to the bottom of things, Garrett, no matter whose toes you step on."

"Daphne got anything besides that survey she downloaded?"

"That seems to be it," Ashor admitted.

Ashor rang off, leaving unsaid his understanding that it would be Daphne's toes, more than anyone's, that Garrett wanted to step on. It was in Garrett's blood, the instincts of a newspaperman riding roughshod over a publicist.

One hour and twenty-eight minutes later Garrett called again. "I'm going to need twelve thousand, five hundred dollars American."

Ashor asked, "May I ask what it's for, Garrett?"

"You don't want to know," Garrett said. "I need it in cash; I have to get down to my bank and make a wire transfer. We want to keep your bank out of the loop."

"Come on over, then. I'll have it for you in fifties."

Later still, Garrett called again. "It's a done deal, boss." And if Ashor was curious about what sort of deal had been done, he was confident the money hadn't been wasted by the fat reporter. Muttering darkly about "military short-sheeting" and "the gorilla in the corner," Garrett said he'd need at least another day, maybe a couple of days, to continue digging.

Ashor got back to Daphne on the comm-line to say he was delighted by

her promptness but that they should wait for another day or two and consider her downloaded survey and Garrett's material at the same time.

Two days later, as Ashor was rising from his cleared desk following a conference with Nasirpal, the intercom buzzed. Ashor eased back in his chair and lifted the phone.

"Yes, Garrett?"

"*Jackpot!* Got a minute? I'll go grab Daphers."

"In thirty minutes," Ashor replied. "I still have to clear a few things from my desk." Hanging up, he opened the desk's bottom drawer and brought out the materials that Nasirpal had collected from the internet over the last two weeks—studies of the campus riots and street demonstrations of the Vietnam War era, the U.S. Selective Service System, and current military recruiting issues in the States.

Ashor's impromptu offices were in a suite across the hall from the rooms he and Talia had taken at the Lisboa Do Rei—what had been the sitting room now furnished with a large round conference table, a coronet of chairs circling it.

Daphne opened the discussion with the article she'd downloaded from the *International Herald Tribune*—an opinion poll regarding American attitudes toward the continuing war in Iraq, as the U.S. presidential election campaign was heating up. The survey had been taken by Stansfield Psychometrics, a Washington polling service.

Garrett had gained more weight in the five months since he'd moved from Maastricht, and had adopted the Portuguese style of loose shirts with neither necktie nor jacket. He slouched comfortably in a chair at the round conference table, radiating skepticism. "It's the bunk, kid," he said to Daphne without a glance at the opinion survey. "No consideration of Pentagon short-sheeting. Doesn't see the hairy gorilla in the corner, grinning and scratching his cojones. Someone's pulling your string."

Unprepared that the large newspaperman would question his former meal ticket, Daphne said, "It's all there in black and white, Garrett." She pointed at the vivid 4-color graph from the article, which she'd printed with her ink-jet. "And ROP color. Fifty-four percent of the American public think the invasion of Iraq was a mistake, but sixty-three percent think American troops should stay the course in Iraq. Are you denying the *Herald Trib*?"

"Bushwah," Garrett said. "First off, it ain't the *Trib*'s poll. Second, they're only publishing Stansfield's face page—the short-list results. Where's the details?" He opened his black catalogue case and retrieved three identical

stapled reports.

“*Garr-rrett*,” Daphne said. “It doesn’t *need* details. Read the article, it says ...”

“Says it’s a statistically balanced cross-section,” Garrett interrupted as he handed the stapled sheaves of paper to Ashor and Daphne. “Sampling of public opinion balanced to political, socio-economic, and cultural blah blah blah. Here’s the original poll, straight from Stansfield Psychometrics.”

In bruised tones Daphne asked, “Where did you get this?” She was reading the face page.

With a casual wink to Ashor, unseen by Daphne, Garrett said, “Confidential sources, shield law pertains and so forth. Only two results were released by the honeys who sponsored the survey: ‘Invasion a good idea or not?’ And ‘Stay the course in Iraq or not?’ But no details. And no mention of the boys who paid for the poll.” He opened his own copy of the survey to the end. “Page one-thirty-seven, names of the survey’s sponsors. Century for American Leadership, and the American Initiative Center. Ring a bell?”

Daphne, who had been furiously trying to wedge a few words into Garrett’s comments, sat back, not stunned, perhaps, but obviously brought up short. “They’re the ones ... they’ve been lobbying to invade Iraq since the end of the Gulf War.”

Ashor turned to study Garrett’s response, but the overstuffed newsman seemed not to have heard Daphne. Garrett said, “There’s a lot of little refinements in Stansfield’s poll that Leadership and Initiative didn’t share with the *International Trib*. Like ... support to stay the course in Iraq? *What* support? Who *are* Stansfield’s ‘stay the course’ respondents? Talk is cheap, and ‘stay the course’ doesn’t stand up to a reality check. So go to page sixty-four, notes, respondent profiles. Respondents as—I love this—as ‘non-volunteers.’ Since the insurgency in Iraq, Army recruitment is at an all-time low. The reservists and National Guard over there are facing extended tours, because the Army isn’t rotating them out as promised ‘cause they need those boots ...”

“*Garr-rrett*,” Daphne interrupted, now getting her second wind, “that’s not what Ashor ...”

“... those boots on the ground,” Garrett said, rolling over Daphne. “‘Non-volunteers.’ So where’s the *real* support for this war, when the mil is short-sheeting itself to just maintain its current troop levels? Take a look at the next page, about the big signing bonuses the Army’s offering. Look at the guys they’re taking in—high school dropouts. Guys with medical problems, criminal sheets, guys who tank on the entrance exams. And so the

Army's lowered the test qualification, just to get in the guys who flunk the exams. So if there are all these 'stay the course' people out there, how come they're not breaking down the doors at the recruiting centers? Stansfield's people make a big point of this ... near near-zero level of respondent enthusiasm to join up."

As though a string connected the two, Garrett settled back in his chair and Daphne leaned forward eagerly to say, "That's not fair, Garrett. Ashor asked about *public* support. *General* support." She tapped the survey she'd brought, as though hoping to wake it up. "This poll deals with the public's general *political* support of the policy to stay in Iraq. *Not* their desire to go over and do the fighting themselves."

Shifting a bit in the chair in search of its sweet spot, Garrett said almost absently, "Page twenty-seven, response to elevated violence in Iraq. Then pages twenty-eight and twenty-nine, response to attacks overseas by Iraqi terrorists, and to another attack here in the states by same. With nice color graphs."

Daphne had already opened her copy and had turned to the page with color graphs, was scanning the text. "Wrong again, Garrett!" Daphne said, folding back the pages to hold up the color bar graphs for Ashor to see. "Look, Ashor."

Ashor turned to the page in his own copy of the opinion poll. It was titled, "Increased Violence, General, Against American Troops in Iraq." As with "stay the course," the median response to elevated violence was in the mid-sixties.

"Next page," Garrett said. He was looking for something in his case, his hand emerging from it with a chocolate energy bar. While Daphne and Ashor turned the page, Garrett chewed reflectively.

"Attacks against American offshore interests," Daphne read. "This doesn't pertain, Garrett."

Yet, Ashor noted that the full title of this part of the survey referred to hypothetical attacks by Iraq-based or Iraq-motivated groups.

"Next page," Garrett said, then licked at the corner of his mouth to capture a rogue bit of peanut. "Public response, if an attack on U.S. soil."

"Ninety-six percent to retaliate!" Daphne nearly shouted it, again holding her copy of the poll for Ashor to see as she tapped the page.

"Read the details," Garrett said, as though Daphne hadn't spoken, and sat up to flip his own copy to the given page. After looking up to see that Ashor had done the same he continued, "This is an Iraq-specific study, front to back—check the face page. The title. What they asked was, what if there was an attack Stateside by some anti-American group from Iraq."

Daphne said, “And the support goes almost through the roof!” She turned triumphantly to Ashor. “You see?”

“Ask yourself what happens, there’s another nine-eleven, John Q. Public wants to send in the Marines—and the Army *and* the Navy.” With this Garrett reached across the table, as though to pat Daphne’s hand. “Where do the soldiers come from—dragons’ teeth? There’s no recruits to be had, kid. Nobody wants to fill those boots on the ground ... and empty boots don’t kick no ass.”

Daphne drew back. “I don’t believe it.”

Garrett said, “DOD has already done a ten percent drawdown of troops in South Korea to pad out the guys in Iraq. Also—*very* doubtful the brass hats would downsize other bases around the world, just to build up security in Iraq. They’ve got vested interests—whole fiefdoms at the Pentagon that are built on overseas military bases. And let’s go back to the reality that everyone who *was* going to enlist after nine-eleven already *has* enlisted.” He leaned down to bring three more reports from his case, these much heavier than the first set. “Now let’s wake up the gorilla in the corner.” He passed one each to Ashor and Daphne.

“I don’t believe it,” Daphne said again, looking to Ashor for reassurance. “There must be *something*.”

“Yup,” Garrett said. “It’s called ‘Selective Service.’” He handed around the reports, black binders that read, *SELECTIVE SERVICE - Possible Need, Probable Response*. Garrett continued, “You want irony? This is the Pentagon’s own study.” It was stamped *CONFIDENTIAL - NO DIS - RESTRICTED HANDLING*, and dated *05 OCT 2001*. “Two days before the Afghan campaign, that’s the *distribution* date. I’m guessing they contracted it almost immediately after nine-eleven.”

Again, Daphne asked, “Where did you *get* this?” She seemed unsure whether to attack Garrett or the Pentagon report in front of her.

“Ask me no questions, I’ll sell you no spies.” Garrett turned to Ashor. “Familiar with Selective Service?”

“I was just a young captain when America discontinued it,” Ashor said.

“Selective Service was never discontinued,” Garrett said. “It was the military *draft* that got stopped.”

“Oh, really?” Ashor said, quite innocently.

“Really. Twenty-seventh of January, year of our Lord nineteen and seventy-three. United States Secretary of Defense announces the end of the draft three days after the war officially ends in Vietnam. That point on, no president has to look to the American public for cannon fodder, he feels like beating the stuffings out of some little punk nation. After that, he’s got

his own salaried army, down to the most humble grunt.”

“I’m not sure I see the difference,” Ashor said, though he knew with certainty what was to follow.

Garrett said, “Selective Service is still there, Ashor. Every American man, eighteen- through twenty-five-year-olds ... they’re all registered. But what the mil has, they’ve got this big pool of possible draftees—but no way of actually *drafting* them until Congress passes conscription legislation and the President signs it. So, DOD is already worried about the numbers two years ago. And they run this study,” he tapped the bound pages, “see what will happen, guys start getting drafted again. Now, you gotta realize, this is after maybe thirty years no one’s getting conscripted into military service. Even during Vietnam, these draft protesters had a long history of thinking it was what you did ... put in a couple years active duty, maybe join the Reserves instead. Now? Now you’ve got guys who think it’s unfair they have to leave school to earn a living in *civilian* life. So what do you think the reaction would be to a reconstituted draft?” He patted the Pentagon report. “It’s all in here.”

With this Garrett opened to the middle of the report, and turned it around to show the page to Ashor and Daphne.

Ashor, after a glance at Garrett’s copy, opened his own and turned to the same page, while Daphne—fascinated—read phrases from it aloud: “Anti-draft riots ... college campuses aflame ... street demonstrations ... major violence against government installations.”

“And this report is valid today?” Ashor tapped the bound papers. “It’s dated two years ago.”

“And that was when enlistment levels were at an all-time high in the post-nine-eleven period—*before* those recruits started getting blown up by suicide bombers in Iraq.” Garrett leaned back once more in his chair, pressing his fingertips into his stomach as though asking if it could hold out another few minutes until dinner. “Men under fifty, fifty-one, they’ve never served as draftees. Ask yourself what happened during Vietnam—the protests, the violence—over a hundred thousand guys going for sanctuary in Canada and Europe. So, imagine what it’s gonna be like for guys who haven’t faced military conscription in two generations. You want the truth? I think the mil underestimates it. I think the whole country would go up in flames, they tried to bring back the draft. Sure ‘n hell they’d scream for a pullout from Iraq, anyone tried to draft kids to go there and get shot up.”

Now Garrett offered Ashor a beatific grin. “And that’s only the half of it. This is an election year. You think anyone on the Hill or at Sixteen Hundred is gonna start up the draft, there’s a big scream to retaliate against



anything?”

“And there seems to be no other way of getting a significant build-up of U.S. troops in Iraq?” asked Ashor.

“You’re a military leader, Ashor. Where would *you* go for reinforcements, given the circumstances?”

“This doesn’t look at all promising.” Ashor shook his head, a bitter gesture. “Not good at all. Let’s pray there’s no crisis, not while Iraq is so dependent on America for its security.”

And though Ashor had never doubted his original assumption, it was gratifying to see his ideas borne out with facts and figures—particularly from such an authority as the United States Department of Defense.

“The meek shall inherit the earth,  
but not the mineral rights.”

J. Paul Getty

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . A L—B A S R A H

In the north and in the south were the capital cities of empires that were to prevail into eternity. As the centuries passed certain empires of the north prevailed over various empires in the south, and certain empires of the south prevailed over the various ones in the north, and eventually the great empires of the north and south were prevailed over by newer and more powerful empires of the east and of the west, which were in turn displaced by nomads of the desert; and in time the ancient eternal capitals went to rubble and were covered over by rich, loamy earth in the north and by the sands of the expanding deserts in the south.

Today in the south, in the desert below and to the west of the marshlands, are the oil fields of al-Basrah Province, a forest of derricks surrounded by pumps that bob like mechanical donkeys, the counterweighted pump arms teeter-tottering endlessly up and down, up and down, sucking light crude from the earth and pushing the sluggish liquid along massive pipes to the port of al-Faw at the Gulf, where Greek and Liberian tankers wait, empty and riding high in the water.

Early on in the war the oil fields and their network of support systems were heavily guarded, yet as naked and vulnerable as new-hatched sparrows. The fields were patrolled by British soldiers, mercenary contractors, and recruits of the Interim Government’s occasionally-steadfast army and sometimes-loyal national police. But it is always the enormous pipes—the oil lines—that are at greatest risk; thousands of kilometers of oil lines north and south and no effective way of protecting every meter of them by road.

Mad-dog Davey Mountolive arrived in the first months of the war, bringing three Piper Aztecs, a Beech Baron, and a private security contract over Jack Straw’s signature. He commandeered a 12-hectare plot of land immediately west of the al-Zubayr oil field and had rudimentary air strips rolled out and Nissen huts quickly thrown up for offices and on-site living.

By Ramadan the need for aerial recon had become so intense that Mad-dog Davey was more often away from his office than in it, purchasing and leasing more and more aircraft, outfitting them with Qualcomm digital communications and tracking systems. Next year, on the anniversary of their

arrival, Mountolive Offshore had a fleet of thirty-eight aircraft from constructors in five different nations.

The matériel was easily come by, the personnel not so easy by half. Ground crew could be had through classifieds in the aviation press, but air crew were scarce indeed, and growing scarcer as the war became a continuing grind of sabotage and suicide assaults. The good pilots wanted more than he could afford—or would not fly in Iraq for any amount—and the flyers who mobbed his classifieds were men he would not hire to clean the compound's toilets.

It was the unexpected appearance of Colonel Badi Hanif al-Mushaf, Iraq AF (ret), at the outer outer gate that solved Mad-dog's flight crew problems.

Dressed in a khaki rollneck sweater, deck shoes, and neatly-pressed jeans that were exactly one size too large, Colonel al-Mushaf put a brown-bag package on the trolley under the outer-outer gate's X-ray. After scanning the taped-up bag, the boys reeled it in. At the cage of the outer gate the dogs sniffed at the package, but quickly ignored it. One of the boys slit the package and unwrapped it carefully while the others kept their FN-FAL rifles trained on the stranger at the outer-outer gate.

The opened package arrived quickly at Mad-dog's desk. He took a brief look at the cap and shoulderboards of an Iraqi Air Force colonel and inter-commed the boys: "Look okay to you?"

"Looks straight, Davey."

"Send 'im through. But 'aiy—pat 'im down first, eh?"

"Don't we always?"

A slim, erect Arab in his middle forties appeared in Davey's office door.

"You are David of the Mountolive, yes?" the slim man said.

Mad-dog smiled big and raised his hand in a casual salute. He'd shaved his fierce Mongol mustache and programmed himself to smile at the locals. It was not in his nature to smile but it was bad form here to seem superior or distrusting.

"I am Badi Hanif al-Mushaf, the colonel recently retired from the Iraqi Air Force ... also recently retired."

Davey smiled again, now without effort and showing his teeth.

"How many of the good men do you need?" Colonel al-Mushaf asked. "Fifty? Hundred? Hundred plus fifty?"

"The good men?"

"To fly your many aircraft. Besides myself I can quickly supply you with up perhaps to maybe thirty, fifty good, reliable pilots and others of the air

crew. If you will give to me the time, I perhaps can find thirty more of the ground crew personnels. I only will offer the crews of honor that I can vouch for. The men of which I have flown with or know other wise to be honorable.”

“And who vouches for you?” Davey asked.

“Captain Sir Alexander Frazier of the Englishmen in Basrah. Also the Englishmen Daniel McElhattan and Dale Sprague of the British High Commission of al-Basrah.”

“Let’s see about that.” Davey flipped open his index of contact cards and reached for the phone. “Let’s us just see, ‘aiy?”

For Mad-dog Davey Mountolive, Badi Hanif al-Mushaf, Colonel recently retired, was a gift from mercenary heaven. The air crew the colonel provided were everything he promised and more than Davey had hoped for. Some were ex-mil like al-Mushaf, others were small-time commercial fliers—crop dusters, oil-field puddle jumpers, charter pilots. Davey’s kind of fliers, without imagination, by which Davey meant they were not inclined to fly upside-down under bridges which was Davey’s overarching criterion for pilots. They were checked out in a variety of aircraft, they kept regular hours, showed up on time, left on time, and took nothing away from the compound but their generous paychecks. And unlike the unskilled help, there was never a hint that they were working for the other side.

Among the Iraqi colonel’s best recruits was al-Tayyib Rasmi Abu-Habil, a quiet, educated man of just thirty-two years—a school teacher and crop duster from a small farming village in the north near the Syrian border. His eyes were hazel and his hair dark brown, unlike the other Iraqis Davey knew, who had deep brown eyes and black hair. Among the other air crew al-Tayyib Abu-Habil became known as “the Blond.”

Leila Hosnani, Davey’s Coptic assistant, vetted all personnel continually, rolling their files over one after the other and starting again at the beginning when she came to the end, only placing the questionables on Davey’s desk, while returning the safe-and-reasonably-secures to her file cabinet.

Tayyib’s file never saw Davey’s desk.

Leila Hosnani’s ferrets in the air-crew Nissen hut spoke occasionally to Tayyib, learning that Saddam had killed off most of the other educated men in Tayyib’s clan by the year 2000: Tayyib’s brothers and cousins who had gone to Baghdad to advance themselves and had spoken too openly. At present Tayyib had only his family in his home village—wife, parents, seven children, along with brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins; a typical family in the countryside of clan-dominated Iraq. Tayyib hated the

Ba'athists with a dead cold passion, and had no stomach whatsoever for religion, whether Islam or anything else.

Tayyib took leave only once a month, five days to visit his family in a small desert hamlet on the bank of the Euphrates. Aside from his home visits, Tayyib seemed to live only to fly. As Leila Hosnani understood it, Tayyib slept in a small aluminum caravan parked within the British protective zone around Basrah.

Besides being licensed for single- and twin-engine piston aircraft, Tayyib was also certified to maintain and repair. And he kept his own aircraft in superb shape, even washing it when the regular crew was over-tasked. His plane was a Russian Antonov An-2 biplane from the Soviet era, a good solid workhorse with small paste-on canvas patches along the sides where Tayyib had covered the bullet holes from ground fire.

Today it was a milk run; the Wadi al-Batin oil line along the old UNIKOM line<sup>1</sup> at the Kuwait border. A good day, visibility to the horizon in all directions, off to the left the Gulf shimmering like a mirage. Ahead the Kingdom of the Saudis. Below, the land of nomadic herders. To the right the desert and the village of al-Abaqizid.

"Nice day for flying," his co-pilot Da'ud shouted over the roar of the huge radial engine. "Wish God had given us a gazelle instead of this buffalo."

"Be nice." Tayyib, shouting. Patting the instrument panel. "Baby here will go on forever. Those gazelles are for women. Children fly them."

"The big Cessnas? The big Beeches?"

"All of them—for women." He patted the dash again, shouting. "Antonov biplane. Biggest single-engine bi- ever built. A plane for real men."

"They should pay us extra then, God willing. I have to put my feet on the instrument panel to turn this flying boulder. This stone in the sky. This dead camel, God is my witness."

"You want extra pay," Tayyib shouted, "go fly in the north. They pay double up there." In the hazard zone.

"You crazy? Last five, six months, pipelines blowing up all over the place up there. Spotters like us shot down every day. Ever since the Yank Bremer runs away. Keeps getting worse. And Allawi's guy, poor Saleem, car bomb, God be with him."

Tayyib shouted, "That was before the Bremer ran away. CPA was still

<sup>1</sup>UNIKOM line - United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission. Mission and line were established Apr 1991, (ended 30 Oct 2003) to monitor the demilitarized zone along the Iraq-Kuwait border.

here, then.”

“Gets even worse after they catch Saddam. Everyone joining the patriotic resistance, praise God. Great heroes.”

“Careful how you talk,” Tayyib shouted. “There’s some in the dorm would turn you in, talking like that about the resistance.”

“Not you,” Da’ud shouted back. “You’re a good guy, God be thanked.”

“Some good guys would cut your throat for enough money.”

“Not you. After the Yanks bomb out that wedding party in your village? Not you. They still denying it? Still saying the wedding singer was a resistance fighter? Saying the fat little musician was hiding a bomb in his little electric organ?”

Tayyib was silent. Studying the road below and ahead. Looking for the trucks.

Da’ud persisted, “That was back in May. Little village, Makr al-Deeb, right? Up near Al-Qa’im? Forty people killed, women, kids, old folks, may they all be with God. Yanks still say they were terrorists? You never talk about it. You lose anyone in that bombing? In the strafing after, Yank planes machine-gunning the running women?”

“Concentrate on your spotting, Da’ud,” Tayyib shouted. “You can’t monitor the pipeline staring at me like that, okay?” And there they were. Two Toyota pickups, parked by the side of the oil-line road. Tayyib unsnapped the thumb-break on his shoulder holster.

“Look,” Da’ud shouted, pointing at the trucks on the road beyond.

Da’ud lifted the microphone from its hanger on the radio while Tayyib kept his left hand steady on the yoke and in a swift, sweeping motion with his right pulled the .380 Beretta from his shoulder holster and put the muzzle to Da’ud’s ear and pulled the trigger twice, spraying Da’ud’s blood and brain tissue across the right window, Da’ud limp, slumping forward against his harness.

Tayyib took the mike from Da’ud’s lap and thumbed it on.

“Mad-dog One this is Little Brother Two-Four-A-One do you read?” Tayyib shouted into the mike.

“Loudandclear Li’l Bro.”

“I have a sick boy here Em-Dee-One. Da’ud looks like he is going to vomit all over my nice clean instrument panel. I am putting down on the line road at Wadi al-Batin about twenty clicks down from A’sh Bayat. Do you read?”

“Loudandclear. Road okay? You need backup?”

“He’ll be okay,” Tayyib shouted, “the road is fine. I have Pepto Bismol. I’ll have it airborne again, maybe an hour. Do you read?”

“Loud and clear keep me posted okay?”

“Will do out.”

The wind was not right. It was northerly. Coming in from this angle the An-2 needed something south-westerly. He altered his approach by making a big roundhouse loop, coming in at the road from the opposite direction and adjusting the An-2's attitude just slightly to compensate for the wind, his initial approach only 65 knots and flaps at 40, with 14 degrees of aileron drop.

He came in at 30 feet and 60 knots where the road dipped, and flared at 35 knots as the road went level again. The huge bi-plane settled onto the tarmac, bouncing only slightly as the tires touched down. The rollout as he had predicted, stopping only 20 meters short of the curve in the road where the two Toyota pickups were parked. Four men waiting beside the trucks. Tayyib pulled the kill key and unbuckled his harness.

Fathi Abdul-Muqtadir came trotting to him, one other followed, also trotting, though not so quickly; Fathi and the one following in pants and shirts and baseball caps. The other two in dishdashas and red-and-white houndstooth kaffiyehs. Getting into the two Toyota pickups. As Fathi got near, the two pickup trucks started toward the An-2, driving backwards rather than turning around.

Tayyib opened the door.

“Ya, Tayyib,” Fathi said, puffing as he approached. “God is great.”

“Sure,” Tayyib said. “Who flies?”

“I found a good man,” Fathi said, stopping at the open doorway and sucking wind. “I could not find one who knows how to take off or land, but he is skilled in the flying once it is airborne.”

“Oh, great. Parafoil?” Tayyib handed down a stepladder.

“I bought the exact one you specified.” Fathi took the ladder. “Jalbert base jumper.”

Tayyib climbed from the plane as they spoke. “How many men go with me to this place, this Las Vegas? Are they here?”

“No, not here,” Fathi said. “Three more. I pick them up later. They go with you by fishing boat to Abu Dhabi. I have air tickets for you out of AUH, to meet the Russian in Odessa.”

“What is the name of the Russian? Who does he work for?”

“I don't know his boss. Used to be a bigwig Russian colonel. First-class operation. Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow—the Russian Mukhabarat. *They* work for *us*, though. Orders come from *our* side, not the colonel's.”

“Name? Description?”

“It's all code. I'll tell you after you've gotten this thing in the air again.

Parafoil out, we pick you up, I'll tell you then."

On the stepladder, Tayyib had the engine fairing unscrewed. This was the delicate part—disabling the Qualcomm geo-tracking unit without setting off the alarm, and without disturbing the ignition and avionics. He had seven sets of wire bridges with alligator clips, and over the past three months he had drawn an elaborate spider-web of modifications over the schematic of the An-24's works manual, showing all the necessary bridging points.

Fathi looked up at the splattered window. "You could not induce Da'ud to join the plan?"

"Da'ud was a man with a future," Tayyib said. "What could I offer? He spoke no English—he had no desire to die in Kuwait, useless to me in the United States." Then, looking sharply at Fathi, "These other three that I meet. Do they speak English?"

"Oh yes," Fathi said, as the other man arrived. "They speak it absolutely."

The men in dishdashas stopped their trucks. The one in pants and shirt stood puffing behind Fathi. The two men in dishdashas pulled a hand-truck from one of the Toyotas and began loading it with flat, one-kilo packages in brown oilpaper from the bed of the other truck.

"God is great," "God is great," the two called out; a fugal chorus.

"Sure," Tayyib said.

One asked, "Where do you want the Semtex?"

"How is it detonated?"

"Cell-phone primary detonator, with cell-phone secondary. Impact detonator for failsafe."

"Who makes the call?"

"We have a man in place in Kuwait City," Fathi said. "Perfect spot, he sees the Hotel Executive Diplomat perfectly."

Waving at the Semtex packages Tayyib spoke to the two men at the Toyotas: "Anywhere inside will do—buckle them down on the cargo benches. There are straps all over them. The kerosene jerrycans go equally along the floor. Straps there, too. Balance the weight, okay?"

The one in the cap stood at the foot of the stepladder, puffing, looking up like a fresh puppy about to piddle with excitement. "God is great," he said.

"Sure," Tayyib said.

"I am Abdul-Baqi, the shaheed" the man in the cap said.

"Swell. Let me work, okay?"

"I am the pilot."

"Sure you are."



“I can fly okay, once it is in the air.”

“I am trying to work, please.”

“I have many questions about approach to Kuwait City.”

“I have to concentrate on this, or I am going to make a complete botch of it please.”

“Yes, of course, okay. On the way to Kuwait City, please explain to me how do we ...”

“Shut up,” Tayyib explained.

The men in dishdashas began loading jerrycans of kerosene into the An-2.

Tayyib carefully scraped at another slim wire with his razorblade and put the alligator clip marked “12” onto the bare copper. Then with the blade between his lips he tightly wrapped black electrical tape around the joint and consulted his schematic and severed the original wire to the left of the joint with a pair of manicure clippers.

“It is ready,” one of the loaders said to Fathi, and both returned to their pickup trucks to listen to Amr Diab singing on Radio Sawa, “Habibi, habibi, habibi ...”

“Another five minutes,” Tayyib said to Fathi and Abdul-Baqi around the razorblade. Then, removing the blade, to Fathi he said, “Have them bring one of those Toyotas here. We will have to tow the airplane back to there, just before the dip,” he pointed, “if I am to take off from here. There’s not enough straight road ahead, and I don’t want to wheel it around and taxi back.”

As Fathi trotted forward to relay the message, Abdul-Baqi radiated pleasure.

“God is great,” he said.

“I imagine so,” Tayyib said. “You keep telling me.”

“I have never seen Kuwait City. Only in the pictures. Only on the television.”

Tayyib said, “You certainly have something to look forward to, don’t you?”

*Down to the felt: The condition of a  
player who has lost all of his chips.*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

“Small *appliances*?” George Granter said to Tim Wilkerson. “How will you keep your eyes open, small appliances?”

They were in the food venue, *Croissants et Fromage*, across from the video poker pit.

Tim Wilkerson said, “It’s not the quarterlies, George, it really isn’t.”

“*Product Accountant*? Tim boy ... you’re a CFO! You’ll zone out over your spreadsheet, *Product Accountant*. Small appliances?”

Wilkerson bit into his sandwich—it was the Rat Pack Special, roast beef French-dipped on a hard roll with extra peppers on the side—and avoided George Granter’s eyes. Looking at the empty tables around them he said, “It’s not the quarterlies, it’s the family. Susan’s going crazy here.”

A classic ploy, end the romance over lunch, Granter wondered how many times he’d done it. Two marriages, a dozen affairs—more? And now Tim was doing it to him, breaking the news over sandwiches and beer.

Granter said, “Timmy, c’mon, get real. You’re going to trade the Vegas good life for shoveling snow?” In his own sandwich there was a single bite, following which his appetite had gone somewhere south of Boulder City.

Wilkerson at last returned his look and appeared fully sincere when he said, “George, I couldn’t be more positive or optimistic about the property’s future. Nothing is going to stop you, really. You never cease to amaze me.”

“But, Timmy, my God, toasters? Fucking *waffle* irons?”

Tim Wilkerson said, “It’s Sears, George. *Sears*.”

“What did you pay for your house here? Five hundred? And it’s worth a million-two now? And what’ll you pay in Chicago for a comparable? Three mill? Tim-boy, get real.”

“I’m sure you’re going to turn the property around, George. Your new marketing idea? The romance of Old Vegas, the classic lounge acts—getting crossover between the old players and the young retro crowd? It’s a natural. A killer idea, George.”

“What’s it going to take, Timmy? Just give me a bottom line.”

“It’s not money—not the property, George. I know you’re going to turn it around, you get the new marketing posture on line.”

“Fifty K bump?”

“Sue’s brother has a little sloop—Belmont Harbor? We go back and he takes us sailing, the kids ask, ‘Can we stay this time?’ I mean, I’m not talking Lake Mead with all those aluminum bass boats, George. Those beer bellies, draped in couturier WalMart. I’m talking Belmont Harbor; white slacks and Topsiders. The Yacht Club. The skyline, Michigan Avenue, the Outer Drive.”

“A hundred K?”

“George ...”

“I mean for the year, not the quarter, a hundred K.”

Wilkerson said, “I would strongly advise against it, George, handing out bonuses with the financials the way they are right now.”

“Tim ...”

“Everything’s going to be okay, I know that, but you don’t want it on record that you’re handing out money to key execs when the financials look like this. The SEC will be all over you like cheap cologne.”

And with that the room went cold and George Granter pushed out from the booth and walked away, saying nothing to Tim Wilkerson or to *Croissant’s* F and B manager, Dick Tompkins, either, Dick saying how happy he was to have the big boss in his room and he hoped George had enjoyed the sandwich.

Had to admit, girl worked harder, faster, better than any of the other girls up in the whale pond—and had to admit, maybe the girl had something, calling the man a zombie. Elvis Dennison wasn’t happy losing Fidelita from the top floor, but it was let her get away from that Russian up there or see her defect to another hotel. And management was getting damn sensitive about that, losing good people. The old saying came to mind ... rats and sinking ships. And just as quickly he killed the idea. Too many years here, too much seniority. Wasn’t no rat; he would ride it out.

Mr. Granter finally did tank, it would be one of the congloms scooped up La Fontaine from the distress sale, add the property to their portfolio. Elvis Dennison with his seniority at one property—with his glowing HR folder—man could lateral nice and easy to another property inside the new corporate family. ‘Please, Mr. Kirkorian,’ Elvis prayed, ‘scoop us off the table, we go tits up. Could do it out a petty cash you’re so cool, way you run your properties.’

The thing about that Russian boy, though—the girl Fidelita had him on the hip, no question. Man had a dead face. Look right through you, no expression, nobody home. Like the devil already had the man’s soul, wasn’t

no-one wanted what was left.

‘Speak a the devil ...’

Elvis running the noonday housekeeping desk, his morning man calling in sick, probably ugly hung-over again, no one else to cover. Unpaid overtime—what it cost when you got the title, wore the necktie. He’d lost two more girls this week, was rewriting the Housekeeping shift schedules at his lobby podium, see who was going to buff the upper floors.

‘... and he appears.’

The Russian boy, dead-faced, going to the elevators, looking straight ahead and walking by Elvis like he was wallpaper.

“Afternoon Mr. Kurskov.”

Nothin. Don’t turn his head, don’t blink, maybe the girl’s got something there.

And here came Mr. Granter, out of the biscuits and cheese cafe, looking like he was fixing to put a sword into someone, heading straight for the elevator lobby.

Elvis watched. Would Mr. G and the Russian explode, they got too close together, like some kind of atomic reaction—“critical mess” they called it? But, no, Mr. Granter smiled big when he saw the Russian. Treated him like he was a human being, instead of a zombie. Elvis thinking, ‘Don’t hurt, you drop a hunk of chips at the baccarat table most every night—way it works in this town.’

George Granter wasn’t sure he had the patience to deal with Kurskov today. Bad enough running the man’s laundry, filling out the IRS forms and slipping around Tim’s accounting office. What he hated was having to deal with him face to face. It was like negotiating with a machine: Kurskov going completely deaf when you talked about anything that wasn’t on his plate.

“Aleks, good seeing you,” he said, pushing both of his hands out to shake the Russian’s limp hand like a fish in a warming mitt. “Everything comfortable for you in your suite? Didn’t know you were back in town, I would have come down personally to greet you.”

It was as though he hadn’t spoken. Kurskov barely waited for him to finish, then pulled his hand back and said, “We have to talk.”

“Everything’s okay? Something I can fix?”

“We have more business to do, you and I. We will walk.”

“I’m sorry, I really can’t just now. I have ...”

“Come and walk. I am going to bring you more business, more money which I know you need.” Kurskov paused, looked at him, and jerked his head toward the distant doors to Fremont Street across the casino floor.

“More money, I will help you fix your problems.”

Granter hesitated, looking at the elevator doors, thinking, ‘Worst you can do, Georgey-boy, is listen and tell him to go pee up a rope.’ He smiled, the big cordial one—the Casino Boss Special—and touched Kurskov’s elbow and with his other hand gestured as though offering the casino to him. “After you, my friend.”

Through the casino without speaking; Granter had learned that with Kurskov there was no such thing as small talk. And into the Fremont Street Experience, chumps in shorts and clashing shirts, fleshy women in halter tops.

Kurskov got right to it, the two of them walking briskly, “I have people, we want to buy a big share of Fontaine.”

“I don’t know if you understand, it doesn’t work like ...”

“We got lots of players in Moscow, in Petrograd, they love Las Vegas. We want to buy a share of this casino, fly our players here, give them a good time. Charter flights, package tours.”

Thinking, *‘A captive market!’* But saying, “Well, it’s a talking point. But you have to understand, there are regulations about who can buy into a Nevada casino. Some real problems there, okay? But I think we can accommodate your packaged tours, fix you up with a nice little rake-off as a finder’s fee.”

“My friends want to invest, to buy,” Kurskov said.

As they turned down Third, the county courthouse a block ahead, a dwarf stepped in front of them. He wore a green top hat and held a tin donations can secured by a keylock. Kurskov reached out to push the man but Granter put an arm out to stop him, feeling the Russian’s power, it took effort.

“Mikey McCoy?” Granter asked.

“Yeah,” the small man said. His voice was deep; Granter wondered if he was compensating. Granter brought out his money clip and peeled off a five, put it into the donation-box slot. “God bless you,” the dwarf said. He handed Granter a large round button with a bright shamrock, and on the shamrock a dark green top hat.

Granter gave the button to Kurskov: “I’ve got twenty or thirty of them, think it’ll bring good luck?”

They walked on. Kurskov took the button and dropped it without looking at it. “My friends put in, it is possible, a maximum of seventeen million USD. We give it to you in odd-amount lumps, it does not bring attention.” He got a pack of Marlboros from his shirt and lit one.

“Seventeen,” Granter said. He could see the numbers in front of him

in bingo-ball figures, seventeen million dollars, there was even a dollar sign in the first bingo ball, he could almost reach out and fondle the numbers. “Any investments in the property, we have to get them cleared by the Gaming Commission. What kind of background check can you and your friends take, do you think?”

The funny thing about this Kurskov was that his expression never changed; he was like a mechanical man reading off a prompter. And he never looked at you, just through you, as though you were standing in front of his prompter and were invisible as well. Exhaling smoke into Granter’s face, he said, “Listen to me, you are not listening. How have you been cleaning my money, the last months from January? I go play baccarat, lose some, win some, go home with money from Fontaine. Now, to invest, I will go to baccarat, lose money, lose more money, Fontaine keeps the money. Can you understand this?”

Thinking ‘Oh shit!’ George Granter said, “Yeah, I’m beginning to get it. Reverse laundering, yeah.” And something inside him broke and began laughing. He was speaking seriously as they hammered out the details, walking by the bail-bond storefronts and then the courthouse itself, but inside the laughter was rolling him back and forth on the floor of his suddenly vivid imagination.

What Kurskov wanted to do wasn’t particularly complicated. He would play multiple hands, maybe have a few associates join him and play. They would lose reasonable amounts per hand per session ... say forty thousand, maybe fifty. After a while it would begin to add up. What Kurskov wanted in return was simple as well. When he flew the Russian tourists in, he wanted 20% of the casino’s winnings from them, Granter would comp them their rooms, food, and beverage.

“I see you are doing new advertising, old pictures of Fontaine, old movie stars, gangsters. Pictures of old cars in front, from the time of the war in Korea, nineteen-fifties.”

“The nostalgia market,” Granter said. “I think it’s a natural, it’s what we can bank on, the property’s classic gangster history.”

“I want pictures of the movie stars, the gangsters, cars in front. The building when it was in framing.” Kurskov smoked as though he was taking nourishment, as though he needed the cigarette to speak.

Granter said, “No problem. We have all the archival shots, big old four-by-five Speed Graphic negatives, starting with the original excavation.”

“And framing. The steel girdles, how it was getting put together.”

“Steel girders, sure, no problem.” He was counting the money, wondering if it was worth talking again to Tim Wilkerson, then thinking, ‘Screw

Tim. Let him freefall.’

“Big pictures, like posters,” Kurskov said. “We show these casino pictures at home, promotional, in Moscow. Petrograd.”

“Great, I love it.”

“American movie stars, American gangsters. Very popular.”

“In Moscow,” Granter said.

“All over Russia. We have chartered planes. Plenty of players.” It was a done deal, obviously, because he turned around without warning and began walking back toward Fremont Street Experience and the casino. “You own mines also. We will buy one of your mines. One in Nye County.”

“Sure, out near Pahrump. You want to buy it?”

“It has an air strip. Buildings look okay too.”

“You’ve been there?”

Kurskov wanted to make a ghost town with a mine. He would fly his tour groups from Russia out to the mine for a few hours of Old West experience, pour more vodka into them, fly them back to town and get them back to the tables again. “Oligarki, you understand,” he said as he dropped his cigarette, not stopping to grind it out.

‘Oligarchs,’ Granter thought. Oligarchs! Without actually saying “yes” he’d already said yes. Granter added that they would have to work out the percentage of who kept how much of the take from the Russians, it was a matter of balancing Kurskov’s investment against the fair market value of the property, and running the numbers off of that.

And the real beauty of it, though neither of them spoke of it directly, was that they didn’t need a contract for the arrangement. Each of them had enough on the other to ruin him through disclosure. It was like mutually assured nuclear destruction of cold war times, and George Granter loved it. It was like being in the pit at Chicago Merc again.

“Only the paranoid survive.”

Andy Grove

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

Charles Remly wasn't fond of walls. When he moved to Las Vegas and watched his house take form in an up-market suburb, he was assaulted by self-styled security salesmen peddling fences, gates, and thick block walls crowned with broken glass. Remly sent them packing.

More than the claustrophobic envelope the walls would create, it was the ostentation of it that gravelled Remly. He had retired from the soft side of the trade, not the black-arts end of it, and other than the occasional busybody there was little to fear from his neighbors. He preferred not to attract attention by turning his home into a fortress; Weaver's sophisticated, underground alarm system in the yard and driveway, he reasoned, was more than enough.

Reason had given way to reality however, and on the strength of a single phone call, and without asking why, Weaver flew in from Portland, Oregon, to supervise the contractor and the stone masons. Before any trenching began for the footing, Weaver re-drafted the contractor's simple blueprints to allow for fiber-optics and co-ax conduit for sensors and cameras, along with the structural rebar.

The contractor's men were outside running string along the surveyor's stakes, Weaver was in the attic running wire for the cameras that would point discreetly out to cover Remly's yards, the neighbors' yards, the streets beyond; fourteen cameras and six multi-split video screens—two screens each in Remly's bedroom, home office, and the kitchen pantry. In the office and bedroom, two more split-image video screens serviced the interior cameras that Weaver would install in the ceiling of each room, pointing down like casino surveillance coverage.

While Weaver toiled in the hot attic, Remly packed an overnight case for his flight to Santa Barbara, pausing now and then to add to the notes in a vinyl-clad folder he'd dedicated to Aleksandr Kurskov. He was wondering if a heavy sweater would be appropriate for California's middle coast at this time of year when Weaver's voice boomed over the new intercom: “Charley, we've got an intruder. Can you see the driveway?”

Through the open curtains Remly saw a white Ford 4-door rolling into the short drive, parking near Weaver's rental van. A bulky man getting out,



no jacket, short-sleeved shirt and ugly necktie, holstered gun on his belt with a badge glinting on the holster. Brisk in his movements despite his size. The Ford with a straw hat dimly visible in the middle of the back window and an EX license plate, the car a plainwrap.

Remly asked, “Where are you?”

“On my way already,” Weaver said.

“Stop him before he gets to the house. I’ll meet you.”

When Remly got to the drive, the bulky man had walked back from his car toward the street and was at the staked string, squinting along its path to the corner of the lot and holding a black ID wallet up for Weaver and Weaver reading something in it.

“Charles R. Remly?” the man said as Remly came up to them. The man’s hair was untamed, gray on the sides and thinning on top.

Remly said, “You’re trespassing.”

“Naw, I’m Morris Berman,” the man said. “Nevada Gaming Control, security division, major crimes.” He handed Remly a business card, then held his black ID wallet up for Remly’s inspection. “Nice string. So, what’s going in here—moat? You plan on breeding piranhas?”

Weaver also had one of the cards, examining it closely as though grading it for spelling.

Remly took the card and only glanced at Morris Berman’s ID wallet. “You’re still trespassing. You have a warrant?”

“Touchy touchy,” the big cop said. “So what’s this gonna be—a wall?”

“I’m busy right now. How about that warrant?”

“Mr. Remly, you’re just a person of interest, I’m not after your ass, okay? Alf Noles, Mr. Remly. He gets whacked, first it looks like a mob job. So my pal Rick Butzek at Metro calls me—off the books between you and me, Gertie—and I ... wait, I gotta go back here a little. Mr. Noles is a bad boy. Small time, but, like, a little maybe bigtime too, you know? In the Black Book ‘cause he’s been popping into slots to screw with the electronics, but not a real major player. Lives in a pickup with a camper shell—which funny coincidence gets tossed about the time Noles is busy getting whacked. Small potatoes, but in the Black Book. Isn’t supposed to go inside even to make weewee, any Nevada casino, okay? Black-booked for life.”

Remly said, “I’m busy.” But still curious. “Maybe some other time?” He snapped the card in his hand. “Can I get you at this number?”

“Small potatoes, but I look at the hit, even the mob hasn’t got guns like this. I mean, Metro forensic can’t get a make on the .22 brass—or the cute little bullets they pull from Mr. Noles. So my guys at Gaming in Carson City send the specs and artwork to the Feds’ lab back in Quantico, and the Feds

think the gun is Czecho, Mr. Remly, because of the caliber. It's not standard .22 caliber, okay? More like 5.54mm. But they're not a hundred percent on that, Czecho, so I contact some friends I've got, E-mail 'em the photos, big enlargements of the recovered bullets and the spent brass. Ask what they think. And guess what: My friends say it's probably Makarov, obsolete USSR model, none of 'em ever exported, okay? Specialty gun, strictly for use by the Kremlin's own bad boys. And get this—there's little tailings on the bullets, looks like someone's using a suppressor, it's a tenth of a millimeter off maybe, tags the bullets a little on exit, okay? So we got what? Russian bad boys in town?"

Now Remly was hooked, both by Morris Berman's stated information and the unstated, wondering who Berman's friends were—friends who could get a better fix than the FBI on 5.54-Russian ballistics.

Morris Berman said, "I see I got your attention. So what I'm wondering ... this looks like cloak and dagger stuff, I'm wondering what this little creep has got that some Russian badboy wants to whack him for. And I'm wondering what an upscale guy like you is doing, consorting with this lowlife. I mean ..." With a wave of his hand he took in the half-acre property, the large house, the string for the new walls.

Remly tilted his head up to read Morris Berman's card through his bifocal segments. "People call you 'Mo?'" he asked as he put out his hand.

"You mean ... and survived?" Morris asked as they shook hands. The man was big, his hand like an infielder's glove wrapping around Remly's. "Rick Butzek—Metro detective?—he tells me you're retired from GSA," Morris said. "Security."

Remly said, "That's right."

Morris cocked his head and inspected Remly. "And I'm the Pope of the Holy Roman Catholic Church," he said. "Nice wall you're putting in. You wired to the mob or something? Maybe some kind of cloak and dagger guy? Or is it gonna be a moat?"

"General feelings of insecurity," Remly said.

Morris said, "Sure. And my father's Mick Jagger. He comes to sing me to sleep at the Vatican alternate Sundays."

Remly almost laughed. He said to Morris, "Where have you been all my life?"

Morris Berman could almost have been smiling, though maybe not. "Likewise," he said. "Now cut the crap and we can do maybe some business. I looked you up, you don't have any traction with a guy I know at GSA. So tell me, Mr. Remly, where are you coming from? What's the deal with the little creep was whacked downtown, couple nights back in the itty bitty

hours? And give me a little hint—okay?—what’s scaring you here. What’s with this wall?”

“Make it ‘Charley.’”

“Okay, it’s Charley, call me Morris, we’re old buddy buds. Now tell me what’s got you spooked, okay? Or are you just wetting your pants in general?”

“I worked in Southern California, not Vegas.”

“My GSA guy calls some guys he knows at the big General Services Admin ziggurat in Orange County—Santa Ana? You don’t come up on anyone’s radar.”

“I was Internal Affairs. Any of your guy’s guys ever put their sticky little fingers into the cookie jar?”

“Rick Butzek over at Metro tells me you’re quick, real quick.”

“What’s your take?”

“You’re on waivers, kid. So tell me what’s going on.” Morris squinted down the string again.

Remly said, “You on duty right now?”

“Whadda ya think I’m here for ... the buck ninety-nine buffet?” Morris nodded his approval of the string.

“I’m enjoying our little chat,” Remly said, “I mean that. Maybe sometime when you’re off duty.”

“I just right now went off duty, funny coincidence.”

Remly checked his watch, calculating the time he had left to prepare for his trip. Morris Berman could be useful, but the Montecito meeting had already been arranged. Remly said, “You want the truth?”

“Sure,” Morris said. “You got some to spare?”

“I’d really like to talk to you, but later. Right now I’m under the gun.”

“So who’s gunning for you?”

“Figure of speech. If you’ll move your car out, I’d like to get back to work.”

Morris said, “I bet you would. So—you and Alfie-boy Noles part of a cheat crew? Working the PC boards in the slots?”

“Only as a hobby, you understand.”

Morris Berman worked up another almost-smile. “What I see, you’re maybe not retired law enforcement but retired some kind of parallel-type work. The kind where you don’t come up on anyone’s radar.”

“You’re an interesting guy yourself, Morris,” Remly said. “I wonder how you got forensics on a rare Soviet gun that even the FBI can’t make.”

Morris said, “Where have you been all my life?”

“So now that we’re buddy buds,” Remly said, “tell me this: Are you go-

ing to move your car or do I call for a tow truck?"

"What I'm thinking," Morris said, "I'm thinking that this little slots low-life knows something the boys at Dzerzhinsky Square don't want him to ..."

"The boys *where*?"

"Oh, shit, Gertie, is my slip showing? Some Russian guys, let's say. The little rat knows something, some Russian clowns whack him, what I want to know —where do you fit? Rick Butzek tells me you're the last guy this Noles calls on his cell, before he gets shot up with this Russian professional-assassin type gun."

Remly said, "Weaver, let's get back to work." There was a plane to catch.

Morris said, "Ah! Weaver!" and got a small notepad from his pants and wrote in it.

Weaver started for the house.

Before getting into his car, Morris Berman studied the license plate on Weaver's rented van, and the construction crew's flatbed, and added more lines to his little pad, peered at his notes like a cat decoding the kabala, then pocketed the notebook. He said, "I'll stay in touch, okay?"

"I'm counting on it," Remly said. "Nice meeting you." Oddly enough, he meant it.

“Misfortunes come on wings  
and depart on foot.”

Henry George Bohn

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . A L—B A S R A H / K U W A I T C I T Y

Tayyib rolled the An-2 down the runway, gunning it up to lift speed, the big bi-plane picking up its feet as prettily as a new lamb and floating into the air. As he explained to Abdul-Baqi, the hard part was when you got into the air, pulling and pushing at the controls with muscle and patience. Waiting for the trim to take effect, the huge plane slow to understand that the trim had actually been altered—like a thick-skinned beast gradually responding to a sharp stick.

“Stupid and slow perhaps,” Abdul-Baqi shouted over the engine, which screamed in pain as it dragged the plane higher and higher. “But it is a fine aircraft all the same, my good friend Tayyib. A marvel of an aircraft, so huge and with the four wings, two below and two above!” And for that Tayyib forgave him all.

Once airborne, Tayyib felt a mild twist of regret. He was fond of the old rattletrap, with its taped window joints to keep out the sand and its interior parts constantly shaking loose onto the planked deck. The plane was a mess, granted, its big-hearted radial engine spraying oil and fumes and roars of anguish all about. But it was indomitable, truly, and it would chew deeply into the Executive Diplomat when it struck, taking a piece of Tayyib’s own heart with it.

As he checked out Abdul-Baqi on the instrument panel, Tayyib’s eyes misted. He blinked rapidly. Scrubbed at them with the back of his hand in order to see clearly.

“Do not let your heart spill over,” Abdul-Baqi shouted. “Everything will be fine. We do something good for our motherland, then I go to be with God and the Prophet and the Virgins in Paradise.”

“Sure,” Tayyib shouted, jolted back to reality. Continuing with his instructions. To keep out the wind, Tayyib jammed a wad of paper into the hole in the blood-splattered right perplex window where one of his .380 rounds had penetrated. “You know the heading,” Tayyib shouted, as he set the course for Kuwait City.

“Yes-yes, of course,” Abdul-Baqi shouted.

“Sure,” Tayyib shouted. Earlier he had learned that Abdul-Baqi couldn’t read an aeronautical chart. He’d come prepared, though, and he brought out a Gizi map of Iraq, showing Kuwait in the lower right corner. On the road map Tayyib had marked the Safwan air base in Iraq, as well as Ali al-Salem air base and Camp Doha in Kuwait. He clipped the map to the instrument panel. “I tell you what. You see that little globe there under your left elbow?”

“Yes-yes.”

“Take the controls. Keep this heading.” Tayyib unbuckled and got out of the co-pilot’s seat and squatted in the open door to the cargo area—a shin-deep depression of the pilots’ deck, level with the cargo flooring. “Here is your current heading.” Pulling a black marker from his shirt pocket, reaching across Abdul-Baqi, and making a mark on the positioning gyro, right on the nose of the little floating plane within it. “Once we check you out, you keep the black line on the nose of the little plane in there, okay?”

“Yes-yes.”

Tayyib pointed to a spot on the Gizi map. “Once you get to here, you change to this heading.” Now he made another mark and wrote a 2 above it. “This keeps you away from the military radar, okay?”

Tayyib also marked the altimeter with his black felt pen, shouting, “Nothing above this, understand? Hug the ground. You want to stay *under* the radar. *Way* under the radar!”

“Yes-yes,” shouted with great authority and affirmation.

After getting the body of Da’ud strapped in the righthand seat, Tayyib went through his final check. He had already given his identification to Abdul-Baqi. Had double- and triple-checked that Abdul-Baqi had retained none of his own. He had a cord around the door handle to pull it closed as he jumped. Before getting into the Jalbert base-jumper harness he went down the cargo benches again, seeing that none of the Semtex had rattled loose and the kerosine jerrycans were still secure on the deck planking.

In an impulsive flash of tenderness, he went forward and kissed Abdul-Baqi on his bearded cheek. “May God be with you, my brother.”

“God is great,” Abdul-Baqi shouted, keeping his eyes on the altimeter, releasing his gaze only briefly to glance at the gyro, then again at the altimeter, not once glancing back at Tayyib.

‘He’ll do,’ Tayyib thought and went to the door and held the cord to the door handle and jumped, at the same time pulling the door closed and releasing the cord and pulling the ripcord to his parafoil, which popped open violently, jarring him in the harness and cutting into his groin.

He floated to earth, guiding the bulbous mattress-shape above him to

turn back, gliding like a vulture toward the two Toyota 4x4s that fanned up great arcs of sand behind them as they chased after the old biplane.

Kuwait City materialized brilliantly, like a vision of Paradise. From the co-pilot's seat of his brother-in-law's little Cessna, Abdul-Baqi had once seen Mosul from the air, but nothing at all like this, the minarets sparkling above the rooftops, their height exaggerated by his low approach. The gulf lay beyond, but Abdul-Baqi saw only a hint of its wet shimmer as a mirage above the city, reflected in the hot desert sky.

As he closed on the city he made out the huge central compound of the Emir's palace. It was more beautiful than any pictures of the Saddam-palaces Abdul-Baqi had seen, but this was only natural: The Emir was blessed by God, and his palace would shine like Paradise on earth.

Abdul-Baqi scolded himself, snapped his eyes back to the altimeter and the gyro, correcting the yoke just slightly to get onto true course.

Swiftly unfolding from under the left wing, a flock of cormorants, black gulf birds rising and fanning off to starboard like a massive ebony burqa. As he plowed through them they grated in the propeller blades, exploding obsidian feathers into the air and painting the windscreen with guts and blood.

"Wipers," he shouted instinctively, thinking, 'God be blessed, where is the switch of the wipers?'

There were toggles all over the instrument panel. Tayyib had not checked him out for the windscreen wipers. Abdul-Baqi looked up, where the toggle should be, in the center panel above the windscreen. There was no center panel above the windscreen.

"Help me, God, please!" he called. "Help Your servant Abdul-Baqi, who is doing Your good work on earth!"

A fine job, one thousand USD plus expenses, which meant a suite on the top floor of Hotel King Faysal, down the Grand Concourse from the Hotel Executive Diplomat. Fresh fruit in a bowl and a 14-year-old whore waiting for him in the bedroom. Roast leg of lamb for dinner. This Fathi Abdul-Muqtadir was an alright guy.

He had no way of contacting Fathi, it had been Fathi who had approached him for the job, but sure as hell he would track Fathi down to get more jobs like this.

He'd never tossed in with any resistance guys before. They kept offering him God and virgins and country to return to Baghdad. But a man had to eat, and he didn't fancy squatting in a hovel in some fucking slum—no

drinking, no smoking, prayers five times daily thanks a lot—when there were plenty of safes and the occasional head to be cracked here in Kuwait. This was a town that kept a guy in pocket money.

Was that it? A wavering blip in his binoculars, coming in from the desert, dangerously low.

He checked his compass. The blip was coming in from exactly 270 degrees, almost due west, where Fathi had marked the dial for him.

‘This is it!’

He went to the desk and pulled the cell phone from the charger and returned to the window and his binoculars. The plane was larger now, and seemed to be picking up speed.

His view from the top-floor suite was perfect—five storeys taller than the Executive Diplomat, giving him a perfect vantage to watch the big biplane close on the hotel. Perfect vantage for timing his call to anticipate the actual impact, so the Semtex blew as the plane penetrated.

He’d gotten a couple bottles of black-market champagne from a U.S. soldier, the bottles sitting in ice in a bucket at the couch.

Picking up speed or not, the plane was taking its time. It looked like a giant ugly truck that had somehow got airborne. Plenty of time for a little early celebration. He retrieved one of the chilled bottles, Andre, American label, good stuff. He twisted the wire and shot the plastic cork across the room.

Again at the window, holding a glass of bubbling wine, he picked up the binoculars and watched the plane closing on the Executive Diplomat.

“Ahlan biq,” he said. *Welcome*. He raised the glass. “Here’s piss in your eye.”

‘This is trouble,’ Jean-Thierry Pombal told himself as he watched a huge biplane coming in toward the city from the desert. Skimming the sand, it seemed. He almost flinched in anticipation of the ground-fire, maybe even rockets, but nothing came.

“Too low,” Jean-Thierry said aloud. “They don’t see things, they only watch the radar screens. What ever happened to eyeballs, I wonder.”

His instincts were too strong to let him continue philosophizing. He threw his linen napkin onto the table and pulled his camera bag from under it.

By the time the triple-A started, it was too late. The plane was over the north-eastern suburbs and closing on the city and the tracers stopped. The biplane looked like an obese crop-duster, and seemed to be heading straight for Jean-Thierry’s table on the roof garden of the Hotel Executive



Diplomat.

He had the camera out now, checking the remaining tape. Enough for twelve minutes at high resolution, maybe twenty at low rez. There was a fresh tape cartridge in his bag, but he didn't want to risk missing the shot while he was re-loading. He set the indicator for high rez and went to the edge of the roof garden, joining a growing crowd.

A man screamed: "*Get out. It's a shaheed. He's coming straight for us!*" The voice sharp and sudden. Just as suddenly Jean-Thiery had the roof to himself. Even the waiters and busboys had scattered, wedging into the elevator and spilling down the stairway.

It was only a vague thought, but he seemed to remember a few other small-craft strikes on large buildings. They ended up with their fuselages sticking out into space at some upper floor. This was bigger than any Cessna or Piper he'd seen, but certainly it wasn't a 747.

'It's a risk,' he admitted to himself. But if the plane struck without bringing down the entire hotel, it was the scoop of a lifetime. Not just local—international. He was it, the only guy who could catch it from this vantage. A million dollar film!

Watching the plane grow larger in the camera's LCD panel, he said, "Jean-Thiery mon garçon, your fortune is made."

But as he pressed the trigger and began filming, the doubts began. Perhaps it was not a shaheed, a suicide martyr. The plane was coming in too high to strike the Executive Diplomat.

He tracked it with one eye on the actual plane and his other eye monitoring its image on the LCD screen. The windscreen of the huge biplane was splattered with a brownish red mess. Through the glop on the screen Jean-Thiery could barely make out a bearded face on the pilot's side. He thought for a moment that the man was looking directly at him. The noise was terrible. The enormous radial engine on the damn thing looked like something from an old DC-3, smoking and spitting oil vapor and roaring louder and louder as he kept his finger on the trigger, zooming slowly wide and filming as the plane skimmed over the roof garden, blowing tablecloths and umbrellas over the edge and down to the street below. Jean-Thiery seeing rivets on the belly of the plane in his camera as it passed his lens overhead, the sound of its filthy engine deafening. Filming its rudder as it flew away, heading toward the Hotel King Faysal.

'*Merde!*' Jean-Thiery kept filming, but his disappointment exploded in a stream of mental curses. '*Merde! Merde! Merde! Merde! Merde!*' No scoop! No international auction for the images! Cursing, he kept his LCD viewfinder on the retreating plane, zooming in to make it fill the frame.

On about his twentieth *merde* the plane blew into a beautiful sphere of billowing flame and smoke, blasting the air around it, now tumbling forward toward the Faysal, yawing sideways, tumbling, a great, expanding blossom from hell that splattered into the windows of the top floor of the tall hotel, ripping into it like a rock into a soft, over-ripe melon.

Then came a secondary explosion from within the hotel where the plane had penetrated, blowing out the top three floors and shooting hot yellow flames in all directions. He remembered his school days, the anatomy book with its transparent pages, peeling back first the skin then the muscles then the organs, finally only the skeleton remaining, and so it was with the hotel Faysal. First its cement and windows flying out. Then the people and parts of people, their arms and legs most visible, along with bedding, tables, chairs scattering into the air. The plumbing pipes bending and whizzing. The frame of the hotel, turning red then yellow then white in the heat of the explosion, while the body parts and furnishings and hotel amenities rained onto the Grand Concourse below.

*'Oh merde!'* Now in glee. *'Merde! Merde! Merde! Merde! Merde!'* He wanted to dance, but continued his steady hold on the Faysal as it began disintegrating on itself, collapsing into the Grand Concourse as human and automotive traffic below streamed crazily away from it.

*'The scoop of a lifetime!'* he told himself. Even if dozens had filmed from below, only he would have the fly's-eye images. And high rez! Good enough to start a bidding war among the magazines as well as the TV news bureaus.

The moment his tape ran out, he shut down the camera and removed the cartridge, confining it safely to his inside breast pocket and pulling out his cell phone to begin calling his agents. Charles Betrand in Paris, Hudad Ibrahim in Cairo, Barney Weinstein in New York.

As he pressed the auto-dial on his cell, Jean-Thierry could no longer hold it in, danced a hopping little dance among the ruined tables.

*"Merde! Merde! Merde! Merde! Merde!"* he sang as he danced. *"Oh, merde merde merde merde merde merde merde merde!"*

He was too happy and too focused on singing and dancing and getting through to his agents to hear the sirens and claxtons of the fire engines, the ambulances and coroner's wagons, the military trucks screeching into the street below.

"Hudad," he shouted into the phone. "Jean-Thierry here. I just got the shot of a lifetime. You been tuning in the news?" A pause, then, "Yeah yeah, sorry, merde, I know what you do for a living, okay. Okay."

Waiters and luncheon patrons now exploded onto the roof from the el-

evator and stairs. Jean-Thierry moved against the tide, into a space of privacy near the tables as the mob rushed to the edge to watch the Hotel King Faysal burn.

“Okay okay, I know I know, but—anything about the plane crash here? Hotel King Faysal? Just breaking? Hey, Hudad, guess who was on the roof of the Hotel Executive Diplomat and filmed the whole thing.” Another pause, then, “Yeah yeah yeah. I zoomed right in on everything. Fly’s-eye view, fills the entire frame. Like I was on the tail of the plane. I thought it was going to chew me up in its propeller, it came over that close. Complete exclusive. Start the bidding at a hundred thousand USD, Arab rights only. I’m going into hiding right away. I have to protect my tape. Abiento.”

Jean-Thierry grabbed the camera bag from his table and hustled to the stairwell, guessing that the Kuwaiti flics would be coming up the elevator to confiscate any cameras on the roof. He pressed another auto-dial number, then cancelled it. No, not Europe next—the States! ‘They’re going to kill each other to get their hands on this one.’ He imagined a family of fleshy Yanks seated in their reclino-loungers, eating pre-fabricated cheeseburgers from microwave trays, watching big-screen TV in open-mouth disbelief as his video unfolded, the biplane’s fireball tumbling into the hotel.

“Barney,” he said into the phone as he skipped down the stairs. “Jean-Thierry here. Yeah, yeah, that one, how many do you have? Listen, I was on the roof of the Executive Diplomat when that plane went into the King Faysal ... ‘*What* King Faysal?’ You haven’t got the news yet? Terrorist attack, Kuwait City. When you get the news, start calling the networks. I have the exclusive coverage of the thing, full-frame, like I was right behind the airplane. Big fireball, huge impact, sound of the explosion and everything. Everyone in America is going to want to see this. *Everyone!* Start the bidding at a half-million, USD.”

“Ce sont toujours les aventuriers qui font de grandes choses.”

(It is always the adventurers who accomplish great things.)

Charles Louis de Secondata de Montesquieu

## AUTUMN 2004 . . .

## . . . S A N T A   B A R B A R A

Not everyone in the Cancer Ward responded to his expulsion with Charles Remly's easygoing insouciance.

Certainly not the F.O.—particularly after Ralph Braschler cancelled the F.O.'s post-retirement consulting contract.

It was obvious to all that the F.O. had developed an allergic reaction to the prospect of retirement, and at first fought it as a cat fights drowning.

Kenneth John Riblings Burlingame, formerly Field Officer and manager of SoCal SubSection, then Deputy Assistant Regional Supervisor of the Cancer Ward—WestCentRegion11—grew increasingly somber as his day approached. He had been ratcheted down more than just a few pegs with the consolidation of the various western SubStations into the slabsided, black-windowed new Federal building on Hill Street, and he had lost both authority and his sense of self-worth in the process. Even more telling, he'd lost his passion for amateur magic, and no longer tumbled a silver dollar absent-mindedly across the backs of his knuckles—disappearing it after two passes—as he spoke.

It was ironically the F.O. who dubbed their futuristic new offices “the Cancer Ward.” Ironically the F.O.—previously an über-stickler for intra-office *politesse*—who railed loudest against the agency's bureaucratic pomposities once they moved into their aseptic new quarters. As the fatal day drew near, the F.O. seemed less and less a company man and more and more an anarchist in a Hickey-Freeman suit.

Remly retired in June that year, the F.O. was removed almost bodily from his office the following August, forty-four years of service, on the event of his sixty-fifth birthday.

In the week before his retirement the F.O.'s bright flame of anarchy grew dimmer and dimmer and finally extinguished itself for lack of fuel, to the extent that he seemed to be preparing himself for the grave rather than a move to his wife's inherited estate on a hillside in Montecito.

Though the F.O. had been told to start cleaning out his personal belongings sometime in July, on the day of his departure he was still pottering

about, packing and repacking the things that Security would have to unpack and vett before the F.O. could carry them away from the building.

Remly had not been there to see it, but was told by Weaver and Basset that it was like a scene from *King Lear* as the F.O. late at night finally piled his last cardboard carton onto a trolley in the hall and slumped dejectedly to the elevator.

Weaver said, “We stayed on, he wouldn’t let anyone help. Just kept packing, taking something out, looking at it, packing up again. Left the trolley in the hall, didn’t even turn around when he got into the elevator. Just stood there, looking away, the doors close.”

“Woulda broke your heart, babe,” Basset said.

“It does,” Remly replied.

In the years that followed, the F.O., already a small man, seemed to shrink into himself, his bravado—his sense of worth and privilege—increasingly subdued the times Remly phoned him, first at his mansion in Hancock Park then at his wife’s estate in Montecito. The few times Remly visited him in Santa Barbara, the coastal city in whose sprawl Montecito nestles, the F.O. seemed abnormally old, his neck not quite filling the starched collar of his shirt. He had no new tricks to show off, nor even his old mainstay—the odd coin to be discovered behind Remly’s ear.

Now, however, seated on the Montecito hacienda’s back veranda, the F.O. like a sunflower grew more and more robust in the noonday sun, drinking from a glass of suspiciously transparent orange juice. He asked, “You’re sure you won’t have some?” and lifted his glass and took another sip. Remly wanted only water.

Remly said, “Alan Singleton I can understand. But ... d’Angelo? After his paper on Russia’s robust monetary infrastructure? Five months before the meltdown? Amazing they kept him on after Moscow’s banks collapsed.”

“The only game in town, as you say in Las Vegas. Put out feelers—anyone with access to the legacy files on Campus? Simon d’Angelo the only one to pop to the surface. Has excellent access to the sacred Campus files: Just finished buffing up a history on Virginia’s successes in eastern Europe.”

Remly barked a sharp laugh.

“I see nothing amusing ...”

“I had to cough. Sorry.”

The F.O. shot Remly a suspicious look, just short of an indictment. “As for Alan Singleton,” he continued, “lucky to get him. Alan made rather a hobby of Brother Kurskov; I imagine it was like watching his own reflection

in dark waters, Alan's a bit of a rascal you've probably heard. Spent a number of seasons in Virginia's fabled department of regime-change. May have some use for his intimate knowledge of the black arts, theirs and ours."

The grounds and the three buildings of the Burlingames' Montecito estate had once been the centerpiece of a Spanish monastery, the smaller buildings and acreage having been sold off to lesser millionaires in the heavily misted past. Noon had come and gone and the sun was cresting over the top of the sky a little to the south, adding sparkle to the ocean and glinting off the oil platforms in the distance. The morning fog had burned off and Santa Cruz could be seen floating in the water, and to the right of Santa Cruz, a little dimmer in the oceanic haze, Santa Rosa and San Miguel, and the sails of a large ketch running to the islands.

There was an unexpected clanging, chimes from somewhere in the house and an irritating bell hidden along the heavy monastic beams that jutted over the veranda from the back of the adobe walls. Voices from within ... Lissie Burlingame's cultured drawl, other women chattering, and a man's voice, booming: "Lissie, you sexpot! When're you going to dump that old fart and move in with me?" And a woman, not Lissie, "Alan someday I'm going to kill you, I swear to God I'm going to shoot you right in the crotch."

They came tumbling out of the big double doors in the even bigger adobe archway along the white wall, laughing, the women with their arms around Lissie who walked between them and hugged them as though she couldn't decide which of the two she loved more.

Of the men, one was tall and remarkably thin and the other might have been tall had he not been hunched over a walker, wheeling it and shuffling with a studied determination, watching the irregular brick surface as he moved. He looked up briefly, then down again, speaking loudly to the paving, "Kenny you dumb fuck, what've you been up to? Day like this, dressed up in a goddam necktie. We going to a funeral?"

The three women came more slowly, Lissie now with one hand shading her eyes against the sun, a woman seeming half the F.O.'s age at the distance but growing older as she approached, her much-lifted face and wrinkled hands giving the lie to her abundant, perfectly styled dark hair. Slim to perfection, decorated with a long casual dress in a botanical print that at once clashed with and complemented the Portmeirion place settings on the patio table. Both wrists heavy with gold bracelets. She released her two outriders, who stood by their husbands now greeting the F.O., and raised her free hand to Remly, bracelets shifting and flashing. As Remly took her hand and kissed her first on one cheek then the other, she said, "Carl, *so* very good seeing you."

“Charley now, Lissie,” Remly said, “remember?”

“Yes, Charley, of course, stupid of me,” Lissie said while offering her face to the F.O. who baptized her with two air kisses.

Introductions—Remly remembered Simon d’Angelo from the Campus in Virginia, and had met Simon’s wife Bea then as well. The man in the walker, Alan Singleton, Remly had heard of but never met. Fluent in Russian and conversant in several Turkic languages, Singleton was a legend on the Virginia Campus, the more legendary for having been virtually invisible despite his booming voice. Much of what was said about Singleton was rumor, of course, but Remly recalled a two-part exposé in *Washington Monthly* about Singleton’s management of the failed coup in Tajikistan. Remly offered a polite hand and a stiff smile to Singleton’s wife Princess, her makeup heavily applied, no hint of a human face behind it.

Simon d’Angelo had a large old-fashioned briefcase—a satchel, severely battered—and a laptop; in the wire basket of Alan Singleton’s walker lay a laptop and a wide, elegant leather case.

“And *so* wonderful Virginia has called all of you out of retirement, darlings,” Lissie Burlingame said, more to Remly than to d’Angelo and Singleton, once they were all seated. “To work with Kenny on this affair. It’s done absolute *wonders* for him, the idea of working again.”

The F.O. sat beaming at his wife.

“Kenny wasn’t so much *vegetating*. It was more, poor darling,” she patted the F.O.’s hand, her bracelets jangling, “more as though he was *composting*. I wasn’t sure which of us would go foamingly mad first; Kenny from the boredom—or me from watching him ferment and dissolve into the earth.” Then, mock sternly, “But for heaven sake, *all* of you boys—put aside your homework! No business chat over lunch. I won’t have it!”

As it happened, the luncheon chat centered around Pilates, food—especially cranberries, bioflavonoids, and Omega-3 fatty acids—the arcane differences between heels and *kitten* heels, and the presidential campaign, though only in reference to Suzie’s recent columns in *W* about the candidates’ wives ... demonstrably girl-talk. Remly watched with a rigidly non-committal expression as the boys’ attention wandered, three old men looking first sadly at each other then blankly out to the Pacific.

At one point the F.O.—at the head of the table, leaning discretely behind Princess Singleton—said to Princess’s husband, “What I cannot for the life of me understand, Alan, is why the poobahs didn’t keep you on as an elder statesman. God knows there’s a precedent for it, particularly for black-arts boys who’ve been through the fire, eh?”

“Actually in my contract, Kenny, post-retirement consulting. Sharing of

war stories. Astonish and invigorate the fledglings with tales of derring-do. Problem was, much of my later opinions conflicted with what the top floor wanted to hear. The contract got invalidated.”

“Top floor?” the F.O. asked. “Or Sixteen Hundred?”

Singleton said, “There’s a difference?”

The F.O. said, “Before I was dropped without ceremony down the elevator shaft, I was to have gotten a follow-on consultancy as well.”

“Fucking political-policy commissars ...” Alan Singleton was saying when Lissie Burlingame tingged on her wine glass with a salad fork, saying, “*Shop talk, shop talk!*”

The conversation reverted to its proper format, Princess Singleton confiding that one of her girlfriends in Hilton Head, where she and Alan had retired, had fallen and broken her hip and was considering a lawsuit against Jimmy Choo over the lack of consumer warning on his stilettos.

Bea d’Angelo said, “How old *is* she, Princess?”

“Old enough,” Princess Singleton said.

“Hasn’t she heard of Linda Bennett’s kitten-heels line?” Lissie asked, and Princess said, “Sure as hell she has now!”

After lunch the wives went to the gazebo on the lower terrace, the maid following with a tray of champagne flutes, an orange-juice carafe, and a bottle of Domaine Chandon Brut.

The men squared off the table, the F.O. and Remly facing each other from the head and foot, d’Angelo and Singleton zigzagged across from each other on the long sides, d’Angelo materializing file folders and papers like rabbits from his battered old satchel, spreading them in an untidy mess in all directions on the glass, his laptop idle at his feet, and Singleton, his laptop active and his leather case open beside it, saying, “Simon, for God’s sake, cut me some slack. Taking up more landscape than the three of us put together.”

“I’m not fully digitized,” d’Angelo said as he put a firm hand on the stack of file folders that Singleton was pushing away from his own table space.

“Move up here, Alan,” the F.O. said.

Singleton eyed the proffered chair suspiciously. “Just want my proper share of space, dammit.”

Remly said, “Move down a chair to me, Simon.” He had only his bound notebook and a thumbnail agenda on the glass tabletop, his laptop and Alf’s WalMart bag at his feet. As Singleton and d’Angelo separated from each other with equal measures of indignation and reluctance, Remly wondered which one of them he would resemble, twenty years on.



“Gentlemen,” the F.O. said, “the meeting of the noble association of discarded intelligence officers is now in order.”

Simon d’Angelo acknowledged the F.O.’s small joke with an even smaller smile, but Singleton said, “You mean ‘The Impotent Old Crocks And Obsolete Spooks Drinking And Bullshitting Society,’ Kenny.”

The F.O. gave Singleton a poisonous look. He had a simple, lined yellow notepad and a fat Montblanc pen. He wrote “1” on the pad, capped the pen and settled it on the pad, and said, “Before we get into the priorities, I gave Simon and Alan only a general overview of the events that have brought us together, Carl. Perhaps ...”

“Charley,” Remly said.

The F.O. rattled on nonetheless, “... you might tell them of your nocturnal adventures in Las Vegas—yours and Mr. Johnson’s.”

Remly put his hands on the thick glass tabletop and looked between them, through the glass but blind to his legs and the adobe brick paving, bringing back the night, the ringing telephone, Alf’s message, the three visitors, bringing it all back in detail and in correct chronological order.

“Stop right there,” d’Angelo said in his soft voice, as the gunfight was winding down, Remly leaning forward to hear him. Simon d’Angelo was astonishingly thin, and although his shirt seemed long enough for him, its width gave him away, the shoulder seams sagging unhappily down his arms. He fidgeted in his shirt, arched his back, and said, “Russian? You’re sure they spoke Russian?”

“Something slavic,” Remly said. “It could’ve been the earplugs, maybe they were speaking Ukrainian. It’s been years since I’ve heard any Russian.” He went on, through their exit down the street as he watched.

“So then they tear down the drive and leave a shotgun behind?” Singleton shook his head, dismayed at this lack of professionalism.

The F.O. said, “Why, I wonder, did they run? You hit both—shooter and the flash man?”

“Right in the Kevlar. A couple of body-armor shots shouldn’t scare them.”

“Not professional hardcases from Dzerzhinsky Square,” Singleton agreed. “These bozos woulda been mafiya, maybe rent-a-thugs from the Ukraine. They talk tough, but—fight it out? These guys aren’t ready for Yanks shooting back, they think we’re all pussies. Two, you say?”

“Plus the driver.”

“And you’ve seen Aleksandr Kurskov there, in Vegas?”

“No, it was Alf Noles who saw him. The guy on the phone, one of our former freelancers.” He walked them through the next phone call from

Butzek the Metro cop. His backtracking to find Alf's goody bag. His new wall and Weaver's security upgrades. The visit from the Gaming Control cop, who had revealed that Alf had been killed with a rare Dzerzhinsky Square assassination pistol, and Remly believing that the cop was somehow wired to an intell service somewhere, possibly Israel. Remly said, "Simon, I wonder if you could get me a backgrounder on this Morris Berman."

D'Angelo said, "You think he's wrapped up in this?"

"I think I might have to do business with him. I like the guy—something about him—but I want to know where he's coming from."

With theatrical reluctance d'Angelo took down the specifics, writing them in a small notepad and tearing out the page to drop it into his satchel.

And that was it, from Alf's call to Berman's grudging exit. "Any other questions?" Remly asked. No one answered.

The F.O. uncapped his pen and said, "Priorities."

"Eddy Johnson," Remly said. "What've we got here? Do we see this as one murder—Alf—one attempted—me—one traffic accident—Eddy? Or do we see it as two murders and one attempted?"

"Too much synchronisity for my taste," Singleton said.

"Eddy Johnson's wife Karen says NHP is booking this as a one-vehicle TA. The insurance company is totalling the Audi, claims there's no salvage value, not worth winching it up. Bottom line, it's still down a ravine."

"The oil slick," the F.O. said.

Pushing up his glasses, Remly said, "Unknown etiology. I made a quick run, sopped some up with a rag—I'm sure it's the one he went across. Just looking at it under a glass, no chemical analysis, it's used engine oil. Pretty simple."

The F.O. looked at Alan Singleton. Then Remly and d'Angelo also looked at Singleton.

"We'll be pissing away a hell of a lot of capital if I get the car winched up and run a forensic on it," Singleton said. "The risk that someone will out us, and money, a lot of money Kenny. Is it worth it, winching up the car and attracting attention? Worth it just to see if there's something woogly-woo with the Audi? I'm willing to have it done, I just question the cost-benefit. Your money, after all."

"Know much about Audis, Charles?" the F.O. said.

Remly said, "Only that they're famous for stability control."

Singleton said, "A good driver, no excess speed, in my experience oil alone isn't going to put him over the edge." He turned to Remly. "He was a good driver? Cautious?"

"Eddy drove, I wanted to reach over and push the gas pedal, he was that

cautious. So I'm going to say someone staged it ... who else besides Kurskov? One hundred percent yes. Not worth bringing the car up."

"Fifty percent," d'Angelo said.

"Ninety-nine," Singleton said. Then, to d'Angelo, "You pussy."

D'Angelo either didn't hear or was ignoring him.

The F.O. said "One hundred" as he crossed off Eddy Johnson. He wrote a new "1" on the next line. "Brother Kurskov done the dirty deed, we go to church on that parochial truth. Back to One, gentlemen."

"This fella Noles ..." Singleton began.

"Mr. Johnson's wife," the F.O. interrupted. "Karen?"

"Karen," Remly said. "She went back to West Virginia to spend time with a sister."

"Should we concern ourselves over her safety?" the F.O. asked.

Remly shrugged.

D'Angelo asked, "Not at risk?"

"In theory, *Eddy* wasn't at risk," Remly said. "*I* wasn't."

Remly looked at the F.O. and the F.O. looked at Simon d'Angelo and Simon d'Angelo looked at Alan Singleton, who said, "Fuck it, *life's* risky. She's on her own."

"Pass," Remly said.

Almost in chorus d'Angelo and the F.O. said, "Pass."

The F.O. didn't write down Karen Johnson's name. His pen poised, he asked, "And our friend Mr. Noles?"

Remly said, "Don't bother inking in Alf." He'd mentioned it, obviously the F.O. had forgotten. On Alf Noles, all they wanted were the details of Alf's material; Alf himself wasn't an issue.

"Any hint what our Mr. Noles has been up to of late? No chance, for example, he may have done the odd job for the competition?"

"A small-change bad boy," Remly said. "When he wasn't out pilfering, he just leather-assed it at sawdust joints."

"Leather-assed it at sawdust joints," the F.O. echoed.

"What it means ..." Remly began.

"I quite understand, intuition guides me. All the same, I suspect you've been in Las Vegas altogether too long." He lifted his glass and drank down the last of his orange juice and pressed a small wireless doorbell-button that rested beside his plate. "You're sure you won't?"

"Thanks, no."

"Simon, Alan?"

Singleton wanted another glass, but d'Angelo held up his hand in a gesture of refusal.

The maid came into the arched doorway at the house and the F.O. lifted his empty glass, calling out, “Dos mass, favor. Poquito menos tequila esta tiempo.” The maid stopped, nodded, and returned to the house.

Remly brought up the WalMart bag and took a thin sheaf of small papers from it. “Photocopy sheets of Weaver’s little black book. My true name, but the old Los Angeles address and phone seem to have been whited over in Weaver’s original and my current info written over the whiteout.” He pushed them up the table to d’Angelo, who stared suspiciously at Remly’s fingernails.

“*Great God!*” the F.O. said as d’Angelo studied the papers. “I’m in there as well?”

Remly said, “You’re not, I checked.”

Singleton pressed the issue: “Any other ties to Virginia?”

“Everything else I picked up, it’s either his black-bag business or the treasure he picked up from Kurskov’s SUV. I left Alf’s tools in Vegas, nothing for us there. I left the gun too.”

“He carried a gun,” Singleton said. It was almost a question.

“Part of his plunder from Kurskov’s Lexus. A Makarov in nine millimeter Russian, a spare magazine. Box of old USSR ammo, looks like mil surplus. I tossed the camper bottom to top, nothing to tie Alf Noles to the firm—nothing else of real interest.” He spread the items from the plastic bag onto his vinyl notepad and selected the Marlboro packs and carton. “Do a close-up on the fine print: Bad counterfeits. They came from Kurskov, I’m guessing they’re not Chinese.”

D’Angelo stopped the Marlboros for a closer look. “Ukraine, likely,” he said. “Odessa, they mass produce them. Did a paper on the underground economy, counterfeiting in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.”

Singleton said, “Like your famous one on Moscow’s robust monetary structure?”

“*Alan!*” the F.O. said sharply.

Remly said, “Usher’s Green Stripe label, counterfeit.” Now soaked away from the clinging shards of glass.

“Let’s see that.” The F.O. motioned for it and it went straight up the table to him. The F.O. mused over the label like an archaeologist. “One wonders what was inside the bottle, eh? Must play hell with their guts.”

“Artwork that Alf Noles got from Kurskov’s SUV.” Remly pushed four small photos to Simon d’Angelo, to be passed up the table. “The two originals were the only ones that Alf saw when they were inside the Lexus. He hadn’t seen me for a long time, and then only briefly I’m guessing. Only luck he didn’t see the computer enhancements—he’d never have tied them

to me.”

D’Angelo had been studying Remly’s fingernails again. “Car break down, Charley?”

Remly folded his hands into his lap: “Working on my Vincent.”

D’Angelo looked blank.

“Old motorcycle, Simon,” Alan Singleton said. “Limey bike.”

When the pictures got to him, the F.O. said, “Any idea where these were taken? The background’s a complete blur.”

Singleton said, “Extreme telephoto, Kenny. Depth of field, you’re lucky if you get decent focus on the nose and eyes.”

“This one I don’t get,” Remly said. “From Alf’s purloined goodies, three words in Cyrillic and an address in London, in English.” Handing up a torn slip of paper. “The Cyrillic reads, ‘didi action now.’ Anyone have a take on the word ‘didi?’”

“I’ll have this one,” d’Angelo said, not passing the paper up to Singleton. “Have we gotten to this Kurskov in our priorities, Ken?”

The F.O. said, “You have to speak up, Simon. I’m at this end of the table.”

“We dealing with Kurskov yet?” From his expression it would seem that d’Angelo was shouting, but the words emerged in conversational tones.

“I hope to kiss a pig,” the F.O. said. He held up his pad to show “Kurskov” written in neat block letters after the “1.”

D’Angelo flicked the small torn slip of paper with his fingernail. “This,” another snap, “*this is gold*,” he said, but cryptically since he didn’t pursue it. Instead he seemed to drift away from the others as he rummaged about in the untidy stack of file folders.

“Simon?” the F.O. said. “Do you have something for us?”

Without looking up, d’Angelo waved a hand in obvious irritation and continued pawing through his papers.

“*Maid!*” Remly said.

The F.O. casually turned his notepad face-down over the photos, and he and Singleton received their glasses of spiked orange juice, the F.O. saying, “Gracias, Elenacita.”

Elenacita took their empties when she left.

“*Ah ha!*” It was d’Angelo, who had been rooting about like a badger in his mess of folders and papers, his voice now loud, startling even himself. He’d opened a file folder and found a sheet in it. Then, in his normal soft drone, “London.” He pushed the sheet at Remly, who read it as d’Angelo continued: “Here we come to the crux of it ... junction points, la-dee-da.”

Looking up from the sheet, Remly said, “Levanov? Same London ad-

dress as the note from Kurskov's car; biography of Levanov, the exiled oligarch." Remly held up the page, a stenciled NO DIS in its upper right corner. "This is from Virginia."

"You have seen nothing," the F.O. said. "None of this exists."

"We don't exist," Alan Singleton said, then half-stood, leaned on the table, stretched, and seated himself again.

"At the moment," Remly said in dry tones, "I happen to be in Denver." As he turned the sheet and began reading it, he said, "What's Levanov got to do with anything? I've only read about him in the papers."

Before he got to the third sentence, d'Angelo took back the face sheet, almost ripping it from Remly's hands, and began, "Nikita Olegovich Levanov ..."

The F.O. cut him off abruptly, "Structure, Simon. First an overview of our options, then the London trivia."

"Levanov's hardly trivia, Ken."

"London details, then."

"I have spent some considerable time making an analysis ..."

"Simon, please, I'm chairing this franchise. I respect your efforts, certainly, but first the priorities."

Simon d'Angelo returned Levanov's face sheet to its folder and clutched the manila folder like a child he was defending against wolves.

"Options," the F.O. said, preparing to guide them through the alternatives.

"Bellybutton lint, for krisake," Singleton said. "Cross it off, let's get to work. What are we gonna do about this bastard Aleks Kurskov?"

The F.O. said, "Has to be done, Alan."

They went over the options, rejecting each in turn.

Alf was murder; Remly attempted murder; Eddy Johnson ninety-nine percent murder—none a federal offense.

"Call in the local police?" the F.O. asked, and was greeted immediately with three "noes," to which the F.O. contributed his own, Remly adding he didn't look forward to seeing his face on the front page of the *Review-Journal*. Given the possible international involvement—particularly the chance of Dzerzhinsky Square—there was definite justification to contact the Bureau, the F.O. suggested. Again a chorus of "noes," Remly now adding he didn't fancy seeing himself in the *Washington Post*.

"Or shrug it off," Remly said. "Pass it over right now to Virginia, maybe the Cancer ward, nothing further on our part. Any takers?"

Singleton dipped an ice cube from his orange juice and threw it at Remly, a near miss.

The F.O. said, “Just us chickens, then. This is our franchise, we run down the intell—get something solid—we play it to its logical conclusion. At which point we consider our options again: Do we move on to plans and operations?”

Singleton made a sour face: “I’m still prone to shooting the bastard right now, Kenny. I can provide the hardware, all we need is the shooter.” He looked significantly at Remly.

“You and I have been through that more than once, Alan,” the F.O. said. “The question on the table is, do we move from intell to plans and operations? Or do we hand the franchise off to Virginia, all tied up with a lovely ribbon?”

“Virginia?” Singleton said. “Only to simpatico ears.”

The F.O.said, “That’s a given.”

Remly said, “What do two retired spooks in Vegas have in common with Aleksandr Kurskov? I was near him here and there, Eddy may have been. But never a time when Eddy and I were in the same city as Kurskov—not that I know of. What is it he’s afraid of?”

“Three in Las Vegas, actually,” the F.O. said. “Paul Thompson. Worked Moscow, diplomatic cover, got outed by Dzerzhinsky Square, then went to the Russia Desk in Virginia. Now somewhere in Las Vegas—place called Anthem? You wouldn’t know him, Charles. I made inquiries—healthy as a horse, happy as clam, no spikes on his excitement meter.”

“Even more ominous then,” Remly said. “Just Eddy and me, specifically singled out. What is it that put us onto Kurskov’s dance card? What’ve we got that Thompson’s missing—pheromones? Some kind of popularity chromosome?”

“Biographs,” d’Angelo said, handing file folders one by one to Remly. “You, Mr. Johnson, Mr. Kurskov, one Valeri Sergeivich Voshch, Nikita Olegeevich Levanov, handful of others.”

Remly said, “London.” He opened the Voshch folder, briefly scanned it. “Valeri’s got a house there in Knightsbridge.” He turned to d’Angelo: “Near Levanov?”

“Major gun runner,” the F.O. said. “Friend of yours as I recall.”

“Friends like Valeri, I don’t need enemies.”

D’Angelo said, “Voshch and Levanov live in Knightsbridge, and Mr. Kurskov makes regular pilgrimages to London. To me there are only two purposes for this.”

“Let’s slow down here a second,” Remly said. “Your biograph on him says Levanov moved to London about the same time I was retiring from the firm. I never met the man. As for Valeri, that means guns ...”

“Arms trade,” Singleton interrupted. “The heavy stuff—mortars, tanks, Semtex. Voshch brokers the deals in London, consummates them in Tiraspol.”

D’Angelo said, “With Levanov it’s money laundering.”

The F.O. said, “Here we part company, Simon. London’s a magnet for Russians with hidden resources. ‘Londongrad’ they call it. ‘Moscow-on-the-Thames.’ Great Britain does not tax off-shore profits.”

“But ...” d’Angelo interrupted.

The F.O. rolled over him: “Let me say that again, perhaps more clearly. Great Britain does *not* tax off-shore profits. No reason whatsoever for Brother Levanov to launder funds to live high in London.”

“Las Vegas, Ken. Kurskov’s been staying there off and on since last January. When you have Kurskov running between London and Vegas—between an on-the-dodge oligarch and a money-laundering hot spot—hard to imagine what the alternative reason might be.” D’Angelo reached out to the material he’d handed to Remly and forcibly retrieved it. “I have made a thorough analysis of the Kurskov-Levanov connection. This will actually be the basis for all of our follow-on considerations.”

“In due course, Simon,” the F.O. said. “Before anything else we have to review the junction points you’ve found between our friend Kurskov, Charles, and Mr. Johnson. You have all the pertinent material, eh? Your biographs are current and reliable?”

“Of course,” d’Angelo said, a certain huffiness in his tone and his expression prim. “What are you implying?”

“Let’s get to it then. Have you printed the intersections in duplicates for everyone, or is this still in your computer?” Then, turning to Remly, the F.O. said, “That is Simon’s gold strike—the biographs, digitized.” He radiated satisfaction, as though he’d just come up with a new quantum theory. “Simon tells me they’re in a form that can be easily raised in a spreadsheet. Dates and people get sorted, the telltale junction points rise to the surface.” The F.O. anointed d’Angelo with a beatific smile. “Bingo!”

Remly nodded, it was close enough: Material this arcane would be sorted not in a spreadsheet but through a data management program. The old man had never concerned himself with details that didn’t relate directly to tradecraft. To d’Angelo, Remly said, “What intersections have you come up with, Simon? When and where was I in the same place as Eddy and Kurskov.”

At this Simon d’Angelo seemed to turn in on himself, as though trying to parse a question in a language entirely foreign to him. As he hesitated, flexing his shoulders within his oversized shirt and pondering Remly’s sim-



ple question, d'Angelo seemed suddenly very old, the polar opposite of the F.O. who had been energized by the challenge of running a franchise—and certainly unlike Alan Singleton, who appeared to be as vigorous and outrageous as his legend had defined him some thirty years ago—and it came to Remly that Simon d'Angelo was overwhelmed by the data he'd collected from his contacts at the Campus, now spread in an untidy mess across the large patio table.

“Are the data on a CD at least, Simon?” Remly gently asked.

But d'Angelo would neither respond nor look at him.

Remly turned to Singleton and touched his lips with his forefinger, but continued speaking to d'Angelo: “If it's on a CD, perhaps Alan might have a program that'll winnow the material we need.”

D'Angelo mumbled something, quite softly.

Remly leaned toward him. “I'm sorry?”

“I've got it all on a CD. Haven't had time to put it through my spreadsheet.” D'Angelo looked as though he was preparing to run away. “This whole project, no time to think, all this damned pressure.” He turned to the F.O. “Should've had this meeting next week, Ken. What's the rush?”

Singleton said, “Spreadsheet? Jesus H Particular Christ, Simon, you don't run this kinda stuff through a spreadsheet. You SQL<sup>1</sup> it in a data manager!”

“Alan ...” Remly began.

“I've done the analysis,” d'Angelo said. “What more is needed? My analysis, connecting Levanov to money laundering, that's why we're gathered here.”

Removing his glasses and pressing the bridge of his nose, Remly spoke gently: “Simon, we're here to open a franchise. My life is on the line, someone's trying to kill me. Can you empathize with that? Aleksandr Kurskov is trying to kill me. Behind that there are probably larger issues—very likely he thinks I know something, something critical that he doesn't want me to reveal. I have no idea what's on his mind. And that's why we have to look into my intersections with him. Eddy's intersections.”

“My analysis ...” d'Angelo began.

“Sucks!” Singleton said. “Like your famous Russian monetary report, five months before the Russian banks collapse, Jesus save us!”

“Alan,” Remly said in a dangerously soft voice, “all due respect but shut the fuck up.” Then, ignoring Singleton's startled, almost pleased expression, he put on his glasses to look at d'Angelo. “Simon, point number one is that Eddy and I never came across Levanov. He was in Russia when Eddy

<sup>1</sup>*SQL - Structured Query Language*

and I were operating, and we never went to Russia. Now, I'll grant you that your analysis is important, Simon, but what we need immediately, in order for me to get rolling on my end of it—what we need this very second is a list of every intersection shared by me, Eddy Johnson, and Aleksandr Kurskov, all three of us, and we need the list of those intersections right now." He tapped the table. "Right now, right in front of us. Can you do that?"

When d'Angelo remained silent, Remly went on, "Simon, I want you to understand that you can say 'no' to me at any time, okay? Just tell me 'no,' and I'll drop the subject. We'll try to find some alternative method of solving this and getting the franchise rolling. Or maybe we'll just turn it over to Virginia. Let someone at the Campus sort it out. Okay?"

Still no response.

"I want you to acknowledge that you understand what I'm saying, Simon. You can say 'no' at any time, that's all I want you to agree to right now, okay? No matter what anyone else does or says, you can say 'no' whenever you wish. Do you agree to that?"

D'Angelo nodded, grudging; an agreement extorted out of him, he implied.

"Thank you. We agree that you can say 'no' to me at any time, and we'll put an end to this topic, is that right?"

Another grudging nod.

Remly said, "Now, here's what I see, Simon. As Ken said, it's just us chickens—you, me, Alan, and Ken. We agreed that we would dig up all of the intell we can, then decide whether to carry it through to plans and ops—or maybe we'll pass it over to someone on the Campus. My own feeling is, your analysis will probably be a major key to this franchise. Before we consider it, though, I'd like to get your take on Virginia's probable response to this first-draft analysis you've done on Kurskov. I mean, if that's all we give them, no intell that we dig up on our own once you've shown the intersections, just your current analysis. So—based on your past experience, based on Virginia's reaction to your previous analytical reports—think you might tell me that? How you think the soothsayers at the Campus will respond if we turn your analysis over to them right now? Not digging any deeper into this mystery?"

If Simon d'Angelo had looked introspective before, now he seemed to be in genuine pain. Behind d'Angelo the F.O. shook his head at Remly, his face pinched with concern as he mouthed a silent 'no,' and, across from d'Angelo, Alan Singleton leaned forward with an expression at once fascinated and uncertain, as though watching a mongoose circle a cobra.

"Your analysis," Remly continued, "this is only a prelim, right? I mean,

it's based on data you've gotten through contacts at Virginia. But nothing new, no original intell that we've gotten on our own. So my question is—one, what do you think the soothsayers' response will be when they read your report, which is based on data that they already have? Data that's maybe incomplete—probably out-dated—possibly wrong. Then the question is—two, how much more impressive will your analysis be, once we've vacuumed up our own intell—material Virginia doesn't even know about—and you base your analytical report this new data, data that *you* helped collect?"

D'Angelo looked at him, thinking.

Remly said to Singleton, "Do you have a current querying program in your laptop, Alan?"

"I don't know how current," Singleton said. "But it's Virginia's own household brand. It should work, Simon got his biographs straight from the Campus."

Turning again to d'Angelo, Remly said, "Here's what I want, Simon. I don't *need* this, you understand—I only *want* it. We can always turn this over to Virginia, okay? Do it in a blink, if it comes to that. But here's what I'd really *like* to see. I'd like to see you and Alan run those intersections, so the four of us can understand why Kurskov is trying to kill me. Now, the fact that I might end up in a gutter with a bullet in my head may not mean a great deal to you, and I'm not implying that you should be concerned one way or the other about my health. But I'd really like to know what's on Kurskov's mind. So, what do you think? Do you want to enhance your report with deeper intell, or would you rather tell me 'no' right now?" After a brief silence, he added, "I'd appreciate it if you'd simply tell me 'no,' so we can move on to our other options—probably just turn the details of the situation in Las Vegas over to the soothsayers. Give them this preliminary analysis of yours in the bargain. Could you do me that favor ... just tell me 'no?'"

Simon d'Angelo looked directly at Remly, nothing in his face. It was as though he'd retreated into some deep inner place and pulled the hole in after him while regrouping his resources.

"While Simon is thinking," the F.O. said in cheery tones, "why don't you show us your contribution, Alan? Charles has brought us a fascinating puzzle, and a chance to play at the big table. I've provided the venue and budget, the round-trip fares for you two from the Atlantic coast and so forth. Now—bring out your gifts, Alan. The ones you hinted at over the phone."

Alan Singleton reached into his leather attache case and brought out a compact cell phone. "Kenny, Simon, remember our mad friend Dieter

Stellenhoff?”

D’Angelo looked with open suspicion at the phone in Singleton’s hand.

“He’s out again?” the F.O. asked.

“Good behavior,” Singleton said. “Back in business like nothing happened. Growing an electronics startup out in Fairfax.” Singleton handed the phone to d’Angelo. “Go on, Simon, take a look.”

D’Angelo looked at the phone, not touching it.

“It won’t bite, Simon, promise. Take it. It’s a gift.”

“What is it?” the F.O. asked, as d’Angelo unfolded the phone.

“Auto-roaming scrambler,” Singleton said. “Still in beta testing, but lookin’ good, kid. Turn it on, Simon.”

D’Angelo punched a button and when the phone glowed to life he said, “GPS?”

“Keep an eye on it,” Singleton said.

“This thing is a piece of junk, Alan.” Simon D’Angelo couldn’t have been more nasty or more pleased. “It’s malfunctioning already.” He held the phone out for Remly to see. “Watch the location.”

As Remly watched, the GPS position changed from Phoenix, Arizona, to Sao Palo, Brazil.

Singleton said, “Phone ID, SIM data, and scrambler protocols change too, on a random basis. This baby’s gonna drive those NSA pussies into a little room with quilted walls.”

Remly watched. The phone changed its location to an unpronounceable town in Norway.

“It’s feeding this back to a satellite,” Singleton said. “Anyone sucking up signal sees the GPS and SIM and phone ID for maybe twelve seconds, then it goes away. Comes up completely different next—new location, the works.”

Remly said, “The scrambled digital code changes too?”

“You got it! Fully synced. The latest digital: Binary to hex to binary, plus Trojan Horse technology that spoofs geo-positioning trackers.”

“Virginia know about this?” the F.O. asked.

“Not yet, Kenny. Like I said, still in beta. Crazy Dieter’s gonna take it up to the Campus once he gets back all the stability reports.” Singleton materialized two more of the phones from his case, handing one each to the F.O. and Remly. “You set the code to coördinate the scrambler with any other unit or units you’re talking to, then lock them in. They all sync as their scrambler codes change, completely auto-ranging. Once you’ve set the original coördinates, no other phone set can sync with your set. Totally and

<sup>1</sup>*SIM – Subscriber Identity Module*

absolutely secure.”

“*Great Scott*,” the F.O. said, “this will revolutionize the world.”

“Sure as hell it’s gonna drive those propeller-heads at the Puzzle Palace<sup>2</sup> nuts.”

Turning to Remly, the F.O. said, “This puts us in business, my boy. No couriers, no dead letter boxes.” He unfolded the phone and stared at it with undisguised lust.

“That’s a wonderful gift, Alan,” Remly said. “Thank you.” He unfolded the scrambler phone, then closed it. “I’m sorry, we won’t be using them.”

The F.O. still looking passionately at his new phone began, “But ...”

“Simon hasn’t agreed to help on the intersections,” Remly interrupted. “No need for secure communications.” He returned the phone to Alan Singleton.

“Ah, but ...” The F.O. let his words dissolve into silence and folded his phone and handed it back to Singleton, hesitating, then releasing it to Singleton’s grip. “Very kind of you to have thought of us, Alan.”

Simon d’Angelo folded his telephone and leaned toward Singleton and spoke almost shyly: “Alan, I wonder if we could go inside. Find a quiet place where we can set up our laptops, run those intersections.” Then, concerned, “You do have the proper SQL for this?”

Singleton and d’Angelo moved their work inside, guided by the F.O., three old men moving at the pace of Singleton who bent over his walker and urged the other two on; “You make me feel like a goddam invalid!” But the F.O. and d’Angelo staying with him, three elderly warriors inching their way toward an ill-defined battleground.

The F.O. returned, Elenacita with him, a box of Montecristos, a bottle of Leopold Gourmel VSOP, and two big-bellied glasses on her tray. Remly declined the cigar and brandy and the F.O. said, “Given up vice entirely, have you? Taken the pledge and so forth?”

Remly said, “I burned through my quota years ago, thanks.”

“There is nothing more dreary than a reformed hedonist,” the F.O. said. “Given up women, too?”

“Show me where they are,” Remly said. “Just *show* me.” He was leafing through the Campus’s biograph of Aleksandr Kurskov.

The F.O. let the sulphur burn off of his freshly struck match, then warmed the tip of his cigar. He said, “One thing I’m curious about.” A puff, an oval smoke ring, he went on, “Simon caved very nicely, but it was a risky

<sup>2</sup>Puzzle Palace – Cryptological Division (code-making & code-breaking) of the National Security Agency (NSA) at Ft. Meade, MD

path you trod, my boy. He's gotten quite fragile in his old age, on the verge of a complete breakdown it seems to me."

"That's exactly what I was playing to."

"And ... if he hadn't caved? It would have destroyed him, you know, returning home, nothing accomplished. Humiliated before the three of us, perhaps made a laughing stock at the Campus. Would have ruined him without a doubt."

Remly watched two sailboats beating toward the islands. One looked like a pocket schooner and he wished the wives hadn't taken the binoculars with them to the lower terrace. He said, "That would have been Simon's problem."

The F.O. thought about that for a long moment. "Yes," he said at last. He sighed. "Yes, I imagine it would have been." He turned his chair to the ocean and sat puffing and sipping until he fell asleep and Remly gently took the glowing cigar from his fingers.

When the three women came up the walk from the hillside terrace they lowered their voices as they passed the sleeping F.O., disappearing into the house. Remly thumbed through Kurskov's biograph. The women came out again carrying sweaters, Bea and Princess heading toward the old adobe stables, now a garage, and Lissie coming to whisper to Remly, "Up to Santa Barbara, shopping. Will you be here?"

"Depends," Remly said.

"I know how it goes, darling. So pleased you're all here for him, you three. Can't imagine how much he missed it." And she was off to the stables, her bracelets sparkling in the sun, then a sleek 4-door Jaguar backing out of the ironbound, heavy-timbered oak doors and tipping over a garbage can and then gone, down the long winding drive.

“Le bien public requiert qu’on trahisse, et qu’on mente, et qu’on massacre.”

(The public wellbeing requires that one should betray, and one should lie, and one should massacre.)

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L I S B O N

From her penthouse terrace near the top of Lisboa Occidental, Talia gazed on the red-tile roofs below—on the white stucco buildings that staggered like congenial drunks elbow to shoulder down the twisting streets, down and down to the swift waters of Entrada do Tejo.

Across the Entrada at the estuary something stirred the flamingos. It was only September but a vanguard of winter migrants had already joined the locals, swelling their numbers. In full winter there would be three thousand or more. Troubled, a dense pink cloud of flamingos rose off the lagoon, undulating like a vast rose-hued sheet set out to dry in a soft breeze.

“Ooooooo!” Joseph cried. “Grandmatalia’s birdies!”

Beyond, over the Atlantic, a sky glinting opalescent tones of lilac in the lowering afternoon sun.

With Hanin and little Joseph, Talia sipped her ritual tea on the terrace—*her* terrace, *her* penthouse, *her* little real estate empire—ignoring the buzz from within.

It was she who had made the final decision—she, actually, who drove the process from the start—that they should buy this complex of three tall apartment buildings grouped in a U around an open, park-like space which she also bought.

Ashor and Nasirpal teased her, calling her “Madam Trump” and “The Taliadonald.”

Talia grinned like a wolf when she heard them, slapping her thigh. “Two thousand, five-hundred, sixty-three dollars a day! Right here, right in my pocket!”

Ashor: “American.”

“American USD, yes!”

And Nasirpal: “Cash flow.”

“Net before taxes. Yes!”

Her current project was the large pond she’d had dredged in the park, waterproofed and plumbed, sand and mud poured around the rim for the

flamingos. *Her* flamingos. She'd had some caught and brought to the property, but they promptly fled back to their estuary. Now it was a matter of stocking the pond with frogs, tadpoles, fresh-water shellfish. For the birds to eat. It would work, she knew it would. Ashor had his projects, she hers.

And who was to say that his were any more grave or resonant than hers? His overflowing staff took up valuable space in the apartments, and also the empty apartments that Ashor reserved for his broken-down colonels and washed-up politicians visiting from home, denying her another seventeen hundred, eighty-four dollars a day, gross. She would have *her* flamingos, then, if nothing else.

A bustling from within, and Ashor coming to close the tall glass-paned doors to the terrace. She watched him sharply as he retreated from the reflections of an iridescent mother-of-pearl sky in the glass.

"Something is up," Hanin said. "Nasirpal looks like he's got pepper in his underwear."

"Intrigues," Talia said. "They are always finding new ways to squander money."

Ashor, walking from the window, hunched over, a phone to his ear—the large ugly phone that the Russian had given him. She turned from his image. Let him have his intrigues, she would have her flamingos. *Hers!*

Looking again at the estuary, she sipped tea and watched the pink sheet fold in on itself as the birds settled again to their watery feeding ground.

"Oooooooo!" Joseph cried.

"When did he take off?" It was not the best scrambler phone, surplus Soviet stock, but he obviously could not use the one that Vanbastian had given him. You worked with what you had—a lesson he'd learned early in life.

"He's not in the air yet." Fathi's voice was scratchy and broke up on random words. "Another twenty minutes until he takes off. One hour before he crash-lands the Diplomat."

"Say again."

"Another twenty, thirty minutes until take-off."

"It looks like a certain thing?"

"Absolutely. Hotel Executive Director is the target."

"Good!"

"Get the message through to Al-Jazeera right now."

"Are the others on their way to Odessa?"

"Say again?"

"I said, Odessa! Are the others on their way?"

"Once the plane is airborne, I send the Abu Dhabi, then to Odessa to deal with



Russians.”

“Good. I’m breaking the connection now.”

“Shall I back when?”

“Don’t call again for the next five days or more. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Repeat.”

“I won’t again ther five d- .”

“Good.”

Ashor broke the connection and handed the scrambler to Nasirpal. “Get the televisions going: CNN, Al-Jazeera, BBC World. Is the shortwave working?”

“It’s on BBC right now, Papageneral.”

“The suicide plane is on its way.”

“I guessed,” Nasirpal said. He grinned and something wild flashed in his eyes. He looked as though he wanted to hug someone, but restrained himself and stood rigidly, disciplined, a fine aide-de-camp.

“Give me the other phone. Get Rafiq in here now.”

“Arvan?” Nasirpal asked as he handed Ashor the slim American scrambler phone.

“Rafiq only. This is high security.”

“Yes, Papageneral.”

Ashor pressed the phone’s preset.

Jon Vanbastian answered, “You got a spycam in my office? Just putting down my briefcase.”

“I have something urgent for you, Jon. Follow-through.”

“I haven’t even gotten coffee yet. Give me a ...”

“Jon, this is very serious and it is very very big. I’ve been telling you these people mean business. It’s the Jund al-Iraq—the Patriotic Commando.”

“Sure sure sure. Since what—December?”

“I told you again last week ...”

“Sure,” Vanbastian said, interrupting him. “And again last month, too. Fairytales from the whorehouses of Mosul.”

“Jon, it’s happening!”

“You’re serious?”

“Jon, *dammit* ...”

“An attack?”

“Jon! From one of my people in Al-Basrah; Jund al-Iraq is launching an attack on an American-related asset in al-Kuwait—Kuwait City. Today, tomorrow latest. Send a warning to Kuwait; tell them, heightened alert. This will be a strike on a major American-related asset, a building—maybe your

embassy, maybe a hotel.”

“You’re serious.” But a statement, not a question.

“A major strike on a building in al-Kuwait. Today, tomorrow at the very latest.”

“How much you got? Direction? People? Delivery?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps a truck bomb. Perhaps air. A shaheed, though, I know that.”

“Window?”

“Daylight. Today or tomorrow, but daylight.”

“That’ll be air, but they’re running out of daylight. It’s already seventeen hundred in Kuwait.”

“Maybe tomorrow, then. How fast can Kuwait be warned?”

“You got more?”

“That is all for now. I will try to get more, get back to you later.”

“I’m ringing off right now,” Jon Vanbastian said. There was no farewell, the line went dead.

Vanbastian would send it upstairs, Ashor imagined. Then the word would parallel to Foggy Bottom—and perhaps to Virginia’s chief of station in al-Kuwait. Delivery through channels to the Kuwaiti legation, it would take time—four hours at least, perhaps a full day.

Rafiq and Nasirpal tapped at the door and entered.

“It’s happening?” Rafiq asked as he made large swift strides across the room.

Ashor nodded.

Rafiq made a fist and pumped it in the air before him. “Congratulations, sir.”

Again nodding, Ashor motioned them to the conference table. He sat, then nodded once more, inviting them to also sit.

Originally it had been two rooms, parlour and bedroom. Ashor had the wall removed and created a proper office for himself. On the advice of Daphne Logan he had directed Talia to purposely create an environment without personality. The anonymous furniture could have been shanghaied from the office of a London accountant or a Lisbon banker. Great taste, Daphne said—great taste or a sense of style—was sure to offend someone. There would be those who resented taste and money, others who disagreed with it. She said, “Stay bland.” Better to have no personality than one that offended.

Only in the corner, where large cushions on the floor surrounded a low inlaid table, was there any individuality to the room. And this he had done

not for himself or his entourage—all of whom preferred western tables and chairs—but for any visiting American or European press who might need reminding of Ashor’s middle-east roots.

It was another fifty minutes before notice of the air strike appeared on the bank of six television screens, which fed from an array of satellite dishes in the attic, hidden beneath the tiles of the roof.

“Here it comes,” Rafiq said.

First Al-Jazeera had a script-crawl at the bottom of the screen over a stock market report from Amman—a statement from Jund al-Iraq that an attack had been launched against American interests in Kuwait.

PATRIOTIC COMMANDO OF IRAQ CLAIMS RESPONSIBILITY FOR ATTACK AGAINST AMERICA IN AL-KUWAIT MORE FOLLOWS PATRIOTIC COMMANDO OF IRAQ CLAIMS RESPONSIBILITY FOR A TTACK AGAINST AMERICA IN AL-KUWAIT MORE

After another half-hour the other channels began reporting an aircraft crash into a Kuwait City hotel. One after another like dominoes falling over they began showing ground-view perspectives of the plane striking the hotel.

“That’s not the Exec Dip!” Rafiq cried.

“You are certain?”

“It’s the King Faysal. I’ve been there. That fool hit the Faysal!”

“Who owns it?” Ashor asked.

“I think it’s in the royal family,” Nasirpal said. “I don’t know who, exactly.”

Thinking, ‘Oh my God!’ Ashor turned to Rafiq. “Are there links to us other than Fathi? Anyone else who can draw a line from there to here?”

“Only Fathi.”

“How much will it cost?”

“I think fifty dollars American,” Rafiq said. “That’s about the going rate around Al-Basrah.”

“Papageneral ...” Nasirpal began.

“There is no choice,” Ashor said.

“Papa, not Fathi! A good man. Loyal.”

“I know,” Ashor interrupted. “Your cousin and you love him. My nephew, I also love him.”

“No, Papa! Pull him out. Get his family out.”

“They have agents, Nasi. Powerful families. No avoiding it.” Then, to Rafiq, “Use a cutout and a cutout. Don’t throw money around, it only attracts attention. Two hundred dollars to the first cutout, he passes one hundred dollars down to the secondary cutout, he passes fifty to the man who

does the work.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No Papa!”

“Nasi, *control yourself!* That’s an *order!* This is war, not family. We will talk about this later.” To Rafiq, Ashor said, “But *now*, understand? He must be gone by this time tomorrow. Are your connections good?”

“I know exactly the ones to tackle it. A cousin’s cousin. Sends the work around several alleys, no connecting the dots back to him or to us.”

Ashor said, “Good. Do it.” Then punching a finger at Nasirpal, asking, “Who feeds to Al-Jazeera? Fathi?”

Nasirpal had been looking at his shoes. Now he looked up, dull-eyed, and again at his shoes.

“Nasirpal—*attend* to me! We are in crisis mode. Who feeds to Al-Jazeera?”

Looking up again, Nasirpal rubbed his throat and spoke haltingly, “Fathi uses a secondary ... a secondary cutout ... in Salman Pak. The secondary feeds ... feeds through a contact in Baghdad.”

“Through this secondary, then. You make the contact. ‘No one is safe’—write this down. ‘No one is safe. All who have traffic with the Yankee occupiers are fair targets of the Commando, even the most powerful of collaborators.’ Get it through to Al-Jazeera.”

“Yes.” Nasirpal went to the low table and pillows to wait for Rafiq to finish with the phone.

The slim American scrambler phone rang.

“Jon?” Ashor said.

“American asset?”

“No, I said ‘American-related.’ I imagine they’re going after anything related to American interests.”

“You watching CNN?”

Ashor looked up to the wall of television monitors. A fireball filled the CNN screen, as though someone had filmed it from directly behind, the explosion quickly turning into the remains of a huge biplane that tumbled like a duck that had been shot, wing over wing into the Hotel King Faysal.

“I see it.”

“The way it skimmed the roof of the Executive Diplomat. Was this a close miss or was it intended?”

“Jon, I honestly couldn’t say. All we have is that an American-related asset was targeted. And I have strong rumblings that they want to take this war to America next.”

“Strong rumblings? You tried an antacid?”

“As strong as for this one. Next on their plate is America. I will have more for you soon.”

“Soon *when*? And where? You want me to fly to Europe, set up a meeting? My den mother wants a sit-down with you.”

“Exact timing for ‘soon,’ I’m not sure. And—Jon, no, not Europe. I have to come to Washington.”

“Not very wise that, my friend.”

“My U.S. visa is valid. And there’s this—I just received an invitation from some people on the Hill to pay a visit. A caucus on Iraq. I really can’t turn down a request from the Hill, not and maintain my credibility. You know that.”

“You visit me first, okay?”

“That is a given.”

“Me first, Congress second. My boss wants to meet you, I’ll set up a safe house somewhere inside the Beltway. But—me first, okay?”

“Absolutely. That goes without saying.”

Jon Vanbastian disconnected, as always with no farewell.

By the time Nasirpal was through with the phone, CNN began replaying the film of the attack. Vanbastian was right: It looked at first as though the huge biplane was heading into the Executive Diplomat, then it skimmed the restaurant on the roof, exploding into the Faysal.

Ashor punched Daphne’s number into the intercom.

“Yes, Ashor?” Daphne said.

“You said you were working on that combined House-Senate Caucus on Iraq Governance.”

“Yes.”

“How soon can you get me to one of their informal get-togethers?”

“I think in the next two, three weeks. They met last month, and they do monthlies.”

“Can you make it an invitation from them? Not a request from this end, but a formal invitation from someone in the caucus to me.”

“Yes, of course,” Daphne said. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Thank you.” Once she rang off, he picked up the Russian scrambler and dialed Aleksandr Kurskov.

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”  
Oscar Wilde

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . S A N T A   B A R B A R A

A man’s character doesn’t change after a brief application of psychological pressure, and Remly was not surprised to see Simon d’Angelo and Alan Singleton lunge angrily out through the great adobe arch some forty minutes after they’d gone in through it, each ignoring the other and both competing to see who would arrive first at the glass-topped patio table. With grim energy d’Angelo clutched his satchel and laptop, a disjointed scarecrow moving at an ungainly lope under his load, while Singleton seemed almost to be skateboarding his walker across the irregular brick paving.

“Wake up you old fart,” Singleton said, taking a whack at the F.O.’s chair. The F.O. came around with a start, as though he might launch himself from his seat and hit someone.

While Alan Singleton painfully eased himself into his chair, Simon d’Angelo dumped his battered old satchel to the bricks and positioned his laptop on the table. “Eight million dollars, Ken.” Although Remly was immediately to his right, d’Angelo ignored him, focusing intently on the F.O. “The connection between Kurskov and Levanov is simply obvious and even more ominous.”

“Fine, Simon,” Remly said to the back of d’Angelo’s head. “First the junction points that you and Alan came up with—connections between me, Eddy, and Kurskov.”

“In late ‘ninety-eight,” d’Angelo continued, as though Remly hadn’t spoken, “Kurskov is in London, seeing Levanov. Then ...”

“Kurskov moves in and out of focus like an astral spirit, Kenny,” Singleton interrupted. “But I got dirt on him—mystery tours to Seychelles, Netherlands, London ...”

Remly said, “Simon, Alan, I need those intersections. What have you come up with?”

Still ignoring Remly and now Singleton, d’Angelo said to the F.O., “We know absolutely Kurskov was in London again in January this year.”

“I’ve been in Vegas since June of ‘oh-one, Simon,” Remly said in a dry voice. “What are the junction points *before* then? Junction points that include Eddy Johnson?”

The F.O. said, “Charles is speaking to you, Simon. He needs an an-

swer.”

D’Angelo turned to Remly and said, “I intend covering the important issues first.”

To the F.O. Remly said, “Take him inside, will you?” Then, to Singleton, “You able to run the intersections—Eddy Johnson and me? Kurskov?”

“Got one at least,” Singleton said. “Not a gold mine, but it’s a solid hit. Maybe got another one, too.”

“Where do you want to work, Alan?” asked Remly. “Inside or out.”

“Let’s go inside for your report, Simon,” the F.O. said to d’Angelo. He pushed himself up from his chair, then stumbled, then steadied himself with a hand on the table, Singleton reaching for him, then Singleton wincing and rolling back in his chair.

“You all right?” Remly asked.

“Fine, fine,” the F.O. said, and in the same moment Singleton said, “No problem dammit!”

The F.O. stepped away from the table, unsteady on his feet, saying to d’Angelo, “Gather up your things, Simon. Follow me.”

D’Angelo cleared the table, greedily stuffing his biograph folders into his satchel, and started after the F.O., who by now was walking, halting, then walking again to the adobe arch that opened into the monastery-turned-home.

As the other two moved away, Singleton asked, “He gonna be okay?”

“A drop too much,” Remly said. “Simon took his biographs. I don’t want to mug him, but ...” He let the words hang in the air.

“Not to worry,” Singleton said. “I’ve got Sissy Simon’s CD data dump in here.” He tapped his laptop. “How d’ya think I ran the intersections? Got a memory stick for the transfer?”

Remly nodded.

“And take notes. I brought my own bio of our boyo Kurskov.” Singleton tapped a finger to his forehead, “up here.”

As Singleton opened his laptop and powered it up, Remly moved to sit beside him and look at the screen.

“What’s in the bottle?” Singleton asked.

“Cognac,” Remly said.

While his laptop warmed up, Singleton reached for the unused glass and the bottle of Gournel.

“You’ve had plenty yourself, Alan.”

“Just a drop for my back,” said Singleton as he poured.

“I skimmed Simon’s printed bio on Kurskov,” Remly said. “It goes dim right after the anti-Gorbachev coup in ‘ninety-one. Kurskov stood with the

coupsters—and on the other side there’s that iconic image of Boris Yeltsin standing on a tank, waving the Russian tri-color. Then Kurskov fades to gray. He wasn’t on the side of the angels, I thought Yeltsin had him shot.”

“Tell me what you’ve already got on the boy, I’ll fill in the blanks.”

Remly said, “The junction points, Alan.”

“Are meaningless without context.” Singleton leaned forward to massage the small of his back. “Tell me what you know about Brother Kurskov, I’ll show you the two times where you and Eddy Johnson intersected with him.”

A curt dip of his head, wondering how hungry Alan Singleton was for the process—the gossip, the war stories—as opposed to his own need for results, Remly said, “A pretty simple career. Aleksandr Kurskov starts out as an enforcer—sophisticated, working political targets—moves up to a spot in the financial directorate, but still as an enforcer.”

“Which is where he comes full onto our radar in Virginia,” Singleton said.

“And moves up swiftly in directorate of finance to where he’s a bagman for Rosvo Oruzheniyeksport, the Kremlin’s arms export bureaucracy. He doesn’t do the negotiating, that would’ve been Valeri Voshch, Kurskov only provides the muscle. Keeps the buyers honest.”

“What it don’t say, our boyo Aleks keeps the buyers honestly *paying* ... under-the-table grease to Aleks and to your pal Valeri Voshch, ROSVORZHEKS’s actual broker.” As Singleton spoke his admiration for Kurskov was not to be ignored.

“Whatever,” Remly conceded. “It also didn’t say it in the biograph, but I understand Kurskov did his own enforcing, hands on.”

“Vyshaya mera,” Singleton said. He poked a rigid forefinger at the back of his head and clucked *dtck!* with his tongue. “Seems to enjoy it.” And at this Alan Singleton looked positively envious.

Remly said, “And that’s all I know about Aleksandr Kurskov. I saw Valeri maybe a dozen times, but I never actually ran into Kurskov himself.”

“Ever buy a truckload of landmines from your friend Valeri Voshch?”

“You’re saying Aleksandr Kurskov was only there to see that the deals didn’t go sour—no one passing funny money for the guns and tanks, no one shooting the ROSVORZHEKS boys and flying off with the goods without paying. That it?”

“You got it. Enforcement, plus he got involved in some of the skulldugery that Dzerzhinsky Square was pulling elsewhere in the international arms bazaar. He was here in the states a couple times, we nosed around him.”



“I only heard about it,” Remly said. “I think Weaver babysat him.”

“Weaver?”

“Electronics voodooman out of SoCal SubSection.”

“You and Johnson happen to notice him in Liège?”

With this the memory of Belgium surfaced, and images of Eddy Johnson and the river and the Belgian women and of smoky cellar nightclubs. To this point in the day he’d felt more like a mendicant, begging bowl in hand, even as he was breaking through Simon d’Angelo’s reluctant shell. Now however a brittle coolness clicked into place—the final *snap* of professionalism, his sense of retirement fully behind him—and he became aware to an almost painful degree of everything he and Alan Singleton said, and everything they did, marking it all down in a mental notebook.

“Except it wasn’t Liège,” Remly said, “it was Herstal, along the Meuse outside of Liège; this would have been summer of ‘ninety-four. Eddy and I are just in from California, we’re troubleshooting odd jobs around SHAPE<sup>1</sup> in Mons. Dzerzhinsky Square has some ferrets deep in the Belgian arms trade in Herstal, so we get sent over—common wisdom has it, the Russians have scoped all our regular staff out of Brussels station, Virginia wants a couple of fresh faces. Belgian small arms is going head to head against both ROSVORZHEKS and Valeri Voshch’s freelance gun-running shop for some African paramilitaries that NATO is supporting on the sly, and the Belgies can’t figure out why they’re losing business to Moscow. Eddy and I do a quick smoke-’em-out of three senior Belgians in the arms trade—ferrets on the Russian payroll.” Remly wondered briefly if he should encourage Singleton to do more of the talking; while Remly spoke, Singleton was free to sip at the brandy. “We get artwork and lyrics on the Belgian ferrets while they’re having a little song-fest with the second cultural secretary from the Soviet legation—and Valeri is sitting in, like he’s part of the Kremlin wall-paper. I’m under commercial cover, Eddy’s covered as a dip, we can’t do anything direct. Our station chief in Brussels aardwolfs<sup>2</sup> our prints and tapes back to the Campus in the embassy’s overnight pouch, and Virginia passes them over to ADIV<sup>3</sup>, and Brussels all but empties the Soviet embassy with expulsion orders, and the party’s over.”

As Remly spoke, Singleton had been inspecting the F.O.’s box of Montecristos. “Cuban?” he asked, looking up.

Remly nodded.

<sup>1</sup>SHAPE – Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, central command HQ of NATO military forces, situated in Casteau (Mons), Belgium.

<sup>2</sup>aardwolf – An unusually marked African hyena. The word is also applied to important reports to headquarters from Virginia’s in-country station chiefs about the conditions in the foreign nations where they serve.

“Filthy addiction,” Singleton said. “One thing you missed here, Charley-boy. Kurskov was there. He’s the guy was orchestrating the whole Dzerzhinsky Square operation.”

“I never saw him.”

“Maybe-probably he recognized you the minute you arrived in Herstal.” He reached again for the brandy.

Remly got the bottle first and resettled it far down the table, out of Singleton’s reach. He said, “Herstal was ‘ninety-four, Alan. Kurskov was out on the street right after the aborted coup in ‘ninety-one.”

“Here’s where it goes off of Virginia’s map,” Singleton said as he measured the distance to the bottle. “Our boy Aleks gets struck from the Kremlin’s official invitation list, but he’s still going to the dances. Like a lot of former Dzerzhinsky goons he gets himself wired to a few of the emerging businessmen from Gorby’s era, now getting fat under Yeltsin. Then comes October ‘ninety-three.”

“The White House siege. Russian Parliament revolt, October ‘ninety-three.”

“And Aleksandr Kurskov’s back in Boris Yeltsin’s lap. While Yeltsin’s tanks are on Krasnopresvenskaya and Prospekt Kalinina, pounding holes in the White House, Kurskov insinuates himself into the building and selectively removes some of President Yeltsin’s problems—*bang bang bang vyshaya mera*—on a per-name basis, thus helping end the standoff and tilting the new elections in Yeltsin’s favor. The siege breaks, fifteen Members of Parliament come out in body bags.” Singleton eyed the bottle, then Remly. “Yeltsin’s ecstatic. Kurskov never gets reinstated in the Service at Dzerzhinsky Square, but now he’s got real presence with Yeltsin’s nomenklatura in the Kremlin ... and with the emerging oligarchs. Kurskov’s someone they can use, without soiling themselves with mafiya types. And Dzerzhinsky Square starts using him on a freelance basis, especially for projects like gun-running, where they want to obscure their fingerprints.”

Remly asked, “And the second intersection? You mentioned two.”

“Look, stop playing patty cake and gimme that bottle of cognac, kid.”

“Alan ...”

“Kenny’s got enough booze in his bar to get this whole town shitfaced. You want me to scoot inside and get another bottle?”

“The other intersection,” Remly said as he pushed the bottle back to Singleton.

Alan Singleton poured more brandy into the fat glass. “What I got on

<sup>3</sup>ADIV – *Algemene Dienst Inlichting en Veiligheid (General Information and Security Service), Belgian military intelligence.*

Kurskov doesn't come from Virginia, it's my own sniffing around. Stay in the business long enough, you make friends here and there. But our lad Kurskov starts to fade in and out somewhere just after your Herstal job, yours and Johnson's. Starts to fade, then my friends at the sister services overseas have him popping up in places he's got no business to be."

"Like?" Remly said.

"You ever in the Seychelles?"

Remly said, "Not even for vacation."

"Cyprus? The Hague? Maastricht?"

Remly shook his head. "Kurskov's been there?"

"That's what I get. Johnson ever been there?"

"I wouldn't know."

"What I can't figure, Valeri wasn't in any of these places either, and there weren't any Dzerzhinsky Square ops going down—not in the Netherlands, not in Seychelles or Cyprus—while our boyo Aleks was there. And then like Simon says, Vegas on and off since January. So what's he up to in Vegas?"

Again Remly shook his head.

"Alligators in the bathtub," Singleton said. "Then I got you and Eddy Johnson in London—four years after Herstal, November of 'ninety-eight. This is the other possible intersection. Kurskov's in London that November, too. But Virginia says you guys went on a bender, got pulled out toot sweet."

"Eddy," Remly said. "First night in, we're at Chez Solange, in the bar waiting for a table, Eddy gets a bag on. Makes a pass at a woman, Italian society type, waiting for someone. She tends toward the stout side, but good looking, dressed to the teeth, and Eddy goes over and she can't get rid of him. What Eddy doesn't see is that there's a table with a bunch of angry Mediterranean types next to her. Italian mafia types—bodyguards, because they're not right with her, just at the table next to hers."

"Johnson gets into some trouble?"

"Management puts us out into the snow, the lady's goons put Eddy into the hospital, I end up with a few facial lumps. We're supposed to be there on double-team surveillance of the traffic at Valeri Voshch's new Knightsbridge digs—now that Valeri's completely freelance gun-running—but we're one man down and I can't carry it alone. Virginia tells me to chuck it, wait for Eddy to get out of the emergency ward, take him home. Nothing else to do while I'm waiting, I go see Valeri solo. A what-the-hell call. By then we've gotten to know each other—we've been having these classic sit-downs at the Karl Marx tomb in Highgate, in theory just gossip, the kind I can add a few

brush-strokes to here and there and maybe paint a recognizable picture of what he's really up to. Valeri's a funny guy to listen to, and I'm trying to get him to invite me to visit his arms warehouses in Tiraspol—by then it's the capital of Transdniester. But ... you're telling me Kurskov was in town when Eddy and I were there?"

"Probably yes," Singleton said. "Like I said, he's fading in and out on me. Then after 'ninety-eight I don't place him near Valeri Voshch that often. I'm getting the impression he's working for someone—someone with a healthy bankroll—but there's nothing solid. This is when he starts showing up in places that don't click—Seychelles, Cyprus, The Hague, Maastricht, Lisbon."

Remly said, "What about Simon's connection of Kurskov with Levanov? Eight million dollars, Simon said?"

Singleton pulled the glass away from his mouth and spilled a few drops of cognac down his chin onto his shirt. He quickly wiped his face with the back of his hand and said, "Exact amount's up for grabs, but what it was, Kurskov helps put this character—this oligarch Nikita Levanov—into business. A bunch of Levanov's competitors—this is during Yeltsin's big sell-off of Russian assets in 'ninety-five—while they're trying to stuff their hands into Yeltsin's cookie jar, a bunch of Levanov's competitors develop sudden holes in their heads. Vyshaya mera."

"Go back a step," Remly said. "Levanov's an exiled oligarch. What more?"

Singleton said, "Instant oligarch, just add kickbacks and a few dead competitors. Picked up a handful of major Russian forests and pulp mills for pennies on the dollar. So he's making paper, now he starts buying up printing outfits in the eastern region; begins publishing newspapers and magazines. Then he tries to get political—the big press baron, okay?—but his timing couldn't be worse, 'cause Yeltsin's out of office: Levanov is part of that stampede of oligarchs who emptied their Moscow checking accounts, absconded to London in their socks and nightshirts in the early Putin years. Word from my friends in London, Kurskov didn't get full payment from Brother Levanov for all the help he gave—at least four dead bodies in Moscow—and our boyo Aleks keeps showing up in London looking for his end of the business. Eight millions ... who knows?"

Remly looked again to the ocean. The sun was dropping, the islands darker with the light behind them, barely visible in the gathering fog, and the oil platforms, and the gulls gliding in halos around the shoreline. What would it be like, he wondered. An estate in Montecito, running a franchise because it amused you to do so. Returning to the trade as a lark, rather

than getting dragged back as the only alternative to the grave. He said, “So two possible intersections—London and Herstal, the three of us, Kurskov, Eddy, and me.”

“Four of you, including your buddy Valeri. Herstal was an operation, London just gossip. Nothing went on there, right? Nothing Kurskov would want to whack you for?”

“You’d have to dig up Eddy for that,” Remly said. “He’s the one who got his clock cleaned. Like you say, my sit-down with Valeri was just gossip. But either way, it was nothing personal, just business as usual. Only crazy people hold grudges, you know that. Whatever kind of sonofabitch he may be, Aleksandr Kurskov’s a pro.”

“You figure your pal Valeri Voshch knows something?”

Remly said, “Maybe I should go ask him.”

Singleton said, “And this word—’didi.’ And Levanov’s London address.”

“Maybe I should ask him about that too.”

Alan Singleton reached again for the bottle.

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## . . . O D E S S A

Didi got them rooms at Hotel Rostov, only slightly rundown, in the commercial district. Yuri thought it was a fine place.

Yuri wanted to see the Potemkin Steps. They walked up them and took lunch at an open café at the top, sitting outside in the fog from the Black Sea and eating varenyki stuffed with cabbage and mutton. Yuri thought the famous steps stank. He said, “Big cheat. They start wide at the bottom, get narrow at the top.”

“Potemkin,” Didi said. “Here was a successful salesman.”

Yuri said, “You stand at the bottom, look up, makes them look like they go on maybe forever. It’s the optical illusion. Phony!”

“Good Russian salesman—the first truly modern man. Potemkin villages, Potemkin steps, a Golden Rule for today: Don’t bamboozle thy brother unless he’s got a few rubles in his pocket.”

It was a day for establishing their land legs for the Ukraine end of the job, and they squandered it like found money, Didi here and there doubling back to see if they threw more than their own two shadows. They went to the waterfront where Yuri admired the fishing fleet, warm-water trawlers—warm, certainly, compared to Murmansk. They wandered into a residential district and in a park there was an impromptu flea market where clotheslines had been strung on trees to show printed tapestries and T-shirts. Yuri bought three Elvis T-shirts and three Mickey Mouse ones, then looked at

big garish rings and belt-buckles under glass at another display. For a moment Didi considered stopping him, but in the end only stopped himself. It would get hot soon enough—so hot in fact that Didi already had in mind a replacement for Yuri if the radionuclides went critical on him. Let Yuri live a little, if only for the moment.

The contact café was in a solemn neighborhood beyond the city center and the tourist shops. Apartment blocks shed their stucco like dandruff onto disintegrating sidewalks and a babushka swept the street, Yuri saying she looked older than his grandmother, the one on his mother's side. He said, "Brezhnev's day, they'd get pensions, poor old babushkas. Now they got to clean streets in their old age."

Didi said, "Free enterprise. The gospel according to Saint Mammon: To the babushkas givest thou brooms."

The café was called Nova Pushkin, its sole literary pretension the menu's glowing comments about the food. They sat outside where Yuri took a sip of coffee and made a sour face. Didi had been chewing on a bite of pastry. He said, "You better not try the cheese varenyki then."

It was a street without traffic, the two of them Nova Pushkin's only patrons, Didi facing the on-coming lane.

"You sure about the time?" Yuri asked.

"Five minutes ago. Maybe his watch is slow."

Yuri said, "Oh, shit, don't look now," and Didi heard what sounded like a small truck coming to a stop behind him.

Didi turned to look. Three blue-uniformed cops jumping from the back of a black official van facing the wrong direction at the curb, the lead cop in a captain's uniform. Another cop tumbled out of the van and held the back doors open.

Looking closely at Didi, the captain spoke in proper Russian with a heavy Ukraine accent, "The Colonel's adjutant?" and it wasn't exactly as though he was asking a question. The captain tilted his head at the van, and Didi and Yuri rose and followed him at a brisk trot, the two cops falling in behind them and the café owner's wife running after them screaming, "*The money! They owe the money!*"

They were settled on benches in the hold of the van, the captain saying, "A hundred American for the ride."

Didi looked at him and considered the alternatives, which were limited, he imagined, this being Odessa, beside which even Moscow blushed.

The captain said, "Twenty-five each for the ride, another twenty-five each security services."

“Roof!” one of the cops shouted.

The captain and the other cops jammed their hands against the roof of the van. Didi and Yuri joined them too late and were jounced off the bench onto their knees: The streets of Odessa are suddenly surprising, by turns smooth or unspeakable. The road got smooth again and when the cops helped them up Didi counted out American twenties for the captain.

The van stopped and they stepped out of the back doors and it wasn’t a police station, it was a warehouse and storage yard. They’d parked in a lot filled with cars, each with a number grease-penciled on its windshield. To Didi it would have looked like a second-hand sales park except that the cars had no prices: Expensive cars—Bentley, Mercedes Benz, big American SUVs—only the numerals on their windshields and two men working on a batch of cars nearest the building, one making keys, the other license plates. Along the fence enormous wooden reels wound with thick copper wire, on one a large cardboard tag, KHERSONSKA ELECTRIFICATION.

“Upstairs,” the captain said. “He’s expecting you. The door says ‘Director.’ Can’t miss it.”

The warehouse was filled with commercial goods, a forklift delicately lifting a pallet of olive oil cans along a near aisle. Next to the oil was a high stack of palletized cartons stenciled in English: “Mickiey—Minniey—Goofy—Plutah / HIGH QUALITY SHIRT.”

They were stopped by two large men at the bottom of the stairs that lead to an open mezzanine gallery, the men heavy-set and seeming almost sleepy. Nothing was said, one man looking closely at Didi as though trying to remember why he was awake, then jerking his head at the stairway. As they walked up the steps Didi surveyed the warehouse and Yuri whistled softly. English whisky, Marlboros, Italian shoes, Didi lost track. “The real goods?” Yuri asked and Didi said, “Think about it.”

At the top of the stairs along the mezzanine walkway, open office doors. One office with women taking phone orders; the next with a serious young man at a computer; another with nothing but a large table and five chairs, full ashtrays and a deck of cards on the table; finally a closed door with DIRECTOR in chipped gold leaf. Didi rapped on the glass pane and stepped in without waiting for an invitation.

The man inside sat behind a massive desk piled high on one side with invoices and what looked like shipping manifests, the man fifty, maybe older, carrying it well. Good haircut but his hair combed over a patch of shiny scalp, good suit and no necktie, health-club healthy going to fat, a famous face—he had even made the Moscow papers a couple of times—Iakov Gubkin.

Didi said, "Councilor Gubkin..."

Gubkin looked up. "Already I got close to eighty metric tons of good high-tension copper wire I can't move. Sits in my lot. You wantta buy? I'll make you a hell of a price."

"I'm the Col- ..."

"You know how many mayors are coming to me, selling off new wire they get from the electrification renewal program out of Kiev? Maybe three every week."

"I'm the Colonel's adjutant."

"Sure, sure, okay," Gubkin said. "Kurskov's boy. I'm short on time." No greeting, no handshake. "We got here what? Straight moving job, security, safe passage document—nothing you wantta buy?"

Didi said, "Straight moving with security."

"Cash up front."

Didi tilted his head and spoke dryly. "The Colonel tells me he's taking care of this, no problem. Are you changing the terms of agreement?" They regarded each other silently for a moment. Didi said, "I speak for the Colonel, you understand this."

"Sure, no problem," Gubkin said. "Tell me who goes where, what you're shipping. You're moving stuff in from Moldova?"

Didi asked, "Who's the security? Cops like these guys who brought us?"

"Federal police, maybe army."

"Make it army, please."

"It'll cost you more."

"Negotiate that with Colonel Kurskov please," Didi said, still polite. "I will need a six-meter truck to bring down crates from Tiraspol. This truck ..."

"Tiraspol?" Gubkin asked. "You buying from Valeri Sergeivich Voshch? I can sell you guns here in Ukraine, save you a bundle."

Didi said, "Farm equipment. We travel up the M16, enter Transdniester near the Kuchurhan exit."

"You just buying guns?"

"Farm equipment," Didi said.

"You need mortars, field pieces? I got a general selling me a divisional arms dump. Comes in next week."

"Farm equipment. On the way, we drop off my cousin Yuri at the Hradnytsi exit from Transdniester."

To Yuri, Gubkin said, "Hradnytsi? No big cities around there. No manufacturing, no farm equipment. So what *you* got? Potatoes maybe?"



“Coffin,” Didi said. “Our darling Auntie Nadja. We are fetching her home for a proper funeral.”

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. . . S A N T A   B A R B A R A

On his way out Remly stepped into the library, which looked as though it had been furnished with books from the F.O.’s Hancock Park house. Simon d’Angelo was droning soto voce to the F.O., who looked up with some relief when Remly appeared in the doorway.

“Thank Lissie for the lunch,” Remly said.

A Meissen tea set was on the low table between the two old men, and the F.O. looked more awake than when he had gone haltingly into the house with d’Angelo. He asked, “Wrapped things up with Alan, have you?”

“He pointed me to London,” Remly said.

Putting down his cup and rising, the F.O. said to d’Angelo, “Stay right here, Simon. I do want to hear the rest of this fascinating tale of yours.” But to Remly he made a weary face and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, as though inspecting it for damp spots. “Grim,” he muttered as he took Remly’s elbow and led him from the room, jostling Remly as they went through the door. They went down a hall, adobe paving underfoot, glazed by centuries of monks’ sandals and secular shoes. The F.O. turned them through a door to yet another library, this filled with map folios and bound sheaves of decaying papers, a large heavy rough-hewn table in the middle, and on the way in they bumped into each other again.

“What is next and what will you need?” the F.O. asked. If he’d been at all vulnerable earlier, he was presently beyond that, the franchise now under full steam and the old man prepared to direct and facilitate it.

Remly gave him a focused briefing of what he and Singleton had discussed and determined, and why he was heading for London next. “It’s a long shot, but it’s the best shot I have, getting a truth or two from Valeri.”

“You’ll need money,” the F.O. said.

Remly said, “I’m fine, I’ve got enough.”

“Don’t argue with me, you’ll need money. You won’t have Virginia behind you, untraceable credit cards are therefore out of the question. I will phone a list to you of car-hire agents in London that accept cash, with no need for credit card ID for payment, just your passport. You have some spare passports?”

Remly smiled.

“I somehow imagined,” the F.O. said. “What name will you be using?”

“Jack Petrocini, probably.”

“You don’t *look* like a Jack Petrocini.”

“How about ‘Rex Havoc?’” Remly thrust out his chest.

“Now now,” the F.O. said.

Relaxing again, Remly said, “It’s what I’ve got on hand. I won’t miss it, a throwaway passport if I get burned under that name.”

“Throwaway,” the F.O. said. “If you need a disposable gun there, I have two sources. I’ll add them to the car-hire names.”

“It’s a bitch without Virginia behind us, isn’t it?”

The F.O. smiled wickedly. “Actually, I rather like the sense of freedom, operating without license or restraints. We might even unleash Alan on someone if the going gets rough—can you imagine it? Alan Singleton, no restraints? Bring down all of Las Vegas, given half a chance. I also have London contacts at MI-5 and MI-6 you may need, but only in absolute desperation, hear?”

Remly nodded.

“Did Alan show you how to program the scrambler phone?”

“He coded mine to sync with his,” Remly said. “He’ll give you yours, but he wants to keep Simon out of the coded loop.”

The F.O. accepted this without comment. He took Remly’s hand in both of his. “Best of luck. If there’s anything else you need ...”

“I won’t be shy,” Remly said. “Thanks for taking this on.”

“On the contrary,” the F.O. said. “Oh, and, by the bye, are you sure you have all the material you brought with you?”

“It’s all here.” Remly lifted the WalMart bag.

“Please double check, just to be sure.”

But when Remly looked, his photo and Johnson’s were missing. “I’ll go back out ...” he began.

“Perhaps your wallet?”

“Couldn’t be,” Remly said as he slipped a hand into his front pants pocket. But even without removing it, he felt there was something wedged in his wallet. And when he took it out it was fatter than it had been when he arrived. He opened it to see that it was now stuffed with fifties and hundreds, and that both his and Eddy Johnson’s photos were peeping out from the ID section. “You rascal,” Remly said. “You old devil, you.”

And the F.O., laughing: “Get out of here, will you, before we become all smarmy and dewy-eyed.”

At the door, remembering something, Remly turned and said, “You might want to go out to the terrace and rescue your bottle of Goumel before Alan drains it.”

Remly’s charter to Burbank from Santa Barbara Municipal in Goleta was a

Piper Navajo, the flight too short, too loud, too choppy for thinking, much less reviewing his notes. At Burbank there was a good-looking woman, brunette and a spark of intelligence and humor in her features. Middle years, no ring on her left hand. He tried to look pleasant as he followed her down the concourse; she stopped at the gate for a flight to San Jose, he let his face relax into the skeptical mode that nature had given him—seemingly at birth—and went on to Southwest's Vegas gate and concentrated on his homework.

“But boundless risk must pay  
for boundless gain.”

William Morris

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . H R A D E N Y T S I

Where the roads intersected just north of Hradenytsi the big KrAZ truck dropped Yuri off with the aluminum coffin then turned and went back toward Kuchurhan and Transdniester. He had two changes of clothes in a plastic bag, Didi had promised him the contact would give him a good lunch. He dragged the coffin into the roadside drainage ditch and waited.

There were farms in the distance north and east, and to the south the small village in the rolling green countryside. No guarantee when the contact would show up, Didi said, but Yuri was untroubled; a farm-country childhood before he entered Makarov Pedagogical, his mother tending their personal market garden on the collective, and he was happy to sit and watch a dappled cow in the field across the road. Maybe he wouldn't buy a trawler. Maybe he'd move somewhere south, sunshine all year round, get away from the fucking hot-stuff territory in Murmansk and buy a farm. Marry his Tatyana and they could have a cow and some chickens, even start a small trucking company. Shit, maybe start a small family.

A few cars passed, a few trucks, some curious, most ignoring him. A farmer in a long wagon pulled by a horse went clopclopping by, slowing as though to offer a ride, Yuri waved him on, mouthing a silent, “No thanks.” The cow across the road came to the fence and considered him while she chewed. A breeze came up and he caught the smell of hay newly cut mingled with the rich scent of cow turds. More cars, a tractor pulling a top-heavy hay wagon, more small trucks, then another farmer in a horse wagon, ignoring Yuri's negative gestures. The farmer was very small and very old—his face wrinkled like a dropped peach, its moisture sucked out by the sun.

“Go on, father,” Yuri said as the farmer stopped. “I'm waiting for a friend.”

“Yes yes,” the old man said. “Good to have friends, comrade. Good good.” His voice was oddly robust. “For myself, I have for long been a friend of the Colonel Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov. I am Podorov. Yes, Podorov.”

Old Podorov was full of stories, which he told with the desperate energy of a

speaker whose audience had long ago abandoned him—Yuri imagined the old man would give the entire history of the slavic peoples if the ride proved long enough. Podorov had begun his career in the tank corps of the patriotic Red Army, a gun loader in a T-64. “I’m not big, no no, couldn’t be if you wanted to be a tank man. Hundred and sixty-two cm, my friend. Probably come to your armpit when we stand up together. Your armpit indeed. Even the newest of those damned tracked prisons—those rolling ovens—even now you’ve got to be a little guy.” Podorov gave the horse a gentle tap with his long stick, more a wand than a whip. “You know how our great Red Army Chorus got its sopranos?” Yuri looked blank. Podorov re-charged his pipe and continued in a burst of smoke, “Automatic gun-loader mechanism. You didn’t watch out, it would grab your arm, maybe your leg, jam it into the cannon chamber. Pull it off, right bang into the chamber, take my word for it comrade. Hear ‘em screaming a couple kilometers down the road.” He was happy to leave the army and join Colonel Kurskov’s political enforcement unit at Dzerzhinsky Square. Still a risky business, enforcement, but you didn’t have that damned robotic clamp trying to snatch off your various body parts while you cringed, terrified, in a sweaty gun pod.

The Colonel had bought him the farm in ‘eighty-nine, carved it out of a big collective and privatized it just like that. Podorov and the missus lived in a very good house at the southern extreme of the property. A very good house, running water throughout, handpumps on all the household faucets connected right to the well. “I warn you, though—be sure you refill the priming beaker after you’ve got the pump started. Hell to pay if Podorova has to walk to another sink for a pan of priming water. Absolute hell, take my word for it, you’ll see when you meet her.” And a splendid barn, with outdoor summer stalls for the pigs and cows. The northern verge of the farm was tithed, so to speak, to the Colonel.

“You’d never guess it to look at me, but I dug out the foundations for the bunkers single-handed. Had a nice big earthmover—Massey-Ferguson from Canada, the junk Moscow sent us, paint would wash off in the rain, it’s the truth! The Colonel brought in a good crew to do the construction. A few slackers, but their brothers got rid of the bad ones soon enough. We were paying them in real money, not comic Soviet Rubles.”

Yuri wondered who designed the bunkers. Inspected them for quality.

“Couple of young men from Yugoslavia,” Podorov said. “Place called Vinca? Very scientific, these young fellows. The bunker cement sandwiched with lead. Didn’t take any excuses from the construction men.”

And the current security?

“Barbwire fencing, looks like a corral. The bunkers are low, roofs come

up to my knees, you don't see them until you're right on top of 'em. Nothing to attract the attention."

"That's it?" Yuri said. "Barbwire?"

The old man opened his rugged coat and showed a Walther P-38 pistol, its bluing rubbed through to the steel, in a sweat-stained leather shoulder holster, then reached behind the wagon seat and threw back a layer of gunny sacking: Under the rough cloth, a Steyr machine pistol.

"I've killed the occasional man in my time," Podorov said. "Indeed I have." He dipped into his pocket and pulled out a new cell phone. "While I'm shooting, I can call for help, it comes to that."

The stories went on, Yuri only half-listening, watching the countryside and wondering what it would be—a trawler or a farm? Assuming of course that he lived through this.

As they turned off the district road onto the track to Podorov's farm Yuri noticed that the electrical lines didn't branch. He asked, "How do you charge up the phone batteries, father—hand-crank generator?"

"Wind generator," the old man said. "Wind generator absolutely. Wonderful invention, the cranking generator."

Yuri said, "And lights in the bunkers?"

"Electric lantern. Put the batteries into the wind generator yesterday morning, I did. Topped them up absolutely."

Lunch was fine, Podorova was not—a pinched old school-teacher in a black dress, black apron, black hose. 'The old woman who turned into a crow,' Yuri thought. Like the fable of mother Marina and the water goblin. He thanked God he'd never been one of her pupils.

At the bunkers there was an outdoor shower, charged by an overhead tank. Podorov had filled the tank the day the Colonel called, but he would top it off with some more, just for luck.

Podorov opened one lock of the utility bunker, Yuri used the key from Didi to open the other, then Podorov handed him the electric lantern and was off to pump more water into the shower tank.

Down three steps and brushing away cobwebs, wondering how spiders got in and what they lived on. The supplies looked good, though more like something from a nuclear museum. A bulky gamma shield, the big flexible lead sheet almost too heavy for him to lift. His hot-stuff boys at the shipyard would laugh to see the single beta radiation suit: Soviet manufacture, but a Serbian instruction set, old as their fathers. Yuri tested it for flexibility, looking for cracks in the fabric. The tape for the seams was dry and beyond hope, the heavy booties looked good. There were paper alpha-fallout

smocks and trousers and bonnets. Paper booties. He'd brought a handful of his own badge-style dosimeters, was glad for it—the ones on the shelf were fifteen years beyond their expiration dates. A small G-M counter<sup>1</sup>. He blew the dust off the counter and turned it over to open the battery compartment. The batteries had corroded and leaked acid into the system. Yuri spoke quietly and simply: "Fuck!"

He needed a stick and a roll of adhesive tape, old Podorov brought him a broom and some very good tape.

"Not a broom, father. I need a stick, thin and light."

The stick came and Yuri taped one of his dosimeter cards onto one end and they used their keys to unlock the primary bunker.

"You stand over there," Yuri said, pointing to a spot in the grass at an angle from the bunker door. He went to the utility bunker and got into the beta suit, taping the seams, and into the heavy booties. He waited to put on the filtered face mask until he was at the main bunker door—these old jobs fogged up quickly, once you started breathing into them. In a single smooth movement Yuri put on the mask and filter-respirator and opened the door and flashed the lantern around.

*'Shit!'* he thought. *'Shit and fucked entirely!'*

Off to the right were some lead pigs<sup>2</sup>, he couldn't read the labels from this distance, but in front of him and to his left were the stainless fuel rod tubes—Soviet RBMK<sup>3</sup> reactor style, seven meters long—and a dozen barrels.

Yuri counted: Of the twenty fuel tubes, eight had corroded through the stainless steel, and he imagined that they would shake out uranium contaminant like salt if they were moved. Twelve barrels—they looked like spent fuel containers—and six of them, no maybe even eight, over-pressurized and cracked, also leaking. But worst of all was the floor, with a thin layer of water, condensate that hadn't evaporated.

Above all else he saw that there were no spider webs.

He taped a dosimeter card onto the bunker door frame, then poked the dosimeter he'd taped the stick into the room, not close to the containers but just inside the door, above the water, and focused on his watch. At two minutes his arm started getting sore, at four he had to change hands, at

<sup>1</sup>G-M counter - Geiger-Muller design of gas-filled radiation meter.

<sup>2</sup>lead pig - Containment barrel for radioactive materials.

<sup>3</sup>RBMK - Reactor Bolshoi Moschnosti Kanalnyi (Channelized Large Power Reactor), the Soviet electrical generator design that made Chernobyl famous. Ironically, the prototype for the RBMK design wasn't an electric power generator, but instead was based on Soviet uranium-graphite reactors that produced bomb-grade plutonium.

six he brought the card back. In normal ambience the center indicator on the card would remain white. As radioactivity increased, the indicator bar would become increasingly darker blue, until at the worst it would seem almost black. There were blue color spots above and below the indicator to show the level of radiation in rads, from zero to 1,000, the color on the central bar to be compared to the reference spots. The indicator bar showed only 5 rads, not bad for a day's work—but multiplied by ten to make one hour, then multiplied by 8 to make one day ... this was a nuclear soup. Even in rubber galoshes, with beta booties and suit, he wouldn't risk it.

At the yard in Murmansk they had remote, heavily-shielded suction pumps for exactly this, but he was in Ukraine, not Murmansk, and there was not even the electricity had he brought a pump, only muscle power ... an old man who had dug these bunker foundations single-handed.

Yuri peeled the dosimeter card from the doorframe: The indicator bar was somewhere between zero and two, liveable with, actually. So it was the water that presented the challenge. He wanted a cigarette but knew that even with the dosimeter showing low the smoke would turn radioactive in his lungs. He stepped out, leaving the door open, and went to the shower and pulled the chain to rinse down his beta suit and slipped out of it and showered himself and stood shivering naked in the afternoon breeze, thinking. Someone would have to siphon off that radioactive soup.

This was a sweet old man. Could he get Podorova to do it instead? Probably not—he was happy she hadn't poisoned him at lunch, that angry old woman. She resented everything about old Podorov, had turned her unspoken fury onto Yuri the entire meal. She wore a heavy Orthodox crucifix around her neck, a millstone from heaven but a divine badge of office—signifying that her every action had the approval of God Himself, and she was therefore right in everything she did and said.

Dressed and seated by the well, Yuri said to Podorov, "Father Podorov, I am late in my work and must ask for your help, for which I will pay generously, as the Colonel has ordered me to."

At the word "Colonel" the old man stiffened to attention, ripping the pipe from his mouth.

The problem was that Yuri could not work on the dangerous materials within the bunker if there was water on the floor. "Like working with electricity," he said. "You understand this, of course."

"Of course," the old man said.

"If I am working with the materials and stand in the water, I will get shocked and probably killed."

"I understand this entirely. I am not ignorant of the electricity."



Did Podorov have, perhaps, a pump and a long hose that would transfer this electric water to a place where it could drain safely away from the farm? No, sadly he didn't. Did Podorov then, perhaps, have a very large bucket, a big mop, a barrow to move the bucket to where he could dump the water and make it run off away from the farm? This was electrical water. Things could get pretty ugly if it washed back toward the farm.

"Yes yes, I can mop it out no trouble, young man. No trouble at all."

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. . . K U C H U R H A N

At four-twenty-three that afternoon, where the M-16 intersects with the road south to Hradnytsi just outside of Kuchurhan, the sun low in the west, Andrei waited for Didi's truck. He'd looked forward to Odessa, the vodka bars, certain parks he knew quite intimately—easy pick-up spots—but he hadn't reckoned that the Colonel would insist on Georgi going along. "For the muscle," the Colonel had said. Andrei wanted to reply that guile beat muscle every day but smothered his thoughts, opinions once again trumped by hunger. And not a chance for the bars and the casual sex.

Bad enough Georgi, now he was stuck with nothing but rolling farmland to look at, bundled in a warm coat behind the wheel of an old Mercedes 220. Las Vegas had spoiled him, had to admit it. Until Las Vegas he'd thought of his childhood in the little house outside of Yalta as warm—even thought of Odessa as a winter vacation spa, moderate and temperate. After a few months in Las Vegas, he realized that the Crimea was level with America's northern states—Yalta in the Crimea about the same as Green Bay in the Wisconsin—and Odessa the equivalent of the eastern Canada. And all these farms. No life, no sophisticated buildings, no bars, no sex, only this barren countryside and the occasional car. And Andrei waiting alone, Mikhail babysitting Georgi down in Odessa because Andrei had had Georgi up to his craw.

Four-twenty-nine.

From the M-16 toward Transdnier a big KrAZ six meter truck rumbling west out of the sun, in front of it a six-by-six Ukraine Army personnel carrier. They came swiftly then braked abruptly, a dozen army troopers pouring out of the six-by-six as it stopped and two men with machine pistols swinging out on the truck doors and Didi finally climbing down from the truck and walking to Andrei.

One of the men with machine pistols went to the back of the truck, reappeared and trotted behind Didi with a large, heavy cardboard carton sealed in paraffin parchment.

"Andrei," Didi said, "good trip?"

“Fine, no problems.”

“Open the trunk,” Didi said to Andrei. Then to the man with the carton, “In the trunk, please.” And again to Andrei, “Where are Mikhail and Georgi?”

“Taking a break down in Odessa.”

“Never again,” Didi said, his face solemn. “No more solo work, never again without a net, you understand?” Then, not waiting for an answer, “You will go with us down to Odessa, stay between the army carrier and the truck. But first we go pick up Yuri—maybe he can ride with you.”

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. . . H R A D E N Y T S I

*“Shit!”*

It burst from him, couldn’t help it.

In Murmansk he would’ve opened the fuel rod tubes, safely cut the rods short, and repackaged them in new stainless steel tubing. This wasn’t Murmansk and there was no dealing with these seven-meter tubes, the spent fuel in the barrels even more useless. Shit!

Old Podorov was recharging the shower tank, time was passing too quickly, getting dangerously close to rendezvous.

He went to the lead pigs and bathed them with the electric lantern’s yellow light. *“Shit and shit!”* The round, lead barrels were of different heights, a few larger around than the others, each pig differently numbered and all with labels nicely sealed in excellent plastic envelopes—the text of each exactly the same, neatly printed in Serbian.

As he walked from the bunker he carelessly removed his respirator and face mask which had begun fogging.

“Father Podorov,” Yuri called. “Do you read Serbian?”

Podorov stopped pumping. “What?”

“Do you read ...”

“Of course I read, my boy, surely. How do you think I got into the tank corps?”

“Serbian,” Yuri said. “Do you read Serbian?”

“Not I, no, not I. But Podorova, a school teacher you know. Speaks languages—Serb, Polish, Ukraine, Russian.”

Without a word Yuri stepped under the shower and rinsed down the beta radiation suit, then went to his pile of clothes on the bench at the utility bunker, returned with the envelope of rubles in his hand. Podorov was again recharging the shower tank.

“The Colonel,” Yuri said, “you understand that the Colonel has specifically asked this of me.”

Podorov's spine went stiff. "The Colonel, yes yes."

"The Colonel has insisted that these labels inside should be read." Yuri nodded toward the bunker. "They are all in Serbian, alas."

"My God what a pickle," Podorov said. He looked at Yuri then at the bunker then at the farm house and again at Yuri. "A pickle indeed."

Yuri pulled rubles from his envelope. "The Colonel told me that this is the highest priority, reading the messages on the labels." He held the money out to Podorov.

"Yes yes." The old man looked at his house, then slowly started toward it, pocketing the money as he went.

And if he had ever doubted it, Yuri now understood conclusively that money and misplaced loyalty could buy a man anything, including another man's wife.

No wagon, no Yuri, the crossroads rendezvous point empty.

Didi checked his watch, then nudged the gunman to his right. "What time do you have?"

They compared watches: Five-sixteen.

Across the road behind a fence a dappled cow chewed and contemplated them with no sense of curiosity, just watching.

At five-thirty Didi said to the gunman, "Go tell the soldiers we turn left here, go down that road." He pointed.

Once they were moving Didi reached into his jacket and withdrew a small notebook. Always of course there were issues of humanity and of concern, particularly for an old friend like Yuri, but it was equally true that a commitment was a moral pact, no less valid if the friend became a matter of history through some caprice of fate. He thumbed through the notebook, stopping at Chukarev, Leonid Krikorevich, by now a senior nuclear technician for the MIR reactor at SRIAR<sup>1</sup>. Turning Chukarev would take some work, some money—maybe even disappearance money for the poor soul as well, once the job was finished. Didi would have to think about that.

And the farmer Podorov? If it was a critical event, Podorov and perhaps even Podorova would have gone as well. And the area? Now Didi gave himself a mental kick: Yuri had a pocketful of dosimeters, Didi hadn't thought to take some of them for emergencies. Well, to be sure, a truly critical event would leave environmental signs—if not a complete meltdown, at least fallen birds and dead insects in the general area.

Then there was the Colonel, but that was too much to endure at the moment. He would make up something for the Colonel as he went along.

<sup>1</sup>*SRIAR - Scientific Research Institute of Atomic Reactors (Russia)*

And a trail of evidence at the farm? Didi had gotten all of Yuri's papers—both the real and the counterfeit ones they were traveling on—before dropping him off. Even if he was traced back as the missing nuclear technician of Murmansk, nothing on him to connect with Didi or his activities.

'Truly, *is* there a perfect symmetry to God's world?' he wondered, realizing that he had passed the famous Cathedral of the Assumption in Odessa yesterday without going in to pray. And now ... was he paying for it?

*"Comrade adjutant!"* The gunman to his right, shaking him and pointing at a tipped farm wagon, bottom broken out and its horse harness empty, an aluminum coffin spilled from it onto the road.

Startled into the present Didi spoke sharply to the driver: "Honk! Honk and stop."

As they slowed to a halt, a figure with a scythe rose like the image of death himself from the field of grain beyond the crippled farm wagon and stood unsteadily for a moment, holding the scythe as a weapon, unmoving as though confirming that they were who they were—and threw aside the scythe and took a few brief, halting steps, then ran, stumbling across the plowed rows to their small convoy, waving wildly.

"Completely unbelievable!" Yuri said. With Didi he was in the back seat of Andrei's Mercedes, the car sandwiched between the army personnel carrier and the big truck, heading for Odessa.

"Jesus! Didn't know *who* would come by. Podorov's wagon collapses under the weight, my lead pigs are sealed in the coffin and the coffin's in the roadway, *Jesus!* I send him back on his horse, get something to shore up the fucking wagon."

"Slowly, Yuri, slowly," Didi cautioned. "Say it slowly just once, not quickly two or three times."

"It was junk! The hot stuff I was looking for—junk. The fuel rods aren't useable, way too long, the spent fuel is crap. So there are all these lead pigs off to the other side, but no labels on 'em to tell me what they are. Total fucking mystery. The crow comes out ..."

"The crow," Didi said.

"The wife, Podorova. Comes out, says the labels all refer to some fucking catalogue listing, which tells you what's inside these things. Catalogue? *What* fucking catalogue? I want to tear my hair out, I'm getting so crazy over this. Must be in the utility bunker, I figure. I go back to it, and now I'm focusing like a camera. Click, the shelf with the useless fucking dosimeter badges. I get everything off of it—badges, spare batteries for the G-M counter—all corroded and leaked out, what the hell were they thinking?

An extra box of latex gloves, three different sizes. An extra box of paper booties, that's it." Yuri paused to calm himself. "Click! I go to the bench where they put the cartons of smocks and drawstring pants. And under the smocks carton—*finally!*—the cheapest fucking attaché case you ever saw, worse than Soviet shit from the People's Valiant Fucking Suitcase Factory, pure Yugoslav junk. Pressed cardboard, deluding itself that it used to be an alligator. Inside, the catalogue—and a bunch of other papers, all in Serb, transfer papers I'm guessing, some kind of history where this crap comes from—the Vinca reactor."

"And so Podorova came and translated for you again."

"Didi, do me the kindness. The lead pigs are numbered, the numbers cross-reference to the catalogue and the catalogue listings refer to *atomic* numbers—scientific numbers, the same in every language."

Didi said, "Now we come to it. What, exactly, did you take? And what did you leave?"

"At first I couldn't believe what my eyes were telling me. Weapons grade uranium, Didi. Highly enriched uranium—HEU—of eighty percent. Some spent stuff, some experimental reactor fuel, and then the jackpot, Didi. The jackpot! Like the slots machines in the Las Vegas!"

Didi waited.

"Plutonium, Didi. We got a tiny little ball of Pu-239. We get to the target, I wrap the U-235 around the plutonium, wrap some reflectors around that, we got critical mass. Nothing like Chernobyl, but a nice little melt-down. No fireman is going to want to get near this. Emergency guys'll run like hell!"

"And the cesium-137, the strontium-90?"

"No, no, forget cesium, forget strontium!"

"There wasn't any? The Colonel said there were several containers."

"Didi you're not *getting* it. You create a critical event this serious—a nice hot melt-down—it makes its *own* cesium-137 and strontium-90. Also a lot of other fucking interesting byproducts, like iodine-131. It's going to be like a beautiful fucking rainbow shower of nuclear fallout, once we start melting a hole into Las Vegas. Trust me, it will light up the sky."

Sitting in the Ilyushin-14 transport at Odessa, parked next to the Voshch-Air hanger and waiting for the Russian who would take them to America, Tayyib listened with strained patience to the three shaheeds Fathi had recruited. They would speak English absolutely, Fathi had said. ‘Absolutely appalling,’ Tayyib amended. Two of them with no English at all, and the third having studied the language for one year at university. Before he met them at Abu Dhabi they had already shaved off their beards and had gotten themselves some Yankee clothes; faded blue jeans, T-shirts, sweaters. One look at them, Tayyib bought tubes of makeup at a shop in the airport’s free-trade center. Their cheeks and chins hadn’t seen the sun since they’d entered puberty.

The youngest and the oldest were both named Ali, and the third was aptly named Ghazwan. Tayyib gave them American nicknames; the Kid, Pops, and Scout. The Kid was the youngest of seventeen brothers and sisters—he admitted to having nearly a dozen nephews and nieces who were older than he. Pops was in his middle forties, but farming in the open sun had worn him into a walking relic; Tayyib first guessed him to be in his seventies. Of the three, Scout was the best educated, with a civil engineering degree from Damascus and a smattering of English. On returning home to Baghdad he had walked into the middle of the American invasion. He’d married, actually got a job, fathered a son, lost his job when his boss’s company collapsed in the aftermath of the war, and then at the urging of his imam—as it had been with the two Alis—had declared his own personal war against the defilers of the Prophet’s lands. And though Scout’s English was spotty, he’d been able to follow the American and BBC coverage of the Abu Ghraib atrocities, as well as the news of them on Al Jazeera and other Arabic outlets. To his wife he’d said he was traveling to Abu Dhabi to look for paying work.

A Russian was let onto the parked Ilyushin, but he didn’t seem to know what was expected of him. He stood at the hatch, looking unsurely at Tayyib, one trembling hand on the grab-bar next to the hatch.

Tayyib asked, “Are you Dmitri?”

“Nyet English,” the Russian said. “Didi zdyes?”

“Didi?”

“Dmitri,” the Russian said. “Dmitri Dmitrievich.”

“We’re waiting for him too.”

“No English.”

Tayyib shook his head. “No Dmitri. Nyet.”

The Russian left.

“He looks drunk,” Scout said.

Tayyib said, “Hung over.”

“The evils of drink,” Scout said. “It defies the will of God.”

“Sure,” Tayyib said.

Pops had brought an el-quirkat board and he and the Kid played, solemnly moving their checkers as though in philosophical discourse, while Scout watched with a growing aura of boredom. Finally he turned from the two quirkat players to sit by Tayyib.

“You don’t speak much of the great blow we strike in God’s name,” Scout said.

Tayyib said, “I don’t speak much about anything.”

“That is true. What brings you to this? An educated man like you, a teacher of college preparation and a pilot I’ve been told. You must have seen a light from the Prophet to devote your life to this blow against the Great Infidel America.”

“Sure,” Tayyib said.

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## . . . M A K R A L - D E E B

When he remembered it, and he remembered it daily, Tayyib flinched with self-loathing—in his haste and fear destroying the boy’s leg. Of the others Tayyib felt no guilt, only regret, there was nothing he could have done.

The wedding tent was open on three sides, more an enormous canopy, but still too small for the crowd that had gathered. Tayyib’s father Khaled had taken the three oldest boys to the food tables, while Tayyib held up little Yazid to watch the three-piece band that was playing for the dancing men. There was a small electric organ, an oud player, and a man with what looked like a home-made nay. Yazid clapped his hands, fingers splayed, and watched the oud player, and above the noise of the band and all the clapping hands and the singing Tayyib heard a familiar drone of jet engines. He looked to the food tables where his boys and his father were filling their plates, then looked toward the edge of the tent to see if anyone else was concerned about the sound of approaching aircraft. A few men had stepped out and were looking into the dark sky, looking south and east—Baghdad

would be there, and the American airfields. But the men weren't looking up but more toward the horizon, as though the planes were coming in low.

It wasn't a premonition, it was simply that he didn't feel good about jets flying in at a low altitude, and he began elbowing his way to the food tables to get his family out of the wedding tent. As he came near, the sound of the jets grew louder and then even the sound of their engines was nothing when the Gatling guns began firing—heavy 20mm rounds ripping through the tent and splintering the tables, lamb and rice and pastries flying and skittering and bodies seeming almost to explode as they were struck, the blood spraying into the mess of food and drink, and Tayyib stopping as a line of 20mm holes popped into the hardpacked dirt in front of him, Yazid now screaming and struggling in his arms. A second plane and a third followed and although his boys and his father ran to meet him they couldn't outrun the bullets, the bullets thicker around than broomhandles and made to penetrate steel, the flesh of his family nothing in their path, his father looking surprised as he flew forward, the center of his body blown through with a direct hit. Tayyib turned and ran between two lines of spitting earth, thinking that to run across the line of fire would increase his chances of being hit. Ahead of him as he ran, tightly clutching the boy, two rows of florets kicked up the dirt, some of them blossoming with petals of red earth where the 20mm rounds had passed through an unfortunate man or boy.

Tayyib was bolting clear of the wedding tent when the planes began strafing the women's tent.

Men rushed from under the canvas—'headlong' Tayyib's only thought—their Kalashnikovs blazing into the sky, while Tayyib ran low with the boy away from the pickup trucks, bundling Yazid to his breast and rolling against the low mud-brick wall of a sheep pen.

The F-16s made a farewell pass, releasing their bombs on the parked pickups. When it was over Tayyib heard Yazid's moaning. Others were crying out, but it was Yazid who focused Tayyib's attention. To shield Yazid from the strafing he had covered the boy with his body, not knowing that he had also pinned the child's right leg against a brick, cracking it just below the knee. Yazid's face was a twist of agony, tears washing over mucus from his nose. His cry was low, as though he couldn't get enough air to scream, and Tayyib felt a great silent scream rising in his own throat.

The women got it worse. Even after the 20mm rounds began ripping into their tent they had remained inside, the tent strafed again and again.

Tayyib rose, gently cradling the boy, supporting his leg, going now to the women's tent, where nothing stirred. He called out for his wife Basimah and his daughters, calling them by name, no answers from the bloody canvas,



the boy moaning, saying in a choked voice, “Mama. Where Mama?”

As Tayyib walked back to the village, the ones who had not come to the wedding were running toward the killing ground, his mother among them, coming directly to him. He said, “Don’t go look, it proves nothing.”

She was wearing her hijab, her face unveiled, but with his words she drew the headscarf around to cover her entire face and slowly and very carelessly sat in the dirt at the side of the road, moaning, her wail a harmonic echo of the boy’s, her hands bringing up fistfuls of dirt which she poured onto her covered head, almost throwing the dirt at herself.

It was still dark when Tayyib began walking to neighboring an-Kahlik where there would be pickups and he could beg a ride to take the boy to the clinic in Hadithah. The news was already out, how the Americans had destroyed an insurgent encampment near the Syrian border; as he was driven to Hadithah, all the radio stations carried the bulletin. He cuddled little Yazid, kissing the boy’s face and whispering gently to him.

When they arrived the doctors were enormously compassionate, shaking their heads gravely as they studied the X-rays.

“It is not simply broken,” said Dr. Muhab, the senior surgeon. “The bone is crushed, and we don’t have the skills or facilities to repair it.”

Tayyib waited.

The doctor continued, “The Americans have a fine military hospital and many medical evacuation helicopters. We have called on them before and they have been very merciful toward our needs.”

Tayyib continued looking at him in silence.

“It is up to you, of course,” Dr. Muhab said.

Tayyib wondered what it must have been like for the American pilots, strafing and bombing what they’d been told was an enemy encampment. They would be young but well trained; firing precisely and dispassionately as though at the controls of a computer game: “Operation Evil Enemy.” The figures on the ground wouldn’t be human, only electronic blips to be zapped with their toy controllers. How he wished he could have brought them down to the ground, to the human level and into the tents to hear the music, see the dancing, share the food, watch the bodies being chewed up by 20mm rounds. If only he could have recruited them to comfort the dying and help carry the dead from the slaughter house.

Dr. Muhab said, “On the other hand, Dr. Rashad and I will certainly do our best. I can’t promise anything, and I suspect that our best won’t be as good as what the Americans can provide. They have better facilities, and their military doctors have more training and experience in this extreme sort of trauma.”

What would happen? Tayyib wondered. His identity papers would connect him to the village and hence to the site of the F-16 raid. Once the Americans learned where he and Yazid had been, and how the leg had gotten crushed, the boy would certainly be taken from him, he would be arrested. Would he be tortured? Killed? What would happen to the boy? Another orphan in the streets?

“My concern,” the doctor said, “is that even at our best, the child’s leg will never be straight again. And may even continue growing at a lesser rate than his left leg. It would soon make him a cripple, and a very pathetic one. He might even be better off without the leg, given this reality.”

This sin of these pilots—their casual indifference to the hell they had rained down on the innocent—this sin, Tayyib believed, was not exclusively theirs. No. Everyone in the chain of command above them had transgressed to an increasingly greater degree and those at the very top would be at their own celebrations in America—secure and eating their own food and listening to their own music and dancing their own dances—oblivious to what their war had unleashed.

In the end Yazid’s right leg was amputated just below the knee.

"If you're careful, you're dead."  
George Lois

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L O N D O N

Thick-browed porters at the Customs exit stood back and eyed the arriving passengers like bookmakers handicapping a paddock of horses. There was an American couple in front of Remly, their luggage sprawled before them, large floppy bags that refused to stay upright, the young husband waving futilely at the porters. His laptop carryall firmly wedged between his legs, a foot on the strap, Remly silently gripped his single checked bag in one hand and held out a five-pound note in two fingers of his free hand, and was pleased to see a three-man sprint to get at the money.

"It's been a long time," Remly said to the heavily-mustached man who got there first and snatched Remly's money and bag in a single sweep. "Traffic still bumper-to-bumper on the way in to London?"

"Worse, mate," the dark porter said in an east-end workingman's drawl. His name badge said A KHAN in boldface type. "G'dawful cock-up—park-n-crawl all ther way." He reached for Remly's laptop carryall.

Shaking his head and pulling back on the carryall Remly said, "What's the alternative to a taxi?"

"Michaelcaine your best bet."

"Sorry?"

"Teakettle. Choochoo, mate."

"Train?" Remly said.

"Get on first cabin. Paddington Express."

The weather was pleasant, Indian summer, but the architecture got in front of it: As Remly rode the train east from Heathrow it became increasingly evident that the romantic London of his memories was a victim of its own hipness—eye-catching new buildings and signage squeezing London's classic charm like hotpants on a duchess. Remly retreated again into his homework.

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. . . M I L A N / C O Q U E L L E S

If they hadn't been carrying the package for London they could have flown from Odessa to Brussels, then motored over to France and quickly to the tunnel near Calais; but the package defined their reality and they flew to Milan on Voshch Air Service—a freight-run of Ukraine pork—touching

down once for fuel at Trieste. Passenger comfort consisted of pads on the wood benches and full-body safety harnesses; they brought their own water, food, and toilet paper and Mikhail won a hundred, sixty-five Euros from Georgi at two-hand durak.

The timing was as critical as the place: The Italian Customs crew with ties to the family in Genoa—who had ties to the family in Moscow—only worked the second shift. For this leg of the journey Andrei, Mikhail, and Georgi were papered as meat brokers from the hog-farm coö্প, and when the Ilyushin landed thirty minutes ahead of schedule Andrei dithered and obfuscated, issuing contradictory orders to the Milanese freight-handlers, and delayed off-loading the iced crates of meat until the shifts changed. There was a brief conflict as to which of the Italian Customs men was to take the envelope of money, until Andrei realized he was being jobbed to come up with a second envelope.

Andrei shoved the envelope forward, not caring who grabbed at it, saying, “Share this among yourselves,” and turned and walked away without consequence. Mikhail followed close on Andrei’s heels with the package wrapped in oil-skin, Georgi coming along last, looking warily over his shoulder at the Italians.

An elderly Vauxhall van in reptilian British green was waiting in the airport car park, FLEURS FRANCE BELGRAVIA in antique type along both side panels. Andrei felt under the left-front fender, found the keys, and opened the back for Mikhail to slip the package in, and they began the journey south to the Med and then to France. In the back of the Vauxhall there were two metal benches along the sides, one of them with a loose seat. Along the way, with the London package safely inside the hollow metal bench, Mikhail attached the seat to it with spot welds, and threw the torch out at a pullout along the A-7. He lacquered over the fresh welds with a spray can, then scuffed the paint to age it once it was dry.

They passed without problem from Italy into France at Menton, using their British passports and travel papers, but Andrei spent a good two-and-a-half hours driving from San Remo to Fejus, a trip which should have taken no more than an hour at most. Andrei had driven this route before and now he commented bitterly about the development; once separate villages had become a non-stop strip of pre-packaged suburbia. Along the coastal traffic jam on the A-8 tollroad Mikhail and Georgi gambled on whether they would see more Rollsies/Bentleys/Jaguars or BMWs/Mercedes/Porsches before they turned away from the coast at Fejus. From the Italian border to Monte Carlo it was the Germans hands down, and a thin majority of Germans to about 3 kilometers below Nice, but between Cannes and Fejus the

British beat the Germans by a scant two Jaguars and Mikhail took another 20 Euros from Georgi.

At Aix-en-Provence they stopped to eat. After, Mikhail shifted to the right seat to drive while Andrei slept in the back. They switched again at Auxerre and continued through the night to Paris, and on to Calais, and Andrei told Georgi over and over to shut up, but without relief.

When they got to Calais next day, the other FLEURS FRANCE BELGRAVIA Vauxhall was waiting, ready for the transfer. With a cordless screwdriver Mikhail changed license plates between the two vans while Georgi and the driver of the other Vauxhall shifted a load of flowers fresh cut in Île de France between them.

The other driver was from Belarus, but had lived in London so long that nothing about him was Slavic. The London driver gave Andrei three train ticket stubs, return-fares for three fictional American tourists who'd gone from the UK to France on an extended holiday and would now be returning. As the London driver was getting behind the wheel of what had been Andrei's van, Andrei asked, "How often do you go through?"

The other driver said, "Twice weekly, regular as tickmarks. Don't worry about it, mate—by now they're bored rigid looking at me."

At Coquelles Andrei watched while his Vauxhall drove through the gate into English customs and security control, which would lead to the Chunnel's vehicle shuttle. Once it was gone, he went with Mikhail and Georgi to the Eurostar Chunnel passenger train, bound for Folkestone.

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## . . . L O N D O N

In better hotels the service depends in large part on the staff's memory for faces and names; in equally large part journeymen in Remly's shadowy world rely on the apathy of others for their comfort, and they find genuine pleasure in being ignored. In the disreputable radius of Paddington Station, Remly registered at a commercial hotel that catered to the lower strata of sales agents. The desk was alive with commission-men, some arriving others checking out, and there was neither a concierge nor room service, making it all the more attractive. He carried his suitcase and laptop carryall without help up to his room. On his way out he checked his laptop into the safe behind the registration desk.

Remly took the tube to Aldgate Station, then followed the F.O.'s hand-drawn map to the car hire agent that accepted cash, where he rented a sedate Toyota. From there he suffered through London traffic to a florist in Kensington. He bought a bouquet and arranged for its immediate delivery with a sealed greeting card that he provided to an address in Knightsbridge.

He added a one-pound note for the deliveryman. “I don’t think they’ll tip him at the door.”

Andrei arrived in London in a black mood, and perhaps as a result more coldly professional than usual. The Colonel had laden him with Georgi, and Didi had given him an impossible deadline with no resources. Andrei had wanted to rent a private garage, with time and budget to make a proper delivery vehicle. What Didi gave him was one day to get in, deliver the package, and get out—twenty-four hours. “The decision’s been made,” Didi had said. “Just get in and get it over with.” And no more than three hundred pounds expenses, plus per diem, for the enterprise.

Given the prospect that having Mikhail and Georgi in tow would attract attention, he charged Mikhail with babysitting Georgi, Didi’s orders to stay together be damned. There was an amusement park on the other side of the river, a place called “the Battersea,” and Andrei gave Mikhail a map that showed two weapons museums as well. Enough to amuse them for the day.

As for himself, Andrei spent a few hours admiring expatriate London, all of it within the extended limits of what the British press called “Moscow on the Thames”—Knightsbridge, Belgravia, Mayfair. One by one he eliminated the commercial venues, particularly because of the constant movement of cars, parking and leaving. What he needed was a solid phalanx of parked cars, finally deciding on the residential street as the best playing field.

The toy shops didn’t have the sort of dump truck he wanted; everything was geared for children. At a busy street-vendor’s cart he bought a wig, then at Tesco he got a cap that seemed common on workingmen. Capped and wigged, Andrei browsed the shelves of radio-controlled earth-moving and construction models at a hobby shop in Kensington and decided on a large dumptruck and left after memorizing the look of the packaging but buying nothing. He took the tube to a hobbyist super-store in Camden Town and removed his glasses before entering. At the construction model shelves he blindly studied a number of radio-controlled items, before selecting the large dumptruck he’d decided on at the first shop. He’d already chosen a handful of pound notes, and had them ready for the cashier, hoping the price wasn’t greater here than at the previous store. When he got to the sidewalk he gratefully returned his glasses to his face and took the tube back to Knightsbridge.

Once inside the green Vauxhall van, Andrei began dismantling the dumptruck while he charged the batteries of both the model truck and its controller from the van’s cigar lighter.

In times past they would have met at the Karl Marx tomb in Highgate, but for several years the cemetery, under a conservancy, had limited all visits to guided tours. Remly missed the enfolding sense of restfulness and sorrow of their meetings ... and the ironic symbolism of Marx's granite bust scowling down on them.

Now—if Valeri chose to acknowledge Remly's invitation—they would meet at Valeri's club, the Old G&H, off Lambeth Road, conveniently bisecting the distance between two intensely British passions, the War Museum and the Museum of Gardening History. The Old Grenadiers and Hussars was deteriorating with aristocratic gentility, its youngest members veterans of the Suez War. Following his successful lobbying campaign and induction, Valeri regularly blackballed the occasional Russian who applied for membership in the Old G&H.

Anyone following Valeri Voshch would have taken note of people who entered the Old G&H after him, not those who had come before. Remly walked briskly up the steps, entered, and was stopped in the vestibule by an ancient butler in a ruddy top hat that might have been pinched from a Lewis Carroll tea party.

In apologetic tones Remly said, "I believe I'm early. If I might just wait on the bench?"

When the door opened a half-hour later Valeri's voice preceded him like a bow-wave before a heavy barge, "So—my friend Charls Remingtonovich is here?" And when he saw Remly he said, "Charls, you got old, yeah? Gray hair!"

As he rose from the padded bench Remly said, "Time catches up with all of us, Valeri Sergeivich."

"Ha, no chance! Look at me—every year I'm getting younger! You took some big risk, sending flowers. You know how many spooks we got hanging out in Knightsbridge? Looks like cloaks and daggers convention. My whole street, you know who lives here?"

"Half of Moscow," Remly said, "and the Kremlin's after all of them but you."

Valeri said, "Ha," and swatted aside Remly's outstretched hand and wrapped his arms around him, squeezing powerfully.

Valeri Sergeivich Voshch was large in the way that big, retired athletes get large, a fleshy wrapper of success around his middle, yet still carrying a sense of great energy—even threat—beneath the fat. He had the stately, dignified gait of the chronically constipated and he lead Remly into the club and through it, past the empty dining room into the library where an old

veteran slept in an overstuffed chair, his bald head warmed by a shaft of sunlight through a tall window.

As they walked Remly said, “Even if they trace the flowers back to me, no one will care—I’ve been put out to pasture.”

“I heard that,” Valeri said. “You got retarded early.”

Remly said, “I’m sure a lot of people would agree.”

They settled in a corner of the library, edged by shelves from Ronald Firbank to Johann Goethe, and it was only through force of will that Remly avoided turning to the books, knowing he would reach out for one if he looked.

“I need conversation,” Remly said. “A lot. Later, if you haven’t enough time right now.”

“Later stinks, I got time now okay. Come on, give me the whole stuff.” Valeri looked at him expectantly across the low table that separated them.

No one had taken an order from them, yet an elderly waiter walked gingerly toward their corner carrying a lightly tarnished sterling tray with two short glasses monogrammed “G&H” and, in a sterling bucket, a block of ice into which a bottle of vodka was frozen. The waiter tried raising the bottle with one white-gloved hand, failed, then settled the tray and tried again with both hands.

“Don’t strain yourself, father,” Valeri said. He stuffed a five-pound note into the waiter’s pocket and sent him away.

“None for me,” Remly said. He poked a finger into the middle of his shirt. “Hole in my stomach, it’ll kill me.” The truth, he knew, would offend Valeri.

“Degenerate capitalist living,” Valeri said as he poured off a double-shot and drank it down. He showed his teeth and said, “*Aaahhh!*” and poured another.

Remly said, “You’re the capitalist, Valeri Sergeivich. I’m just a retired civil servant.”

“Who needs a whole bunch of informations,” Valeri appended. “So give me it; what you want to know, Charls?”

Tenting his fingers and resting them against his pursed lips, Remly hesitated, then said almost contemplatively, “No one knows what’s in another man’s heart; no one can peer into someone else’s mind.”

“*Now* you are learning this, yeah?”

“What I’m getting at, I don’t expect you to be a mind-reader. I’m just looking for some kind of instinctive response, the feeling in your gut. We have a mutual acquaintance—I’d like to know what he might be afraid of.”

“Afraid of. This is universal, you understand—fear.”



"I'm specifically interested in any small item of information that he doesn't want to be known, information that I might have about him."

"This man, who is . . . ?"

"Longtime coworker of yours, Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov."

Valeri's hand, which had been lifting the monogrammed vodka glass to his lips, stopped, Valeri peeking over it like an animal regarding hostile territory. He said, "You tell me you're retarded from the service."

"That's correct."

Valeri said, "Virginia don't know you're here, yeah? So—I don't like your questions, I can take you home and bury you in the basement, no problem."

"No problem."

Valeri thought about it. "Now you are off the payroll, you got a contract with Virginia?"

Remly shook his head. "This might go to Virginia later on, it might not. But your name won't be on anything I pass along. Right now it's for a private client—very discreet."

"Discreet," Valeri said, and drank off the vodka. "The Campus in Virginia—both of these Silly Intelligence Services here in London, the MI-Five and the MI-Six—all of you guys, you leak like old boots."

"This isn't Virginia, Valeri Sergeivich. This is me. No one is going to learn about my resources."

Valeri was silent, measuring Remly.

"What would Aleksandr Kurskov want to keep hidden, Valeri? Something he knows, something he thinks I know—maybe something that had to do with Herstal? Year of nineteen ninety-four, remember? Kurskov was running a little clutch of ferrets inside the Belgian small-arms community there. I smoked them out, the government in Brussels expelled half the Russian legation. You were there too. Can you recall anything that went on there that would make Kurskov scared shitless in today's world?"

Valeri said, "Make him scared without shit? Everything was known, what the hell!"

"I mean now, Valeri, not then. What went on thirteen years ago that Kurskov wouldn't want known *today*?"

"We have talked about this before."

Remly said, "Yes."

"You got something about it you don't tell me so far?"

"My partner and I didn't have any inside dope, I'm not holding out any sources from you. All we did was run a make on which Belgians were living beyond their obvious income—anyone could've smoked them."

"I got nothing you haven't got."

“So, nothing happened in Herstal that Kurskov wouldn’t want to come to the surface today.”

“How many times I got to tell you?”

“Oh ...” Remly said contemplatively, spreading the fingers of his left hand and selecting them one finger at a time with his right.

Valeri said, “What I like about you, you got no shame.”

“So tell me this—what do you think Aleksandr Kurskov might be doing in Las Vegas?”

“The gambling empire?”

“I’m living there now.”

“You? Big gambler?”

“It’s not like what you see in the publicity,” Remly said. “What do you think Kurskov would be doing there? Anything he wouldn’t want me to know about? Maybe something I know but he wouldn’t want me to talk about?”

Now Valeri Voshch was silent, tilting his head and studying Remly. He poured more freezing vodka into his glass and sipped at it, sucking air through his teeth. He said, “So now *you* tell *me*, Charls Remingtonovich—what is this you are getting to? What is it makes you think Aleksandr Leonidevich don’t want you to know something? Maybe not talk.”

“The way he’s behaving in Vegas,” Remly said, which was both completely truthful and utterly obscure. “Anything you can think of—even some small, insignificant detail—that you think Kurskov might want to keep hidden? Perhaps there’s a rumor of something. Gossip ... anything.”

“I don’t know he is in Las Vegas until right now. How is he keeping you from knowing things?”

Again dodging, Remly asked, “How about London? He’s been coming here a lot, lately. He getting clubby with the Moscow expat community?”

“Sure,” Valeri said. “We hold big expatriate buffet and fashion show every Saturday. Aleksandr Leonidevich flies in for the borscht and cabbage. Sure!”

“Maybe to visit Nikita Levanov?”

Valeri Voshch laughed, coughed, turned his head and sprayed vodka onto the aging carpet. He blew his nose into a linen napkin and said, “You got to warn me, you start telling jokes. Aleksandr Leonidevich can’t get nowhere near Niki Olegevich. Nine, ten years back he gets Nikita into the billionaire club, Niki don’t pay Aleksandr the money he promised, maybe eight, ten million in American dollars. Now, Niki has got maybe more bodyguards than even *I* got, and I got probably too many already.”

“How about sponsors?” Remly asked. “Kurskov has money, he travels, he plays baccarat in Las Vegas. Who’s employing him nowadays? Dzerzhin-

sky Square? Is he freelancing for some private enterprise?"

"You got lots of questions."

"I've always had a curious mind, you know that."

"Curious like the cat," Valeri said. "You remember what the curiosity does to the cat?"

"So, who's he working for?"

"This one I give to you straight—I got no idea."

"How about the word 'didi?' Something about 'didi' that Kurskov's interested in? Something here in London?"

"You better start looking for somewhere else to go, Charls. You are getting damn close to trouble with questions like that, here in this town."

"Let me give you some dates, then," Remly said. "November of 'ninety-eight."

"Ha!" Valeri barked. "Ninety-eight, you and me at Highgate, with Karl Marx looking down his beard on us. Year your friend gets beat up, goes into the emergency ward."

After a beat, registering Valeri's comment, Remly said, "Yes, the last time you and I gossiped, at the cemetery, Marx scowling down on us. Kurskov was in London at the same time. Was he visiting you, too?"

Valeri Voshch's good humor evaporated, and rather than respond he stared at Remly—perhaps through him.

"What did Kurskov have in mind that time?" Remly asked. Valeri pursed his lips and leaned back, and Remly got the impression he was being measured for vivisection. Yet Remly persisted: "How about this year? He was here in January. Did you have a sitdown? Borscht and cabbage?"

Valeri remained silent.

Remly said, "Okay. How about his business with you? Kurskov been buying things from you lately? Things that go bang?"

At this Valeri rose and reached across the small low table and took Remly's upper arm with one hand and brought him to his feet. Despite flexing his arm against Valeri's grip, Remly felt as though he'd been caught in iron pincers. Valeri stepped away from the table and marched with Remly still in his grasp past the sleeping grenadier to the tall open window, a step back from it releasing his hold to point to the street below.

"You see those guys?" Valeri asked.

As he rubbed his arm, Remly looked to the street. There were three large Mercedes limousines parked across from the Old G&H, the middle one two-toned like a Bentley, black over pewter, and longer than the other two—an added section between its front and back doors—and all of them with oddly thick-set tires that spoke of run-while-flat construction. There were eight large heavy men near the large heavy limousines: Three each at

the front and back cars, two at the middle one. The men weren't lounging but instead were hyper-aware of the street, the ones front and rear scanning it while the middle two looked up directly at the window where Remly and Valeri stood.

"I asked, you see those guys?"

"Friends of yours?"

"How many guys you got out there?"

"I get the point," Remly said in a dry voice.

"You know how many guys try to move in on my business?"

"Is this a multiple-choice?"

"I tell you exactly. Since the last twelve years I got exactly four guys tried to open up air service and surplus defense materials businesses. Tried to compete with me, okay?"

"Okay, four."

"You know how many guys who tried to compete with me are disappearing totally off the planet?"

"Let me guess," Remly said even more dryly. He was still rubbing his upper arm, and his resentment was growing over the open contempt that Valeri had shown in pulling him across the floor, but other than expressing sarcasm he smothered his rancor—this was Valeri's playing field, after all, and even if they had been evenly matched Remly would have suppressed his pride and accepted any humiliation to get the answers he needed.

Valeri stared directly and with no humor into Remly's eyes and said, "Guys who get too close to my business—guys who try to find out so much about me—they don't end up happy neither."

"Okay," Remly said as he massaged his arm. "Let me rephrase that: What kind of activity has Kurskov been up to lately? Activity that you might know about?"

"I got business to look after," Valeri said, and turned and walked away toward the dining room.

Remly waited long enough to gather up what remained of his dignity, and to avoid looking as though he was chasing after the large retreating Russian, then walked out also. When he got to the street the three black Mercedes were gone and only his rented Toyota waited at the near curb.

"He's been selling to Kurskov," Remly said. He was consulting his notes and speaking into the Stellenhoff scrambler that Alan Singleton had provided. "Given Valeri's over-the-top response, I'm guessing he's been selling to Kurskov recently, not just three years ago. And that Kurskov has been getting either very heavy ordnance or very big loads of smaller goods—Kalashnikovs, maybe RPGs. Also, there's a disconnect. I never told Valeri about

Eddy getting his clock cleaned by some lady's goon squad, but he knew that Eddy got dumped on and ended up in an emergency clinic."

The F.O.'s voice came through clearly and tinged with irritation. "It is seven-thirty in the morning here. Do you have something that I must absolutely know, or are you willing to let me continue with my beauty rest?"

"Go back to sleep, you old fart," Singleton said. For Alan Singleton in Hilton Head it was ten-thirty. "I'll fill you in when you've slept off your hangover."

"There are limits, Alan," the F.O. said. "There are limits."

The F.O.'s line went blank and the screen on Remly's phone suddenly shifted its GPS location from Doha, Qatar, to Ballymore, Ireland.

After a glance at his watch and deciding there wasn't time to lecture Singleton on the dynamics of tact within their impromptu group, Remly said, "I've got too much riding on this trip, I'm digging deeper before I give up and leave. What's your thinking, Alan? Do you have anything fresh for me from your end?"

"Fresh?" Singleton said. "Kenny tried to follow through on your request for info on this Morris Berman character, Sissy Simon d'Angelo has gone mute on him. Simon's about as useful as tits on a chicken, doesn't even answer his phone."

"Nothing on Berman, then?"

"I got the poop you asked for. Some friends at Foggy Bottom, I told 'em I'd casually run into this guy while Princess and I were living it up in Vegas. They checked ex officio with guys they know in Tel Aviv. Turns out your friend Morris ain't no spook. He was some kinda commando, was with this group that pulled the raid on Entebbe."

Remly said, "The Unit. Sayeret Matkal, Recon Unit."

"That's the one," Alan said. "So—what'd your boy Voshch tell you he sold? You see a manifest for the shipment?"

"I thought I made it clear, Alan. I asked if Valeri had sold anything to Kurskov, Valeri made an unveiled threat to boil me in oil and walked out. I'll try at least one more time, and I'll look up Nikita Levanov while I'm at it. I have too much at stake to walk away from it right now."

"And, yeah, go for it, kid. Like you say, you're already in London. Justify the round-trip ticket."

Again Remly held himself back, not contradicting Alan Singleton, the prospect of wasting a round-trip ticket balanced against a shotgun muzzle flash and the memory of the armoire door spinning away, and of Karen's desperate phone call and Remly's own understanding of what had happened to Eddy Johnson. He said, "Sure, Alan, let's not waste the ticket—it's non-refundable."

After they rang off, Remly got out of his Toyota rental, memorized his space number in the car park, and walked three blocks, then turned and walked another block and stopped. Valeri's three Mercedes were parked in front of his house and stocky men stood along both sidewalks, the men somberly dressed and closely watching the occasional car that drove by. Without making a point of it, Remly noted the tires on the cars and understood that every vehicle on the block was armored and shod with thick high-security rubber. Remly turned and went around the corner and two blocks down from Valeri Voshch's house, where the streets got wider and the houses measurably larger, and again large armored cars lining the curb, though more Bentleys and Rolls Royces here than on Valeri's block. Remly checked the slip of paper that Alf Noles had taken from Aleksandr Kurskov's SUV. He looked down the street to determine the number, and looked as well for anything that might vaguely relate to the word "didi." Nothing. Without directly looking at them Remly measured the stocky men sprinkled along the way, some behind the iron picket fences that bordered shallow yards, some leaning on their masters' armor-plated cars: Moscow on the Thames.

In the middle of the block a door opened, four bodyguards emerging and Remly judging that this was about where Levanov's house should be. Two of the heavy-set men peeled off left and right along the sidewalk, one of them coming directly at Remly and blocking his way: "Pleess no passink." It wasn't a request.

Remly stopped, pulling on his "I'm harmless" face and taking a step back in order to see around the man.

The remaining two bodyguards were at a black Bentley parked directly in front of the open door, one—a wand in his hand—looking under it, moving the wand back and forth. When he stood there was a bright flash at the end of his wand—a mirror. The other guard busied himself with the remote locks, then slipped into the driver's seat and started the car. Distant on the sidewalk the fourth thug held his arms wide, three impatient pedestrians trying to step around him.

A middle-aging couple, well-dressed—a fur coat casually over the woman's shoulders—stepped from the house without haste, the man walking ahead as a guard opened the curbside back door of the Bentley, the thick bodyguard closing the door after him and rushing to the street side to help the woman in.

When the blast came, Remly was only briefly aware of the fireball and the simultaneous booming explosion.

— T W O —

P L A N S

“Die Menschen gehen wie Schiesskugeln weiter, wenn sie abgeglättet sind.”

(Men, like bullets, go farthest when they are smoothest.)

Johann Paul Richter

## AUTUMN 2004 . . .

## . . . INSIDE THE BELTWAY

At first he resisted the makeup. It was only after Daphne showed him test photos—one with makeup, the other without—that Ashor yielded. As they rode in a Lincoln stretch limo between photo ops, the makeup lady touched him up.

Although her plan for the Washington campaign had been approved by Danziger himself—Danziger’s blessing of it relayed personally to Ashor via phone—every detail had been crafted by Daphne and presented to Ashor before they left Lisbon for Washington. Her overarching goal was not to solicit an outright call for Ashor’s return to the government in Baghdad. Instead, as she put it, the plan was to “make everyone think they’ve already agreed to what you’re going to do, once you start doing it.” The “what” that he might wish to do was left unspoken, but “everyone” was clearly articulated by Daphne—not simply the pols on the Hill but, even more ambitiously, select business interests and the entire American people . . . or at any rate the American press, which in its arrogance and naiveté imagined itself to be the entire American people.

“It’s gonna be a grind,” Daphne said. “I’m dragging you and Talia all over the parking lot. National photo shoots, the usual suspects—Lincoln Memorial, Capitol Dome, Supreme Court steps, yada yada; a different venue for each DC bureau of the major metro dailies—NYC, Chicago, L.A. yada yada yada. Maybe one or two of the usual suspects for national TV feeds, the AP, I don’t know what Chaz lined up for you on that end yet. For the *Post*, the local TV outlets, we do a whirlwind of insider stuff—maybe you and Talia buying mangos or something in Eastern Market, depends on security of course. Definitely Kenilworth Gardens, def the Law Enforcement Center—they’ve got a great memorial wall, beauty photo-op—I’m working with my local staff, refining the list, getting the best angles and how to bunch the photographers. And we’re looking for some kind of Susan B. Anthony-type tie-in where Talia can make a few comments; new era of women’s rights needed in Iraq, et cetera and so on, yada yada. Chaz has gotten her a French interpreter.”



Two days before Ashor was to leave Lisbon, Garrett Alderson and Nasirpal had come to Ashor's top-floor office with a copy of the position paper on which Daphne had based Ashor's Washington agenda.

"Absolute disaster," Garrett said. "No credentials as a press agent, mind you, but I can tell you chapter and verse what the boys at the editorial desk want: Bombs! Floods! Fires, car chases, celebs! What this lady's got ... looks like broccoli to me, Ashor."

Nasirpal said, "I don't see where she's buffing your image, Papageneral." He and Garrett had been invited to sit, but Nasirpal remained standing, now chopping his hands through the air as punctuation. "She's got you talking export-import numbers" ... (chop) ... "industrial graphs" ... (chop) ... "economic models." ... (chop) ... "My thinking—isn't she supposed to be positioning you as a great leader?" And here he held both hands out to his father, as though offering him a tureen of soup.

"What this makes you look like," Garrett said, "all due respect, it makes you look like a guy selling farm implements."

Ashor's smile was not called up from his repertoire of charm, it was an expression of genuine amusement. "Perhaps it would be good to ask Daphne up here to defend her agenda," he said. He pressed her button on the phone console.

Although Nasirpal's vehemence collapsed when Daphne walked into the room, he remained firm in his opposition to the Washington position paper that she had written for his father. "I know you put a lot of thought into this," he said in consoling tones, "but I don't see a single item that makes Papageneral look like a great leader. There's no *celebrity* factor in it."

Daphne had brought an emery board with her, Ashor wondering if he had really interrupted her fingernail grooming or if she had anticipated trouble and this was a ploy to let them know she was cool.

"Celebrities," Daphne said, smoothing what may have been a rough nail on the little finger of her left hand. "How many celeb Iraqi expats can you think of who flamed out—and brought down their Washington promoters when they crashed? Three? Four?"

With no trump cards to play, Garrett was reduced to nodding as though he had been skeptical about political rock-idols all along.

Daphne looked up from her fingernails and continued, "But, okay. Okay. Let's do it your way," she said directly to Nasirpal. "So we buff and puff Ashor as a kindly, ahem, ex-general? Ouch! From Saddam's, ahem, armed forces? Double ouch! Voluntary exile who wants to go back to Baghdad and get back into the military? Ho hum! So what's the response of your typical senator-slash-congressperson?" She paused to inspect the nail of

her ring finger, then looked up. “No takers?” Another brief pause, and she said, “Okay, I’ll tell you. No matter how we try to glam him up, the average Washington pol is going to ask, ‘Who is this character? What’s he want from me? What’s he peddling?’”

She looked first at Nasirpal, then at Garrett, waiting for a response.

Nasirpal, who had been focusing closely on Daphne’s words, accommodated her: “You talk about my father as though he’s just another Iraqi refugee. But you know he’s not. Our family has three thousand years of history in the region. Mesopotamia ... Assyria and beyond. I don’t even see a *hint* of that in what you’ve come up with.”

Daphne contemplated Nasirpal for only a brief moment, contemplated her perfect manicure, then turned to Ashor, her face without expression beyond a slight lift of her eyebrows, as though asking, “May I?” Ashor dipped his head and gestured with an open palm toward Nasirpal, symbolically offering him up as a sacrifice.

“I want to break the truth to you,” Daphne said to Nasirpal, her tone conciliatory despite her words. “But gently, gently. My first instinct was to say, ‘Your family heritage and twenty dollars will get you a cup of coffee anywhere inside the Beltway.’ The practical reality is that politicians are even more self-centered than single-cell viruses. They don’t care about you, they don’t care about your father, and they don’t have the slightest clue about history beyond the last study their campaign pollsters ran. Am I getting through?”

Perhaps she might have been, for Nasirpal remained silent though petulant.

“What I’m doing,” Daphne said, “I’m pressing these guys’ hot buttons—the ‘What’s in it for me?’ button. Ashor doesn’t count, you don’t count, I don’t count, only their self-interest counts. We want these folks on the Hill to understand at a deep intestinal level, right down to the exit of their lower gut, that Iraq’s stability is crucial to local economic interests, city by city and state by state. Vote by vote! I got my staff at Chas Danziger and Assoc to run a database of exports from the U.S. to the Gulf States last year. We developed a model of how the exports would have increased if Iraq had been a stable trading partner. Broke the numbers down industry by industry.”

Nasirpal again showed his agitation: “You’re making this look like some kind of trade mission.”

“Has a point,” Garrett added. Daphne looked sharply at Garrett, who in return offered a small grin and a slight ducking gesture. “Gotta admit,” he said weakly.

“It *would* be a trade mission, as Nasi puts it,” Daphne said, “if there

was any trade to be done with Iraq. But given the present situation there, American industries are doing zip business with Baghdad. And you,” here she pointed at Nasirpal, “should know that. We have federal government data regarding gulf-states purchases—*detailed* data—products, states, cities, Congressional Districts, companies ... even the unions that are tied to these companies and industries. And all of it shows that these congressional districts are doing a lot of business with every one of the Gulf States *except* Iraq. Now comes the ‘What’s in it for me?’ button. We’re pitching our message about export possibilities directly to the press in each one of these Congressional Districts. ‘Imagine,’ we’re telling them, ‘how much money your region could be earning if only Iraq had a *stable* government. Shouldn’t you be talking to your representatives in Washington about this?’ And our pitch inside the Beltway is that Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi is the only guy in the known universe who can bring any kind of stability to Iraq, *if* he returns and is put in charge of the Iraq military general staff. *If* he’s allowed to give amnesty to a number of former officers, some of ‘em Ba’athists, who’re currently out on the street.”

Neither Nasirpal nor Garrett responded.

Now in the back of the Lincoln stretch limo Daphne continued briefing Ashor on their pitch.

“Some of these reporters,” she told Ashor, “you’ll have to be patient with, okay? The major metro dailies, they’ve got bureaus inside the Beltway, their people will be cool. A lot of the smaller papers—like northern Los Angeles County slash southern Ventura County, out in California—we’re flying their guys in for the photo ops. These reporters will have handouts that target their local industries and companies—lots of computer stuff and CNC programming in that north L.A. south Ventura area, it gets kinda arcane—but you may get some weird questions. I mean, these are small-town writers, not the Washington Press Corps. Just be relaxed, okay?”

Ashor nodded patiently, wondering how carefully Daphne had been watching him the last few years.

The follow-on story—to be distributed when Ashor was no longer available for photo ops and questions—was that the government in Iraq, both as it now existed and where it was headed if left to its own devices, would never be able to contain the growing violence. And of course, lacking any reasonable security in Iraq, the communities and industries that Daphne had targeted would not be able to export their billions of dollars worth of goods.

Ashor asked, “The Kurdish Center?”

“Depends, if there’s time, yeah, but strictly for overseas feed. Here in the States? Who really cares? Sorry.”

“The Kurdish Center,” Ashor insisted. “You focus only on America. I have other constituencies as well.”

As for the caucus: Daphne explained that it was an informal group, the Iraq Governance Caucus. Members of the caucus were from both the Senate and the House, and from both sides of the aisle. Caucuses, she told him, weren’t official congressional committees but informal cliques, often social ones and very often sponsored on the hush by monied interests. Iraq Governance was heavily supported by large private contractors who hadn’t yet gotten a slice of the reconstruction or security pies. “Could be a *very* powerful defacto lobbying group for you, not a dime out of your own pocket. They’re running alongside the tracks, looking to get onto the Iraq gravy train, and they don’t yet have any really powerful allies on the Hill. Hello? While we’re there, we’ll collect business cards from these contractors without portfolio.”

Talia wanted to see the cherry trees, but the security people vetoed it. There wouldn’t be any blossoms, this time of year. And both the Tidal Basin and East-Potomac Park were a sharpshooter’s playbook of opportunities.

As he and Talia were taken from one photo-op to another, Ashor studied the script Daphne had written for him to give to the caucus. Along with responses and one-liners there was also a list of personality profiles of certain congressmen, the ones who would probably throw beanballs at him—Daphne defining “beanballs”—little skull-and-bones marks beside their names.

“This town has more eyes than a potato farm,” Jon Vanbastian had said. “Foreign spooks, dips, tourists; also you’ve got the folks who labor in the local power plants—the pols, uncivil servants, lobby-mobsters from Killer Street. Plus always the press-credentialed rumor-meisters and scandal-sheeters who call themselves ‘journalists.’ Inside the Beltway? No one has a meeting without getting logged in someone else’s diary.” They couldn’t meet in Virginia? Ashor asked. No way, Vanbastian said. “Only anonymous way in would be blacked-out limo, maybe chopper; even that’s vulnerable. It gets too Byzantine.” He told Ashor it was going to be simple magic, nothing complicated, a dropout. He said, “You disappear, we talk. We finish talking, you re-materialize.” Simple magic.

Daphne Logan was to take the day off, Ashor had insisted. The last two days had been a blur, he’d watched her balancing on the thin edge. “See your old friends, catch up on the gossip. Forget work until time for the cau-

cus.” Daphne pulled a face—her worried-little-mother look, which Ashor had been seeing more and more recently—and started to protest. Ashor said, “For me, too, Daphne. Some privacy to enjoy my family.”

Ashor urged Talia to be on time, she insisted on picking the proper dress and handbag for a casual lunch in Washington, then agonized over the best shoes to complement the purse ... they were thirty minutes late getting out the door. Once in motion—dropped off five blocks from the restaurant and walking a low-key SDR<sup>1</sup>—Ashor got caught up in observing the details of the operation; no sudden stops, no turnings, nor any doubling back, any of which would have alerted unwanted followers that his detail of escorts was in fact *looking* for followers. It was, simply, a casual stroll, its meaningless route quite meaningfully plotted by Vanbastian’s people, with all the pauses for windowshopping natural to tourists, and Ashor, taking mental notes of how they’d configured the hesitations and the leapfrogging of Vanbastian’s minders, hardly noticed that Talia, walking alongside him, had begun to limp.

“My feet are killing me,” Talia said at last, pulling Ashor to a stop. “Why couldn’t they just drive us straight to the restaurant?” She clutched his arm and leaned against him to remove her open-toed pumps, one, then—teetering again—the other, both of which Ashor gallantly took.

“Mama!” Hanin said, looking as shocked as she dared at her imposing mother-in-law.

“That or have Ashor carry me,” Talia said. Then, looking into the window display of the art gallery they’d stopped next to, she said, “I believe I recognize that hideous painting. Is this man having us walk in circles?”

“That was an entirely different hideous painting, darling,” Ashor said. “They all seem to resemble one another. I think we go to that bistro just there.” He pointed at a French restaurant and boulangerie three shops ahead.

“They could have *dropped* us there!” Talia said in offended tones.

Vanbastian had checked beforehand about Talia’s preferred restaurant for lunch. “It has to be French,” Ashor had said. Vanbastian said, “French isn’t trendy this season,” and Ashor replied, “You don’t know my wife.” Vanbastian had been right: The quarter was getting gentrified, desolate old buildings jammed between eclectic art galleries and esoteric restaurants, fully six eateries with middle-east menus by Ashor’s count—plus three Asiatic and at least a dozen “organic,” causing Talia to ask acidly if “inorganic” food referred to rocks and the like—but only this single French one. The crowd on the streets was young, outfitted in expensive lack of taste. Previ-

<sup>1</sup>SDR - Surveillance-Detection Route

ously, as they walked, Talia would say, “Oh my God, would you look at that one!” speaking French rather than Aramaic. Hanin, on the other hand, looked closely at the young women as though memorizing the American styles, to be replicated when they returned to Lisbon.

“Pick me up, Grampageneral,” Joseph said, tugging to get away from Hanin’s restraining hand.

“On the way back, darling,” Ashor said. “Be a good soldier and walk in on your own feet.”

With a small hanging sign the restaurant identified itself as MAISON H. P. PELLAPRAT, promising in subtext, *Le Nouveau Cullinaire*.

Vanbastian had provided today’s escorts, more discrete than the private bodyguards Ashor had hired. One walked ahead, leading without seeming to lead, then dropping back to look in a window, another guard moving forward, now leading, and then switching again, six of them in all, men and women casually leapfrogging back and forth around Ashor and his family. At the door of the restaurant a chalkboard, the day’s menu, on a free-standing pedestal. Ashor watched as the lead escort examined the chalkboard and removed a bit of clear tape from its side. As he did so, a cab pulled to the curb beside them, one of the following escorts opening the back door.

“I will be back in an hour,” Ashor said, kissing Talia’s cheek—though Talia, appreciatively eyeing Maison Pellaprat’s simple stone façade, seemed more intent on getting at the *nouveau cullinaire* which was to be had within. Then to Joseph, “Be a good soldier and watch after your mama and grandmother.” He stepped into the cab. A glance at the licensing information panel along the back of the front seat, Ashor saw there was neither photo nor name for the driver.

As the cab eased into traffic Ashor said, “Talia’s shoes!” Which he still clutched in his left hand.

Vanbastian had called it a haunted house—“Where the spooks hang out.”—though it was far more impressive in name than in physical reality; nothing more than an efficiency apartment just off Massachusetts in the Pennsylvania Quarter. Ashor’s new escort, the notional cab driver, tapped on the door, which opened immediately.

“Hands on the wall, sir,” the driver said to Ashor. “Spread the feet.”

To Jon Vanbastian, Ashor spoke in blunt military tones: “Tell this person to take me back to the restaurant. Immediately—are you listening?”

“Just wait for us here,” Vanbastian said to the driver.

The driver shrugged, then remained outside as the door closed behind Ashor and Vanbastian.

“Going to a dance?” Vanbastian asked, looking pointedly at Talia’s blue slingback pumps.

Ashor said, “You sent us on quite a hike, Jon. My wife’s feet began swelling.” Without entirely meaning to, he sniffed; a trace of stale tobacco smoke in the air.

Vanbastian gestured toward an older man who was rising from an undersized chair in the small sitting room. “This is Leonard,” Vanbastian said, no indication if it was a first name or last.

“Pleased to meet you, General,” Leonard said, looking not so much pleased as wary. He offered his hand cautiously, like a tray of over-filled wine glasses, and pulled it back immediately, Ashor wondering if Leonard’s handshakes were in short supply and he was rationing them in his old age.

Ashor said, “Just ‘Ashor,’ if you will. I put aside my gold braid years ago.”

“But looking to get it back, is that it?”

And that was the last Leonard had to say until twenty-seven minutes later, when Ashor rose to leave. Leonard wore a vested suit, elbows and knees glossy with age, and peeping from his breast pocket a white handkerchief going yellow at the edges, in harmony with his tobacco-stained white mustache. Contrasting with Leonard’s venerable attire, a new and obviously expensive attaché case rested on the floor beside his right shoe.

They sat on squat leatherette chairs around a small coffee table, on which there rested a tray of diagonally-cut delicatessen sandwiches—“Took you away from lunch,” Vanbastian explained—along with napkins, paper plates with plastic flatware, lidded cardboard cups of coffee and sugar packets, and an ashtray with a single crushed cigarette.

Casually looking from Vanbastian to Leonard, Ashor took in the room, a place even more cheaply furnished than the apartment in Maastricht, if that was possible—the sort of chairs and tables that he imagined were favored in what the Americans called “motels.” On the walls, two reproductions whose colors were noticeably out of register; one of George Washington in a small boat on a bitterly cold day, the other of a weary native American on a horse that appeared even more destitute. The heavy drapes were closed—in their folds Ashor caught a reflection, imagining it to be a camera lens. The apartment was clinically free of dust, and there was no indication that anyone else had been present recently, though Ashor assumed they had a tape running and would put his voice through a stress analyzer later. And he quickly accepted that Leonard was to remain silent, settled back in his chair while Jon Vanbastian leaned forward as though preparing to engage in conversation ... or perhaps in battle.

Ashor uncapped a cardboard coffee carton and selected one of the sandwich triangles, put it on a plate, then the plate on his lap, his hand still on the sandwich. When neither Vanbastian nor Leonard reached for the food, Ashor took his hand from the sandwich and put the paper plate onto the table. He said, "You told me that your den mother wanted to have a little chat, Jon." Ashor nodded vaguely in the direction of Leonard. "Did you have a subject in mind?" He settled back in the chair and waited with a look of benign expectation. In the brief silence that followed, Ashor reviewed his own battle plan, which was to remain relaxed in body and voice ... and to watch for an opening into which he could insert his request for payment for the reams of intell he had forwarded to Virginia over the past five years, and for a new proposal he was about to offer—payment not in cash but in kind.



“If you go directly at the heart of a mystery, it ceases to be a mystery and becomes only a matter of drainage.”

Christopher Morley

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L O N D O N

Remly's most immediate and vivid experience was neither the sight nor the sound but a violently expanding universe centered at the Bentley fireball which lifted him off his feet and slapped him backwards and ripped off his glasses, the heavysset thug before him lifting as well and flying toward Remly, arms windmilling and his mouth open in a great silent “O” of shock.

Only when Remly hit the ground did he hear the explosion, instinctively plugging his thumbs into his ears even as he rolled away from the flying bodyguard. He rolled again, was stopped by the left-rear tire of a big Rolls Phantom at the curb, and dug himself into the tire, eyes squinted shut, waiting for the debris to stop flying.

The shock finally wasn't the exploding Bentley but the emotional burst that drove a spike through his chest, from his heart into his spine, and he lay fighting for breath, telling himself, ‘Inhale, exhale, smooth, smooth. Calm. Calm. The ocean flows, waves come in, waves go out. Calm.’ The pain receded but only to the extent that the fear dissolved, leaving him with a damp, cold face.

When the wind stopped he unplugged his ears and opened his eyes and wiped the sweat away from his face. Later, once he was finally able to think clearly about it, he understood that it was at this exact point when the reality of the explosion began—the real sound of it—the screaming of both people and car alarms, equally loud, and the sound of running feet and curses shouted in Russian and a few in English and under it all the crackling of fire. And the dust in the air—the entire street looking like an unrestored painting, a fog of particles, all the colors of the scene subdued to pointillist mauves and gritty browns, much blurred to his naked eyes.

Quite miraculously Remly saw his glasses in the fog of granular dust motes, unbroken but badly scuffed, and retrieved them. Once on, and still pressing at the pain in the middle of his chest with his fist, Remly squinted at the blast center to see an empty space where the Bentley had previously been, the car itself in the street, a large abstract metal sculpture resembling a shallow, skeletal bowl tipped on its side, one wheel spinning lazily. The

remains were still burning and black smoke of rubber and plastic rose in a toxic mushroom above the shattered plane tree that had stood beside it. The Rolls immediately behind the former Bentley was blasted as well, the engine compartment burning brightly. The front of the house had been blackened by the blast but there was an unblackened pattern of pickets in the charred front wall, like a bikini line on a sunburn. The iron picket fence itself stood perfectly upright, except the spot where the Bentley's left-rear door had banged into it and was now impaled on the fence's topmost spikes. Somewhere in this chaos there would be human remains as well, Remly imagined, but nothing as fragile as flesh and clothing was immediately obvious.

The bodyguard who had been flying at Remly was on his stomach on the sidewalk—lying there in his stocking feet, his shoes nowhere to be seen—crying and cursing, arched and reaching futilely to the middle of his back with both hands, blood oozing around a piece of something solid and sharp that had pierced him just above the left kidney. Other heavy men on the street were running toward the blast area and windows were opening one after the other like a set-piece in a musical comedy ... although the faces looking out—some in fear, others in horror—were demonstrably not preparing to sing.

Telling himself he could see the rest of it later on television, Remly turned and walked away, dusting himself off and breathing deeply to stabilize his heartbeat, wondering if the street was monitored with closed-circuit video cameras, as most of London seemed to be nowadays. He kept his head down as he walked, as though unsure where he should put his feet.

As he approached the rented Toyota, he carefully dusted his pants and shirt, then slipped out of his jacket to inspect it. The elbows were badly scraped and the dirt embedded in the back wouldn't brush out. Worse, the right knee of his pants was torn. Thankful for the warm weather, he carried his jacket inside-out, casually obscuring his torn trousers until he was in the car park and into the Toyota.

By now it seemed that all of Knightsbridge and fully half of Kensington were in the streets, surging toward the blast site to the accompaniment of the sirens and hysterical clangers of emergency vehicles.

Remly sat behind the wheel, shivering and breathing deeply with a forced calm, but soon enough was shaking. His glasses were nearly as useless on as off, badly scuffed, and he wondered how safe it would be to drive back to the commercial hotel in Paddington in this half-blind state.

He hadn't long to wonder. The driver's door was jerked open and a thick hand was pulling him from behind the wheel. Before he could respond, ei-

ther grabbing at the wheel or trying for a crotch kick, two more black-suited men had their hands on him and he was all but thrown into the back seat of a black Mercedes, where yet another very large man waited. As Remly raised a hand to smash at the new man's throat he realized, even through his damaged lenses, that it was Valeri Sergeivich who was scowling at him and reaching to grab his rigid fist.

"Charls, we gotta talk right goddam now!"

"Valeri?"

"We gonna talk while I get to Gatwick, no sitting around. I gotta fly to Odessa, and I got a lot you want to hear."

As the car started off, silent and heavy, Remly said, "The bomb, was that Levanov's car?"

"That wasn't no bomb, it was anti-tank charge."

"Under Levanov's . . . ?"

"*Fuck* Nikita Olegeevich. I got a plane locked down with radioactive contamination in fucking Anunci3n, South America."

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## . . . O D E S S A / D A K A R

There were the two other Russians; Yuri and a structural engineer named Fyodor. There were two Ukrainians recruited on the fly to replace three who had disappeared in Las Vegas, after bungling some kind of job for the Colonel. Finally there were the four Arabs, and of the Arabs only one spoke completely intelligible English, so that Didi was dependent on the one man, whose name was Tayyib, to communicate to the suicide crew. And that one man Tayyib had a mind of his own.

At Odessa airport this Tayyib refused to deplane his three Iraqis from Voshch Air's little Ilyushin-14, which had picked them up in Abu Dhabi. The four Arabs wouldn't enter the transatlantic Ilyushin-18 until Tayyib had confirmed that his mother and son were safe in Dubai, and that the monies had been properly transferred. Didi offered Tayyib his cell phone, the Iraqi demanded to be let off the Il-14 to make his call from a public phone in the terminal. "I have a pre-paid international card," he said.

A small item, to be sure, but there would be the complication of getting this Tayyib back to the Voshch Air hanger once he'd made his call; always the opportunity of confrontation with the Odessa authorities inside the terminal, more cash to be paid. The smallest error and Didi would have three suicidal Arabs on his hands who, lacking Tayyib, could hardly be spoken to, much less led—just another example of the gnat that killed the ox.

Didi walked the Iraqi Tayyib into the terminal, let him make his call, then walked him back to the Voshch Air counter where he showed his pa-

perwork for the Il-14 coming in and the Il-18 going out and was able to sweettalk his way through the counter and out the Voshch Air employee door to the tarmac.

Another forty-three minutes lost.

Then of course there had been the standoff, when the three suicide Iraqis had barged to the hatch of the Il-14, and the Ukrainians and the Voshch Air navigator had stopped them. Didi was told of this when he returned with Tayyib. “Crazy men,” said Viktor, the larger Ukrainian enforcer. “They’re trying to get away.”

“They have to pray,” Tayyib said, after conferring with the three. “They have to know which way is Mecca.”

With strained patience Didi went to the cockpit with the navigator and got an aviation chart and a global map showing the Black Sea and the Red Sea. Again with Tayyib, Didi pointed south and slightly east. “There, you can’t miss it,” Didi said. “Turn left at the second oil well.” For himself, while the cargo was closely watched by Yuri and the two Ukrainians, Didi had simply faced the altar at the Cathedral of the Assumption, offering thanks to God for having watched over him and sending up a prayer that the work would continue smoothly. It never occurred to him to wonder where Jerusalem might be in relation to Odessa.

Then there was the issue of food, although—thank God—this hadn’t turned into an item, large or small, just a minor irritation. The suicide Arabs needed special food. “Halal” they called it, and had brought it aboard in large sacks.

Didi asked, “What will they do when we get there—fast?”

Tayyib said, “Don’t worry, there will be plenty to eat.”

“I don’t see a big market for this ‘halal’ in Las Vegas.”

“Kosher is much the same,” Tayyib said. “I think there will be plenty of kosher in Las Vegas.”

The transfer to the larger plane went smoothly enough, the paperwork of farm equipment wasn’t questioned and the coffin, now crated in wood, went through as a “trenching tool.” Nor was there a problem with the refueling in Dakar. The problem there was that Didi had to dig into his expense-account cash to pay off three Senegalese officials who’d gotten wind of the fly-through and put their limousines and an army truck in the Ilyushin 18’s path.

Again on the flight across the ocean the Arabs had to pray, and Didi had to chart a line from mid-Atlantic to Mecca. He asked Tayyib, “What happens when we get to Las Vegas? I’m a pious man myself but ... do they always pray five times a day?”

Tayyib said, "It's what God tells them to do."

"They aren't resentful that you don't join them?" Didi said.

"I told them I'm a Suffi. The boy and the old man have no idea what I mean, but they accept it."

"The other?"

"Scout knows I'm insincere," Tayyib said, "but he accepts it too. His zealotry is a personal thing, he doesn't impose it on others."

Didi asked, "Are they literate?"

"The old man, no. But Scout and the Kid can read and write. Scout has a degree in civil engineering."

"Oh ... really?" Didi said.

As they approached Anunci3n, the civil-engineering suicide began to look even better. As it turned out, Fyodor—the structural engineer whom Yuri had promoted—was drinking something other than water from his Evian bottle. Somewhere mid-Atlantic he'd started moaning about the loss of the Soviet workers' paradise, a tragedy orchestrated by certain fat American capitalists and their handmaiden Gorbachev. By the time the South American coast came into view, Fyodor was angrily accusing Yuri and Didi of being part of the conspiracy, and threatened to have them tossed off the plane mid-air.

Didi said to Yuri, "What happens when he sobers up?"

"If he gets beat up real bad, he wakes up cursing the doctors."

"Does he get drunk all the time?" Didi asked.

"Only when he has booze."

Didi went back to speak to the Iraqis. Through Tayyib he asked Scout, the suicidal engineer, what he knew about structural work, particularly what he knew about critical stress-points in the metal framing of large buildings ... a hotel, for example.

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## . . . L O N D O N

Remly brushed futilely at his clothes and focused on his calm breathing, the armored Mercedes rolled heavily west, and Valeri Voshch cursed the world in terms both general and, as regarded Aleksandr Kurskov, dangerously specific. The Voshch air services Ilyushin-18 that was being held in quarantine in Anunci3n had been chartered by Kurskov to ferry men and mat6riel from Odessa, the mat6riel a load that Kurskov's man had picked up at the Voshch arms compound in Tiraspol. "But there wasn't no hot stuff, not from me, the risks is bigger than the payoffs. So fuck them, I'm giving you the whole story."

Valeri fell silent, but with the look of a man who was checking the play-

book in his head, deciding which chapters of the whole story to recite. And Remly, recognizing Valeri's fugue state, remained silent, waiting for him to puzzle out what he was bringing to the surface—and quite likely what he intended to suppress. They were going south on Gloucester Road toward Cromwell when Valeri came out of his daze, saying, "Vinca!"

"Vinca," Remly echoed, not at all clear what the big Russian meant. His heart seemed to have found its place again in his chest, and the pain had receded somewhat.

"Institute," Valeri said. "Vinca Institute of Nuclear Sciences, Yugoslavia. Grand opening ceremony, like at a GUM department store, in 'forty-eight. Then nineteen fifty-seven, fifty-eight, they get reactor, start processing weapons-grade uranium—'sixty-six they start reprocessing plutonium. Complete holy fucking mess, Tito don't have no idea what he is gonna do with all this hot stuff. Finally someone in Bucharest gets smart, they shut down the reactors in 'eighty-four, and Aleksandr Kurskov is there running security for Moscow's protection—the heavy waters and raw radioactive stuff was from Russian stocks in the first place. Aleks is making sure no hot stuff gets itself lost in the shut-down. He goes back again in 'eighty-nine when Moscow wants some accounting of the nuclear materials. This is very serious for Moscow—you know HEU?"

"Highly enriched uranium."

"Sure. Bomb-grade, eighty percent enriched. Some bomb-grade plutonium. Aleks Kurskov comes back, reports everything is hunky dunky. And this hot stuff still is at Vinca ten years later, when your president is making war on the Yugoslavs in March, 'ninety-nine. But funny thing, no bombs hit Vinca—everyone knowing what's there, nobody is gonna put that stuff into the atmosphere, okay?"

"Very thoughtful of them," Remly said.

"This little war from the U.S. gets over, everyone agrees the hot stuff should go back from Yugoslavia to SRIAR nuclear facility in Russia." Valeri paused, contemplating the traffic around them.

Remly said, "And . . . ?"

"Funny thing. Big audit is run, where everything is counted before they load it up for shipment to Russia's reactor institute. Turns up, some of the hot stuff is missing."

"How much is 'some,' Valeri?"

"What you looking for, original audit papers? I'm only telling you the story I got from friends at Dzerzhinsky Square."

"Fine," Remly said, turning to look out the window. "Valeri, your driver is taking us west. Gatwick is south from here."

“Fucking billionaire Russians, snotty English rich kids, it clogs up when you make it straight through Sloane and Belgravia. We go through Chiswick, Putney, loop around them.” Then, responding to Remly’s smile, which was only somewhat suppressed, “I’m only a fucking *millionaire* Russian, okay?”

Remly said, “And now? You think some of this missing hot stuff was on your plane to Anunci3n?”

“Radiation, where else does it come from?” Valeri Voshch seemed injured that Remly hadn’t gotten the point. “Aleksandr Kurskov charts my plane, his boys are taking a load of goods to South America. Everything is marked ‘farm equipment,’ but there is a big, heavy crate, something I don’t sell them. It is in the freight hold of my Ilyushin, this crate, where the radiation counters start going crazy at the airport in Anunci3n. So where else is the radioactive out of? This crate—nothing they buy from me glows in the fucking dark. Plus, inside the passenger cabin, one of the seats, this is something a little hot, too.”

“So, tell me the whole story, Valeri Sergeivich. What did Kurskov’s people pick up at your Tiraspol warehouse?”

“No problem,” Valeri said. “What Aleksei Kurskov’s guys got was one anti-tank charge, which I think is a present for Niki Levanov in London, not going to Anunci3n. Plus one RPG. Plus some two-kilo packs of Semtex and detonators—probably enough, it should bring down a steel bridge.”

They were turning down toward Chiswick, the traffic now thinning and the driver picking up speed.

“Plus they got maybe a couple old Kalashnikovs—old 47 models—and a lot of bricks of ammunition for them. And a bunch of suits of body armor in small to large.”

“Jesus!” Remly said.

“Myself, I am not religious,” Valeri said.

“You say ‘some.’ You say ‘maybe a half-dozen’ and ‘a lot.’ And ‘a bunch.’ What were the actual quantities?”

Valeri was offended: “Mickeymouse little sale like this—you think I keep these numbers in my head?” He brushed the air with the back of his hand, fingers splayed, as though dismissing an insect. “This is not a big sale, please understand Charls. A big sale is when you got field pieces, mortars, maybe a couple helicopters, enough rifles for ten thousand guys—maybe twenty thousand—and lots of four-wheel assault vehicles.”

“Small potatoes,” Remly said. “So why did you do the deal, something this small?”

Valeri Voshch didn’t answer.

Remly asked, “Did Kurskov tell you what it was for?”

“What customers do with stuff don’t come up in my business, you know this already. But even so, I am thinking he’s got some monkey business in South America. This is not enough goods for no sustained warfare, but plenty for some work against one of those mickeymouse governments they got there. Maybe bring down an airplane. But now I’m thinking ... maybe make a dirty bomb with his hot stuff.”

“And no mention of Las Vegas,” Remly said.

“Aleks never mentions he was even in Las Vegas. His man Dmitri picks up the stuff at my warehouse in Tiraspol, across from Ukraine, he doesn’t mention nothing neither, just he charts my freight run from Odessa to South America, a special to Anunci3n.”

Remly said, “Kurskov’s man—Dmitri?”

“Sure,” Valeri said. “This is going to be your ‘Didi’ you was asking about. He is Dmitri—Dmitri Dmitrievich Dmitrovsky. Didi, a cadet when Dzerzhinsky Square kidnaps Gorbachev, trying to pull off the coup. He goes into private business, working for Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov.”

Remly consulted his notepad, making sure he’d gotten all of it. Tapping the pad with his pencil and studiously not looking at Valeri but concentrating intently on the small lined page, he said, “And what kind of SAM did they pick up in Tiraspol?” When Valeri remained silent, Remly glanced up and asked again, “Surface to air missile, Valeri. An Igla?” He returned his attention to his notes and continued, pencil poised, “Exactly how many Iglas did Aleksandr Kurskov buy from you?”

The silence was longish and Remly finally had to look up, painting a look of mild curiosity across his face. Valeri in his turn studied Remly as he might a stray cat, unsure whether to chase it off with a broom or offer it a saucer of milk.

Speaking slowly and distinctly Valeri said, “You climb too far out on a limb, Charls Remingtonovich, you never can tell if it’s gonna hold you up. Especially you keep sawing on it, the way you do.”

“How else will Kurskov’s crew bring down an airplane?” Remly wondered. “You said they bought an RPG, rifles, Semtex. when you said maybe they would bring down an airplane. And an Igla goes for ... what? Two hundred thousand, USD? More? I don’t see you bothering with the sale, based just on the other stuff.” Remly looked at his notepad again, as though confirming his memory. In a gesture that implied the sanctity of their conversation, he folded the notepad and pocketed his pencil and tilted his head as he looked squarely into Valeri’s pale eyes. “All I want is to get at Kurskov. No one else, just Kurskov. I can’t do that unless I know everything he’s got—and everything he intends. Are you telling me you’re protecting him?”



Valeri thought about that for a moment. He said, “Everything.”

Remly waited.

“Go back maybe a couple years with me,” Valeri said. “Aleksandr Leonidevich buys a bunch of old Soviet scrambler phones from me. This would be maybe ‘ninety-eight, ‘ninety-nine.”

“November of ‘ninety-eight?” Remly asked.

“Sounds right,” Valeri said. “Okay, November ‘ninety-eight. All of Aleksandr’s purchases before this, he is brokering for someone else; he’s always bringing the customer with him, okay? He’s doing odd jobs for Moscow, Dzerzhinsky Square sends along a keeper, make sure Aleksei isn’t screwing no one for money. He make buys for other guys—maybe customers from Africa, from these FARC rebellious guys in Colombia—same thing. They want to come along, see that they get their money worth. These phones, no keeper. He buys on his own. Also, January this year, he’s getting prices from me in London for this shipment his man is picking up now. Prices for this shipment, for other stuff, but not making no deals for anything, like he is putting up the budget for future buyings.”

“The ‘ninety-eight buy—that would be about the same time that we last sat at Marx’s tomb?”

Valeri slapped Remly’s knee. “Yeah, exact time. You got it. January of this year he buys up ten little 5.54mm pistols with mufflers, old Dzerzhinsky Square supplies. Plus ammo.”

“Mufflers,” Remly said. “Suppressors, right?”

“I got no idea how you American guys screw up languages. Mufflers, like on a car, makes the noise go away.”

The driver had turned south on the M-23, now speeding to the airport, and Remly recalled Morris Berman: 5.54mm. With suppressors.

“And you think he would be shooting down an airplane with a 5.54 pistol?”

Another slap on Remly’s knee, Valeri said, “This load his man just picked up. They got one single Igla.”

“We have an Air Force base at Las Vegas.”

“This is going to South America, not your Vegas.”

Remly said, “And no obvious backer when he paid for the load? No one double-checking to see what this Didi picked up?”

“Anyone is there,” Valeri said, “he is out behind the sceneries.”

“No guess who it might be, the real buyer behind Kurskov?”

“How many times I got to tell you?”

“About the other people on the flight. Who else was there besides this Didi? Anyone who looked like the end user?”

“Dmitri Dmitrievich has a lot of guys going with him, total of nine guys including Didi. He’s got four Arabs, plus four Russian guys besides Didi. No one looks like he is keeping the eye on Didi. Didi is the boss on this transporting.”

“Wait,” Remly said. “What makes you think they were Arabs?”

“Dark, big noses, they got to pray to Mecca five times a day. One of them speaks English damn good, the other three they don’t speak nothing any of my boys understand. It ain’t Armenian, which these guys maybe could be if they wasn’t praying to Mecca. It’s got to be Arab they’re talking.”

They were well south now, the heavy armored Mercedes purring through Horley, the Gatwick turnoff coming up fast.

“You fly to Anunci3n,” Remly said. “Then what?”

“I get my fucking plane back, and I find out where these bastards have gone and I get rid of them.”

“And if you can’t track them down?”

Valeri laughed. He had a big laugh and it filled the inside of the Mercedes. “I piss away more money in single month than Aleksandr Kurskov gets his hands on, one whole year. Anunci3n, all over South America, money wins. I’m finding these guys no problem.”

Remly hoped he was right. He asked, “How do I stay in touch with you, find out how you’ve done in Anunci3n?”

“You don’t,” Valeri said. “Give me your cell phone number, I call you after maybe.”

Remly spent the remainder of the trip trying to make a logical connection between Valeri’s news and Kurskov’s assassination attempts in Las Vegas; two of them successful and one less so. But there was no logic to any of it—he now had a sack of beads but no coherent thread on which to string them, and he was left to wonder if there was such a thing as too much information. And more than anything Remly wished he could slip back into his amazingly boring retirement, to catch up on his reading and get the valves polished on his elderly Vincent.

“A happy bargain, Sir! Well struck and beneficial to all!”

Lorenzo de Malaga, *The Dunc and the Devil*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

## . . . INSIDE THE BELTWAY

Jon Vanbastian said, “We need some validation from you about these characters you dug up, Jund al-Iraq, this little stunt of theirs in Kuwait City. You’re losing traction around the Campus, pal. None of our sources in Iraq has come up with dick-all about any so-called ‘Jund al-Iraq.’”

“Perhaps that says more about your sources than it does about the reality of Jund al-Iraq.” Ashor offered this more as a philosophical alternative than a contradiction. “The corpse of a moderate leader, killed in Ba’qubah. The rubble of a hotel, attacked in al-Kuwait. The evidence is both hard and hard to deny. Have you considered firing your sources and recruiting a few who know how to find the men’s room?”

Without emotion, neither amused nor defensive, Vanbastian replied, “Anyone could’ve pulled off the Kuwait City job. You see how many outfits took credit for it? We’ve counted half a dozen so far.”

“Ah, perhaps. But it was Jund that claimed it prior to the event, and I also warned you of it beforehand, based on information from my networks inside Iraq.”

Leonard, listening carefully, reached into his jacket to withdraw a cigarette—not bringing out the pack but only extracting the single cigarette from his inner pocket, as grudging with his vices as with his handshakes. He struck a safety match, then retreated behind a veil of tobacco smoke.

“Your networks,” Vanbastian said. “Your sources. Where’s your information coming from? Inside man? Got someone who’s wired to Jund? Or is this just more of the old shaku maku from the whorehouses of Mosul?”

As Ashor saw it, Jon Vanbastian’s greatest strength was his talent for maintaining an outward show of bluff camaraderie while his mind lurked in the shadows, observant and manipulative. Ashor had long ago learned to separate Jon’s nicely crafted theatrics—the big smile, the rugged humor—from the little clues that Jon unconsciously displayed about the reality of his thinking. Now, however, Vanbastian showed a side of himself that Ashor had never previously seen: An expression that was in reality no expression—neither amused nor angry, his face as bland as a marionette’s.

Ashor said, “Jund al-Iraq is a rock within a rock, Jon. From what little my people have learned so far, Jund does not have its own forces, not the

way the secular militias have troops and shaheeds. Jund has power and money and keen operational smarts; and we also believe that a few of them may be very high in the current government in Baghdad. When they mount attacks—the Ba’qubah shaheed who killed poor Harun al-Asrag, the al-Kuwait hotel—when Jund goes operational, they contract the work out. With nothing but an inner-inner circle, there’s no way to penetrate Jund al-Iraq.”

“So how do you get your intell if there’s no breach in their wall?”

It was, quite obviously, a game of cat-and-mouse; but the question in Ashor’s mind was—which of them was the cat, which the mouse? He said, “As you put it, shaku maku from the whorehouses of Mosul. Jund al-Iraq hires a few operatives to place a shaheed in a suicide vest in Ba’qubah, they pay others to mount the air attack in al-Kuwait. I’ve developed broad networks throughout my country, Jon. Some small things get mentioned—something here, something there—my people in-country pick up these little bits of gossip. My inner-circle analysts put the pieces of the puzzle together, and I pass it on to you in Virginia.” With this Ashor sat back and relaxed, as though that had been the sole reason for this meeting and he was now ready to exchange a few pleasantries before leaving.

Vanbastian asked, “How reasonable is this threat that they want to take the war home to America? Hard intell, or just another fairytale from the whorehouses?”

Ashor said, “Less than shaku maku, Jon. Only a whisper so far, and no validation that it’s anything more than talk. Still, I’m keeping my people back home tuned to the gossip.”

Leaning forward, Vanbastian said, “What we need, Ashor, is validation for this traffic you’re passing on. You’ve got ‘people back home.’ You have ‘inner-circle analysts.’ What we need is names and times and places. Else it’s all frankly bullshit, so far as we can see.” But, still, Vanbastian’s expression impenetrable.

Ashor said, “I think I will share my Iraq resources with you when you share Virginia’s Iraq resources with me.” As they sparred, Vanbastian digging but, really, not digging, Ashor tried to fathom the meaning behind the other’s odd, almost robotic attitude.

Vanbastian asked, “Your access to information inside the government in Baghdad—just validate it. That’s all we ask. Just validate it.”

Ashor responded, “Why, Jon, you’re really asking which department of government I have resources in. And then you’ll want ... what? Names? Employment IDs? Please—have the courtesy! We both know what becomes of resources who speak to Virginia. The roads back home are littered with

headless corpses. I prefer to keep my sources close—as you do yours.”

Leonard reached forward to snub out his cigarette in the ashtray, then leaned back, even more blank and unreadable than Vanbastian, pulling his yellow-edged handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiping the fringes of his heavy mustache. Ashor briefly measured Leonard, who sat impassively, elbows on the chair arms and fingers tented in front of his face like a mask. This would be an interesting man to study, this masked entity. ‘A very rare primate indeed,’ Ashor thought.

His attention again on Jon Vanbastian, Ashor saw a flicker of the other’s eyes, a brief and very slight twist of Vanbastian’s head, as though in warning. And in that blink of time Ashor understood the reason behind Vanbastian’s self-consciously cold presentation: Ashor was being cautioned. Could it be possible, he wondered, that this Leonard was more than just a supervisor at the Campus’s Iraq Desk? Possible he was somewhere near the top of the food chain in Virginia’s administration? Whatever the case, Jon was not speaking for himself, and there was something about Leonard, as Ashor now understood, that was a threat to him, and he must be even more on his guard than was his usual habit.

Jon Vanbastian continued probing—or seeming to probe—deeper into the details of Ashor’s intell networks in Iraq, but it was obvious to Ashor that Vanbastian was only going through the motions. And it became more and more obvious that the impetus behind Jon’s probing was the enigmatic Leonard, sitting like a basking reptile in his chair.

“Jon,” Ashor protested at last, “I think you can appreciate that I have put a great deal into developing my networks in Iraq. Are you telling me that you want me to turn over my resources to Virginia? In the past five years I have given you thick stacks of intell that your own people have failed to surface. And since I moved to Lisbon, you have been asking more and more issue-specific questions, which I have answered in greater and greater detail.” Then, directly to Leonard, “And I have given you information about a new terrorist group, Jund al-Iraq, well-funded and well-organized, that may be planning an attack against you, here on your own soil. I have shown that even in exile I have resources that are profitable for you and your colleagues in Virginia. More than that you cannot ask.”

“That’s another touch-point,” Vanbastian said. “Attack on American soil? What’s your raw source on that? Where’d you get it?”

“Shaku maku, Jon—whispers, nothing more. As I keep trying to tell you, Jund al-Iraq is impenetrable. The information that I give you on any subject is the latest I have ... and I never give you anything that my people haven’t verified from multiple sources—shaku maku or not.”

Leonard emerged from behind the tent of his fingers, still mute, to lift the attaché case at his feet. With a significant nod he passed the case to Jon Vanbastian.

“What we’ve got,” Vanbastian said as he opened the case, “is a little proposition for you, Ashor.” He pressed the delicatessen food aside and settled the open case on the table, Ashor guessing what was in the case and repressing a smile as Vanbastian casually turned it around to display banded stacks of hundred-dollar bills within. “One million, unmarked and completely authentic. Non-sequential numbers—spend it anywhere.”

“And what, exactly, Jon, do you hope to buy with that?”

Vanbastian said, “In simple terms, the raw product from your intell network.”

“I thought we’d settled that issue.”

“This is our bottom line,” Vanbastian said. “Our final offer—one million a year. We’ll leave you at the head of your network—no identities of your resources, no explicit details of your operations. But we want the raw product, not your analysis of it. And we’ll give you assignments of intell that you should chase down.”

Ashor contemplated the open case, probing it with a forefinger as though it was a bug he was testing for life. “Imagine! All that in a single attaché case. I’ve read about this sort of thing happening—never considered that I would actually witness it.” With the same prodding forefinger he tipped the lid shut.

“You’re making a big mistake, my friend,” Vanbastian said.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” Ashor said, as much to Leonard as to Jon Vanbastian. He picked up Talia’s shoes and rose. “If you’ll walk with me to the taxicab, perhaps we might have just a few more words.”

Leonard, also rising, said, “Sit down, General.”

“No, please come walk with me.”

“Don’t delude yourself you’re flying under our radar,” Leonard said. “We’ve been watching your moves inside Iraq.”

Vanbastian stood and said, “Ashor, there’s this. We’re getting rumbles from every corner inside Iraq about the agents of General Ashor coming into money. Word from the compounds of tribal warlords here and there, you want to pay courtesy calls on ‘em. You been there on a visit?”

“The sheikhs are *clan leaders*,” Ashor corrected, “not ‘tribal warlords.’ And *friends*, not ‘agents,’ throughout Iraq, Jon. I thought you knew that.”

“These friends of yours...”

“And, no, I haven’t been home since I left in ninety-eight.”

“Your friends, it sounds like a secret army. Even out into the boonies,

beyond our mil's forward operating bases."

Ashor replied, "Why, Jon, I told you all about this back in—was it February? Yes, February. I began expanding my networks." Ashor tapped his nose in remembrance: "Actually, I expressed my *intention* to expand in December of last year. Our conversation in Maastricht?"

"You're playing with matches, kid. Some of these guys who're dropping your name, we're getting feedback that a lot of 'em are old Ba'athists. And a lot of ex-brass hats from the army—Saddam's general staff."

"And you and Leonard, Jon?" Ashor said. "How incendiary are you two, meeting here with this ex-brass hat from the Iraqi general staff?"

"Not remotely the same, you damn well know that." Still, despite his words, Vanbastian seemed quite charitable in both expression and tone. "The problem is in the context. You start expanding your in-country networks. You're getting cozy with a bunch of Ba'athist bad boys—that article of yours about an amnesty in *Foreign Affairs*. There've been sporadic calls in Iraq for you to return. Now you show up inside the beltway, big hotshot flak like Chaz Danziger behind you, all this press coverage you're getting. What we see is you saying how profitable it'll be for specific U.S. industries, specific regions around the country, to do business in Iraq, given a stable government there. You opening a trade delegation here, or what?"

Again Ashor waited, smiling without particular meaning as though looking forward to Vanbastian's next comment.

Vanbastian also waited silently.

Finally Ashor asked, "Is there a new policy in Washington against a stable government in Iraq?"

"'Democracy' is the operative word. The line is, we want a stable *democracy* in Iraq. The word 'democracy' is missing in all of the eyewash your hucksters have been spreading. And this makes us in Virginia very nervous, we add your democracy-free PR to your Ba'athist military contacts in Iraq."

"I'll mention that to my hucksters," Ashor said, quite innocently. "Add 'democracy' to all future eyewash." Though it seemed unlikely that Jon Vanbastian cared any more about democracy at this point than he ever did, given the nature of his work. "Now, I tell you one last time, come walk with me." And with that Ashor started for the door. Behind him he heard two snaps. He looked back to see Leonard stepping around the table to follow him, and Vanbastian picking up the now-locked attaché case.

Once outside the door Vanbastian ordered the driver down to his taxicab to wait for Ashor. To Ashor he said, "Okay, we're out of range of the video

and the mikes. What've you got in mind?"

"First," Ashor responded, "let's consider your current intell situation in-country, Iraq's own service, at a cost to Virginia of around three-hundred of these every year." He lifted his chin at the attaché case in Vanbastian's hand. "What happens after elections? I mean, specifically, where does your docile in-country service go when the elections produce a Baghdad government with more friends in Teheran than inside the Beltway?"

"Not a problem, my friend," Vanbastian said, not convincingly.

But Leonard, showing a rare crack in his façade, looked grimly at Ashor as though Ashor had channeled the future.

"I would like to paint a picture for you," Ashor said. "A vision of an Iraq that might have been, an Iraq that could still be, an Iraq that fulfills much of Virginia's agenda in the middle east. Consider that this area—where, historically, there have never been any underpinnings of participatory government—consider that Iraq had a committed friend of the U.S. in the upper echelons of the army's general staff. A general who had his own proven intell network within Iraq. A general who was not aflame with religious fervor, who had no antagonism toward neighboring states that were friends of America."

Around the edges of Vanbastian's mouth a smile seemed ready to form, though Leonard kept his reptilian inscrutability.

Ashor said, "And, can you visualize this: That your office in Virginia has a direct link to this general in Baghdad? Would that be of more interest to you than just an intell network there? Imagine that there is a strong general with a firm hand on Iraq's security controls." Before either of the others could respond, Ashor added, "When I say 'the controls,' I refer to the entire security establishment: The military, a strong national police force, and a re-established internal secret service to monitor potential troublemakers."

"And who would this strong general be, do you think?" Vanbastian asked, with not a trace of sarcasm.

"I mentioned to you once I think, Jon—I intend to return home."

"As . . . ?"

"As a simple man who wants to see his homeland become stable and secure. Perhaps with the help of your agency in Virginia."

Still without sarcasm, either in his expression or his voice, Vanbastian asked, "That's it—the extent of your ambition?" And in Vanbastian's utter absence of sarcasm, Ashor recognized an even deeper sense of sardonic response. Vanbastian continued, "You'll settle for a desk job in the Iraqi mil?"

"Consider further that there is a crisis" Ashor replied. "A power vacuum,



say, that throws Iraq into anarchic turmoil. As a faithful patriot, I wouldn't hesitate to step in and restore tranquility and security—even to the extent of suspending the constitution.”

“Anarchic turmoil,” Vanbastian said. “Washington would just ramp up the troop level—Tranquility-R-Us.”

Ashor shrugged. “As you wish.” He looked from Vanbastian to Leonard, who seemed lost in thought, as though focusing on some distant place.

Jon Vanbastian also turned to study Leonard.

They stood that way, silent, at the elevator doors for a full thirty seconds, none of them pressing a button.

Leonard materialized another cigarette from within his jacket and set it glowing with a match.

“It's been a long time,” Leonard said in a musing sort of voice. Ashor and Vanbastian waited while he dragged heavily on his cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke. He shook out the match and dropped it onto the hall carpet. “Reza Pahlavi. Pinochet. Hissène Habré. Nuri as-Said. A long time since we put anyone onto the throne.” He looked up at the sundial indicator of the elevator status, then looked directly at Ashor, his face hard. He said, “What do you want? No fucking around, just tell me what you want.”

Ashor felt his spine relax, yet kept his mind sharply focused. “In blunt terms,” he said, “Virginia still has some influence within the administration, if not directly at Sixteen Hundred. Before I return, I want you to apply pressure there, to second my bid for a place on Iraq's general staff.”

“Now wait,” Vanbastian said. “You're asking ...”

“Done,” Leonard said. “What else?”

Ashor glanced at Jon Vanbastian, who looked both offended and strangely pleased at the same time. To Leonard, Ashor said, “Virginia has strong relationships with a lot of power brokers on the Hill, in both houses. I want pressure there as well, to endorse me.

A nod. “What else?”

“Amnesty for all pre-invasion Iraq military officers who have not been accused of crimes. Plus amnesty for all Ba'athists who are not on any wanted lists.

Jon Vanbastian looked from one to the other as though watching a high-stakes match at Wimbledon. Leonard, for his part, looked first blankly at Ashor, then contemplatively at the closed elevator doors.

Ashor pressed his case: “Face reality, over two and a half million Iraq government workers, military men, security personnel, teachers, professionals—over two and a half million of them are shut out from the current

system, only because they joined Ba'ath, often against their better judgement, in order to continue in their professions."

After an interval of inhaling and breathing smoke against the doors, Leonard said, "I think we still have enough juice to press that issue."

Ashor said, "And from the time I touch the street below, everything between us is to be at arm's length—even more than it has been between Jon and me. If we discuss anything later, it will never be face to face."

Leonard nodded and said, "Anything else?"

If he had not secured the deal by now, Ashor felt he could cap it with his final requirement: "I will also need Virginia's help in training my intell and security operatives in the use of polygraphs and voice-stress analyzers. I hope to put operatives into Iran and Syria, and, given the conflicted loyalties of so many Iraqis, I realize the need for these tools."

Leonard looked for an ashtray on the wall. Finding none, he dropped his cigarette and turned it under his heel, smoldering in the carpet, then reached for the DOWN button and said, "Done."

At the street, as the driver opened the back door of the taxi for him, Ashor remarked to himself that the word 'democracy' had been glaringly absent during their hallway conversation. Once in the back seat, Ashor reached into his jacket and turned off his microcassette recorder. When he joined his family at Maison Pellaprat, Talia took her shoes and sniffed suspiciously at Ashor and spoke in offended tones: "You smell like an ashtray. What sort of lowlives have you been consorting with?"

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## . . . L O N D O N

Charles Remly's retreat from London was only modestly complex, and if one ignored the lingering ache that drilled from the center of his chest to his back it was entirely without incident. He humored the ache and his shortness of breath by moving slower, stopping now and then to regulate his breathing while he pressed a fist into his solar plexus, waiting for his heart to catch up with the rest of him. And throughout fiddling with his spare eyeglasses, adjusting and re-adjusting the nose pads, and bending the temple bars into a less uncomfortable shape.

The Toyota had been rented in the throwaway name of Jack Petrocini, and Remly threw it away, having Valeri's driver return him to the commercial hotel in Paddington rather than to Knightsbridge where the rental was parked.

Remly called Weaver, asking cryptically if Weaver had done any interesting artwork recently, and Weaver said the traffic was light—typical for

Remly's suburban street—"Some nice street scenes for the new gallery," as he put it, though most of them quite lifeless. There had been a multiple pass by one car, a white soccer-mom van, that had gone around the block and made a second turn down Remly's street. Weaver had painted the van that morning as well, though showing only a single pass. "Light was good this morning," Weaver said. "She had a little camera in her hand, pointing it at your new wall." He'd flagged the video on the system's DVD—Remly should be able to pull it up later without much trouble.

Finally, waiting at Heathrow for his flight out, his heart now more secure within his ribs, Remly debriefed to the F.O. and Alan Singleton over his scrambler.

"Anunci3n," the F.O. said. "You've never been there?"

"Never been there," Remly confirmed.

Singleton said, "It'll be a transit point. Question is, what'll their destination be? Vegas? And ... why radioactive?"

"Vegas, maybe Los Angeles," Remly said. "Eddy and I worked out of SoCal SubStation." Then adding, "But that's a reach. I mean, we're not there now. And Kurskov's been targeting us in Vegas."

"Johnson's not *anywhere* now," Singleton said.

The F.O. said, "One imagines that our friend Levanov is equally off the map. Perhaps that will get Simon down from his hobbyhorse and back into the arms of the true apostles."

A passing British Airways stewardess distracted Remly. Tall, not much in the way of hips, but with an amused expression, as though she wanted to share a rare quip with someone. She passed; he watched her recede; he decided she really could use more in the way of hips.

"Back to square one," the F.O. said, "if you'll allow me to coin a cliché."

"Herstal," Singleton said.

"No connection," Remly said. "Nothing Valeri told me in the car changes anything he told me at his club."

Singleton asked, "Nothing nuclear in Herstal?"

"Nothing," Remly said.

"So ... why radioactive?"

"And *what*?" Remly added. "Valeri says some HEU went missing at Vinca when Kurskov was providing security. Weapons-grade hot stuff. Can you get specific numbers and materials, Alan?"

"I've got a friend at Nuke Regulatory. What year was this?" Anywhere between '84 and '99, Remly told him, and Alan said, "Fifteen years, thanks a bunch, kid," and they returned to the people and arms that had been

aboard the flight from Abu Dhabi to Odessa to Anunci3n.

“Why Arabs?” the F.O. wanted to know. “Are they what you call ‘high rollers?’ On their way to Sin City, pockets stuffed with petrodollars?”

“Not this bunch,” Remly said.

Another stewardess was walking by, falling-over dropdead gorgeous, Remly thought, and spectacular hips, but young enough to have been his daughter should he have had one. Still, he continued scanning the waiting area, perpetually open for that magical chance encounter.

“... on him,” Alan Singleton was saying. “Do you have a physical?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I said, this Dmitrovsky. I’ll run a make on him if we can’t get sissy Simon stirred up. You have a description of the guy?”

Remly described Dmitri Dmitrovsky, as Valeri had to him—early- to middle-thirties, medium height and build, blond, going plump—and added that physicals on the others were too sparse for a lookup.

“And there’s this,” Remly added. “Even with the SAM, I don’t see this as a big enough sale to warrant Valeri’s attention. Something bigger is going on here, behind this one sale and a cargo-plane charter.”

The F.O. said, “Two questions remain: One, what is your risk coefficient when you return? Should we put you down a rabbit hole and let your house fend for itself?”

“Interesting question,” Remly said.

“And have you an interesting answer, my boy?”

“I’ll have to think about that some more. Barricading myself still puts me at risk whenever I leave home.”

Singleton asked, “Bottom line—think you’ll need help rabbit-holing?”

“I need help, I won’t be shy, Alan,” Remly said.

“Question number two,” said the F.O. “How close are we to the tipping point, or have we already reached it?”

“Jesus H Particulate Christ,” Alan Singleton said. “You serious, Kenny? Hand this muddle to Virginia’s soothsayers? We’d get booed off the stage. Even now ... bits and pieces, all we’ve got. Nothing holds together except the threads that we’re crocheting with our own instincts and intuition.”

“You may be right,” the F.O. conceded.

From that point the conversation wandered, as did Remly’s attention, Alan Singleton telling of his one visit to Tiraspol in the rogue breakaway nation of Transdniester, the statues of Stalin and Lenin freshly washed, the streets clean and largely empty, like an abandoned set for an old Soviet propaganda movie. And Charles Remly wondering about his risk coefficient while watching a woman walking down the hall from the security

checkpoint—the woman slim but nicely hour-glassed, her hips moving provocatively under a tight waist—and his hopes dying when a man in a heavily-striped City power suit came swiftly after her, putting an arm around her and steering her into the BA First Class waiting lounge.

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. . . I N S I D E   T H E   B E L T W A Y

It was cocktails-and-buffet among the Louis Quinze furnishings of a meeting room at Hôtel Le Monarque, whose undemocratic ambience immediately won Talia's heart.

The room's hot spot was near the bar; loud conversation punctuated with laughter, backs getting slapped, arms punched. "The money boys," Daphne explained to Ashor. "Killer Street lobbyists for the security hardware people, the building and infrastructure contractors."

Ashor said, "The ones who aren't getting juicy plums from the Iraq reconstruction pie."

"The very ones. Next Saturday the caucus has a celebrity golf tournament at Andrews. The money boys pick up the tab, pretty much the same crowd as this—plus some washed-up old celebs. Except there won't be any children's corner."

The children's corner, she told him, was the large contingent of young women and men—barely post-pubescent to Ashor's eyes—who crowded the buffet tables in a feeding frenzy: Congressional aides. "You reach thirty," Daphne said, "you're still on staff, they look at you like you're ready for long-term care. The girls and boys calorie-load at these get-togethers, save their pocket money to hit the singles bars later." She explained that the pols would comprehend the general message—income for their districts—but couldn't be expected to remember any details beyond what they'd need for sound-bites back home. "I've slipped copies of your CV to all of the significant aides. Copies of your position papers on Iraq and the middle east, reasons why Iraq remains a hot potential customer for American goods, and the desperate need for strong, reliable security services, both police and military. A little face time here—something substantive comes up, the pols'll remember you more or less. And the aides'll fill in the blanks for 'em." Ironical justice, as Ashor saw it: A gaggle of adolescents determining reality for a nation of superannuated children.

Daphne walked Ashor and Talia around like thoroughbreds being shown the jumps before a major competition, introducing them to the politicians. Never entirely comfortable in her English, Talia stuck to French, which appeared to give her an advantage over Ashor in these brief touch-and-go encounters: "*Enchanté, comment allez-vous?*"—which, with her sweetest *Pe-*

*tits Mille-Feuilles* smile, stopped the politicians, if only for a blink, all of them returning her smile and a few patting Ashor on the shoulder as though he had won a prize.

For herself, Talia's reticence about speaking English wasn't so much that she had no grasp of it, but instead that she was painfully aware that she spoke it with an accent, as opposed to her perfect parisienne command of French. And in the people in this room—both the politicians and their spouses—she recognized a sort of cannibal instinct; that they feared being eaten as much as they lusted to consume the lesser personages, hungrily eyeing the *faux-bourbons* among them. Given her accented English, she was convinced she would be devoured if she resorted to their native tongue. This was not a well-reasoned response in her, but an instinctive understanding, born of many years experience in the political and social jungles of Saddam's Baghdad, which this Washington D.C. reminded her of.

Talia was largely oblivious to the men—both the politicians and the husband of a female senator—but focused instead on the women, swiftly measuring and categorizing each in terms of hair, cosmetics, couture, handbag, fingernails, and shoes. She noted happily that she compared very well in all departments to this obviously powerful crowd. If anything it was hard for her to avoid feeling superior, for none of the women spoke French and she imagined that their English—though not as accented—was hardly more sophisticated than her own. And she doubted that they and their husbands had even one twentieth as much in the bank as she and Ashor. Twice, as Daphne paced them through the crowd, she turned to Ashor, her smile frozen in place and to the outside world quite genuine, and whispered in Aramaic, “When do we escape from this den of serpents? I tell you, husband, my face will fall off if I smile for another minute!”

It seemed to Ashor that he was getting a checkerboard response—every second senator or congressman recognizing him, the ones between greeting him blankly, not so much rudely as in distraction, an expat Iraqi general well below their radar of need-to-greet power brokers. Daphne would say, “Ashor dur-Shamshi—the anti-Saddam general who went to The Hague? Gave evidence about Saddam's massacre of the Kurds? Maybe you saw him yesterday, local TV coverage.”

“Oh ... sure.” Eyes losing focus as they looked around Ashor to find someone who could do them some good.

Even the pols whose districts Daphne had targeted seemed mildly distracted, as though they weren't sure if Ashor was there to dispense indulgences or to beg favors. They exchanged business cards with him, Ashor

saying, “I’ve pencilled in my direct line in Lisbon; later I will get my direct line in Baghdad to you as well. Please feel free to call me whenever you need something. I have a large staff in Lisbon, and extensive contacts in all walks of life back home.”

“Likewise,” was the common response, though Ashor correctly heard the word not as a meaningful invitation but only as kneejerk *politesse*.

Finally, after one distracted politician wandered off, Daphne whispered, “Don’t let it get you down, okay?” Pulling them on to the next introduction, she continued: “I told you how it works—all we want now is a few seconds of face time, let them see you. Shake your hand. Exchange cards.”

“It is not getting me down,” Ashor assured her. “Not at all. But here is an even more interesting prospect. Can you see the door over the heads of all these people?”

Daphne stepped on a folding chair to look, and said, “Oh ... my ... God. Who let *him* in?” But if she was worried, certainly Ashor was not. Daphne saw in Ashor’s expression a look of wolfish hunger—a predator mapping out the best approach to a sheep that had strayed from its flock.

“The strong will do what they can, and  
the weak shall suffer what they must.”

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . ANUNCIÓN

Ciudad Anunci3n lies in a trough of the Sierra Oriental; above the city on the north-facing slopes, the homes of the rich—north facing to catch the winter sun in the freezing months of July and August, to be shaded in January and February when the city withers in summer heat. As the plane banked and descended on the crosswind leg to make its final approach, Didi saw rusting corrugated roofs of shanties clumped like scabs in a jungle on the south-facing slopes, veiled under heavy woodsmoke.

Didi and his crew had left Odessa in autumn; it was spring in Anunci3n and snow-melt from the mountains had sent streams of slush into the valley and therefore the city. Anunci3n International was clear of mud, and traffic along the runways was brisk. The big Il-18 was first directed to a taxiway that led to the main terminal. The pilot explained that this Voshch Air flight was mostly cargo, and was re-directed by ground control to a taxiway that angled off to a block of gray terminals beyond the central hub.

The taxiway to the Freight and Agriculture terminals was interrupted by a series of raised chevrons just before the customs offices, and, waiting just before the chevrons, a forklift, a large white van, and two men with a spindly rolling stair. The van was without license plates; on its side, in two lines of gothic letters, “Autoridad Federal / Ministerio de Cultura.” The pilot stopped the Ilyushin near the waiting staircase and the navigator called through the open cabin door, “Get your people moving. Ten minutes to offload.”

As the propellers spun to a stop, Didi and Yuri unlocked the front passenger hatch and tilted it back on its hinges.

“Tell your men to help offload the cargo,” Didi said to Tayyib as they skittered down the rolling stairway. “Everyone works.”

Once out of the plane they scrambled to the double cargo hatch, where the forklift had moved with a pallet. Yuri and Didi jumped onto the pallet and were lifted to the belly of the Ilyushin. Yuri twisted and pulled at the hatch locks, then dropped open the doors and swung into the cargo bay where he looked at the dosimeter he’d taped onto the crate that housed the coffin, and swung quickly out again.

A white Range Rover was driving toward them across the grassy median



between taxiways, and Didi, on the pallet, was watching it.

“Look into the cargo bay like we’re talking about the load,” Yuri said. “See that dosimeter? What we got in here is a nice little warm zone. Not bad enough to burn anyone—not *hot*, really—but I get my daily dose back home at the shipyard. This I can’t deal with, not without my beta hot suit.”

“Will it get worse?” Didi asked.

“Here in a cargo bay—someplace enclosed like this—it would concentrate, you left it a week maybe. I wrap it up a little more, we get to the city of the sinning, open air—it won’t be so bad.”

Didi said, “Here comes Don Tomaso’s driver.” That, Didi imagined, or someone else outside the rules, driving the white Range Rover across medians and taxi strips as though God was flagging him through on a divine right-of-way. “You get into the car with him. I’ll join you when we’ve got this farm equipment into the cultural truck.”

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

He flew British Air to New York, shuttled to Newark, flew Southwest to Vegas. As the Southwest flight taxied to its rolling passageway at McCarran, Remly opened his phone and checked the caller IDs on his messages. Two from Karen Johnson, two from Weaver, one from a motorcycle shop in California, and three from a Vegas number he didn’t recognize.

He pressed the first of the three odd messages and heard a familiar voice: “Funny coincidence, it just came in, three guys shot in the head, sitting in this rental Chevy four-door, parked on a side road off the 163 down near Laughlin. Slavic-looking Joes, no valid ID, they’ve got a trunkload of stuff that’s been swiped outta Laughlin. Rental company says they try tracking down the dude who picked up the car, all of a sudden there’s no record he exists. But the really funny coincidence is, these Slavic types all got hit by little 5.54mm pistols. I’m getting copies of the forensics. You want me to put you on the buck slip?”

The same voice again: “Funny coincidence. Forensic’s back; same kinda brass markings, same kinda bullets whacked your buddy-bud Alf-the-Loser. But you ... hey, Charley, you’re not calling back. Having a bad hair day?”

And finally: “You make me so ... so ... I feel like a wallflower. So how about this: I got this party has a load of info on a certain Colonel Kurskov, late of Dzerzhinsky Square—which you may recall was famous for handing out little 5.54 Makarovs with suppressors—but this Kurskov is now gracing our fair et cetera. You want to have a sit-down? Talk about this famous colonel or whatever with this party? What we’re having, we’re having a barbecue next Sunday—this party’s gonna be there. You get over your bad hair day,

RSVP me—hear?”

Other passengers were fighting for aisle space, clogging the way while they wrestled luggage from the overheads. Remly remained in his seat and dialed Morris Berman’s number. When Morris said “Hello?” Remly said, “I’m RSVPing. So what is it, black tie?”

“Black tie optional,” Morris said. “Sneakers mandatory.”

“Give me the time and address.”

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## ... INSIDE THE BELTWAY

After forty years of marriage Talia knew quite well the moods of her man, though she still puzzled over what she saw as his complex and often contradictory reasoning, in which he was no different, really, than any other man she’d ever spoken to: They all seemed bereft of any grasp of logic. Overall Ashor had been a good husband, particularly when balanced against the other young men of the village when they first met. Like all soldiers he was prone to traveling his own willful path, despite her appeals to both logic and heaven, yet he had never once asserted masculine superiority, as was common in both village and Baghdad.

At the moment Ashor’s mood was typical of his symptoms of a repressed blood-lust, his eagerness to get into the thick of it—slashing and hacking—even if only a war of words. He had never been one to confide his feelings or display much outward emotion beyond pleasant interest in the world immediately around him. But in his scant repertoire of expression, that slight pull at the corner of his mouth, which gave an edge to his smile—as well as the lift of his left eyebrow when he spoke to the woman Daphne Logan—put the lie to his pretence of affable sociability.

He had not been like this when he rejoined Talia at the café Pellaprat. She hadn’t asked him about the important meeting that had taken him away from lunch: Again, this was part of Ashor’s world, and had little to do with her own reality of keeping her family in line and looking to their finances. Yet he’d seemed pleased when he joined their table, as though he’d secured a business franchise of some sort.

At this political buffet, however, his seeming pleasure had evaporated as he pulled on his polite, noncommittal expression—the mask he routinely offered in political venues. Then someone entered the grand meeting room and Ashor suddenly looked wolfish, the ancient Assyrian in him provoked—Talia imagined him sharpening his spear and rubbing tallow on the axles of his chariot. He spoke to the young woman Daphne, who quickly stood on a chair and looked appalled when she saw who had just come in, Talia now intensely curious. And yet, even if she asked, she knew from long experience

that his answer would be that nothing was wrong, the world was a place of infinite wonder, and perhaps he had a mild headache. But his cunning assessment of some new arrival put her in mind of a cat amongst pigeons.

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### . . . A N U N C I Ó N

The driver's name was Hermosillo, but he said, "Call me Segundo," for he was El Segundo in Don Tomaso's household. He had gotten his English in the Jesuits' school, and spoke it well. In fact he was, in Didi's appraisal, an intelligent man overall, and Didi wondered why he was El Segundo for Don Tomaso, instead of his Number One.

"I have been, Señor, for seventeen full and terrible years, El Segundo for El Patrón Don Tomaso Atillo Bernardo O'Neil-y-Cordoba, and in these many grim seasons El Patrón has had twenty-three El Primeros. I have memorialized these Primeros in a journal, like a book of the dead."

Didi said, "Don Tomaso is miserable person to get along with, eh?"

"Señor, I would not think of saying a word against my generous master. I have the best position in all of Anunciación, perhaps in all the nation. But also I shall not deceive you about the facts of this matter."

At the moment, Don Tomaso was particularly sensitive—"In a snarling rage, some might perhaps put it," Segundo said—because of the sporting week, which this year was held on Don Tomaso's very estate. Don Tomaso's horses were losing, Don Tomaso's dogs were losing, and Don Tomaso himself was at great risk to lose the polo event. In such periods of sensitivity, it was the wiser course to hold one's person at some distance from the passion of Don Tomaso. There were others, arrived earlier, who had chosen not to broach their requests until after the storm subsided.

And how long would that be, Didi wondered.

"I think in two weeks," Segundo said, "if El Patrón does not lose too badly at the polo."

Didi asked, "And if he does lose badly?"

"I would recommend for you a month on a beach, perhaps in Rio where the weather is sunny and the dispositions likewise."

"And what if he wins?"

"Señor, after expressing his gratitude to God, Saint Jude, and perhaps to the person who helped him prevail, my master would then deal swiftly, happily, and equitably with all those now waiting for his attention."

"A long line of people?"

"Perhaps two days worth, if El Patrón deals with everyone in a business-like manner."

Didi, accustomed to the squalor of Odessa and the bizarre tastes of

Moscow's newly rich, was surprised to see something familiar in the crumbling opulence of the estate of Don Tomaso Atillo Bernardo O'Neil-y-Cordoba. The Don's lands were a throwback to the days of Pushkin, the lower outbuildings beautifully designed and well-made, but now deteriorating as though the effort of constructing them had sapped all resources and it had become futile to look after them—their south sides encrusted with moss, and here and there a roof haphazardly relinquishing its tiles to gravity. There were vegetable patches beside these lower buildings on the road going in, and as Segundo neared the main house there was an encampment of caravans and armed men, the men formed in a circle and watching something at the center of their ring. Didi asked if these were Don Tomaso's serfs.

"Serfs?" Segundo asked.

"Peasants."

"Peasants?"

"Servants."

"Oh, not at all. The peons of the Don live in those little house-itos we passed, down the road." He waved generally at the broken-down cottages behind them. "These in the camp will be the men of El Reyito de los Carcareros."

Didi said, "In English, please?"

"Jorge Delgado," Segundo said. "The little king of the cocaine business. He has an enormous shipment of commodities that needs facilitating from Don Tomaso, but he has resigned himself to riding out the storm."

"How long have they been camped here?"

"Oh, no more than four days, I think. From the first day of the sporting week, when the animals of Don Tomaso began losing."

As they passed the encampment of the cocaine crew, Didi could see clearly that two roosters were circling each other in the ring of armed men, and the men jabbing sticks at the birds to get them to engage with each other.

Didi asked, "Are these some of Don Tomaso's animals?"

"Dearest God no!" Segundo said. "Patrón Don Tomaso does not fool with such insignificances. I will show you." He turned abruptly from the roadway.

"Roof!" Didi cried over his shoulder to Yuri, and reached upward himself as the Range Rover jounced into an uncultivated field.

Segundo was driving uphill toward a small, rude, uncovered grandstand in a flat clearing. The men in the grandstand were decidedly more civilized than the men at the cocaine camp—all of them got up in white trousers and shirts, all straw-hatted—but like the sporting enthusiasts below they were

leaning forward to watch an event, the event itself within a low boarded fencing and beyond Didi's view.

"The dog fighting," Segundo said.

"Don Tomaso's?" Didi asked.

"Good heavens, certainly not! What a sin! These are the peons, and those are their dogs. Everyone in Anunci3n is addicted to sport."

They bounded past the dog fight, headed once again uphill, now toward what looked to Didi like a miniature horse-racing ring. The grandstand here was covered with a roof and filled with men and women, dressed in a sort of rural elegance, the offhand good taste of people who read fashion magazines and perhaps ordered their clothes from the boutiques of New York. Some in the crowd were rising, others looking into pamphlets and discussing what had gone on within the ring.

"Fine dogs," Segundo said. "But the greyhounds of my patr3n have only been fine to run second and worse in these races. Don Tomaso can afford to lose the money, wagering; it is the lost honor, it makes him crazy."

From the back seat, Yuri asked, "What will it take to make him sane again?"

Didi turned to look at Yuri, both with their hands pressed firmly into the roof of the jouncing Range Rover.

Yuri said, "A week here is more than we can tolerate; we should be gone by tomorrow, no later than the day after, yes?"

Didi said, "My friend is right. What would put Don Tomaso's soul at ease?"

"The polo," Segundo said. "Don Tomaso is an eight-goal player—are you familiar with the polo?"

"I'm not fond of horses," Didi said.

"The very fine players, it makes a handicap against them to play so well. One eight-goal player brings a difficult handicap against his team, especially if he is having a bad season of play. Tomorrow Don Tomaso's reds face Don Reymundo's blues. Don Reymundo is nothing more than a six-goal player, but he has been playing recently like a ten-goal man while my master plays like a five-goaler. You can understand the bitter disappointment of El Patr3n."

"Tell me about this polo," Didi said, "and how it is played. There are ponies?"

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## . . . I N S I D E   T H E   B E L T W A Y

"It's Walter Paskowitz," Daphne said as she stepped down from the chair. "Spiritual godfather of the 3ber-cons. Op-ed pages all over the coun-

try, he authored dozens of pre-war pieces justifying an invasion.”

“Exactly,” Ashor said. “The scholarly voice of his party’s imperialist wing. But you said that this—the Iraq Governance Caucus—this was less about governance and more about getting slices of the reconstruction pie for the politicians’ business constituents.”

“Yeah. A few anti-war politicians tossed in for seasoning. What in the world can *he* be doing here?”

Ashor said, “It will be fascinating to find out, will it not?” And as Paskowitz moved from the door toward the raised floor at the end of the room, Ashor put a gentlemanly hand on Talia’s elbow—“Just a few more minutes, darling”—and guided her through the light crowd to a table where four chairs remained empty. “May we?” he asked, and, receiving polite nods from the others seated there, he held first a chair for Talia, then for Daphne, and seated himself between them.

As Paskowitz and another man stepped onto the raised section of floor, Daphne leaned to whisper to Ashor, “Representative Teller. Jack Teller, Ohio. Not exactly a zealous candidate for this caucus. He was for the war bigtime, but back in his district a lot of his industrial sponsors are unhappy about not getting any recon contracts from the Pentagon or State. I’m guessing they’re sticking it to him to help them get their snouts into the trough.”

“Folks,” Teller called. “Gimme your attention, here. We’ve got ourselves a speaker this evening, Walter Paskowitz.” Then, even louder, to the congressional aides at the buffet table, “Kids, keep it down over there, okay?” As the buzz in the room reduced to a low hum, Teller continued, “Dr. Paskowitz has taken time from a busy schedule to speak to us, let’s give him the courtesy, folks.” Then, reading from an index card: “Walt got his PhD at University of Chicago, is a founding member of the Century for American Leadership, and is a Distinguished Fellow at the American Initiative Center. He’s authored five books on sociopolitical subjects, and published dozens of policy papers in scholarly journals. So without further ado, here’s Walt Paskowitz.”

“And an unrepentant carnivore,” Daphne added, whispering to Ashor under the light scattering of applause, “and the leading neo-imperialist of the age.”

As the applause died from its own lack of momentum, Ashor brought a small leatherbound notepad and gold pen from his jacket and focused intensely on Walt Paskowitz, his pen poised like a dagger.

“Man is the only animal that can remain on friendly terms  
with the victims he intends to eat until he eats them.”

Samuel Butler

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . ANUNCIÓN

It was his curse, Didi imagined, that in this savage land he was to be held hostage by pagans who had little fear of God and no sense whatsoever of the realities of power. In Europe, God’s presence wasn’t reduced to straw shrines next to fighting rings for chickens and mongrel dogs. In Europe—and especially in the Europe where Moscow was once the voice of reason—the Colonel’s name echoed in every corner, both because of his ties to Dzerzhinsky Square and the Kremlin and because of his connections with certain men of the mafiya, who were themselves intricately entwined with the service and the politicians.

Here, though, in this land of heathens and dog fights, a playboy politician on the order of Don Tomaso Atillo Bernardo O’Neil-y-Cordoba was oblivious to the level of pain Colonel Kurskov could bring down upon him, and Didi felt himself reduced to the status of a serf—doing what he could to get this infantile man out of his petulant sulk over a game of horse hockey. It was in general beyond humiliating: Even the living conditions of these people were outside civilized social norms. As it turned out, what Didi first imagined to be the rural dacha of this El Patrón was in reality Don Tomaso’s permanent home, a place quite large but as rude as a country scene from Chekov.

What was needed was outside Didi’s experience and well beyond his skill. In reasonable circumstances he would have turned the whole affair over to Andrei and got on with his own work.

“A month of waiting if the reds lose tomorrow?” Didi asked.

“A month at least, Señor, evading Don Tomaso’s terrible eye. And I can promise you, if we lose there will be a new El Primero within the week.”

“And it is the blue number three who guides the enemy team,” Didi said, half question, half statement.

“Don Reymundo has been formidable this week, Señor,” Segundo said. “It is hard to imagine that he could be beaten. His horses are magnificent, and Don Reymundo himself is like some mythical figure who has become a part of his horse.”

He had El Segundo take him to the polo field where the final game

would be played next day, and he studied not just the field but the surrounding hills, now shedding their winter cloak of snow. The game was to be in the afternoon, and Didi looked to the hill to the west, heavily wooded, which would be in shadow when the ball was put into play. As Segundo explained how the game was played, Don Tomaso and five other mounted men burst onto the grass, swinging mallets and cracking the ball between them—practicing for the morrow’s game. Four would be the team, Segundo said, two were potential substitutes in case of injury.

“The team of El Patrón is holding the cup from last year,” Segundo explained, “so the games are being played here.” This year, Don Tomaso’s team had beaten its way to the top, winning its leg yesterday in the semi-finals—the finals to be played tomorrow against the team of Don Reymundo—but, to his shame, El Patrón’s team had had to fight for every point to get here. It was the matter of the handicapping. Segundo told Didi that the better players had higher handicaps placed against them, and each team was handicapped in the sum of its players. Segundo said, “Don Tomaso’s team carries an eighteen handicap, Don Reymundo’s team is a sixteen. So tomorrow, in the finals, Don Reymundo will have already two points before the game begins.” And Don Tomaso’s team would have to score three more points than his opponent to take the cup this year.

“We are in the finals only because of El Patrón’s magnificent heart. He rides—you would believe the devil himself was after him,” Segundo said, and crossed himself. “And Don Hector Villalaredo has defended our own goals with great artistry and courage. But, against Don Reymundo? There are rumors that Don Reymundo played badly in later games last year as a form of artistry, to lower his handicap coming into this year’s sporting week.”

El Segundo explained the basics of polo in the simplest terms, for it was an understanding of the basics, rather than the nuances of the game, that Didi needed to tip the balance and bring Don Tomaso a certain win—and to ransom himself and his crew from these pagans.

Despite their white pants, which contrasted against their dark brown mounts, the men at practice seemed part of the horses, Didi thought, or perhaps the horses were more properly heavy undercarriages of the men, for each man-beast wheeled and drove as one, the upper part swinging a mallet on a whiplike shaft, striking the ball with a *thwhackk*, and the lower part pounding, occasionally slowing then spinning to pound without warning in a new direction, as though driven by furies.

Even in practice, Didi saw it as a violent ballet, not a moment of quiet, the horses in constant, whirling motion, their stops and turns sending



chunks of grassy earth into the air, the men perhaps the thinking part but their bodies merged absolutely with the horses' sinews as they blocked and checked each others' mallets, as they whipped the ball from either side of their mount, and sometimes even behind the horses, whirling the mallets overhead and striking the ball with desperate, sinister force.

"I've seen enough," Didi said, once he understood the simpler elements of the game as described by El Segundo. "Where is the Cultural Ministry van? I want to take an inventory of our farm equipment before dinner."

Segundo had put them into a dormitory for transient workers, and they unloaded the cultural van into the far end of the dorm—and Didi calculated a near-perfect line from the center of the dorm to Mecca for the Arabs.

The religious Arabs had only three more days of their special food. The structural engineer Fyodor had run out of vodka and seemed to be in withdrawal, his expression guarded and his eyes searching the corners of the world for hidden threats, while Yuri, now that he'd gotten into this western hemisphere, spoke of nothing but slots machines and titty-girls. And Didi, the calm engine that kept this collection of conflicting personalities moving in a common direction, asked himself again and again what Andrei would do. In the middle of the night, sleepless and staring at a moonlit dormitory ceiling, he got his answer, and immediately rolled to his left side, curled up cozily, and went to sleep.

Next morning Yuri got a blanket from one of the dormer bunks and pulled the nails from one of the crates, and slipped the blanket and its load to Didi.

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#### . . . I N S I D E   T H E   B E L T W A Y

In photographs Walter Paskowitz's face—wrinkled as a shar-pei—was harshly disapproving. Yet to Ashor he seemed in real life the perfect picture of an indulgent uncle, grizzled and avuncular. Ashor guessed that the photographers were expressing their political tastes rather than capturing the image of the man. Paskowitz smiled and in his smile it was obvious that he was enormously fond of the people in the room, and that he wanted them to love him in return.

"I realize the risk I took in coming before this particular caucus," Paskowitz said. "So if I look a little stout this evening, it's because I slipped into my stainless-steel underwear before leaving the house." In response to the light laughter his smile grew, blossoming into happy folds. "I do have a message of hope for you—a *confidential* message. Now, I've been in this town long enough to appreciate that my secret will be safe with you folks

from the Hill: Everything you hear goes in one ear and out your mouth.”

“He’s rather good, isn’t he?” Ashor said to Daphne under the laughter.

“*Very* good,” Daphne said, “if you don’t listen too closely to the actual *context*.”

“Before I give you the news,” Paskowitz said, “let me make a few general comments about the situation in Iraq. When you consider the dictatorship that Iraqis lived under just eighteen months ago, you’ll have to admit that things are looking bright for the average citizen there. In the words of Plato, ‘Freedom in a democracy is the glory of the State, and therefore the freeman will wish to dwell only in a democracy.’ About two thousand years later, John Adams wrote, ‘As the happiness of the people is the sole end of government, so the consent of the people is the only foundation of it.’ Now, I ask you to think of this: From the time of its origins in Mesopotamia to the genocidal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, the people of Iraq have never had control over their own government. But now, for the first time in recorded history, going all the way back to pre-biblical days, the Iraqi people will decide on their own government, compliments of the United States.”

There was handclapping here and there, though not exactly definable as applause, and Ashor glanced at Daphne, tipping his head toward the buffet table where a few subdued laughs could be heard. As Paskowitz spoke, Ashor had been taking notes, but to Daphne they were indecipherable—perhaps Assyrian, she thought, which even a passing Arabist could not have read.

The laughter of the aides at the buffet table slipped by Paskowitz unnoticed, and he went on to show, in graphic word pictures, how the Iraqis and the American military were putting the lie to nay-sayers worldwide. As he began his brief, commenting specifically on the numbers of insurgents killed and captured in the past few weeks, Daphne cringed, but Ashor caught Paskowitz’s words in the leatherbound notebook. When Paskowitz spoke of the mercy mission of a military field hospital for children, Ashor’s eyes dimmed, and he thought, ‘Get to the meat, more targets for my spears.’ But when Paskowitz returned to specifics of the improving security picture, Ashor again began scratching in his little notebook, filling a third page and turning to the fourth.

At the point where Paskowitz was on the field hospital, there began an exodus from the buffet table, a sort of Children’s Crusade to holy land of the singles bars, Ashor imagined. As they slipped away, one called out, “You tell ‘em, Walt baby.” Jack Teller stood, swift anger in his frown, to see who had thrown the jibe, but too late, the kids had already streamed out the door.

While Paskowitz spoke and Ashor took notes, Talia admired the wall sconces and the rococo moulding on the ceiling. The chairs and fabrics she'd already memorized for reproducing in Lisbon, the architectural details now absorbed her. She strained back in her chair, even tilting it, to see around the group to her right—remarking on the brass door hardware—Walter Paskowitz's words buzzing meaninglessly around her head.

Paskowitz spoke of the emerging Iraqi army and police force, and here, especially, Daphne saw that Ashor was writing swiftly and urgently. And finally, when Paskowitz came to his news—a “confidential message” he said again—Ashor seemed to drift, concentrating on what he'd already put into his notebook, and then turning to empty pages to take notes on his notes.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Paskowitz said, now raising his voice to the level of a stump speech, “you’ll be hearing this from official sources in about three days, but I wanted to bring it to you in advance.” He looked around, from one side to the other, taking them all in, as though he was preparing to anoint them. “Ladies and gentlemen, the Pentagon and State are opening up the accredited Reconstruction Contract Outsourcing list, and a lot of your business constituents will be invited to make presentations to get onto it.”

A short, blunt-framed man stood, his hand-tailored suit giving him the look of a bouncer at a fashionable saloon. He spoke loudly in a gravelly voice, “Walt, I got a question.”

“Gio Buccini,” Daphne whispered to Ashor. “His district is heavily industrial.”

“Looks tough,” Ashor said.

Daphne said, “Middleweight boxing champ in the navy, as I understand.”

“Why, of course, Gio ...” Paskowitz began.

Speaking over Paskowitz, Buccini said, “These gonna be open-bid contracts?”

“What else do you have on him?” Ashor asked, and Daphne dug into her briefcase.

Paskowitz said, “Well, you know, Gio, it’s going to be, as I understand it, the reconstruction system, as it now stands, is really doing, I mean is satisfying the needs of the program as it was originally designated, and the criteria being met ...”

“Cut the crap, Walt—you’re not running for office. Just gimme a simple goddam ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

“This isn’t something to be hammered out right here, Gio. It’s up to State and the Pentagon to determine the bona fides of the companies that

will be added to the accredited RCO s.”

Daphne handed Ashor a thin, stapled fact sheet on Gio Buccini. “Just an overview. How much do you need?”

Ashor said, “This looks good.” As Buccini continued, Ashor briefly scanned the few pages.

“So this great news you’re giving us is just chum for the bottom fish,” Buccini said. “Your pals in the administration give our guys back in our districts little crumbs of the reconstruction budget. What’s the payback? We gotta get hitched onto your bandwagon for the war?”

“Gio ...”

Buccini went on as though Paskowitz hadn’t spoken: “I don’t really give a crap one way or the other, see. I just wanna know the terms.”

Walter Paskowitz looked like a man getting ready to flee from an on-rushing freight-train, which from Ashor’s perspective was the worst thing Paskowitz could do. Ashor rose, even standing on tiptoe to differentiate himself from the stubby Buccini, and pulled on his most diffident face. “Dr. Paskowitz, I would like to ask a question, please. It is allowed?”

As he looked at Ashor, Paskowitz showed a certain grateful relief. He asked, “And you are, sir?”

Ignoring Daphne’s vicious tug at his jacket, Ashor said, “I am Ashor dur-Shamshi, an anti-Saddam exile from Iraq. I read with great interest *Reconsidering Democracy, New Solutions for the New World Order*, your collection of essays on America’s obligation of global management in the post-cold-war era.” Ashor waited just a moment to let Paskowitz absorb his words, in fact watching the other’s stiff back relax while a look of pleasure come into his face. Ashor continued, “Will you entertain a question or two regarding the newly-democratized Iraq?”

“Happily,” Paskowitz said. But rather than focusing on Ashor, he tipped to one side and spoke a few quiet words to Jack Teller.

Ashor now became the very soul of diffidence. Even Talia broke off her review of the room’s Louis Quinze decor to look at him, repressing a laugh, thinking that he only needed a hat, held by its brim with both hands, to seem a schoolboy shyly begging knowledge from his tutor.

Ashor began, “I’m relieved to see that things are looking so much brighter for my fellow Iraqis. You commented on the large numbers of terrorists and insurgents who have been killed or captured recently. Could you elaborate, please, on the actual number of insurgent *attacks*?” Ashor paused to look about the room, as though preparing to defend Paskowitz’s good name.

“Alas,” Paskowitz said with a disarming smile, “I don’t have exact num-

bers. But I can assure you that the numbers of terrorists killed and/or captured has gone up substantially.”

“Well,” Ashor said, with obvious relief, “Thank God for that.” A brief glance at his notes, and he asked, “Can you give us a more detailed briefing—perhaps some reference to source materials—regarding the improvements in Iraq’s military and police forces?”

Paskowitz, however, had been leaning to speak to Jack Teller, who had a cell phone to his ear.

“Sir,” Ashor said. “If you please?”

“I do beg your pardon,” Paskowitz said as he straightened. “What exactly was your question, Mr.—is it ‘Shur Shami?’”

“Dur-Shamshi, sir,” Ashor said easily, “not a common name, I suppose. I asked if you might let me know what your direct-source materials were regarding improvements in Iraq’s military and police. I would like to show this to others who share my concern for Iraq’s stability.”

“Your best bet would be the office of public information at the Pentagon,” Paskowitz said. “I don’t exactly recall the documents I quoted from.”

Now looking less accommodating, Ashor asked, “And do you recall any mention of the number of Iraqis kidnapped this month? Or the number of AK-47s that have gone missing, primarily from the stocks of Iraq’s Interior Ministry?”

Paskowitz looked briefly and silently at Ashor, then leaned down to speak again to Teller, who was closing his cell phone.

“Perhaps the lack of documents comes from the fact that even government agencies in Iraq have electricity only ten hours a day,” Ashor said, referring to his notes. “And perhaps this is why the U.S. military has created a mobile hospital for children—because Iraq’s brick-and-mortar hospitals, those that haven’t been looted out of existence, are shut down fourteen hours out of every twenty-four.”

Rising again from Jack Teller, Paskowitz raised a clenched fist and an out-thrust finger, pointing at Ashor as though he wished he was aiming a gun. “Now I recognize you, General. You’re one of Saddam’s chief military officers, and you’ve got no right to be in this room.”

“Not with honest Americans,” Teller added, getting up and standing beside Paskowitz and scowling in the grand manner of a biblical judge.

“No,” Ashor said, loudly but in reasonable tones. “I am the *anti*-Saddam Iraqi general who escaped with his family and staff back in ‘ninety-eight. And went to the International Court in The Hague to expose Saddam’s massacre of ...”

“I’m telling you *get out*,” Teller said, raising his voice and showing veins

in his forehead. He looked around the room, calling, “Is there a security officer in the room?”

*“For krisake shuddup and siddown, Jack!”* It was Gio Buccini, standing again and looking as though he was prepared to rush the area of raised flooring to punch Teller back into his seat. “If the man’s got something to say, let him the hell say it. If he’s full of crap, go after him. But let him have his goddam say.”

And Teller—even, it seemed, to his own astonishment—abruptly sat and looked as though he’d been shot directly between the eyes.

Ashor coughed, covering his smile with a hand and wiping away his amusement while working up a humble expression. He spoke once more in placating tones: “I honestly mean no disrespect, Dr. Paskowitz. I am only trying to determine the specifics of your good news about the growing stability in Iraq. Before you spoke, I couldn’t imagine any responsible business executive sending his company into Iraq at this time. Among other things, the U.S. military has had more kills and has taken more prisoners because last month saw the largest escalation of insurgent attacks in Iraq to date—three thousand such attacks in one month, an all-time high.” He paused, looked around the room. “Perhaps it is hard for Americans to understand the scope of Iraq’s problems, because the numbers seem to be relatively small. Please imagine what it would be like if these things were happening here, where there are eleven Americans to every one person in Iraq. So the three thousand insurgent attacks would be the equivalent of *thirty-three* thousand attacks around the United States in one month—in Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, even here in Washington. And imagine eleven thousand Americans fleeing the violence here in the States every day, streaming into Mexico and Canada. Eleven thousand a day. In Iraq there were a hundred and fifty-two kidnappings in the past month. Imagine nearly one thousand and seven hundred terrorist-related kidnappings around your country last month. And mortar rounds falling daily on the grounds of the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department in Foggy Bottom, as has happened this last week in Baghdad—and indeed as happens there every week. And then, in the face of all this, someone tells you that ... things are looking *up*?”

Ashor paused, first measuring the room then looking at his notes, knowing that he was getting dangerously close to losing his audience, no matter how dramatic his information might be. He said, “In Iraq, to date, seventy-five thousand AK-47s have gone missing. Some from the army, most from the Interior Ministry, where many of the national police do second duty on sectarian death squads and kidnapping gangs. Please—I realize I’m go-

ing on much too long—but think of it. Seventy-five thousand AK-47s, purchased by the United States for Iraq security forces, but now in the hands of gangsters and insurgents, courtesy of Iraqi government agencies. That equates to over eight hundred thousand fully automatic AKs, if they'd been stolen and distributed to gangsters here in the States.”

In his survey of the room as he spoke, Ashor noted an equal number of appalled expressions and boredom, and a few people preparing to leave. He quickly continued, “There is more, and all of it as unfortunate as the news I’ve just given you, but I imagine you’ve reached the saturation point and really don’t want to hear more. So again I ask, what responsible business executive would send his company into a place like this?”

Ashor turned from his appeal to the room in general to face Paskowitz: “And I ask ... if the U.S. has a major crisis elsewhere and finds it necessary to leave Iraq at a moment’s notice, will Iraq degenerate into anarchy, chaos, gangsterism, and sectarian civil war? Or will it become the democratic paradise that you envision, Dr. Paskowitz?”

Walter Paskowitz also looked the room over, a general auditing his troops, and seemed pleased with his count. Ashor noted that, as Paskowitz toured the room with his eyes, he avoided Gio Buccini’s table—but particularly surveyed the area where Daphne’s “money boys” had taken up three tables. And judging by Paskowitz’s quick visual retreat from them, Ashor imagined that the lobbyists were neither smiling nor, as some of Paskowitz’s supporters had done, giving thumbs-up signs.

“I’d like to answer you in full, General,” Paskowitz said, blessing Ashor with a warm smile. “But I’m afraid if I do, your interruptions and rebuttals will keep me from finishing my own comments.”

With a smile of equal luminescence, Ashor responded, “I am only a poor soldier, trying to understand the facts of the current situation in Iraq, Doctor. I promise to sit and be quiet, in order to be enlightened.” And, as Ashor sat, he heard a single appreciative laugh from the direction of the lobbyists’ tables.

“General,” Paskowitz began, “I think you realize that most of Saddam’s cronies and architects of mass-destruction weapons have surrendered or been arrested. The ‘deck of cards’ is now reduced to a single blackjack spread, so to speak.” Paskowitz waited for his small clique’s laughter to subside, then continued: “Monies that Saddam had been diverting from public welfare to his palace-building and into his personal bank accounts—some fifty- to seventy-billion dollars that he looted over the years—these monies are now benefiting the people of Iraq. And in fact the people of Iraq, for the first time in five thousand years of recorded history, will democratically

choose their own leaders in just a few months. Now, you mentioned the increase in terrorist attacks. General, as you know, the reason for military activity is not always obvious on the face of it. This uptick of insurgent attacks only confirms that the terrorists are afraid of the advancement of democratic values. Most importantly, addressing your negativity about U.S. resolve to continue its important mission in Iraq—there is no question of hot-footing it out on short notice. The U.S. has committed itself to the rebuilding of Iraq as a moral imperative, and America will continue there as long as Iraq needs us.”

‘Or as long as your own people don’t experience a crisis’ Ashor thought, ‘like the prospect of a military draft. And cry out to bring the troops home.’ He stood, but tentatively, as though afraid to ask his final question. “So, in other words, you stand behind Mr. Paul Bremer’s famous Proclamation of Baghdad, which he issued when he handed over power to the new Interim Government in June of this year?”

“Absolutely!” Paskowitz said as he leaned down once more to whisper something to Jack Teller. Teller rose, and, with Paskowitz, began stepping away from their central position on the raised flooring. Speaking as he left, Paskowitz said, “I endorse Mr. Bremer’s Proclamation of Baghdad without qualification.”

As Paskowitz and Teller walked away, Ashor said, “Doctor Paskowitz, thank you for your courtesy. I only hope that you are right.”

“Ashor, don’t go after him again,” Daphne hissed.

“I have no intention to,” Ashor replied as he sat. “I want him to leave with a few shreds of his dignity intact.” And indeed he did, for his intent had been not so much to discredit Paskowitz as to put the flea of doubt into the politicians’ ears.

“Good,” Daphne said. “Because ... don’t look now, but I think you caught yourself a fish.” At which she stood and turned to face Gio Buccini, who was plowing his way to their table with all the grace of a tugboat.

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## . . . A N U N C I Ó N

It was afternoon, two hours for lunch and two for siesta, four o’clock, the sun to the west behind him and somewhat to his left in the northern sky toward the equator. Didi sat on the hill, on five days of newspaper, *La Prensa*, the dampness of the earth seeping up and the front-page photos of El Señor Presidente, Don Tomaso’s brother-in-law Don Eduardo Colima de Valencia—which were above the fold on each day’s edition—picking up ink from the pages below, making Don Eduardo under Didi’s buttocks as indistinct in *La Prensa* as he was on the world stage.



Behind Didi in the trees the Ukrainian enforcer Viktor stood motionless, facing the path that led down from the hill. Viktor held a Makarov in 5.54mm in his right hand, his forefinger outside the triggerguard and pointing rigidly along the slide. Ahead of the pistol's slide, screwed onto the barrel, a fat suppressor—as long as the gun itself.

Viktor was tall and heavy in a way that spoke more of agility than of power: He carried his weight through the chest and in his shoulders and legs, and his waist was narrow. Viktor had little to say and his eyes were watchful and Didi, who had never seen the man before they picked him up in Odessa, had placed his faith in God that Viktor would be as professional in reality as he was in his outward presentation. The polo field below absorbed Didi's attention, the task ahead was something he'd never before attempted: Through simple expedience, Didi left it to God and Viktor to watch his back.

Didi sat on El Presidente's face, the RPG launcher was nested beside him on a blanket that had been folded several times against the dampness of the ground. Through pocket binoculars he watched grooms preparing the horses below. Some horse attendants wrapped their charges' legs, others walked them briskly, the big horses high-stepping and the grooms trotting alongside them like lovers. Horses were not his taste in sport—he preferred shooting, both hunting and target work—and so Segundo had had to explain to him that the horses, in theory at least, contributed sixty percent or more to a player's success. Of course, Segundo added, it was the player's responsibility to train and maintain his string of ponies, so that the excellence of the horses depended very much on the excellence of the player.

It was a fine day for such sport, Didi imagined, the air cool and invigorating for both the horses and riders. As he watched them shaping up on the field, he couldn't help but remember the stories he'd heard as a boy about the great famine, when even cossacks ate their horses. And of course the siege of Leningrad, where only the fortunate had horse steaks for dinner. To use them for sport seemed almost a sacrilege.

And Didi wondered briefly which was the more irritating—his apprehension that he was operating out of his depth and risking that he would make the situation even worse, or his absolute rage that he was at the mercy of this two-kopek playboy-politician, whose wife's brother was the president of the nation. Here—whatever Didi's cachet in the civilized world—here he had no trump card. Here he couldn't pull the Colonel's name out of his sleeve and watch gangsters go white around the mouth and make an embarrassment in their pants. Here he couldn't bring down the wrath of a man who was wired to both Dzerzhinsky Square and the mafiya, and get

this petty fool to end his tantrum. It was like being dropped behind enemy lines.

The first period—a “chukker” El Segundo had called it—began, and as Didi watched, the doubts began anew. Yesterday during practice, El Segundo’s explanation of the game fresh in Didi’s mind, the players moves seemed easy enough to follow. Now at some distance from the field his guts tightened as he tried to watch the target, Don Reymundo, in the blue shirt with a large white 3 front and back. Exactly as El Segundo had explained, it was the two opposing number threes who drove the action mid-field, riding hard against each other as they fought for control of the ball. The number three rider controlled his team and—unlike God who simply ruled from heaven—covered the most ground to get control of the ball. Number three was the power player, the man who stole the ball from the enemy and fed it to his number one rider to make the goal. And now, as Didi watched, it was the number three of the blues, Don Reymundo, who charged and challenged Don Tomaso, stealing the ball and whipping it toward the blue number one, while the red number four worked furiously at the goal to defend.

Andrei had written out specifications for the goods Didi picked up in Tiraspol. Andrei wanted the most recent RPG, but had to make do with an older model. On the plus-side, it was very close to Andrei’s requirements, upgraded and accurized, with the latest sighting configuration. Valeri Voshch had assured Didi that the enhanced RPG could put an anti-tank charge into a man’s hat at 600 meters—and not by coincidence the spot Didi chose was not quite 600 meters from Don Tomaso’s polo field.

Didi watched the horses kicking up clods of grass as they wheeled and Don Tomaso spun his mallet to whack the ball downfield, riding after it in a fury, and the sound of the hit coming to Didi only after Don Tomaso got three horse-lengths from where he’d made the strike, the clicking sound almost musical.

Around Didi the trees and the low scrub were in their first leaf. The trees were old, most of them, and around them here and there on the ground was an occasional branch, brought down perhaps by snowload. Didi rose and searched among the downed branches and found one of good height that was forked into a near-perfect Y. Returning with it to his place in the scrub at the crest of the hill, he sat and began patiently drilling the forked branch into the earth, until the Y was about right, then brought up the RPG launcher and shouldered it. He rested the front of the launching tube in the crotch of the Y and sighted on the polo field below. The sight picture was high, a twig of scrub intruded in the crosshairs.

Didi twisted and pushed on the leveling stick, then gently snapped away

the thin shrubby twig, and re-shouldered the RPG, now able to clearly follow the distant action yet candidly admitting to himself that everything stood against him—his lack of experience with the RPG, his ignorance of this horse-hockey nonsense, the great distance to the field. His only real hope, he imagined, was that he would pray with all of his heart. And that God would not be napping at the time.

“Between cultivated minds,  
the first interview is the best.”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

The house was old Vegas, resting in a patchwork neighborhood that sprawled in slovenly contrast to the nearby master-planned tract, which appeared at first blush to be a penal colony for yuppies; old Vegas if thirty years was old, a cluster of one-acre horse properties, a steel distribution yard, a scattering of vacant lots for sale, and seven rambling homes barricaded behind high walls on half-acre parcels—Remly wondering if the walls, like his, were topped with broken glass.

Before he could announce himself at the security panel the gate rolled back—beyond the gate a water-miser landscape of river gravel and gray-green plants, the house obsolete California-ranch and in the carport a big-shouldered diesel-Dodge pickup, the Gaming Control Ford, and a diminutive Honda Civic in vivid lipstick red.

As Remly climbed stiffly from his pickup Morris Berman emerged from the house all elbows and heavy feet, a bruiser who couldn’t wait to get into the ring and mix it up. His big hand flew at Remly in a sidelong swoop and as they shook he said, “So you got through your bad hair day, so what’s with all the creaky walking? Fall down the stairs?”

“I was out of town—fell down the stairs.”

“So how’s the moat coming along?”

“I’m stocking it with piranhas.”

Morris’s luau shirt was a riot of red parrots and yellow-striped blue fish, on his shirt pocket a large printed button with a green top hat centered on a green shamrock. It said, “I GAVE.” Morris stepped back a pace and studied Remly from hairline to shoeshine: “You carrying?”

Remly said, “Want to see my permit?”

“Touchy touchy! I’m thinking, two of us carrying, it’s safe to leave the gate open.”

“Tough neighborhood?”

“This whole town, you know? I get it from people, this is a tourist village, crime rate oughta be in the toilet. *Hello?* Our whole economy—we lure people, think they can get something for nothing ... so I ask you, gimme a definition of the criminal mind.”

Morris's hand in his back, urging him into the house, Remly asked, "So what makes you think I'm interested in some Russian visitor—or some Slavic types who got whacked down near Laughlin?"

"Well shit you're *here* aren't ya? C'mon in, get yourself a brewsky." They went through the entry into a living room that seemed to have been furnished on the fly at a clearance sale, and were stopped by a woman's voice, "Mor-rissss," rising sharply on the *rissss*.

Saying "Oooops, the wife," Morris went through a broad archway into the kitchen and after a moment of soto voce conversation returned with a thin woman who moved as though she was negotiating the sharper edges of an unkind world. She had a gift of looking at her husband with an expression half skeptical, half amused, like a child waiting for the pantomime to begin. She stood cautiously, an oblique smile as Morris introduced Remly—"Charley, my new bud!"—offering her hand, fingers bent, a woman's fingertip handshake. "I even have a name," she said. "Mimi. Very nice meeting you, Charley." On her jersey pullover blouse, like her husband Mimi had a shamrock and top hat button.

"Gotta talk a little biz with Charley here," Morris said. He kissed Mimi's forehead and pressed Remly onward, into a TV rumpus room that opened through a glass wall onto a patio and pool. Outside, a whole-steer gas grill in stainless steel, brightly buffed and squatting beside the pool as though wondering if it was safe to go in. The big-screen television was on, sound off, local advertising—a furniture store, now with the lowest prices of the year again, the TV salesman almost life size. Morris went to the bar and retrieved two bottles of beer, "XO" on the metallic labels. "Singapore's finest," Morris said, indicating the bottle in Remly's hand. "I got cheeseburgers all set up—by definition not strictly kosher. Cold pasta salad the wife's making. You hungry already?"

"I'll wait," Remly said. He rolled the cold bottle unopened across his forehead. "Big crowd?"

"Only four of us," Morris said. "Me and the wife and a bud who's got some stuff on this Ruskie Kurskov. Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov—once upon a time a big cheese at Dzerzhinsky Square, or so I hear."

Remly said, "Your bud who's got some stuff about Kurskov here in Vegas—professional interest?"

"Naw, just started seeing him around our little village, early part of the year. Works at La Fontaine, mentioned some sourball Ruskie who's favoring us with his lovely presence." Morris tipped back the XO, emptying half the bottle in a single gulp. "Then I see all this 5.54mm Dzerzhinsky Square brass, it's littering the streets of our fair et cetera, I figure maybe I'll check

Kurskov out.”

Remly asked, “Any idea why Kurskov’s in town?”

“Not a clue,” Morris said. “So what’s your take, how come he’s here?”

Stepping around Morris’s question, Remly said, “Three Slavic types, shot dead in a Chevy four-door down near Laughlin you said. Same brass, same bullets as used on Alf Noles, you said. Who’s on it—Metro?”

“Yeah, my bud Rick—Rick Butzek, homicide. Because of the gun.”

Remly asked, “Anything special about the Chevy?”

“You seem interested.”

“Just curious.”

“Sure,” Morris said, openly skeptical. “The *Chevy*, nothing special. Light tan four-door. Rental. All the interior courtesy bulbs pulled out, maybe a little special. But, hey—in the *trunk*? These guys’ve got it filled with loot they’ve boosted. Plus a lotta tools from Burglars-R-Us. Now, this isn’t big-time activity, like they’re working toward their retirement, just chickenshit stuff—a bunch of electronics they can turn over quick for cash. Maybe get-outta-town money. Plus eight Yellow Pages of pawn shop listings. Plus some ninja stuff.”

“Ninja stuff?” Remly said, but casually, lifting his XO beer to cover his face as he spoke.

“You know—ninja. Black sweats, black gloves, black balaclavas. Also, they got three Kevlar vests in the trunk, two of ‘em with what looks like maybe 9mm dents, like someone took a couple shots at them.”

“Any closer to ID-ing the departed?”

“My bud Rick says there’s a lot of European shit about them. Haircuts, dental work, underwear. Funny, they’ll buy local clothes, but they’re too cheap to pop for Yankee drawers. Rick knows about the gun-of-choice, I already told him—the Ruskie assassination special.”

Remly said, “But no ID-ing them.”

“Yeah, no,” Morris said. “But I’m here to tell ya, whoever’s doing this, he’s good. The way it happens—the way Rick sees it—there are two guys in the front seat, one in back, the three guys who get hit. There’s an old Datsun pickup in front of ‘em. And there’s a nail strip across the road, on the other side. Datsun slows down, the Chevy pulls out to go ...”

“Wait, how did he conclude . . . ?”

“Stolen Datsun pickup dumped on the scene, Chevy skidmarks, way the Chevy and the pickup’re left once the job’s done. Chevy gets a flat, only one tire, jams off to the side. Datsun pickup goes just a little beyond, stops on the shoulder. Now it gets *very* professional. Guess who just happens to come along, right after the flat tire.”

Remly said, "The auto club?"

"Aw, you peeked." Morris Berman looked genuinely hurt. "Stolen auto club truck, parks right behind the Chevy, which is now sandwiched, the Datsun in front. Somewhere before they get hit, the guys in the Chev see what's going down, but only one of 'em—guy in the back seat, where he's got a little elbow room—only one gets his gun completely out. Too late to shoot, though. All three get it from at least two, maybe three 5.54mm Makarovs, *pink pink pink*. The shooters go off in the auto club truck, it's abandoned seven miles down the road. *Very* professional."

"And very expensive," Remly said.

"Yeah, kind of makes you wonder." Morris paused to empty the other half of the bottle, then with a contemplative look measured Remly: "So ... what I'm asking myself—*why*? This is chickenshit stuff they're stealing—some Ruskie heavyweights are gonna whack 'em for lifting it? Sure. And I'm the Pope. And how's our boy Alf Noles hooked into this? I'm here to tell ya, no way Alfie-boy is connected to these clowns. And I ask myself, how're *you* connected to it? General Services Administration? Sure. And my pop, Mick Jagger, is gonna come sing me to sleep tonight."

Remly smiled, as though he hadn't heard it before, and lifted his bottle to Morris in salute, then put it back on the bar counter.

Morris said, "No matter how hard I try, you don't come up on my radar. So what I'm doing, I'm playing 'Where's Charley?' You're all over the page, but I can't put you into the picture. The last guy Alf Noles phones, you don't really know why he called. Maybe to hit you up for money, some hot tip he's got? Somewhere near midnight? Oh ... yeah? Where's Charley? Russian 5.54mm assassination special, probably with a suppressor? Where's Charley? How's he fit in? You don't come up on any GSA radar, not that I can see. Where's Charley? He ain't there. You're interested in three guys getting whacked with a 5.54mm pistol down near Laughlin, or you wouldn't be sitting here. You're curious about a certain Colonel Kurskov, mentioned to you in my invite, or again you'd be at the buck ninety-nine buffet instead here, right? So I keep asking myself, how do I put you into the picture, buddy-bud? I can maybe help you, whatever it is you got up your sleeve, but not if you don't open up with me, okay?"

Remly said, "How about your interest in this. Professional? This look like a Gaming Control issue?"

Morris said, "Rick's holding down the crime end of it—he's got enough bodies here, he could make a lifelong career. Me? I'm just in it for the mystery and the funsies."

Remly took that in, digested it, and said, "You know some intriguing

guys, Morris. They get info on Russian guns even the FBI can't make. Did they feed you news-of-the-day about Kurskov? These guys of yours—happen to live in Tel Aviv? Maybe Jerusalem?"

Morris put the long neck of the beer bottle to his lips and said, "Shhhh. I got friends in low places."

Remly asked, "July fourth have a special meaning for you? I mean—beyond the obvious?"

"Funny coincidence." Morris Berman smiled hugely, parenthetical dimples blossoming on his cheeks. "The fourth, my birthday!"

"Anyone ever throw a birthday party for you at a famous airport in Uganda? At Entebbe in 'seventy-six, maybe?"

"Hey, you're pretty sharp yourself, kid. I mean, for a GSA civil service grunt."

"You were with the Unit, right?"

"Good times," Morris said. "Kicking ass and taking names. So what's your alma mater—I mean, outside of GSA? Somewhere in Virginia?"

"Stanford. It's in California."

The doorbell rang and Morris said, "Oh shit Gertie, there's company."

In a house where the walls went up eight feet but the ceiling went to twelve there were no doors, only broad openings, and Morris went to the opening that led to the living room, Remly shifting to look around Morris and across the living room to the front door where Mimi Berman hugged a greeting to another woman.

Remly asked, "Your bud who sees Kurskov at La Fontaine?"

"The wife's best girlfriend," Morris said. He waved toward the front door: "Hi, babe!"

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## . . . A N U N C I Ó N

This El Segundo person had explained the action, but to Yuri it was just a lot of horse's asses sitting on a lot of horses' asses, running wild on an oversized football pitch, the horse hooves tearing up the grass. Yuri's mind, though, was not on horse's asses but on Las Vegas. To keep from going completely mad, he occasionally closed his eyes to see the swirling lights; the naked titty-girls; gushers of coins spewing from the slots machines like water from an open hydrant.

The ringing of his cell phone snapped him into the present. "Da?" he said.

"Me," came Didi's voice. "Just testing."

Yuri said, "Very clear."

"It won't happen until the last period," Didi said. "The sixth. Keep your



eye on the scoreboard. If the score is even, or if the reds are ahead of the blues by only one or two points, I will take him down.” It was the handicapping, as El Segundo had explained: The reds had to be ahead by three points or more to win. “If the reds are ahead by three points or better,” Didi said, “then he wins without our help.”

And, as Yuri understood it, if Don Tomaso won on his own, they would have to wait in line behind the other applicants for passage. Whereas if Don Tomaso’s red team was losing, and Didi interfered, they would go to the top of the list, beneficiaries of Don Tomaso’s gratitude. For all sorts of obvious reasons Yuri prayed mightily that their inhospitable host Don Tomaso would be no more than two points up toward the end of the sixth chukker.

The periods went quickly, a blur of horses and spinning mallets and the ball shifting from one team to the other, men bumping at each other and hitting at each others’ mallets to gain control of the ball. Where there were fouls, or changes of sides following a scoring hit, no time was lost; the game was kept in constant motion for each seven-minute period. After the third period El Segundo grabbed Yuri by the elbow and herded him onto the playing field, where indeed it seemed that all the male spectators were heading. “Deevots,” El Segundo said, and although Yuri had no idea what the other was talking about, he quickly understood that he and all the others were to put the chunks of grassy earth—dug out by the horses’ hooves—into reasonably appropriate holes and stomp them vigorously into place. That done, the spectators returned to their seats under the canopied grandstand and Yuri and El Segundo went to their two very tall observation chairs where Don Tomaso’s team was gathered.

As for Don Tomaso himself, Yuri was encouraged to see that the man’s dark face had grown even darker. The half-time score was even—six to six—putting the blue Don’s team ahead by two points, after the handicap. And from the look on Don Tomaso’s face, it didn’t seem that he believed he could pull those extra points in the final three periods.

The teams returned to the field, the horses wheeling, one team’s players spinning around the other then merging into and through them, the middle players—especially the number threes—leaving their positions and moving from a defensive position, having taken the ball, and running the ball aggressively down the field to fire it to the number one man who was waiting to strike it viciously into the goal. And Yuri lost himself in the spectacle, without clearly understanding it.

Mimi separated from her friend, the two still holding hands, Mimi's friend on the short side, in Wranglers and a bulky white sweater and high-rise wedgies that made her as tall as Mimi. The two women stood looking at Remly, Mimi saying something softly to the other.

"C'mon," Morris said, stepping into the living room and motioning for Remly to follow, the woman in the white sweater sizing Remly up as though he was to be auctioned.

Mimi said, "Morris's new bud Charley," the woman's name was Prudence Littleton. Remly took her in without looking away from her face, a skill developed long ago, both for personal reasons and from his time in the trade: A semi-hourglass figure that had settled at thirty-eight minutes past, her reddish-black hair a failed attempt at control—partially styled and the remainder feral curls—and a vivid smile that could have burned through tungsten. At the neck of her sweater the top hat and shamrock button: "I GAVE."

Remly shifted the bottle of XO to take her hand. "Prudence? Really?"

"You know? Everyone says that? Call me 'Pru.'"

She seemed young—"Early thirties?" he wondered—young enough to have been his daughter if he'd had one.

Morris said, "Mimi's best girlfriend. Pru works at La Fontaine." He wagged his hands in a shooing motion as though herding chickens and said, "Let's get cooking."

Mimi squeezed Pru's hand and said, "You go with the boys. It's just a pasta salad, I don't need help, really."

Morris shooed them through the rumpus room to the pool deck, where there was another bar. "Stay with me," he said. "I get lonely." While Morris slapped burgers onto his grill, Pru poured white wine into a stemmed glass and sat on a tall stool at the bar. Still brittle from the Knightsbridge explosion, Remly wanted to settle onto a cushioned poolside lounge, but he joined her, climbing stiffly onto a bar stool.

Morris began twisting dials on the grill in the academic manner of a man who has justified his expensive appliance by calling it an investment.

"I've been fighting my hair," Pru said. "Why I'm so late?"

Amused and recalling that women concerned themselves with these things, as men did their gas grills, Remly asked, "Who's winning?"

She rubbed the back of her head, fluffing the uncontrollable curls. "I wore heels. Mimi said Morris said you were a tall guy."

"I'm just average all around," Remly said. "You work at La Fontaine?"

“Drinks. But I’m looking. Some other property? La Fontaine’s tanking. But the thing is, I’ve got seniority so I get good shifts. Somewhere else? I’ll have to start at the bottom all over again, probably graveyard, maybe swing. So I’m wondering, stay and see if one of the congloms buys us? I could use my seniority to go to another property inside the conglomerate.” She dipped a finger in her wine and rubbed it around the rim to make the glass sing.

Pru had been studying Remly’s shirt, as though searching for gravy stains. She said, “Have you given?”

“I’m sorry?”

Pru rooted about in her large purse and came up with a plastic freezer bag filled with green top hat-shamrock buttons and a few five dollar bills. She said, “Mimi and I, we’re on the board of the Li’l Mikey Committee. Let me have five dollars, okay?”

As Remly pulled out his wallet, Pru brought up a pre-printed receipt and an “I GAVE” button. After receiving his money, Pru pinned the button on Remly’s shirt pocket. “Poor little guy. We’re all praying for him.” She smelled of lavender.

Remly had a list of questions in his pocket. When he thought he’d covered them all, he would excuse himself to go to the restroom where he would re-read them to see if he had missed anything. In the meantime he fingered the list like a talisman. He said, “Morris says you know some of the high rollers at La Fontaine.”

“Oh, God. High rollers?” She sipped at her wine and wrinkled her nose, Remly not sure if it was an appreciative squint or critical comment. “A guy drops five big-dimes at the table, doesn’t blink. Drop a hundred bucks on the servers? Don’t hold your breath.”

“I’ll keep breathing,” Remly said. “Morris says you’ve run into a Russian at La Fontaine—named Kurskov?”

“One of the beached whales,” Pru said. “Clueless and tipless.” Another sip, another wrinkle of her nose, the light sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks moving sympathetically. She said, “So, Mimi says Morris says you’re retired?”

Remly nodded.

“I’m divorced,” Pru said. “You?”

“Long time ago.” He tried to think of a conversational path that would return them to Kurskov.

Pru said, “You don’t *look* like you’re retired.”

“Thanks.”

“When did you retire?”

“A few years ago,” Remly said. “Three, actually.”

“Thirty years on the job?” Pru asked.

“Twenty-five. I took an early leave. About Kurskov ...”

“You started right out of college?”

Remly said, “I did a couple of years active duty in the navy.”

“Then you started with GSA?”

“Bummed around Europe for almost a year before I settled down.”

Pru sipped speculatively at her anonymous white wine, focusing inward as though she was working out a math puzzle based on his life.

“Funny about this Kurskov,” Remly said. “I mean, funny he’s here. They have a lot of glitzy casinos in Moscow now. I thought we’d lost all the Russian traffic.”

Pru said, “Yeah, casinos, but—you know? You hear these news bites about some Vegas-style casino opening somewhere. But—drive down the Strip? Only *Vegas* has Vegas-style casinos. We’re *it!*”

In the open sliding door, Mimi appeared with a large serving bowl; the pasta salad. She said, “Inside or out?”

“In,” Morris said. “I feel like there’s a breeze coming up.”

“I’ll get the plates,” Mimi said as she stepped back inside.

“I’ll help,” Pru said.

“It’s no trouble, stay there,” Mimi said. “You two get acquainted.”

Pru took another sip of her wine, then, before Remly could dig any deeper into the Kurskov vein, she said with some concern: “The way you walk, are you getting arthritis?”

If Remly’s conversation with Morris had been oblique, his attempt to get information from Pru was like scampering after hamsters. He said, “I was out of town, fell down some stairs.” Pru’s concerned expression dissolved into a look of relief, and Remly spoke before she could scamper off again. “So, a lot of Russians are coming here?”

Pru said, “I don’t think so. I talk to my girlfriends—about the only Russian in town is this one we’ve got at La Fontaine, some guys with him. So, you live alone. No pets?”

Remly shook his head, no. He said, “This Kurskov has friends?”

Pru said, “Friends? Jeez, I hope not. You allergic?”

“Sorry?”

“Some people are allergic to pets.”

“Oh, no. Not allergic.” Remly dug into his mind for the thread, asked, “You said there are some guys with Kurskov—Russians. Recall what they look like?”

“Just three of them with this Kurskov. And George is showing them around like he’s a real-estate agent—you know the look? Like he wants

them to fall in love with the place? George is showing off the renovations, the stuff that's turning the casino into, like, a retro old-Vegas-gangster-rat-pack kind of place?"

"These other three," Remly said. "What are they like?"

"They're, like—these are guys you wouldn't want to mess around with. Big, all three of them. Like—like, goons, you know?" Pru said. Then, "Cats. You're okay with cats?"

"I suppose I am—I don't ... they're not really at the forefront of my attention, cats, you might say." To Morris, Remly said, "Are you catching this? Three goons?"

"Every word," Morris said. "Not the same goons. These three are big, they're still walking. Three you're thinking of, going stiff in a Chevy down in Laughlin, they're your average-size goons."

After a curious look at Morris, Pru said, "Some people don't like cats."

"Actually I like cats just fine," Remly said, then, quickly, "How long has this Kurskov been in town?"

"Been here since around January."

"January?"

"Just before my vacation—I went down to Tecate to warm up." She leaned toward him slightly, the scent of lavender. "So what do you do for excitement?"

He was tempted to tell her—the occasional gunfight in his bedroom, getting blown up in posh London neighborhoods. He said, "I fight the HOA."

"Hello?"

"Home Owners Association. Where I live. HOA wants me to pull all the weeds in my yard, I leave the dandelions in. If I pull them, I have to go out and buy dandelion greens for my salads. I like to go into the yard with scissors and get them fresh—no pesticides, no artificial chemicals."

Morris laughed, but Pru nodded empathetically—she seemed to like the idea. She asked, "So how do you kill time otherwise, you're retired?"

"I'm catching up on my reading," he said. "Some old British motorcycles I'm restoring."

"My brothers've got Harleys. Back in Wyoming? So what are you reading?"

The question caught him unprepared. A moment to think, he remembered and said, "Villon. *The Testament*."

Pru said, "*Mais on sont les neiges d'antan?*"

"I'm sorry?"

"*The Testament*," Pru said. "But where are the snows of yesteryear?"

"You speak French?"

“I took a couple semesters.” Pru warmed him with the smile that burned through tungsten. “Just for the Villon? And, you know, for the Verlaine, the Rimbaud. Baudelaire. Have you read Robert Desnos? *‘J’aime l’amour, sa tendresse et sa cruauté.’*”

“I don’t speak French,” Remly admitted. “I only read translations.”

Pru quoted: “I love love, its tenderness and its cruelty.”

To this point, Morris had been flipping hamburgers and spreading grated cheese over them, excess cheese spilling into the grill and sending up smoke that veered off to the side like an offering rejected by heaven. Now he prodded the cheeseburgers, nodded benediction over his labors, and quickly slapped the burgers onto an oval charger plate and ordered, “Everyone into the house, let’s go let’s go.”

Mimi was dealing earthenware plates onto the table in the center of the rumpus room, and she placed Remly and Pru side by side at the table.

Across from Remly on the big screen TV a magician Remly had never heard of was pulling silk scarves from a half-naked woman’s cleavage. In the upper right corner there was an image of a green top hat on a shamrock. A line of text scrolled continuously in front of the act, telling viewers to phone a local number and make a pledge for Li’l Mikey McCoy, the honorary mayor of Fremont Street.

As they served themselves cheeseburgers and pasta salad, Pru said to Mimi, “We’re comparing French poets.” She asked Remly, “Do you like Jaques Prevert?”

“I’ve only read ‘Barbara’—in translation. I thought it was pretty good.”

Mimi said, “Proosie has a degree in literature,” in tones that implied she was forwarding Pru for employment. “University of Wyoming.”

Remly said to Pru, “You went on vacation in January. Right after New Year?”

“About the middle.”

“So this Russian Kurskov showed up just before that.”

“He shows up, probably the second week of January, starts playing big-numbers baccarat.”

“Is he winning?” Remly asked.

“You know, it’s funny. He starts out—I saw when I got back, and right through summer—he’s kinda breaking even. I’m not there all the time, but I hear it’s always the same, he’s only losing a little bit. Like maybe someone’s doing a Maytag.”

“Hello?” Remly said. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Pru said, “Laundering money.”

“He plays every night?”

“No, just maybe once, twice a week. But what I see, every time—and I get this from some of the other girls too—whenever this Kurskov is in the room, there’s a mechanic dealing. Like the house is running a cooler.”

Remly said, “Cooler—a fixed game?”

“You really don’t get into town much, do you?” Pru said. “Cold deck, cooler, where the dealer pulls cards from the top, bottom, or middle. Or out of your ear. Like, the game is fixed. So it’s kind of strange that they’re cold-decking Mr. Kurskov, but he’s not really losing very much, unless it’s a laundry.”

“Still just academically curious?” Remly asked Morris, and Morris spoke around a mouthful of cheeseburger, “Wait, it gets better.”

Remly took a bite of the pasta salad. “This is really very good, Mimi. Is it simple? I’ll ask for your recipe.”

Mimi said, “Oh, this is nothing. You ought to taste Proosie’s eggplant casserole—absolute heaven.”

“Do you go out, see shows on the Strip?” Pru asked Remly.

“Not really,” Remly said. “I’ve still got a couple cartons of books to catch up on.” He imagined the list of questions in his pocket and soldiered on: “This money Maytag, you think Mr. Kurskov is using La Fontaine as a money laundry?”

Pru said, “At first it looks like. Then he disappears in the summer, then he comes back and starts playing again. But ... lately? *Whew*, talk about tanking? I’m serving one night—it’s around Friday, two weeks back?—this Russian drops four, five big-dimes. Doesn’t blink. Most guys, even if they don’t completely lose it, you’ll see ‘em looking hacked. This Russian? Shrugs like he’s done a day’s work, gets up and splits.”

Once more removing his glasses, Remly said, “Big dimes? Thousand-dollar bills?”

“Ten-thousands. Four or five ten-thousands—he’ll lose forty or fifty thousand dollars, and it’s like the fix is in. Like they’re still playing with a cold deck, but this Kurskov’s like, ‘Me worry?’ But boy does the house ever need it. Everything George tries, it doesn’t work.” Pru studied him closely, another expression of concern, then asked, “Are your eyes okay?”

Remly shook his head in confusion. “I’m sorry?”

“You keep taking off your glasses. Rubbing your eyes.”

“It’s my spares,” Remly said. “I scratched my regular glasses when I fell down some stairs in London. I’m waiting for a new set of regulars.”

Again she looked relieved. “You ought to get *two* regulars. Then your spares would be regulars too, and it wouldn’t bother you to switch.” Her

tone implied that he needed looking after.

Remly said, "I'll keep that in mind. Tell me, who's this George?"

"George Granter. He owns La Fontaine. Very nice man, but he's not a Vegas guy. In over his head, and not coming up for air."

To Morris, Remly said, "Still just curious?"

"No complainant, no evidence," Morris said. He held a forkful of pasta salad suspended before his mouth. "You want to hear how much hearsay and gossip we get, twenty-four seven down at Gaming Control? We don't have time for canvassing new business—we're deal closers."

"This is good for the casino," Remly said to Pru. "This Russian dropping that kind of money. On purpose?"

Pru said, "What it looks like."

"What do you think he's getting in return?"

"You know, I've been thinking about that?" Lightly with her fingertips Pru dusted the surface of her curly hair. "Maybe I should ask around."

Remly asked, "Any of his Russian friends losing there too?"

"I'll give you points this Kurskov hasn't got any friends. He's a guy, you get the feeling he's had a radical charmectomy, a real zombie. Everyone at La Fontaine says so. Even some of the girls—the housekeepers?—the ones up on the whale floor, they really don't want to work the whale floor, this Russian is that spooky."

"I'm sorry," Remly said. "The 'whale floor?'"

"Top floor, under Mr. Granter's penthouse."

"Kurskov lives there?"

"I thought I said. Off and on since January. Except, I think he moved out. No one's seen him for like the last week."

The telethon was ending on the big-screen TV, a clip of Li'l Mikey McCoy marching along in a green top hat, behind Mikey the Fremont Street Saint Patrick parade. The image shifted to a still photo of a bed-ridden Li'l Mikey in a teeming hospital ward, Mikey sprouting tubes, and two silent talking heads at a desk in front of the hospital photo.

"Do you know where he's gone?" Remly asked.

"He just lies there in County," Pru said. "The donations, this TV thing—we're hoping we can pick up enough to get him out of the charity ward."

"Kurskov," Remly said. "Anyone have an idea where he's gone to?"

"Oh, him, no." Pru said to Morris, "You asked me the same." Then turning back to Remly, "You haven't touched your XO."

An apologetic glance at Morris, Remly said, "Actually, I don't drink."

Without a word she took his beer bottle and knocked back a significant gulp.



The telethon was over, the news was starting, and Remly, a reader by nature and disinclined to look at moving pictures, was forced to submerge his irritation with this wallpaper of smug faces backed by a moving image of yet another fire. Remly had run out of questions—or at least had run out of memory, and would have to refresh his line of inquiry by referring to his pocket reminders. Pru ate silently and Morris commented bitterly on the cost of diesel fuel for his big Dodge pickup, diesel having begun a serious climb against gas now that the new low-sulphur standards were kicking in, and Remly saw a woman's face on the big screen and said, quietly and with some intensity, "*Holy Jesus Christ!*" Though not quietly enough, it seemed, Pru asking, "Are we having an epiphany?"

"Morris." Remly reached for Morris's shoulder. "How do you turn up the sound?"

"Howzat?" Morris said, looking first at Remly then at the big television screen.

A solid matron, superbly dressed in azure, with matching bag and shoes, was standing in front of a double-door, and beside her a mousy woman, unfashionable in grays and browns. A smart young woman—the news interviewer from the look of her—stood holding a microphone to the mousy woman's chin; and a crawl at the bottom of the screen in capital letters: WASHINGTON DC LIVE COMMENTARY. The camera panned up to a banner that identified the building as the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

"Someone you know?" Mimi asked.

And Remly's phone tingging Satie's *Gymnopédie*, his eyes still on the big-screen TV, waiting for Morris to fumble with the remote, then Remly flipping open the phone and glancing briefly at it, the caller ID saying only LONDON but a text message on the little screen reading, TIRASPOL WE GOT TO FUCKING TALK.

“Immense money and power await those who tap into our moral insecurities and supply us with symbolic substitutes.”

Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear*

## AUTUMN 2004 . . .

### . . . INSIDE THE BELTWAY

Gio Buccini came to Ashor’s table with the grim look of a man sent into the rain for cat food—not pleased with the task, but determined to get it over with. He cut through one group of departing pols without doing much damage, but not slowing either, and soldiered on. Ashor rose to greet him.

When he arrived, Buccini punched a hand forward and said, “Little lady probably told you who I am.” He nodded at Daphne.

“Yes,” Ashor said as Buccini pumped his hand vigorously. “Navy middleweight champ, degree in American history, worked as a pig-iron slagger to pay your way through university. All I can say is, good for you.”

This stopped Buccini, who flashed a tough grin, then plowed forward: “You got some information Walt isn’t giving us. What’s your news? What am I gonna tell my guys back in my district ... whadda they gotta look out for?”

“Better than anyone else in this room,” Ashor said, “you know the genesis of American democracy.”

“Cut the soft soap and gimme some straight talk here,” Buccini said. “Your name is . . . ?” He materialized the tattered envelope of a utility bill from an inner jacket pocket, and poised a pencil stub over it.

“Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi.” Ashor spelled it for him. “How much time do you have, Mr. Buccini?”

“Not a hell of a lot.”

“I want to talk a little about *why* there’s a problem in Iraq. Do you care?”

Buccini said, “Yeah. ‘*What*’ is bullshit, you don’t get to the ‘*why*.’”

“Here is some information you probably have at your fingertips,” Ashor said, “but please bear with me. Before your war of independence, the people in the American colonies had a centuries-long history of dealing with democratic institutions; the English, the Dutch. Even the French settlers in America—though nominal monarchists—had a history of intellectualism and endless debate regarding the free nature of man. All of this of course dating back to the collapse of the Roman empire, sometime around four seventy-six AD. Are we still together?”

“I’m running with you, pal,” Buccini said. “Just keep rolling and get to the payoff, okay?”

Ashor said, “About seven hundred, forty years after the end of the Roman empire, a group of English nobles forced their king to sign the Magna Carta—a glimmer of democracy for the nobility. That was in twelve-fifteen. Then about five hundred, sixty years after the Magna Carta, in seventeen-seventy-six, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, other educated colonists, declared their independence from England. If you’re staying with me, this would be some thirteen hundred years following the collapse of the Roman empire.”

“You know your history, General. So what’s your point?”

“My point is that the Ottoman empire collapsed in the year nineteen-twenty. And of course, all of the area we now call ‘the middle-east’ was at the very center of the Ottoman Turks’ empire. Now, if you’ll extrapolate the American timeline against this historic fact in Iraq, you’ll see that today is only eighty-four years following the collapse of the empire that controlled the middle-east—an area with no concept of individual rights, freedom of speech, or democratic institutions. The Magna Carta came about seven hundred and forty years after the collapse of a repressive European empire. Look at Iraq seven hundred, forty years after the collapse of the Ottoman empire—the year twenty-six-sixty or so, give or take a year or two. That’s about six hundred and fifty years from today. Then in sixteen-thirty came the beginning of the Enlightenment in Europe—Descartes, Spinoza, Newton, Bacon, Locke. The triumph of reason over superstition; of compassion over hate-mongering religion. This was about eleven hundred and fifty years after the collapse of the Roman empire. Extrapolate that into Iraq and its neighbors, the Enlightenment would come sometime about the year thirty-seventy to the middle-east—some one thousand and sixty or so years from today. And in that time frame, perhaps the Thomas Jefferson and James Madison of Iraq would be prepared to write Iraq’s Declaration of Independence in the year thirty-two-twenty.”

Buccini was at the point of walking away, from the look on his face. He said, “*Jesus*, will you cut through the goddam confetti and tell me what the hell you’re getting at?”

“My point is really very simple—that Thomas Jefferson and his associates did not work in a vacuum. They had the momentum of thirteen hundred years of cultural maturation, civil growth, and philosophical discourse regarding democracy and the structure of a republic. Whereas Iraq and every other country that was carved out of the detritus of the Ottoman empire have had histories of dictatorial absolutist governance, and not a single

institution that fosters compromise and respect for one's opponents in the political arena."

"You saying ..."

But Ashor rushed on: "In your debates on the Hill, you refer to your adversaries as 'the honorable.' Mr. Buccini, Iraq is a nation where ballots are marked with a few rounds from an AK-47. It is a nation where you silence your opponent in a political debate not with logic or 'the honorable' but by copping off his head—literally. A nation where the loudest voice is that of a zealot in an explosive vest."

"You saying democracy stinks?" Buccini asked.

"I'm saying that democracy works for people who listen. It works for people who are willing to work with those whom they disagree with. I invite you to visit Iraq and see how people deal with their political adversaries; come see the corpses in the roadside gutters. I'm saying that, in Iraq, security and stability are more important than political theories—whether the theories are yours or anyone else's." Ashor offered a modest smile to Buccini. "Wouldn't it be nice if there was a stable government in Iraq—be it democratic or otherwise? A leadership that could make its own open-bid decisions about which American companies should help rebuild its infrastructure. Wouldn't it be nice if Iraq could guarantee the security of Americans who came there to help get the country back on its feet ... particularly if the U.S. pulls out on a moment's notice?"

Buccini grinned, yet Ashor could see no humor in it, only challenge. "Okay," Buccini said, "bringing democracy to Iraq. Like bringing virginity to Lewinsky. So cut to ..."

Daphne said, "Oooop!" but Ashor said, "Lewinsky?"

"You hadda be there," Buccini said, and Daphne said, "I'll explain later."

Buccini said, "So cut to the chase. What's your piece of this? Waddaya want?"

Ashor wanted to breathe deeply and offer up thanks, but his understanding of the rules of negotiation drained him of emotional response and kept him moving forward: "I am returning home soon, and I hope to present myself for a position on the Iraqi army's general staff. I will need sponsors and angels here in Washington to second my bid."

"That's it?"

"There's also this," Ashor said. "There are a lot good men—colonels and generals and key members of the police—who are unemployable because they were members of the Ba'ath party. The weren't active members, as such, but joined Saddam's Ba'ath only because they couldn't get promot-

ed otherwise. A vast pool of talent that Iraq has shut out because America's anti-Ba'athist campaign has purged them. If they aren't being sought for crimes, they should be in the security infrastructure, to make Iraq secure for itself ... and for any outside contractors who are needed to help rebuild the country."

Seeming out of nowhere, Buccini said, "Electricity ten hours a day?"

"Yes."

"I got at least two power companies in my district could fix that in a blink."

"A blink?"

At this, Buccini came as close as he could to blushing. "Faster than the lard-asses over there are fixing it right now, okay? But I got one last question." He waited.

"Just one?" Ashor asked.

"Yeah, one. You telling me, maybe Iraq's better off without democracy right now?"

Ashor said, "I'm only a simple military man, sir. I leave it to political and historical scholars like you to determine what might be a reasonable form of government for Iraq at this time—particularly if Washington decides to pull out its armed forces on short notice."

Like a boxer in a sparring ring, Buccini faked a punch at Ashor's gut, and as Ashor flexed his abdomen Buccini said, "You sound like a guy I can do business with."

"Why, thank you," Ashor said, his sincerity quite genuine.

"One more question. What was it Bremer said—this proclamation—he skipped from Baghdad?"

Ashor laughed. "I thought the other question was your last?"

"I'm a politician, waddaya expect? So, what was it Bremer said, Paskowitz stands behind?"

Ashor said, "The Proclamation of Baghdad was not made recently by Mr. L. Paul Bremer the Third, the American Viceroy of Iraq, but by Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude in March of nineteen-seventeen, as the British were conquering the middle east and reshaping it to their liking. This is required reading for anyone with a genuine interest in Iraq. It makes for amusing reading, particularly in the context of today's Baghdad."

"So Walt Paskowitz didn't know what the fuck he was talking about."

"You would have to ask that of Dr. Paskowitz," Ashor responded.

"I gotta run. You got a card?"

Ashor handed him one of his prepared cards. "On the back, my direct line in Lisbon. If you'll give me your card, I will send you my direct line in

Baghdad, once I return.”

Buccini handed Ashor his own calling card, then turned and left, saying only, “Stay in touch, okay?”

The room had largely emptied, but as Buccini walked away a man broke free from the thinning crowd of lobbyists around the bar and started toward them.

“Ohboy ohboy,” Daphne said. “*Here comes payday.*”

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## . . . A N U N C I Ó N

Following the half-time it seemed to Didi that Don Tomaso had become a dervish, a madman’s edge to his riding and the swing of his mallet. Oddly, though, neither Don Tomaso nor any of the other players crossed an imaginary line in front of the travel of the ball. Whether from superstition or for some other inexplicable reason, the ball had a magic right-of-way, as did the rider who controlled it. Yet Don Tomaso, despite any such conventions, bumped even harder into both the blue number two and Don Reymundo, the blue number three, and throughout the fourth and fifth chukkers consistently stole the ball, firing it to the number two red rider who fed the ball to the red number one.

In spite of Don Tomaso’s furious play, the score was only eleven to ten as they went into the final chukker, in favor of the reds—two goals short of a win—and Didi asked himself whether a single shot would do the trick, or would that only put them into an overtime chukker of sudden-death scoring.

‘Only one way to find out,’ Didi thought. He looked over his shoulder to confirm that Viktor was still steady at his post, the suppressed Makarov casually in Viktor’s hand, then brought the RPG up and put it again in the Y of the branch and sighted down to the field.

Whether Don Reymundo was on the ball or not, Didi needed a clear shot at him as he faced west, into the sun. Didi followed and followed and followed but—praying “Please God” aloud—only catching fleeting views in the ideal position, as Don Reymundo’s red shirt was obscured constantly by other players.

Even so, he reached for the phone.

Yuri snapped his phone shut and leaned over in his tall chair to speak to El Segundo: “My friend, news for you.” But El Segundo was intent on the game, his eyes following the ball.

Yuri reached out and pinched El Segundo’s arm, twisting the flesh.

“*Dio!*” Segundo said.

“My friend, keep watching the blue number three. Watch closely.”

“Why you twisted me?”

“Watch the blue number three. Your master is going to win, my friend Didi is fixing it.”

“You are crazy, Russian.”

“Watch blue number three. I’m telling you—no matter what happens out there, watch blue number three.”

This wasn’t a big juicy target like a tank. It was more like the hat that Valeri Sergeivich said the RPG could hit with its enhanced sighting system. Worse, the small target, the blue number three, was determined for some reason to keep a pack of other riders between himself and Didi.

Then it happened, almost magically as Didi later recalled it.

Don Reymundo had split away from the pack of riders to follow a ball hit by Don Tomaso, following the ball as it sped toward the red number one, poised at the blue goal. The blue number four intercepted the ball, clipped it to Don Reymundo, and as Don Reymundo caught the ball with his mallet and set it up for a strike downfield to his own team he faced west and slightly north into the sun and Didi caught the head of the horse precisely in his RPG’s crosshairs and pressed the accurizing button to validate the target acquisition.

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#### ... INSIDE THE BELTWAY

“General dur-Shamshi, I’m Peter Carpin.” When they shook hands, Ashor felt a controlled, powerful grip, as though Carpin was capable of crushing his hand like a peach. “Mme dur-Shamshi,” Carpin said, bending over Talia’s hand, just short of kissing it. “*Enchanté, Madame.*”

Ashor measured Carpin, seeing in him a man very much like himself. Carpin’s clothes—even his haircut—were less polished than those of the politicians Ashor had met this evening, yet Ashor instinctively comprehended that Carpin was purposely dressing down, in order to put the pols at ease. Under the suit, Ashor recognized the hint of a body that was hardened daily at a gym. Though Carpin was perhaps in his mid-fifties, there was no loose flesh on his face or under his chin.

“Peter represents a large group of mid-west heavy-equipment manufacturers,” Daphne said. “People tend to listen when he speaks, don’t they Peter?”

Carpin shrugged off her compliment with an easy-going smile. “What can I say? My friends in manufacturing tell me what to think, and my congressman tells me how to vote.” He handed Ashor a business card.

“Here is my direct phone in Lisbon,” Ashor said, handing Carpin his calling card and pointing to the phone number that Daphne’s staffers had written on the back of it, as indeed they had on all of the cards. “If there is anything I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to call.”

Carpin said, “I caught your news-bite on Channel Four last night, you and Madame at the Eastern Market.” He turned to Daphne. “Nice touch.” Then, to Ashor, “Hope you enjoyed the mangos—Eastern’s got about anything and everything, don’t they?” And continuing in a modulated tone of gossip, as though they were talking about nothing more important than the weather, “A lot of hometown papers out our way say you’ve been stumping for exports to Iraq. I see boatloads of heavy equipment needed there from our neck of the woods, but my manufacturers have been shy about cutting deals. Please forgive me, but every so-called ‘businessman’ in Iraq that we’ve dealt with has been a grafter with his hand out for a bribe.”

“Both hands out, you mean,” Ashor corrected. “Yes, it has to be stopped, if anyone’s to benefit from this rebuilding.”

“What can be done?” Carpin asked. “In these news reports I’ve read—what you’ve said here today—the big stumbling block is the matter of getting stability to Iraq. Fine, but *how*?”

Ashor said, “Stability results from security, and security results from a dispassionate, competent military. The most competent generals and colonels were purged by the American caretakers whom Washington sent to Baghdad. Now that the Coalition Provisional Authority has left, the Interim Government has kept these military men and top police officials out in the cold, in favor of its own political cronies. Internal security is run by the Ministry of the Interior, where the only battles being fought are over who gets to hold out both hands for the bribes.”

“And you think . . . ?” Carpin let the incomplete question hang in the air between them.

“I think that it’s time for someone in Washington to tweak a few noses in Baghdad. I will be returning there, and if Washington is behind me I imagine I’ll be able to return to the general staff. I wasn’t, after all, a Ba’athist.”

Carpin said, “About the only one, I hear.”

“You’ve been doing your homework, Mr. Carpin.”

“Just make it ‘Peter,’ okay?”

“And just ‘Ashor,’ if you will,” Ashor replied. “Once I get home, I would love to see a number of good, honest men cleared and returned to the army, others to the national police. They were Ba’athists in name only, as a means of continuing their careers in the service. Once returned to positions of leadership, they would bring expertise and experience to an army that, as



it's now constituted, is a gathering of buffoons. On top of that, imagine what it will be like in Iraq if Washington has to withdraw your American troops on short notice."

Daphne had been digging in her briefcase, selecting and sorting stapled reports. "Position papers," she said, handing a sheaf of material to Carpin. "The details and data are all there—Iraq's needs and America's export potential. Given a security upgrade in Iraq, and a stop to Baghdad's gangster capitalism, you can rely totally on these numbers; they add up and they make a lot of sense."

"I'm sure they do," Carpin said as he accepted the handouts. "Chaz Danziger doesn't play softball."

And then it was over, and when Carpin said he'd be in touch Ashor believed he meant it.

When Carpin was gone and as Daphne guided Ashor and Talia from the meeting room Daphne said soto voce, "He lied."

Ashor said, "I beg your pardon?"

"No one tells Peter anything," Daphne said, "it's the other way around. Peter tells his manufacturers what to think, and whom to give campaign money to. And he tells his congresspersons and senators how to vote. Once he starts rolling them over, we'll see a lot of others lining up to follow suit. It's how things work in this town."

"The domino effect," Ashor said.

"The lemming effect," Daphne said, then smiled as though she'd only meant to amuse, rather than correct him.

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## . . . A N U N C I Ó N

Yuri saw it clearly and snapped around to see if El Segundo was indeed focusing on Don Reymundo. And, yes, Segundo had seen it as well—obviously—the man's eyes going wide. Yuri turned to the field, watching Don Reymundo's horse balk and twist as Don Reymundo swung his mallet at empty air and Don Tomaso and the red number two rider rushed Don Reymundo on each side, the number two pressing Don Reymundo's twisting horse wide while Don Tomaso swung viciously.

"What *was* that?" hissed El Segundo.

From there it was a rout. Don Reymundo's horse had lost its spirit, looking around madly, as though something was after it. Don Tomaso, for his part, smoothed out his riding, still fierce but no longer with the desperate air that had driven him through all the earlier periods. Even to Yuri's untrained eye it was clear that Don Tomaso was playing stylishly, as though against amateurs. Don Tomaso smiled, encouraged his other players to take

the ball more often, and ended the period and the contest with a score of fifteen to ten.

Again El Segundo asked, “What happened to that horse?”

“Laser,” Yuri said. “Didi sent it. Don’t look up there, not so much that you’ll attract attention, but can you see a movement in those bushes in the hills to the west?”

El Segundo looked up at Didi’s blind, then away, and said, “Laser?”

Yuri said, “Part of the sighting system on one of our farm implements. Do you think Don Tomaso will be grateful?”

“Satius est supervacua scire quam nihil.”  
 (It is better to know useless things than to  
 know nothing.)

Seneca

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

As Morris Berman brought up the sound with his remote, the bottom crawl read LIVE COMMENTARY - INTERVIEW WITH TALIA DUR-SHAMSHI.

Remly said, “Sorry, wrong person.”

The familiar matron in blue stood silently, the mousy woman next to her, while the news interviewer ignored them to smile brightly into the camera: “... speaking to Madame dur-Shamshi through her translator, Mademoiselle LeBerthon, about the need for a new era of women’s rights in Iraq. Thank you Madame, thank you Mademoiselle. Back to you, Erik.”

“Thought it was a friend’s wife,” Remly added.

Tilting his head to one side, Morris Berman considered Remly with a distinctly skeptical expression.

Remly disentangled himself from the hospitality of the Bermans with as much finesse as he could call up, which was not a great deal given the shock of the moment. Beyond doubt the formidable matron in the tele-newsclip was the same one Eddy Johnson had made a pass at in the bar at Chez Solange so many years ago. Remly even recalled the dark, sharp-featured faces of the men who had put Eddy into a London emergency clinic, and in his mind’s eye saw the men sitting at the table beside hers.

He forced himself to finish his cheeseburger, and he smiled a great deal, nodding as Pru Littleton spoke, though not fully understanding what she was saying—something about Voltaire, then about Alphonse Mucha.

At a point where Pru was catching her breath, Remly checked his watch, saying, “I hate to eat and run, but I’ve got a pile of work to do at home.”

And with that, and with attendant apologies to all, he excused himself to get back to his fortified house, where he booked air passage to Odessa. Later that afternoon Morris called with questions about the woman, this chunky Iraq babe named Talia dur-Shamshi as Morris had it, a mystery that was expanding like kudzu in Morris’s fecund imagination.

“I’m out of town again,” Remly replied. “Nothing to do with the woman, Morris. I just thought she was someone else.”

“So, one look at her, you hadda get home?” Morris wanted to know. “Going to Washington, show her the sights? Take the lady out to the buck

ninety-nine buffet?”

“I’ll call you when I get back.”

As it turned out, Talia dur-Shamshi had been all over the news in the last few days. She was married to a certain Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi, one of Saddam’s former generals.

Given a choice Remly would have used Virginia’s resources as against the internet, but the last time he looked the beggars were still walking, and so he went Web surfing. The raw results were overwhelming—over 40,000 responses regarding an Iraq general whom Remly had never previously heard of. He began limiting his search by adding *-progressive*, *-justice*, and *-peace* in order to filter out the doctrinaire leftists, who seemed on the war-path for dur-Shamshi. Then added *+BBC*, *+“Washington Post”*, and *+“International Herald Tribune”* to focus on key news sites.

In Remly’s refined search, dur-Shamshi’s presence on the Web came in two spikes, one in ‘99—when he was acquitted of Iraq war crimes in The Hague following his defection from Saddam’s Iraq the year before—and recently when he seemed to be touring Washington DC as some sort of unofficial spokesman for the Iraq Chamber of Commerce, with coverage of his Iraq trade message repeated in news outlets around the States. Despite that, Remly couldn’t find any items that placed dur-Shamshi in Iraq between ‘99 and his Washington pilgrimage. Curiously, the only Google returns for dur-Shamshi had him living in The Hague, Maastricht, and Lisbon from then till now.

Though his search yielded no connection between dur-Shamshi and Kurskov—indeed, the Web had nothing at all on Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov—there were multiple responses showing the Iraqi in Maastricht and Lisbon, as well as The Hague, places where Kurskov had been sighted in the past few years according to Alan Singleton.

Remly tried adding *+Seychelles* then *+Cyprus*, as Singleton had also commented. Nothing. On a gamble he entered *+London* and finally *+1998* to further particularize his search, but nothing within these variables came up either. After clearing these he added *+Voshch* on the off chance that this might be his day. But his day must have been two lifetimes ago, or perhaps two lifetimes forward if his karma held ... there was no public connection between Valeri and dur-Shamshi.

Valeri however would have the definitive answer to that question, and Valeri was now receiving visitors in Tiraspol. Remly took out his will and inter vivos trust to review them—Tiraspol was the capital city of Transdniester, after all—and put them into an envelope stamped and addressed

to himself, then put that inside another stamped envelope addressed to his lawyer in Henderson, with instructions to open the interior envelope if Remly didn't contact him within ten days. Contacted, he was to mail the inside envelope, unopened, back to Remly in Vegas.

As he was sealing the larger envelope, one of the security screens showed a flicker of movement. There were four monitors, two each for the inside and outside cameras, each screen partitioned like the Balkans into autonomous sections, one for each camera. In one of the small segments, a white soccer-mom van had stopped at his front gate. Remly clicked a remote and the image filled the screen, a woman emerging from the van to drop an envelope into Remly's security mailbox. Remly zoomed in on her and clicked the CAPTURE button on the remote to catch a finely-detailed still. After a brief study of the controls on the remote, he managed to swivel the attic camera to capture her van. The woman, leaving, paused at her car, looking at Remly's house beyond the gate, then left.

He dug Weaver's instructions out of the pile of backed-up mail and other papers on the desk of his home office. After two false starts he was able to load the archived DVD images into the security system's monitor, comparing them with the pictures that Remly himself had just taken. Though Weaver's shots were medium range, the soccer-mom van and the woman matched, right down to the car's license plate and her nearly shapeless sun dress. According to the archived DVD, she'd been around the block twice one afternoon, and again the next morning to photograph the new wall, while Remly was in London.

When he retrieved her envelope, it proved to be a citation from the Home Owners Association: Mr. Charles R. Remly had constructed a wall! Without first getting approval from the HOA's Architectural Committee! The woman's name was Henrietta Lapeer! And Mr. Remly was to contact her on her cell phone within one week! Or he would face consequences of legal action by the HOA! The citation was all capital letters and exclamation points. Remly was impressed by the lady's style and intent. The Behavior Police had struck again.

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### . . . T I R A S P O L

Remly flew Southwest to Long Island, Air France from New York to Paris, then Air France again, now outbound from De Gaulle to Odessa. Before departing, at the main post office on Sunset Road across from McCarran, he dropped the large envelope to his lawyer into the big drive-up mailbox.

He'd avoided contacting the F.O. about his trip, imagining the old man's

voice, strong over the telephone, arguing against going into Transdnies-ter on the grounds that it was like embarking on a trip to outer space, the break-away state largely unrecognized as a nation and no one of the F.O.'s acquaintance having the means of exfiltrating Remly, in the event things started unraveling.

At Odessa International two men in Voshch Air flight jackets were waiting for Remly outside the Customs section, one man with a hand-trolley, the other immediately recognizing Remly and coming straight at him. He handed over a small piece of paper and said, "Valeri Sergeivich giffs you this, pleess."

Remly accepted the paper and read silently: "The philosophers have only to interpret the world in various ways." With a laugh Remly said to Valeri's man, "The point, however, is to change it." The two lines—one from the slip of paper, the other Remly's own response—were the epitaph on Karl Marx's tomb in Highgate Cemetery.

Without smiling, the man acknowledged Remly's counter-sign and asked, "No luggitch pleess?" When Remly replied that he had none aside from his small carryon, the man forcibly took the lightweight bag from Remly, placed it with great ceremony on the other man's trolley, and accompanied by his silent counterpart turned and started off toward the Voshch-Air hanger without looking back.

Remly had anticipated an executive jet; the plane Valeri had sent was a venerable and cloddish propeller-driven craft that looked like a startled goose standing tiptoe, wings outstretched—an Antonov An-14, Remly later learned.

As with his luggage, Remly was traveling light in terms of professional paraphernalia: No recording devices, no cell phones, and Dieter Stellenhoff's auto-ranging scrambler phone, courtesy of Alan Singleton, locked securely in Remly's gun safe back in Las Vegas. He carried only a clean laptop purchased specifically for this trip, two automatic pencils, and a bound notepad, its lined yellow pages free of any remarks. All that he had to know for this adventure was in his head, questions he'd memorized on the flights to Paris from a sheet of rice paper, which he flushed down *les waters hygiéniques* at De Gaulle. The plane took off, Remly watched the countryside below metamorphose from the cosmopolitan sprawl of Odessa's seaport to low, green rolling hills with farms and villages—the pilot tracking his lumbering An-14 like an airborne truck above Motorway-68 toward the Transdnies-ter border—and Remly went over the check-list in his head of dangers of off-the-books travel into rogue nations and the protocols of covert interrogation, in preparation for his meeting with Valeri Sergeivich Voshch.

The pilot buzzed the border checkpoint, dipping the wings right and left in salute, Remly pressing to the window to take in the fabled would-be nation, particularly the environs of Tiraspol as they lost altitude, preparing to land. Everything he'd read seemed to hold, even from this height: The sense of order, the clean streets, the lack of commercial bustle, the statuary—in the government square he recognized Lenin, one arm outstretched to Socialism's delusional, ever-receding workers' paradise. And no thriving shopping district alive with crowds of tourists ... there being no discernable tourists aside from himself.

The airdrome on Tiraspol's verge had been closed to major traffic since the war of independence from Moldova some dozen years past, but the smaller planes of Voshch-Air and similarly privileged light aircraft were routinely given access. The Antonov landed without notice, and Remly was hustled directly to a black Mercedes—no concern for Customs control—and driven at armrest-clutching speed not into town but, to Remly's disappointment, away from it. He'd hoped to get a tour of Tiraspol, the last fully Stalinist city in Europe. Instead they hurtled along a lightly-traveled road that cut through solemn outlying neighborhoods and then farmland, to the headquarters of Valeri Voshch's varied and complex enterprises.

It had originally been a Soviet arms compound, roughly 18 acres, but Valeri had had all the Russian military signage replaced with simple embossed metal placards: VOSHCH COMPANIES, writ large in seven languages. The fence was three meters high and topped with concertina wire. Remly's driver put the big armored Mercedes through the gate without stopping and without incident. Within, the patrolling guards wore ostentatious communications headsets and carried Kalashnikovs; their dogs were German Shepherds. The buildings were squat, utilitarian cement blocks, and the four that Remly could see were guarded by obsolete and rusting anti-aircraft batteries. In the distance, an array of battle tanks, each different, like a display of small appliances neatly shelved at a major discount store. The Mercedes parked at the second building in, well down the road from the high fence, a gray block structure without windows.

“Don’t have one hundred rubles.  
Have one hundred friends.”  
Old Russian saying

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. . . T I R A S P O L

Valeri Voshch was in fine voice. “*Charls Remingtonovich!*” He was wrapped in his standard uniform of a tan double-breasted suit that was half Mao-military, half Socialist Realism, a look that had been out of style in Moscow for thirty years or more. With arms outstretched, Valeri bore down on Remly, and Remly flexed his legs, bracing for Valeri’s hug.

“Valeri Sergeivich,” Remly said as he was crushed, hugging in return, his hands barely meeting around the other’s broad back. As they parted, Remly added, “You sure I’m supposed to see all this?” The venue was not so much a conference room as it was a sales display: Mounted along three walls automatic rifles, pistols, RPG launchers, submachine guns, knives, bayonets, body armor, the tools of intimate combat. On the floor a mortar, a howitzer, and eight heavy machine guns from manufacturers in as many different nations.

“Sure, why not?” Valeri said. “Now you got retarded, maybe you can sales rep for me. You still got contacts in the trade?”

Remly studied the photo wall: Tanks, APCs, artillery pieces, aircraft, half-tracks, amphibis, an explosively-formed penetrator, and a dozen variations of bombs and even more variations of mines—but no surface-to-air missiles. He said, “You know me, Valeri, I’m a pacifist at heart.” He turned to Valeri. “Your ballpark, your game. You caught up with Dmitrovsky? Got your airplane back? What’s on the agenda for today?”

Valeri went to the large table in the center of the room and eased himself into a heavy chair. “Sit down, Charls, maybe you are learning something.” He brushed aside a clutter of papers and pistols.

Remly sat and opened his notepad after similarly clearing away Makarovs, Berettas, Brownings, Czech CZ-75s, and sales orders. He settled the newly-purchased laptop unopened beside the notepad.

A tap on the door, a discrete young man in a Voshch guard’s uniform entered with a snubby Kalashnikov—and a water carafe, a bottle of frozen vodka, and two glasses on a stainless tray. He put the tray on the table at Valeri’s elbow but kept the subgun slung over his shoulder. Valeri remained uncharacteristically silent while the armed waiter retired then returned with



an even larger tray—dried fish, figs, apricots, grapes, three different sorts of cheese, and a loaf of unsliced, quite heavy-looking bread, beside which rested a serrated knife. On the young man's final appearance he brought them plates, flatware, and linen napkins as large as dishtowels.

When the waiter left, Remly said, "I'm listening." He got food onto his plate, took a bite of fig and cheese, and advanced the lead on one of his pencils.

Valeri said, "Let's maybe see that computer first, eh?" He tucked a napkin into his collar under his chin, draping it over his shirt like a bib.

Remly opened the computer, turned it on, and brought up a display of the directories. He turned the laptop around and pushed it to Valeri. "I bought it new, Valeri. Nothing in it except the programs—completely virginal."

"Nothing?"

"I bought it just for this trip. My working laptop's at home."

Valeri's fingers flew over the keys and across the touchpad as he searched for any materials that Remly might have written. He said, "So, Charls Remingtonovich, you don't trust your old friend Valeri Sergeivich Voshch?"

Remly measured him. "How much do you weigh, I wonder."

"Old American saying, yes? Like how far you are throwing me?"

Remly shrugged and offered his open palms and Valeri, grinning, pushed the laptop back across the table, knocking a Browning pistol onto the floor.

Remly said, "Anunci3n."

Valeri's expression darkened. "Tolya goes there with me, he ..."

"Tolya?" Remly interrupted.

"Anatoly, one of my fixers, my guy for South America. He has bought up already the entire agriculturing and commercial division for the Customs inspection, Anunci3n. I got a lot of customers in South America, Anunci3n is my port of entry, okay? Since years ago I'm getting stuff into and out of there, no questions, no problems, no nothings. Now me and Tolya fly there, turns out someone else is got a bigger purse than even I got. The Customs guys ask, 'What Dmitrovsky? What personnels? What cargo load?' Like this radioactive Ilyushin that flies into their fucking airfield is completely empty. Me and Tolya try to go the next level up, the super-vice guy. No dicing, no one is at home to Tolya, no one is home even to *me*—this after I have honestly bought the entire division, right up to the tops."

Remly stopped jotting his cryptic notes. "What do you think happened?"

Valeri exploded: "What the hell *you* think happens? Someone is in with

a fix bigger than even *I* been giving them. But this has got to be more money than Colonel Aleksandr Kurskov has. To me it is just the big puzzle.”

“No idea who his client is—the one he’s buying arms for?”

“I knew this, I’m going to this client right now and making direct deals with him, fuck Aleksandr Leonidevich.”

“And your plane?” Remly asked.

With this Valeri slapped the table, and the pistols jumped and the sales orders fluttered and he said, “These bastards have got it figured to the kopek how much it is costing for me to buy another Il-18, fix it up. And they put a ransom on my plane that makes it only just a few bucks cheaper to buy it out of their fucking hands than to go and get another airplane somewhere else.”

“No cargo, no passengers,” Remly said. “How did the Customs people come up with radiation contamination?”

“Shit, *you* go talk to them, Charls, you want to know so bad. These guys, they make Odessa look like a bunch of nuns in the cloister.”

“And your man Tolya couldn’t manage to track down Dmitrovsky and the cargo?”

Another “*Shit!*” and, from Valeri’s expression, Remly imagined he was reviewing his colorful English for stronger synonyms. Failing that he unleashed a non-stop stream of invective in Russian.

Once Valeri exhausted his rich vocabulary, Remly said, “So they disappeared.”

“Off the face of the fucking planet. Tolya spreads a little money around, he learns that some guys chartered a beat up old DC-6 from Anunci3n to Juarez, in Mexico.”

“Drugs,” Remly said. “Juarez is a major junction in the dope trade. It’s not likely that Dmitrovsky would have gone out by that door, I don’t care how much money he has behind him.”

Valeri said, “What I am also thinking too. The only other long-range charter Tolya finds out of Anunci3n is a Cessna 402. Didi has too many guys, too much stuff, for a 402 to even fit them all. Never get off the ground, all the weight they got.”

“Thin air.” Remly made Spartan notes on his pad, but they were entirely meaningless—a stall to give him time to think. He was mentally ticking over the options for getting Valeri to answer his own list of questions, which indeed was the only reason he’d answered Valeri’s summons. In the end Remly decided on straight barter to bring Valeri around to addressing the issues that Remly held dear. It was a matter of getting Valeri to be the first one to put his wares on the table, and so Remly said, “You didn’t bring me

all this way in order to give me the latest news from Anunci3n, Valeri. So tell me why I'm here."

Himself an old horse-trader, Valeri replied without hesitation, "This is the question I am asking myself, Charls. Out of your own pockets you fly around-trip to Odessa, I'm only giving you free around-trip Odessa to Tiraspol. So tell me why you are here."

Remly paused to take a mouthful of bread and cheese, then answered, "Why, Valeri, your text message on the phone. You said we had to fucking talk. I thought you'd remembered all the little things you'd forgotten when we spoke in London, and you wanted to share them with me." Remly took some water—recalling his wish list in the interval—and continued, "In 'ninety-eight, Aleksandr Kurskov bought scramblers and suppressed Makarov 5.54mm pistols from you. A mickeymouse order, you would have sent him to a retailer for this stuff. Hard to believe you'd let him have it, based on the *promise* of that batch that went to Anunci3n. So why did you do it—make such a mickeymouse little sale?" Valeri remained silent, though smiling, and Remly soldiered on; "I thought you'd remembered why—wanted to tell me about it."

Still Valeri sat without responding, only pursing his lips and measuring Remly.

"That *isn't* why you called me here?"

"I wonder," Valeri said, "what is it your friends in Virginia want, they are sending you to hot-plate me."

"I'm retarded," Remly said.

"This business, no one gets completely out excepting feets first. I wonder how come you are so interested in Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov."

Remly pressed back a smile, asking, "How curious are you, Valeri Sergeivich? I tell you why I'm interested in Kurskov, will you tell me why you've made two mickeymouse sales to him—first back in 'ninety-eight, then this current order that went to Anunci3n in South America?"

"A deal!" Valeri said. "So tell me how come you keep coming back to me, outside the fact you are in love with me."

"Money," Remly said, and Valeri gave him a wolfish grin—money was what Valeri understood best. Remly continued, "There are some people back in the States who want to know what Aleksandr Kurskov is doing in Las Vegas."

Valeri asked, "These people—they are in Las Vegas? They own casinos?"

"These people, they aren't in Vegas. They are in Chicago, they are in New York, they are in New Jersey. They have an interest in some Las Vegas

casinos.”

“I understand this is not legal no more, these guys having their fists into Las Vegas.”

“Give me your definition of ‘legal,’ Valeri Sergeivich.”

Again Valeri brought forth his big grin, and Remly—who had rehearsed this tack with a view to Valeri’s devotion to money and his very broad interpretation of “legal”—bathed his friend with an equally glowing look.

Valeri said, “I know these types of guys. We got maybe one or two in Russia.”

“And that’s exactly what my clients in Chicago and New York are worried about. Is Aleksandr Kurskov the lead man for a consortium of Russian mafiya types? Is he feeling his way around, looking for ways the mafiya can muscle in on Las Vegas? That’s what my people want to know.”

“Ha!” Valeri said, “I tell you absolutely, your guys got nothing to worry about. Aleks Leonidevich has got strings to a few oligarki guys in Russia, but nothing doing with no mafiya. For sure nothing in Las Vegas. For me this is a big mystery, why he is there.”

Remly said, “So tell me why you made a mickeymouse little sale to him in ‘ninety-eight—the obsolete Soviet scrambler phones, the 5.54mm pistols.”

“Just like this stuff Didi Dmitrovsky takes to Anunci3n, this is mickeymouse for sure. It’s the other sale makes up for it—the stuff Aleks sends by boat across the Black Sea.”

Remly wrote “98” on his pad to remind himself not to lose sight of the issue. He said, “Tell me what went across the Black Sea, then.”

“Okay, details. Eight thousand SVD sniper rifles, hundred-twenty thousand ...”

Remly interrupted, “Sniper rifles?”

“Not just for sniping. Versions of the SVD—this is the rifle of the 3lite troops all over. Hundred-twenty thousand rounds 7.62 by 54 Russian. Twelve thousand boots. Ninety-six RPG launchers, couple hundred RPG rockets. Eight thousand helmets with night-vision goggles, eight thousand body-armor vests. Eight thousand each haversacks, web beltings, rifle cleaning kits. Three howitzers. Five mortars. Three thousand tents.”

Remly wrote it all down, fully knowing that Valeri would take the paper once they were done, but getting it in writing as an *aide memoir*. He asked, “Destination?”

“This big order is going to somewhere that is touching Georgia.”

“How would you know that, Valeri?”

“Boats,” Valeri said. “I got more people in Odessa than Faithful Ruslan

has got fleas. This big order, my own private army in Ukraine gets everything to Odessa harbor. Aleks Kurskov takes these crates into some commercial yard he has hired, sends my boys off. But my people on the docks tell me he's shipping everything on a big fishing trawler across the Black Sea to Abkhazia. And now everything gets erased. I got no more contacts, Abkhazia is not my playing ground. For Colonel Kurskov it is like old home times there, all his old military and Dzerzhinsky Square nomenklatura pals helping the Abkhazis break away from Georgia. Abkhazia is smuggles paradise, the best landing for Aleksandr Leonidevich. Through Abkhazia it goes fucking anywhere—but first through smuggling highways in Georgia, where in Georgia you got a government is half in the pockets of the smugglers anyway." Valeri paused to toss back a short glass of vodka. "So you are wondering why I called on you to come here. So I will tell you, Charls Remingtonovich. You got friends still in Virginia? No bullshitting me, okay?"

"When have I ever lied to you, Valeri?"

"You want this in actual numbers, or only general guessing?"

"I probably have a contact or two in Virginia, yes."

Valeri said, "What I want ... you should tell them to get on some guys' asses in Tblisi, capital of Georgia. Tell them about this convoy of arms getting smuggled through. Get it stopped—but no bringing my name into it, okay?"

"You said the Georgia government was half in the pockets of the smugglers. What makes you think they'll listen to anyone from our embassy? Or our intell station in Tblisi?"

"Big connections to the smuggles guys, sure. But Tblisi also is trying to get into NATO. For this they got to clean up their acting, catch a few bad guys, maybe shoot a couple terrorists, so-called. You get official Washington DC to speak, they are going to listen big in Tblisi. 'Look at us,' they will say. 'Great candidate for NATO. Look how we catch gun traffickers for you guys.'"

"So the Georgians stop the convoy, confiscate the arms. What's in this for you, Valeri?"

"This business," Valeri said, opening his hand to the room around them, "you don't want to make enemies out of your customers. Government of Georgia takes the goods, Aleksandr Leonidevich Kurskov has got to get another shipment to send to his clients, okay? Who else you think he's coming to, buying the order all over again?"

"So you get your payback, and you won't have to confront him about the radiation in your Ilyushin in Anunci3n."

"Sure, why not?" Valeri asked with a look of charming innocence.

Removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes, Remly said somewhat stupidly, “But then, the confiscated shipment in Georgia gets traced back to you, Valeri. And this puts your fat in the fire.”

“Ha! You been away from business too long, Charls!” And with this Remly could not argue. “Georgia cops, they grab eight thousand rifles, report maybe two thousand, maybe just one thousand, sell off the rest. Same with the other stuff—cops got to earn a living too, see. Guys driving the trucks pay fines to the cops right on the spots, disappear. These guns that get reported, these are Al Kadesiah with fucking date-palms—probably Chechen war surplus these Georgia cops is thinking, who knows? The guys with the trawler, they got back to port in Odessa with a big load of fish—‘What guns?’”

Remly nodded and replaced his eyeglasses, now gently rubbing his temples with his fingertips. He’d hoped to bring up dur-Shamshi’s name in the context of Valeri’s ‘98 London meeting with Kurskov, putting forward the idea that it was dur-Shamshi’s shopping list that Kurskov was pricing with Valeri that November. But as Valeri had said, he’d been away from the business too long. And had slipped, in that he hadn’t imagined Valeri continuing to do business with Kurskov. Before, knowing only about the mickeymouse sale in ‘98 and the load that Dmitrovsky had taken to Anunci3n, Remly had supposed that Valeri would be all too happy to tie dur-Shamshi—or anyone, for all of that—to Kurskov, and let them all sink together. Now, however, understanding Valeri’s end-game, it became obvious he’d have to continue his slow circling around the subject, looking for a crack in the wall—a slim flaw through which he could sniff for dur-Shamshi’s connection to all this, without jeopardizing his own agenda.

“Through Georgia, then,” Remly said, lamely. “What’s the destination, do you think?”

“Ha!” Valeri boomed. “Anywheres! Through Georgia, then who you got for possible customers? Armenians for Nagorno troops, Georgia rebellious guys, Chechens, Ingushis, maybe to Kurd separatists in Turkey ... shit, anywhere!”

Remly opened the map room of his memory and pulled down a chart and said, “These smugglers’ highways, would they extend down into Syria, say?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Maybe Iraq? Maybe Iran?”

“Shit, easy, anywhere,” Valeri said. “So what you think? You going to get this shipment stopped for your old friend?”

“I was wondering,” Remly said, stalling, reaching into Valeri’s own words

for that crack in the wall, “I was wondering, you said these rifles could be Chechen war surplus.”

“Sure, could be, okay. But is not.”

Remly waited.

Valeri waited.

Remly said, “So where did you get the rifles in the first place?”

“I told you, Al Kadesiah.”

Remly looked blank.

“These guns,” Valeri said. “This is not just your regular Russian SVD sniper rifles—this is Al Kadesiah.” He stopped, as though waiting for the news to sink in.

After a pause, Remly said, “I’m not really a gun guy, Valeri.”

“Al Kadesiah, this is Iraqi-licensed SVD types, fucking date-palm trees on the magazines, like a tourist souvenir. I got bargains on lots of them out of Baghdad, right up to your war against Saddam.”

While Valeri lifted a slice of bread to his mouth, Remly prompted, “Lots of them,” still trying to draw the conversation out.

Valeri was silent, chewing his food and thinking. Finally he said, “Maybe a little over four hundred thousand.”

Remly whistled, then took off his glasses again to rub his eyes and forehead. “Who did you buy them from, Valeri?”

Valeri continued chewing, and again that measuring glance, perhaps for a shroud, perhaps for a straight-jacket. “You been on this planet long?” He poured a fresh glass of vodka and washed down the well-chewed bread and fish. “Got your flying saucer parked outside?”

Remly waited for him.

At last Valeri said, “Where you think Iraqi Al Kadesiah automatic rifles are from?”

“Saddam sold them to you?” Remly asked.

“Welcome to fucking earth, spaceman. Sure from Saddam. Following his big war with Iran, Saddam sells a little more than four hundred thousand Al Kadesiahs to me over the years.”

And here, despite the pounding in his head, Remly saw an anomaly. In all of Virginia’s internal squibs on Valeri, no mention was ever made that he’d traveled into Iraq or the countries around it. He asked, “When were you in Baghdad, Valeri?”

“Baghdad comes to me,” Valeri said. “Saddam’s man, his facilitator, big general named Ashor dur-Shamshi.”

Replacing his glasses, Remly slipped into a facade of mild curiosity, saying, “Dur-Shamshi. Iraq was never my area of interest, Valeri. Who is this

dur-Shamshi?”

Valeri Voshch laughed, large and loud, and slapped the table again, again bouncing the pistols beside his plate. “Even it *was* your area of interest, you wouldn’t know nothing about this guy. Your friends in Virginia got a lot of fairy tales and blank pages out of Baghdad, Charls. My friends in Dzerzhinsky Square has got whole libraries of non-fictions.”

“So who was he, Valeri?”

“This Ashor dur-Shamshi is Saddam’s man. Facilitator for arms buys, facilitator for arms sales. Facilitator for Saddam’s kickingbacks.” Valeri looked at the table, looked at Remly, looked toward the ceiling as though tracking a moth. “I got a word lost.”

While he waited for Valeri, Remly reached for a CZ-75 in the pile of pistols he’d pushed aside, checked the butt for a magazine—empty. He pulled back the slide to look into the chamber, into the barrel—empty. Snapping the slide back into battery, Remly punched the pistol forward in a two-handed isosceles at the photo wall, balancing a 6-wheeled Renault swamp assault buggy on top of the front sight and smoothly squeezing the trigger.

Valeri, noting Remly’s aim, asked, “So how many thousand French trucks you want?”

“What’s the word you lost?”

Valeri said, “This fellow dur-Shamshi, this is Saddam’s ... is it ‘sacks guy?’”

“I don’t get you.”

“The guy holds the sacks for another guy. Picks up monies, takes monies around to distribute.”

“Bagman,” Remly said.

“*Ha!* This dur-Shamshi is Saddam’s bagman. He is the buyer, seller, bagman, everything for Saddam—the only guy Saddam trusts, right up to the minute dur-Shamshi sneaks off and goes to The Hague. When Iraq buys arms, pays for it out of the national treasury, half of the sale goes back to Saddam as commission. This dur-Shamshi fellow acts like the bagman. I hear he takes the money to accounts in the Seychelles and Cyprus, all of it cash.”

“The Seychelles.”

“Seychelles and Cyprus.”

“Amounts?”

“Sometimes hundreds of thousands, American. Carries it around in the diplomatic pouches.”

Remly whistled.

Valeri went on: “You got any idea how much in actual American dollars



Saddam is taking out of Iraq, all these years?”

“Got me,” Remly admitted. “A couple billion?”

Valeri boomed, “You got no imagination!”

“Twenty billions?”

“Try seventy billion USD,” Valeri said. “That fits you okay?”

“I find that hard to believe, Valeri.”

“Believe what you want, no problem. But do the mathematics. In ‘sixty-three Saddam becomes leader of Ba’ath secret intelligence, the al-Jihaz a-Khas. In ‘seventy-nine he is taking over the whole country. In March of ‘oh-three your war on Iraq begins, he’s got no way of making more looting. But he got forty years to milk this big cash-pig of petrodollars, every last barrel of crude. You got any idea how many trillions of Yankee dollars in cash-flow, over this time? And all the military arms purchase kicks-backs? All the civil buildings contracts?”

Remly whistled. “And Ashor dur-Shamshi handled the money for him.”

“Right up to when he gets out and goes to The Hague.”

‘In November of ‘ninety-eight,’ Remly thought. ‘But stopping off in London on his way.’

Valeri slapped the table, but lightly, as gesture of conclusion, saying, “So! You got your answer about Aleksandr Leonidevich for your guys back in the States. You going to call someone when you get home? Put the stops on this smuggled cargo in Georgia?”

“It’s doable,” Remly said. “No need to contact you, I imagine you’ll hear about it from the other end.” Then, as he began putting away his pencil and notepad, he asked almost absently, “London, November ‘ninety-eight—you recall we gossiped at the Karl Marx tomb?”

“Sure. This is the last time we have a bull-shitting secession.”

“I forget—did you tell me this when Kurskov negotiated the price for all the purchases he made since then?”

“This was that time, sure. Negotiates, gives me a big down pavement.”

“And why did you think I was in London?”

“Shit, you and your partner was baby-sitting Aleks Leonidevich Kurskov.”

Yet it had been the opposite—he’d been stationed there with Eddy Johnson to watch the traffic at Valeri’s new digs in Knightsbridge. And until he’d contacted Valeri for a bull session, he was sure Valeri didn’t know he was in town. And so, Remly wondered, what would have made Valeri think he and Eddy were there for Kurskov. What ... or who?

Remly pressed his luck a few inches more, asking, “And do you remember that you mentioned, when we spoke in London, why my partner wasn’t

with me when we talked?”

“Like you told me, Charls, he makes eyes to some woman. Gets beat up and put into the emergency clinic.”

‘Someone told you, Valeri,’ Remly thought. ‘Sure as hell it wasn’t me.’ And quite sincerely, Remly said, “Thank you for the information, Valeri. My friends back home will be very happy to hear it.”

As Remly had anticipated, Valeri took Remly’s notes before escorting him to the black Mercedes parked outside.

“L’occasion de faire du mal se trouve cent fois par jour, et celle de faire du bien une fois dans l’ann.e.”

(The opportunity to do mischief is found a hundred times a day, and of doing good once a year.)

Voltaire, *Zadig*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . N Y E C O U N T Y

The stillness in the eye of a hurricane is not an oasis of tranquility but simply a lull in the violence. The same is true of periods of inactivity in any brutish conspiracy: The rest periods, far from being restful, are moments when idle minds focus even more fearfully on the savagery yet to come. In Didi’s experience these moments of deceptive quietude were more precarious than the critical point when bombs exploded or fatal shots were fired—there is neither a manual of arms nor a standard contingency plan for boredom and fear. Added to this was the fact that Didi’s team was not so much a team as they were a fractious collection of hastily-fitted parts and conflicting personalities; Didi as a result worrying that—along with their tension about the coming action—each would begin cutting the others off at the legs in order to seem taller. He’d already noticed a growing level of hostility between his Slavs and the three religious Arabs; stiff postures when they approached one another, and rancorous glances as between boys in the run-up to a schoolyard fight. And so, during their waiting hiatus in Anunciøn, Didi kept his crew active fifteen hours a day with preparations, housekeeping chores, and busy-work.

The Ukrainians Viktor and Slava were the most tranquil of the group, perhaps because they were the least imaginative; to them fell the task of overseeing security in general and making sure the team didn’t mingle with the South Americans. Yuri was occupied with improving the insulation of his radionuclides, and Didi instructed Fyodor to assist Yuri in the work. Within the first hour, however, Yuri came with a clenched face to tell Didi that he would kill Fyodor—or, alternatively, himself—if he had to spend so much as another minute with the structural engineer. At which point Didi made Fyodor his personal assistant, much as a holy hermit might slip reluctantly into a hair shirt, and Fyodor with no real work to do took it upon himself to grind at Didi with a constant stream of demands and complaints.

Despite the unlike chores that Didi had assigned to them, Yuri and Viktor found time to gossip with each other about their leader. Yuri had

been Didi's friend from childhood, but Viktor had also become attached to Didi in the way that subordinates will sometimes view their master as a parent, particularly when they admire the boss's professional expertise. Viktor's ties to Didi were further cemented when Viktor saw Didi materialize a bible from his old canvas bookbag; Viktor coming shyly to Didi to show his own well-thumbed traveling bible, handed down from the time of Viktor's great-grandmother. At the sight of Viktor's small bible, Didi confided that he had found a suitable church in Anunci n, one unaffiliated with the Pope of Rome, and would Viktor like to go there with him, to pray for the enterprise?

"This is not forbidden?" Viktor asked, somewhat troubled. Didi had laid down a strict rule that the team was not to leave the compound around their dormitory until they boarded the flight to America. Especially, he'd said, they were not to let themselves be seen by any of the Slavic or Arab communities in town.

"Don't worry," Didi responded. "This is not a Russ or Ukraine church, Viktor."

"Old Believers?" Viktor asked.

"No, the Old Believers are Russians also, have their own church here. Came over maybe in the eighteen-thirties, the Tzar Nicholas Pavlovich purge. No, I found a Copt Orthodox. Egyptians, but good Christians. Rituals like the Old Believers."

And so they had gone to the modest Coptic chapel to pray silently in the dimly lit nave, surrounded by almost-familiar icons—images that could have been made by Slavs shanghaied to Anunci n by way of Alexandria. Following their secret return to the compound, Viktor felt himself bound to Didi as though by blood.

At any rate, the hot-stuff handler and the security enforcer agreed that Didi had withdrawn into himself, and they were concerned about his mental state. Except for the assignment of chores and the two times he interceded in squabbles between Slavs and Arabs—and except for his perpetual arguments with Fyodor—Didi had gone all but mute, staring into the distance as though he hoped to reach out, grasp infinity, and pull himself into it. Yet far from withdrawing Didi was anticipating the larger and more threatening issues they would face from Anunci n forward. And his distant focus wasn't on infinity but instead on the unsure future for which he was preparing them.

Didi had concluded that Fyodor would have to be removed from the equation. The Iraqi suicide, Scout, had a degree in civil engineering—enough, Didi decided, to pinpoint weaknesses in the steel framing of the

Fontaine hotel—thus making Fyodor redundant. For the needs of the project a civil engineer would do as well as a structural one: They were bringing a hotel down, after all, not putting one up. From the time he joined them in Odessa, Fyodor had succeeded in sending everyone into a rage at one point or another. And there was also the fact that Fyodor was incapable of keeping his mouth shut, which was the most elemental security requisite.

The Arabs had brought along Arabic games—shesh besh, el-quirkat, azzahr dice—to keep themselves occupied, and Didi took Tayyib into Las Vegas in the next county over to buy kosher food for them. Though halal meat was offered by a few Islamic grocers in the city, Didi and Tayyib avoided them, as Didi similarly avoided the eastern-rite churches of the town.

On a graded pad between the mine entrance and the air strip there were three cabins made of rough wood planks and two of concrete blocks with earthen roofs. There was a well with questionable water, which they used only for bathing; Andrei filled large barrels with drinking water for them at his rented house in Las Vegas, and Didi drew no attention as he transported the barrels to the mine in his second-hand Ford pickup truck. Aside from its major farm areas, he had not imagined an America city with so many pickup trucks, yet here in Las Vegas there were nearly as many pickups as there were cars, women driving them even, the pickups transporting everything from slabs of granite to hay-bales stacked two meters high. Once, in a freeway construction zone where the traffic had been detoured off to a narrow passage, he got caught in a pod of nothing but pickups, no passenger vehicles in sight. There were large warning signs about traffic fines becoming double in road-construction zones, and equally large signs proclaiming a speed limit of 35 miles per hour. Pressed along with the other trucks, Didi found himself going 85—and wondering how fast they would be traveling if not for the speed-limit placards ... altogether an astonishing experience.

Everything that was getting done—and a great deal *was* getting done—went forward with Didi's understanding that satellite cameras were putting images from every possible corner of earth onto the internet, and that no amount of piety or prayer would make this abandoned mine an exception. He had the electrical generator set up inside the mine shaft, and trenched the heavy cable from it to the two occupied block cabins and to Yuri's separate wooden workshop. All eight men wore desert camouflage, with stems of shrub pinned onto their shirts and floppy-brimmed hats when they were outside; on this issue Didi imagining that the satellite photos weren't movies, and in a windy desert venue the displacement of brush was to be expected. Even so, he urged the men to remain inside to the extent that they

could, short of the point where they wanted to go at each others' throats.

For Victor's and Slava's convenience, concerned as they were with security issues, Andrei had supplied hard-wire video surveillance of the locked gate at the rutted road coming in, and the two Ukrainians had seeded multiple rows of nail strips along a trail of what Andrei referred to as an "off-roader track"—a path of ripped earth through the desert's hard-packed surface—that led to the mine from some anonymous trailhead. And as further defense against vehicles of any sort, Didi issued the accurized RPG and two rockets to the two security men; a last-ditch action, to be sure, but measurably more effective than their Kalashnikov rifles.

The only truly difficult issue was in planning for the airplane. The rude airstrip needed but a good sweeping to be serviceable again, and once they'd brought in the plane they could easily re-cover the strip with blown tumbleweeds. The challenge lay in making the plane itself invisible. And as Didi quickly learned there was the problem of Tayyib, who insisted that, since he had no idea what kind of small aircraft they were getting, he would quite likely need time to check himself out in it, both on the ground and in the air, flying under the radar of at least six airports within the zone—perhaps as many as fifteen, he said—and one of them a U.S. Air Force facility.

"I was told you know how to fly," Didi said, at once challenging and encouraging.

Tayyib said, "I am a pilot, not a stork. I will need a manual for the plane, and at least five hours of airtime to familiarize myself with it."

"You can't do this on the ground?"

"Sure," Tayyib said. "Also I will fly into your hotel for you without leaving the ground."

Didi felt himself yielding.

Tayyib spoke dryly: "Look it up. I should be getting checked out by someone who knows the plane ... it's a risk that I do it on my own."

So now there would be the problem not only of thinking up a hiding place for the airplane, but also of moving it from hiding place to air strip and back again, and monitoring the sky for other small craft on Tayyib's maiden flights.

For the plane's secret hanger, Yuri came up with the simplest solution, one they all should have recognized at the beginning.

"This wood cabin that covers the mine entrance," Yuri said. "We take down the front wall, leave the sides, and back the airplane into the mine-shaft. Wings go into the cabin—it's wide enough."

"And the nose and propeller stick out," Tayyib argued. "A mine with a propeller, is that it?"

Yuri said, “Make a front porch, all this leftover wood, covers the nose and propeller. We got eight men, we can move the porch off, move it on, no problem eh?”

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. . . J F K   N E W   Y O R K

Morris Berman’s voice: “What you got, you got this genius for leaving me hanging. What’s it this time? Outta town? Fall downstairs again? Gimme a call before I send in the Saint Bernards.”

Another hour and a half to catch the connector to Burbank in California. At a pay phone in the waiting area for the boarding gate, Remly watched the crowd grow, the women too old or unattractive or too young or too skinny or too fat. And of himself, too selective, especially given the benefits he brought to the table; pushing 54 and himself too old, probably, and a medical basket case. He focused again on people nearby—no one listening.

The next message: “You out making a pass at this lady? This broad in the TV news? Naughty naughty! You got a hot babe right here in town wants your body. I told her, ‘patience.’ Told her she’d see you again, okay? Gimme a call. The Saint Bernards are getting—whatchacallit—restive? Is that a word?”

Pru Littleton: “Charley, what was that all about? I’m sure it must have been important—Morris says you’re really a very stable kind of person. But, I mean ... running off like that? I mean ... do you think you might call me? I’d really like to talk to you.” And she left two numbers. “Mostly? You can get me on the cell?”

Morris again: “Restive. But me, I’m whatchacallit—sanguine. Easygoing. You don’t phone, I’m gonna come over there, drain your moat.”

By instinct, Remly wanted it to be friendship, but the way things were going he settled for expedience. Somewhere along the line he would need Morris Berman.

“I was out of town again,” Remly said when Morris answered. “What’s a good time to get together with you?”

Morris said, “Rest of the week, everyone wants a piece of me. Maybe next week sometime? Dinner at our place?”

It was good for Remly.

“Proosie, too,” Morris said. “She’d really like to see you again, said to the wife you’re not like the other guys around town—not a total fixer-upper. Told the wife she thinks you only need a little work here and there.”

“Morris, she’s a nice girl, but ...”

“I think she’s hot for your body. The wife lets it slip.”

“Morris, I’m old enough to be her father.”

“So you’re what? Seventy-two? Seventy-five?”

“Sorry?”

“Girl’s having her fiftieth birthday next month. The wife? The wife’s cool with fifty, I think Pru’s getting a little desperate around the edges. I mean, given the fact there are like zip eligible guys in this town, they all need so much fixing up.”

“Fiftieth?”

“Zip excepting present company, natch.”

“Fiftieth?”

“Works out every day. Looks good for fifty, don’cha think?”

Next Remly called the F.O.

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## . . . N Y E C O U N T Y

When the subject came up, Yuri, who had been thinking maybe he’d buy a farm in Ukraine, said it shouldn’t be any more difficult than putting down a pig. Viktor said it was actually simple, as compared to putting down a pig. With a pig everything had to be intact and useable afterward, even the brains that went into kulebiaka and the blood and guts for kishka sausage. A man, on the other hand, needed only to be dead for the enterprise to be accounted a success, whether his end was prim and tidy or he dissolved into a gelatinous mess.

And so it was with Fyodor, Viktor at first wondering if they shouldn’t simply have one of the Arabs stab Fyodor ... but no, Didi responding, the Arabs weren’t to think they could kill a Slav. In fact, the Arabs weren’t even to know that Fyodor had been put down, only that he’d gone into Las Vegas to work with others of the team, who’d already been stationed there.

Getting Fyodor into the mine after dark wasn’t particularly difficult—Yuri telling Fyodor he’d smuggled along a few bottles of kvas, and did Fyodor want to slip into the cavern with him for a taste. Viktor shot Fyodor twice in the back of head with the suppressed Makarov, the second round only for luck. Slava and Viktor had earlier looked through the mine for a deep vertical shaft, and Fyodor’s body was sent down it without ceremony, consigned to God and the earth, followed by an avalanche of loose rock. Didi waited patiently while Viktor repeated the Prayer of Saint Boris over the rubble, after which they joined Slava and Yuri at their cabin.

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## . . . S A N T A B A R B A R A

Although Charles Remly wasn’t a salesman he understood that some pitches could be made on the phone, others needed serious face time. And



to simplify his sales pitch he neglected to let Alan Singleton know that he was back in the States when he called the F.O. Remly flew directly to Burbank, then chartered to Santa Barbara, dragging along his fatigue like a grim spiritual shadow.

It was close on midnight when Remly arrived at the great monastic estate in Montecito, careful to park his rented Chevy well away from the garage doors—he hadn't taken the optional insurance on the car.

The F.O. greeted Remly with a strong handshake and a distinctly unsteady tilt. "Astonishing, my boy! Incursion into Transdniester, came back whole. Old times! As though we'd never left the firm, eh?"

"Was that what we did?" Remly asked. "Leave?"

Next morning Remly's travel alarm jarred him awake at six. He'd opened the window to let in the sharp over-night smell of the ocean, and the fragrance of pine trees and lavender from the slope; now he closed it against the cold morning fog. He got himself clean, taking his time, but stopped before shaving. The question was, should he keep his thirty-six hour growth, thus reinforcing his desperate-infiltrator persona for the F.O.? Or was he more concerned about Lissie Burlingame's refined sensibilities? In the end Remly put away the razor and rumbled his neatly brushed hair. Then removed his fresh shirt in order to roll and crush it in a number of angles before slipping into it again.

At breakfast Lissie was dressed in a sweeping floral kaftan, her dark hair perfect, thick, her glory. The F.O. was in tan slacks and a black, double-breasted blazer, and what Remly took to be a Sulka tie, expertly knotted.

After a quick, disapproving glance at Remly, Lissie worked up a cheery smile and asked, "Carl, you slept well?" in tones that implied Remly looked like a war-zone refugee.

"Perfectly, Lissie, the room was wonderful. And, uh, it's Charley, now."

"Oh, dear, sorry." But she had looked away by then, gesturing to the maid with her coffee cup, and it was difficult to tell whether she was sorry about missing his name, or sorry that he thought the guest room was wonderful and she was concerned that he intended to move in for the duration.

Remly was accustomed to only a quart or so of coffee in the morning, nothing to eat until noon. With Lissie's sensitivity in mind, he took bits of this and that from the abundantly provisioned table—half of a sourdough muffin; an orange that Elenacita had opened like a magnolia blossom; a decorated hard-boiled egg, the yolk of which had been churned with capers, diced chives, and a white sauce with a light hint of rosemary. Although he

later concluded that their breakfast couldn't have taken more than thirty minutes, at the time it seemed to go on for fully half the morning.

Despite her initial askance looks at Remly's appearance, Lissie Burlin-game quickly warmed to the idea that he had done something desperate on behalf of the F.O. And though it was obvious that she was light on details, she kept patting her husband's hand, the F.O. beaming and Lissie's gold bracelets jangling on the marble table top in the east-windowed morning room. "Isn't Kenny just *vibrant*?" she said of the F.O. "It's as though the Cold War never ended."

"When did that happen, exactly?" Remly softly asked, but Lissie seemed not to have heard him ... nor for that matter had the F.O.

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### . . . N Y E C O U N T Y

Yuri needed sheets of carbon tungsten, along with a lot of other specialized items for his mini-Chernobyl event. He'd come to ask Didi for one of the pre-paid cell phones that Andrei had gotten for them, and for the use of Didi's new wide-screen notebook computer to wifi up to the internet.

Didi was still in the middle of finding an airplane for Tayyib, and he asked in a not-completely focused way, "You didn't bring everything you need with you?"

"Why lug stuff half-way around the world when there's a nice big dump of it just down the road." Across the border in California, Yuri explained; a place near a small town called Barstow. "Big government surplus yard, they got their catalogue on the internet. Except for the radioactives, they sell everything I need to make a critical event. Send Andrei down for it, he's got the best English. I'll give him a shopping list."

"U.S. government," Didi said.

"Sure. Great resource, these Yanks. Better than Gubkin in Odessa—and none of it's stolen. It's all paid for by American taxpayers."

Didi loved the irony of it.

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### . . . S A N T A B A R B A R A

Following breakfast Remly and the F.O. retired to the secondary library rather than the terrace, the pines outside the leaded windows lost in thick fog. The F.O. flicked on the lights, then went to the windows and closed the heavy drapes. Settled at the library table, Remly opened his laptop and his lined pad and brought out an automatic pencil.

"Great God!" the F.O. said when he saw Remly's page covered with scrawls. "Didn't take notes, did you?"

With four rigid fingers Remly tapped his forehead. "From memory on

the flight back. Valeri grabbed my note pages before I could eat them, but it's all gobbledygook. He'll get hemorrhoids from the strain, trying to decipher it." He pointed at the laptop: "And the notes were strictly a workup for the spreadsheet. I've entered everything into the computer to get some idea of the line of logic in this, such as it is."

The old man relaxed and reached for the auto-ranging scrambler that Alan Singleton had given him. "Has it an outlet for a speaker? Lets us make some sort of conference call to Alan?" He unfolded it.

Remly said, perhaps too quickly, "Let's bring Alan in after we've gone over the details." He managed a small smile. "You know Alan—he'll want to cook a batch of plastique and start blowing things up. You're administration, I think you should hear the facts before we take it any farther."

"What is it, I wonder," the F.O. said, "that you're afraid of." He sighted down the scrambler phone at Remly. "What, that you don't wish Alan Singleton to hear?" When Remly returned his look in silence, the F.O. continued, "You have made something of a career of it ... manipulating people. Not targeting me as your next victim, are you?"

"Sir, me? Manipulate?"

"Only if you think you'll not get caught at it," the F.O. said as he folded the scrambler phone to put it aside, then reached for his own notepad and fat Montblanc pen.

“Yet the deepest truths are best read between the lines,  
and for the most part refuse to be written.”

Amos Bronson Alcott

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . S A N T A   B A R B A R A

If it was true even in the face of his casual cynicism that he'd ever loved anyone, Remly supposed he loved the F.O. and when he broke the old man's heart something would crack within his own breast as well; a death of sorts. He was the one, after all, who'd revived his old mentor, and he imagined that the F.O., having been raised up to some rare emotional stratosphere by this return to the game, would land all the harder when he fell. But short of buying into the F.O.'s fantasy that this franchise was still doable—a fantasy that would quickly become a hellish reality, should they pursue it—Remly saw no alternative but to dissolve the fantasy and crush the F.O.'s spirit, returning him to his vegetative state. His “composting” state, as Lissie had it.

Yet Remly knew he couldn't put the truth of their situation directly to the F.O. but would have to lay out small facts like doves in the grass after a hunt, lining them up one limp little fact after another until his old friend began to understand the overwhelming issues they faced, deducing the harsh reality on his own. Eventually it would have to be the F.O. who spoke the fatal words that ended this quest—the F.O. who voluntarily gave up and retreated into his empty retirement, perhaps reliving old battles while he drank more good cognac than was required, watching sailboats beat past the oil platforms to the islands in the Channel, then nodding off in a chair as the sun sank into its watery refecation on the horizon.

First, though, he would listen to the F.O.'s news—and so Remly soldiered on, bringing up the spreadsheet in his laptop and asking, “What did you and Alan dig up while I was gone? Alan get a biograph on Ashor dur-Shamshi from Simon?”

“Our esteemed colleague Simon d'Angelo has become as distant as the moon, and even less speakable to.” The F.O. reached for a cigar box on the table, then reconsidered and pushed it aside. “Simon has actually gone so far as to have changed his phone number—the one I have for him is disconnected.”

“Nothing, then?”

“Alan and I are not without our own resources, let me remind you. After

discreet feelers to a few friends still active at the Campus, we were able to put together something of an ersatz biography, though not necessarily the complete and official document.”

Remly went to another page of his spreadsheet, poised to add data, asking, “What did you learn?”

“Not so fast,” the F.O. responded. He studied Remly. “There remains a question in Alan’s mind and in mine ... you’re absolutely *certain* it was the dur-Shamshi woman with whom Mr. Johnson flirted in London?”

“Not a doubt. I could draw you pictures of the bodyguards.”

“Ah *ha!*” And here the F.O. paused to jot a note on his pad. “That might prove interesting. Ask Alan to have one of his nefarious contacts photograph dur-Shamshi’s entourage in Lisbon.” He looked up again. “I ask about the lady because it is not on record that the dur-Shamshis were in London at the same time as you and Johnson. Through our various friends in Virginia, Alan and I have the dur-Shamshis escaping Iraq with bags, baggage, and retainers in early November of ‘ninety-eight.”

Here the F.O. paused, to cast a disapproving eye at Remly’s fingers which were tapping away at the keyboard of his laptop. “Must you do that? It’s quite distracting.”

“Sorry,” said Remly, “unavoidable. I have to merge your information into my spreadsheet if I’m going to make sense of this.”

With a dramatic sigh the F.O. once more peered at his notepad and continued: “The dur-Shamshis re-materialize in modest quarters in The Hague in December of ‘ninety-eight. Then—following General dur-Shamshi’s acquittal of genocide charges at the ICJ—they move with family and entourage to even more modest quarters in Maastricht. This would be August of ‘ninety-nine. Recently, things liven up for Family dur-Shamshi: In January they move to Lisbon. Live for awhile in a pricey hotel—again with all appurtenances and retainers—then move into an impressive complex of apartment buildings which they purchase for forty million dollars. What, I wonder, might the source have been of this reversal of fortune?”

Remly stopped his tapping to say, “I have a clue about that, it goes back to dur-Shamshi’s position in Baghdad, but ... later? I want to categorize these things in some sort of logical order.”

The F.O. asked, “And have you a clue as to what duties General dur-Shamshi performed while on active duty in Iraq?”

“Yes, from Valeri in Tiraspol. But, later on that, too, please.”

“And his military service is somehow related to his fortune?”

Remly nodded.

The F.O. expelled another theatrical sigh. “Alan and I also have it that

our friend General dur-Shamshi is poised to return to Baghdad—with the blessings of a number of grand nabobs inside the Beltway. And Alan caught inferences that one or two voices in Virginia may have been raised in the general's behalf as well.”

Remly keyed this information into another new cell in his spreadsheet.

The F.O. continued, “And of course the famous radioactive materials. Alan confirmed through his contacts at Nuke Reg that some considerable amount of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium went missing from the Vinca laboratory in Yugoslavia in the timeframe Brother Kurskov was there. Still, we have no real evidence that it was this missing material that contaminated your friend's aircraft in South America.” He paused, looked up from his notes. “Anunci3n, was it?”

“Anunci3n,” Remly confirmed.

“Alan in the meantime has gotten a mother-lode on this fellow Dmitrovsky from a contact of his in Riga—a major in *Zemessardze*<sup>1</sup>. Chap E-mailed Alan a biography, a surprisingly readable English translation. Also, there's some fellow, one Andrei ...” The F.O. searched through the envelope beside his notepad. “Ah! One Andrei Pierreovich Stepanenko, who works for Mr. Dmitrovsky now and again—details from Latvia to follow, so Alan informs me. Perhaps even photographs of the two. Alan will hand deliver all of his material, next we meet. Which, one hopes, will be quite soon, eh?”

“Absolutely,” Remly agreed without much enthusiasm.

“And now, my boy, it is your turn.” The F.O. said. “What news do you bring from darkest Tiraspol? What ... that caused you to fly here directly from New York?”

Considering the screen of his laptop through the bifocal segments of his glasses, Remly paused before speaking. At last he looked at the F.O. and said, “I have a lot of small facts, but I'd rather not comment on what I've extracted from them. If there are any truths here—and I think there are—I'd prefer to have you build your own logical construct from them.”

In a dry voice the F.O. asked, “This procedure of yours—are we being Socratic? Or do you propose to become nothing less than Machiavellian?”

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## . . . L I S B O N

As Ashor saw it, the highway to Baghdad was getting smoother by the minute.

Reports from Colonel Kurskov regarding the progress of the Las Vegas venture, though infrequent, were consistently upbeat. And both Gio Buccini and Peter Carpin had called, asking for favors, which Ashor was

<sup>1</sup>*Zemessardze* “Home Guard” - Internal security and secret police, Latvia.

delighted to accommodate.

Buccini had wanted the name of a reliable military man in Iraq—whether now in service or, as Buccini put it, “on the Bremer shit-list”—to put together a strong bodyguard force of locals to protect one of Buccini’s manufacturing constituents during a fact-finding tour of Baghdad. Ashor provided the congressman with a former one-star general, Darwish Abdul-Haqq, who assembled and led a paramilitary bodyguard team for the group.

As for Peter Carpin, the request was a bit more complicated: Carpin wanted a list of all Iraq infrastructure damaged in the war, and those that Saddam had let wither during his episodes of palace-building frenzy. “This can be quite time-consuming, Peter,” Ashor had said. “We are talking about a country that was bombed back to the dark ages—then looted back to the stone age.”

Carpin sympathized. “What I’m looking for are those projects that will require bids of fifty millions USD or higher. I understand it’s asking a lot, Ashor. But I can promise you, the men who want this information have voices that are heard in Washington. And they’ll be glad to show their gratitude, both in Washington and in Baghdad.”

At home in Iraq, among dozens of other threads of intelligence passing to Ashor’s team in Lisbon, the son of a ground-water recharge hydrologist came into view. The boy had developed a friendship with another teen who, on learning that his new friend’s hydrologist father was somehow connected with Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi, let slip the fact that he’d been blogging on the ‘net for Ashor’s return since a year ago summer. Govan was managing this intell thread, and when he brought the news to Ashor, Ashor told Govan that, rather than responding to this news, he was to completely ignore it. No feedback, no reaction whatsoever. In the next breath Ashor asked, “Can you find someone else with a boy at this school, Govan? Another teenager who knows this kid?”

“I can always try.” If Govan was puzzled by the question, he hardly showed it.

“See what you can do. If you find someone, Rafiq will share bits of his military intell with you. Whatever shaku maku Rafiq has about corruption in the army, in the national police—good valid news, not just gossip—feed that to this Baghdad blogger through some other kid in his school; any boy not connected to the men we’re supporting back home. If the boy is kidnapped or killed, there mustn’t be any trace back to us.”

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

Coming in from Nye County, Didi got off the freeway south of the airport and angled over to Las Vegas Boulevard to let Yuri see the famous sign—an initiation of sorts. Driving north toward the Strip’s gauntlet of neon they come upon it—WELCOME TO FABULOUS LAS VEGAS—but neither the sign nor they were in fabulous Las Vegas. The sign is at the southern foot of the Strip, and the Strip is not in Las Vegas but Clark County, Vegas still four and a half miles up the road. Yuri wasn’t told this, and both Didi and Viktor, flanking him, could feel him vibrating with unspoken excitement at the sight of the fabulous welcome.

Didi had already been through on a reconnaissance and knew that the action was at the center of the Strip where Tropicana intersected and the sidewalks were crowded with tourists who wanted to see everything and do everything before returning to their gray workaday reality. There was an energy at the center of the Strip, the crowd surging like a heavy tide from casino to casino, pods of tourists stopping to watch the free shows that fronted some of the venues, pausing at the intersections to stare skyward at showroom previews on barn-size electronic videos, the tourists no longer individuals but a massive sprawling animal with a pulsing, almost sexual lust for pleasure—now with the addition of Didi, Yuri, and Viktor, shirtsleeved and little different than any other out-of-towners.

Though he’d been through last week, Didi found it overpowering, the lights and the crowds and the glitz; the sense of money and the aura of non-stop entertainment. And if for Didi it was overpowering, for Yuri it was almost too much, Didi and Viktor now and then holding Yuri still as he drank it in, this opposite end of the universe from grim and freezing Murmansk.

Yuri played the slots as they drank their way north, starting at MGM Grand where Didi had the devil’s own time dissuading Yuri from crossing over to New York New York for a ride on the roller-coaster. “Slots, Yuri,” Didi said. “Slots!” And Yuri in a Pavlovian response turned away from the arching rails across the street and went inside with Didi and Viktor. As Didi saw it, Yuri hadn’t any interest in winning, it was the activity that energized him: Feeding in the dollar bills, the spinning images, the sounds of the casinos, dizzying activity. Yuri was disappointed that the slot machines no longer had a lever to pull, to spin the wheels.

At Bellagio they watched the dancing fountains and listened to Pavarotti sing Verde, then crossed the street where Yuri fed the slots at Imperial Palace while Viktor went off to look into the car museum. They stood



awestruck to see the volcano at Mirage, the heat from it warming them and Viktor stepping back uncertainly as sparks and fire spewed. Finally, at Treasure Island, Yuri seemed to have gambled himself out, having put over three hundred dollars of his own money into the Las Vegas economy. As they watched the pirate show—Yuri loudly cheering while pirates sank the British ship—Didi sent up a special thanks that his prayers had been answered and Yuri's losing streak had not broken: Winning a major jackpot would have brought a photographer. Yuri's name in lights. U.S. tax forms.

They'd been carrying drinks along the way and sipped from them as they watched the pirates, and Didi asked where Yuri wanted to go next.

Yuri was removing a little umbrella from his glass. "Titty girls," he said as he looked up. He grinned slyly and his eyes took on a rather manic lilt.

The show was more exciting and the dinner more elegant than anything Didi had experienced at Casino Borodin in Moscow, but he imagined this was also a part of the Las Vegas experience, dozens of casinos pushing the bar higher with every new show, every newly-recruited celebrity chef. The downside was the final pricetag: Including yet more drinks and the bottle of Hermitage Syrah they'd had with the dinner, it came to over \$560, this out of Didi's own pocket, which he paid in cash.

As for Yuri, he seemed torn between the food and the tall, stupendously-breasted women on the thrust stage. Didi had gotten them a table three rows back from the footlights, and had ordered two complete dinners for Yuri when Yuri, torn between the chateaubriand and the lobster, seemed on the verge of a breakdown caused by indecision. Oddly, though, by the time they left Yuri had eaten his way through both dinners without once looking at his plate.

The story that thinly supported the stage show, as Didi understood it, had something to do with shipwrecked Greek sailors—perhaps Odysseus and his crew?—though the main attraction was the astonishing women. Toward the end, a chorus line of women wearing little more than sandals came to the footlights for a final tableau, their nipples ripe as plums and as intimidating as rifle muzzles. Yuri stood for a closer look, and it took both Didi and Viktor to get the feverish nuclear technician into his chair again.

When they left, Didi waved for a cab to take them south to where he'd parked his Ford pickup. Yuri was too drunk and too excited to walk, and Didi wasn't sure that he and Viktor were much better. Their taxi pulled up, immediately behind it a pink Cadillac convertible—a big-finned throwback to the '50s—in which five Elvises of various sizes and ages sat, the largest of them possibly 150 kilos, in Didi estimate. Though Yuri stared, no one else

paid the Elvies any mind, not the parking attendant who took the huge pink cruiser nor the other guests arriving and departing.

In all it had been an astonishing night and for the entire day following Yuri walked about in a daze.

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. . . S A N T A   B A R B A R A

Plunging directly into it, Remly said, “Valeri Voshch knew that Eddy Johnson took a beating in London, back in November of ‘ninety-eight. But Valeri had no idea that this Ashor dur-Shamshi was in town at the time.” He paused to look up from his computer and study the F.O., but nothing registered in the other’s face. “Any information Valeri got about Eddy’s beating or the fact that I was in town too, he got from Aleksandr Kurskov.” Now Remly studied the screen, wondering which small fact to lay out next.

“Let me understand this,” the F.O.said.

Remly looked up again, his controlled expression a blank page.

“The last information regarding Mr. Kurskov that you presented, this dealt with his purchases this year from Mr. Valeri Voshch, along with the small items he picked up earlier—what were they? Guns? Scrambler phones?”

“Makarovs in 5.54 Russian in ‘oh-one, the scrambler phones in November of ‘ninety-eight.”

“Then ... what has Mr. Johnson’s beating to do with this?”

“It’s nineteen ninety-eight, London—Eddy makes a pass at dur-Shamshi’s wife. Dur-Shamshi’s bodyguards pound Eddy into the sidewalk. But according to your sources, dur-Shamshi supposedly isn’t in London at the time. In ‘ninety-eight, besides buying the phones, Kurskov is putting a down payment for arms—a *lot* of ordnance, not just the Anunci3n shipment—with Valeri. Valeri knows that Eddy got pounded, but Valeri doesn’t know dur-Shamshi’s in town. So ... how does Valeri learn that Eddy got beat up? Dur-Shamshi doesn’t tell Valeri, but the Iraqi tells *someone* about it—yes?”

The F.O. was silent, but from his look he was digesting a meal that did not sit well with him.

“Comment?” Remly asked.

“I don’t imagine one is required,” the F.O. said. “Not quite yet, at any rate.”

The library windows faced south, and the drapes were glowing from mottled sunlight which filtered through the pines outside. Remly asked, “Possible to open a window? It’s getting warm in here.”

“It is indeed,” the F.O. agreed. He rose and went to the wall near the door to adjust a thermostat. Cool air breathed down from the ceiling as the

F.O. resettled at the library table.

“You know,” Remly said, continuing his fact-dropping, “that Kurskov purchased small arms, Semtex, a SAM, and an RPG from Valeri. And Valeri provided air service for the arms, along with five Russians and four Arabs to South America. And there was radioactive material on board as well.”

The F.O. nodded grimly.

Remly said, “Now Valeri tells me that he also sold a major load of arms to Kurskov.” He elaborated on the details of the purchase, watching the F.O. write them down: The elite guns in Iraqi configuration, the RPGs, the field pieces, the rest.

“I imagine prices have gone up measurably in the interim,” the F.O. said, with a trace of sarcasm. “Perhaps he was pre-purchasing to speculate on a rising market.”

“It was as much their availability that Kurskov was checking on. But, again, everything was negotiated between Valeri and Kurskov while dur-Shamshi was in town.”

“You needn’t beat the drum so loudly,” the F.O. said. “This major shipment, now. Did Mr. Voshch intimate where it might be going?”

“It’s in Georgia now, along a smuggling route by way of Abkhazia. Valeri thinks it might be headed for Chechens, maybe Kurd separatists in Turkey.”

“From your expression, I gather you don’t agree with Mr. Voshch’s assessment.”

“Let’s assume that Kurskov is only a straw buyer. Who do you think was the actual purchaser? And what is the most logical route to move a heavy load of ordnance from Odessa to Iraq?”

The F.O. said, “I feel rather like Fortunato, waiting for a cask of Aman-tillado to materialize.”

Remly waited.

“And watching the wall getting closed up,” the F.O. said, “brick on brick. Two bricks remain. You said you had news of General dur-Shamshi’s military duties, and perhaps further news regarding the source of his sudden wealth.”

“Dur-Shamshi was Saddam’s bagman on Iraq’s arms purchases and sales. Valeri tells me that Saddam siphoned off something like seventy billions, USD, between the oil and the arms. Dur-Shamshi banked the arms graft for Saddam Hussein.”

“And this—perhaps part of it—would be the source of the good general’s sudden fortune?”

“Saddam gets captured in December, a month later dur-Shamshi is a

sudden multi-millionaire. Moves from his modest digs in Maastricht, buys a huge compound of apartments in one of Lisbon's upscale neighborhoods."

"Or for all we know, a sudden multi-billionaire." The F.O. turned from Remly and from the notes before him and contemplated the books that lined his library walls, scanning them as though somewhere on the shelves there was a reference volume he could pull down and consult. He measured the east wall first, then let his glance wander over the north and west walls, book after book after book.

Remly, now embarrassed, looked away from the old man and waited for him to speak again. In this room the smell of old books seemed heavier than it had in the Hancock Park mansion, but perhaps that was due to the coastal fog. Or, Remly considered, perhaps due to his heightened senses—everything seeming more vivid and sharper-edged.

The F.O. cleared his throat.

"Yes?" Remly said.

"Yes," the F.O. said. "Yes. Indeed. General dur-Shamshi with a load of rather serious arms. To run guns to Iraq from Odessa, one would first move the load across the Black Sea, then through Abkhazia and Georgia, along the smugglers' expressway." Again the F.O. stared mutely at Remly. When he broke his silence he said, "And this dur-Shamshi has been planning this from the start, from the moment he ran from Baghdad, even before he landed in The Hague. Planning to return to Baghdad in a post-Saddam Iraq."

"With a load of arms," Remly added. "And now with the blessings of some heavyweights inside the beltway, and maybe a few novenas from the Campus in Virginia."

"And radioactive materials," the F.O. added grimly. "With Semtex and a surface-to-air missile. On their way perhaps to Las Vegas?"

"And Arabs maybe on their way to Vegas, don't forget. Did we mention that earlier?"

"And Arabs," the F.O. repeated, "yes. As well as Brother Kurskov realizing that you and Mr. Johnson could place him together with dur-Shamshi and your friend Voshch in London, as the general was just beginning his exile."

Remly waited, giving the F.O. time digest his own words, then asked, "In order to carry our little impromptu franchise forward, what do you think we'll need in the way of personnel? And how can we get access to RH<sup>1</sup> files in Virginia? How about electronics? Ordnance? Alan might have some

<sup>1</sup>RH "Restricted Handling" - Secrecy level applied to files and reports that can only be seen by specifically-listed recipients. RH files are the most closely-held documents within the intell community.

idea, don't you think?"

The F.O. sat silently, and Remly was equally mute.

Finally, speaking softly and gently, Remly asked, "Do we really need to share this with Alan?"

The F.O. had already begun to wilt, you could see it in his face, the energy he'd shown at the breakfast table now gone and a certain fatalistic aura settling about him like an invalid's shawl.

After a brief while, Remly tried again: "Should we call Alan? Or ... do you think . . .?"

The F.O., looking up, pulled on a mask of false bravado. "Into this well over our heads—I suppose one must accept the inevitable. Bite the bullet, make the call." He went to the short table by the reading chair and retrieved an archaic telephone, its dial clumsily converted in some distant time to accept a touch-tone pad. Trailing wire, he brought the phone to the table, seated himself, and settled the phone before him and stared at it without pleasure. Again he said, "Bite the bullet," and lifted the receiver and punched at the numeric buttons. "I still know a person or two near the top of the food chain in Virginia."

While they waited, Remly looked at his watch: Eight thirty-eight—about twenty minutes before noon, eastern time.

"Hello?" the F.O. suddenly said, his voice vigorous again, though Remly read in both the F.O.'s voice and his face a strained quality. "Hello, Leonard? Ken Burlingame here." A pause, then, "That *is* a coincidence." Then, a hand over the mouthpiece, he said to Remly, "Leonard says he was planning to call me." Now, however, the F.O.'s expression of false bravado seemed to melt, replaced by a look of genuine curiosity.

And again into the phone: "You'd like a conference? Of course, of course." A significant look at Remly. "What might you have in mind, I wonder." Another pause, and now, looking directly at Remly, and making a theatrically prissy expression, the F.O. repeated, "I will find out when we meet?" As he listened, the F.O. seemed to grow in his chair, his face taking on fresh color and his expression that of a man who was being told he'd just won the Nobel Prize. "And you want Weatherstone and Singleton too? Certainly, certainly." Then, winking at Remly, he said, "No, no, no—'fraid not. For me at any rate, a meeting in Virginia would be terribly inconvenient. And as for Carl, I think I can say the same." He listened, openly grinning and reaching for the cigar box on the table. "If you can't fly out to meet us, perhaps we can get together at some future date. I would love to see you, of course, but my time is rather taken up with important personal issues of this or that nature. In a month or two I might have time to fly east—possibly

good for you?” He inspected the cigar, a Romeo y Julietta, to see that it had a proper hole in the rolled end, then got a large wood match from a crystal match pot, struck the match with an expert snap of his wrist, and warmed the cigar’s cut end once the sulphur had burned off—listening the while. After a few puffs on the cigar he said, “Oh, yes, sorry. My property manager is here. Afraid I became distracted. You were saying . . . ?” The F.O. blew a perfect ring of cigar smoke and watched it dissolve as it floated to the ceiling. “No, no, I’m afraid not. Honestly haven’t the time, fly back to Virginia, at least not in the next month or so. As I said however, more than happy to meet you somewhere out west.” Grinning again at Remly, he said, “You will? Yes, of course, not a problem that. I shall phone Alan and Carl and see if this is convenient for them as well.”

The F.O. replaced the phone and looked at it for a moment. He looked at Remly for a moment, then looked at the book-lined far wall, then again at Remly. He said, “Leonard seems quite eager. Was about to call for a meeting, including you and Alan. Says he’s willing to meet on our home field—it sounds rather like a come-to-Jesus meeting. You understand what this implies.”

“I’m afraid I do,” Remly said.

— THREE —  
OPERATIONS

“Fallite fallentes; ex magna parte profanum.”  
(Deceive the deceivers; they’re mostly a rotten bunch.)

Ovid

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

“Sure you don’t want a wheelchair?” Charles Remly asked.

“For God’s sake stop mother-henning me.” Alan Singleton arched his back, then settled into a rumpled slouch over the bars of his walker. “No idea what Kenny’s got in mind for this sitdown with that sonofabitch Leonard?”

For the sixth or seventh time Remly responded, “Haven’t the foggiest,” his voice so sincerely innocent that he almost believed his own words.

When he’d picked Singleton up at McCarran International, just off the Strip, the old man had muttered darkly about “that backstabbing sonofabitch” and “Mr. Last-in, First-Out,” referring to Leonard. And there was much in Singleton’s tone that implied he’d worked perhaps too closely with Leonard in the past. “You know him pretty well?” Remly had asked. But Singleton only responded, “Someday I’ll tell you the story.”

And now they waited at the broad bank of windows, Singleton asking, “Kenny gets here first? You sure of that?”

Remly shrugged. “It’s a charter.”

“I hear you.”

The meeting had been set for Summerlin Skyport and they’d arrived early, Remly picking up the old man at McCarran and the two of them now standing at the panoramic windows watching for one of Virginia’s executive jets and a smaller plane chartered from the Goleta airport outside of Santa Barbara.

Remly said, “Piper Navajo? That’s what they said it was when I chartered out of there.”

“Sure ‘n hell that isn’t it,” Singleton said. A large private jet coming in, the image wavering in the rising early heat. He said, “Citation Ten.”

“I’m not really an airplane guy,” Remly said. Then, “About the Tiraspol trip, Alan . . .”

“Will you for krisake stop hammering on that,” Singleton said, “not a problem.” Yet his sharp expression gave the lie to his words. And for Remly there was this deeper understanding of Singleton’s vexation: That Remly’s failure to invite Singleton—fluent in Russian—to travel with him to confer



with Valeri Voshch was only a minor goad, the principal source of Alan Singleton's unhappiness the abrupt closure of their impromptu franchise. As with the F.O., Singleton had found new purpose in life with this adventure ... and now it was to end. And, perhaps worse, it was to be turned over to the very people who had years ago declared Alan Singleton too old to be of any value.

As though to take the edge off his response, Singleton asked, "Keeping busy otherwise?"

Similarly offhand, Remly said, "At the range a lot. Sharpening the eye, steadying the hands."

"Didn't know you played golf."

"Ha ha."

"Well, it's over, so Kenny says. So fuck it, you ain't gonna be a gunslinger, right?"

"Right," Remly affably replied.

The Citation landed with a graceful skim and finished its rollout. Taxied to the terminal. Remly glanced briefly at it; federal GSA markings on the tail. General Services Administration—another big auction of desert land?

As the Citation's door swung open and the stairs unfolded, a tall thinly-muscular man in chinos and a light duffle jacket appeared, pausing in the opening to scan the terminal windows then consulting a bright gold wristwatch. He was deeply tanned, and when he squinted in the sunlight he showed bright teeth.

"This will be our guy, I'll betcha," Singleton said. "And here comes your Navajo." He pointed off to a small twin-engine plane approaching the runway out of the west.

"This guy at the jet," Remly said. "Recognize him?"

"Perfect stranger. You bring glasses?"

"I should have thought of it," Remly said. His bird-watching binoculars were in the glovebox of his Isuzu. Then watching the man get closer, walking briskly, and something stirring in the distant reaches of Remly's mind, something about the man. Something almost familiar.

"I shoulda thought of it," Alan Singleton said.

The approaching man slipped off his tie and ran a finger under his collar as he walked, but kept his jacket on. He took a black ID case from his jacket, opened it, and held it before him like a talisman against evil as he approached the terminal's security door.

"Warm out there," Singleton said. "Wonder what he's got under the jacket."

"It's a gift," Remly said. "He'll get me through the metal detector."

“You carrying all the time?”

“The way things have been going ...” Remly let it hang.

“At the range,” Singleton said. “Carrying. This thing’s got you paranoid, kid.” Then turning and scooting his walker toward the guarded exit to the field, he said, “Let’s go,”

They stopped short of the metal detector at the exit door, and when the door opened and the man from the Citation walked through, the metal detector clanged violently. Behind the tanned newcomer a security guard leaned through the door, speaking to the security man inside: “S’okay, he’s credentialed.”

“Mr. Singleton? Mr. Weatherstone?” the man asked as he approached them.

Remly asked, “Your name?”

“Jon Vanbastian. Make it ‘Jon,’ okay?” He had an air of energetic good nature; Remly imagined him ski-ing.

“Do I know you?” asked Remly.

“I was the resident at our consulate in Liège, back in the dark ages. You got called in to smoke some bad boys out of the Belgyn gun biz. I went on to bigger and better in The Hague.” He grinned, his teeth gleaming. “You’re using ‘Remly’ now, right? You prefer ‘Charley,’ or ‘Carl?’”

“Whatever,” Remly said, wondering how deeply they’d researched him for their come-to-Jesus meeting.

With one hand in the small of Remly’s back Vanbastian got them through the metal-detection arch, which clanged mercilessly at their passage, first Alan Singleton’s, then Remly’s and Vanbastian’s.

“You got a big lump on your kidney, Carl,” Vanbastian said once they were out the door and onto the tarmac.

“I’ve got a carry permit,” Remly said. “You?”

“I don’ need no steenkeeng poormeet.” Vanbastian’s grin was enormous, all brilliant teeth. He turned to Alan, who was having some difficulty getting his walker over a break in the tarmac. “You okay there, old-timer?”

Alan Singleton stopped cold and Remly stopped also, turning to see Singleton’s face going white as he said, thin-lipped, “How many agents you run in your brief lifetime, sonny boy? How many offshore politicians you turn? What’s your fucking body count?”

‘And this,’ thought Remly, studying Vanbastian’s face, ‘is what a man looks like when he tries to swallow his tongue.’

In a strangled voice Vanbastian said, “Oh, shit, sorry, I forgot who you were.”

“Were?” Alan Singleton asked, now even more furious.

“Here comes the F.O.,” Remly said, pointing at the Navajo which had taxied and parked, the F.O. stepping out and starting toward them, carrying an elegant attaché case and looking less than happy. Remly waited patiently and silently while Singleton, even more grim-faced than the F.O., fought his way over the irregular pavement. Vanbastian remained wisely silent as well, but inched toward the Citation as though to entice them forward.

All four arrived at Virginia’s big executive jet together, Vanbastian saying, “Mr. Burlingame?” to the F.O. and offering his hand.

But when Vanbastian stepped aside and motioned an invitation toward the stairs to the plane, Remly, looking up at the Citation, said, “We have a conference room ready.” He pointed at the park beyond the fence and across the street.

After nodding ‘hello’ to Singleton and Remly, the F.O. said to Vanbastian, “We’ve arranged for our own meeting place, thank you. Is Leonard joining us?”

And now, strangely, Remly saw something charming in Vanbastian, a half-smile as though Vanbastian understood and appreciated their counter-plan, and in that brief lucid flash Remly guessed that Vanbastian might have been as much a maverick as the three men he faced had the dice fallen differently.

“Are we experiencing a failure of trust here?” Vanbastian asked of the F.O. “It’s very comfortable inside, drinks if you want them.”

“I assure you,” the F.O. said, “I shall feel perfectly comfortable in the park. Once inside your plane, it’s not a matter of dealing with equals—we three become your hostages.”

Remly said to Vanbastian, “It’s secure in the park. Sweep us if you want to, we’re not recording anything.”

“Neutral territory,” Alan Singleton added, taking one hand off his walker and pointing across the street. “Leonard’s here? Have him come out.” And when Vanbastian hesitated, Singleton said, “I want Leonard to join us where he can’t get at my back. But for God’s sake, don’t tell him I said it. Don’t want to hurt his feeling.” And Remly caught the heavily-inflected singular of the word ... “feeling” as opposed to “feelings.”

Still Vanbastian hesitated.

“Entirely up to you,” the F.O. said. “We will happily toddle off and tend to our own knitting.”

“Another park,” Jon Vanbastian said.

Alan Singleton, who had been closely watching Vanbastian’s expression, asked, “Problem?”

“Not at all. I *live* for meetings in parks.” A cryptic smile, then Vanbastian

turned and bounded up the Citation's stairs like a schoolboy and ducked through the door.

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. . . M A R I P O S A   C O U N T Y

The cow-calf enterprises of Mariposa County are scattered across high green foothills that tumble from the western slope of the massive Sierra Nevada in California. Although narrow roads twist their way across the towering mountain range, connecting Mariposa's cattle ranches to Nevada's Nye County, the more secure and anonymous route between Nye and Mariposa are the broad, heavily-traveled expressways that run down, over, and up—circling the Sierra Nevada and Death Valley—to form a boot-like path between the two counties, bending around Mount Whitney and Bad Water, the highest and lowest points in the contiguous states.

With Viktor beside him and Tayyib riding pillion in the club seat behind Viktor, Didi drove the Ford pickup on a 540-mile pilgrimage along the heel, arch, sole, toe, and shin of the boot, the three of them gagging as they passed dung-heaped feed lots south of Fresno where cattle waded in a sargasso of their own shit, finally turning east toward the ranch with its private airstrip and a Cessna 172 for sale. Near Bootjack in Mariposa County Didi pulled into a rutted private road, Viktor getting out and studying the dual grooves in the dirt and coming back: “No tracks, crusted dust. No traffic maybe for a month.” Didi drove in until oak trees and bull pines and a rising road-cut sheltered them from the county road. Didi stopped, Viktor quickly exchanged the pickup's Nevada plates for a set of California licenses that Andrei had counterfeited.

“Everyone is on script?” Didi asked as they arrived at the road that led to the ranch.

Viktor nodded.

In English, Didi repeated, “You on script, Tayyib?” And from the dickey seat behind him Tayyib said, “I'm Italian, no problem.”

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. . . L A S   V E G A S

“I would love to be a fly on the wall inside that plane,” the F.O. said. For the first time since he arrived he looked, if not pleased, at least reasonably comfortable with himself, having set the terms of their meeting.

“I'd love to be a hornet in there,” Singleton said.

“We haven't had time to catch up,” the F.O. said. “All this hurlyburly. You've been well, Alan? Princess fine?”

“Everything was peachy weechy till you called, said we'd come to the end of our rope on this. There's still a lot of intell to be dug up, we're just

the lads can handle the shovels. And—Jesus—*Leonard?*”

Remly said, “It’s a little more complicated than that, Alan.”

“Leonard can be dealt with,” the F.O. said. “You know my skills of sleight-of-hand and misdirection.”

“So what’ve you got in mind?” Singleton asked. “Bullshit and poetry?”

Before the F.O. could reply, Vanbastian reappeared, ducking through the doorway, followed by a youngish man who, if he was to be looked at closely, had perfected the expression of a man who has no expression; and if Remly didn’t specifically recognize him he easily categorized him by type. The newcomer seemed vaguely military—with buzz-cut hair—and carried a thick electronic wand as though preparing to club someone with it. Rather than beating anyone, he ran the wand over the two briefcases, first the F.O.’s then Alan Singleton’s. Then, slipping the wand under his chin and clamping down on it, he used both hands to turn Singleton’s laptop over in the walker basket to unlatch the battery and slip it out, placing it on top of the now-useless laptop.

“Arms out, please,” Vanbastian said and the security man scanned them, stopping once at Remly’s holstered gun.

Remly clapped a hand on the gun. “Don’t touch it, pal,” and the security man looking blankly into Remly’s face, measuring him, and Remly, willing his face to go dead, returned the man’s look and conveyed nothing.

“Otherwise, they’re clean,” the man said. But it was developing into a staring contest.

“That’s fine, Billy, fine,” Vanbastian said, but the man continued looking into Remly’s face.

Remly cocked his head and said, “You can go now, Billy,” and Alan Singleton leaning across his walker jabbed at Billy’s back with his attaché case, saying, “Go!” And as the security man left, Singleton, shaking his head at the simpletons who were now staffing the Campus, said to Vanbastian, “Get him a fucking hearing aid, sonny boy.”

The F.O.’s back had stiffened. “If this is what we’re to expect ...”

“My apologies,” Vanbastian said. “He’s just back from one of our overseas facilities—interrogations—they do things a little differently over there.”

“I imagine they do,” the F.O. said.

Billy had disappeared into the Citation and now in its doorway there appeared a man in a vested suit that had gone shiny at the elbows and knees. His white, soup-strainer mustache was yellowed at the edges, and Remly understood why when he dug inside his jacket and retrieved a cigarette as he came down the stairs.

“Not here, Leonard,” Singleton said, his voice sharp. “Jet fuel, av gas, you’ll have the cops on us credentials or no.”

As Leonard paused, then returned the cigarette to his inside pocket, Vanbastian asked, “Introductions needed?” When no one answered he said, “No? Let’s get rolling.”

When they went back through the security door, the metal detector beyond it rang continuously, drawing a level of attention beyond their comfort zone.

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## . . . MARIPOSA COUNTY

“Call me ‘Red,’” and indeed he was: Red freckles on the backs of his hands, a weathered red-veined face, and red hair that had gone thin and was in serious retreat from his features. “Welcome to God’s country.” He took in the ranch with a wave of his hand. There were oak trees scattered about the property, their leaves going red and yellow and many of the leaves gone from the branches, but few leaves on the ground.

Didi accepted Red’s hand and introduced himself, “Bob Ferguson,” and the others, “My partners Vic,” a nod to Viktor, “and Tomaso, from Italy.” Didi took off his light jacket. It was September, and he had imagined the foothills of California would be cooler than the mine in Nevada, but it was at least as hot here as there. He glanced at Tayyib, who was looking up at the green eastern foothills. The foothills were more than foothills, Didi thought, rising so high that they screened High Sierra beyond, and Didi understood that Tayyib had good reason to be interested in the Sierra.

Red’s wife had been waiting behind him in the open door of the big clapboard house, smoothing first her apron then her bristly white-and-gray hair, rocking from one foot to the other, leaning toward the four men at the outer edge of the broad porch.

“My wife, Clingy,” Red said.

Clingy all but leaped at them, quick steps across the wood planks, her footsteps cracking, and then shaking all of their hands vigorously, “Good t’meecha, good t’meecha.”

Didi recognized her as energy in its purest form, and he immediately understood why everything here, unlike other ranch properties they’d passed, seemed almost too picture-perfect, as though Red and Clingy were waiting for the photographers to arrive.

“Show him the place, Red,” Clingy insisted. “You boys recognize championship lambs when you see ‘em?”

“I’d love to get a tour,” Didi said, “but even if we buy the plane, we still have to drive back to Los Angeles today, Mrs. Maclendon.”

“Clingy!” she said.

“Clingy,” Didi agreed. Then, to her husband, “Do you think we might see the Cessna?”

But Clingy was determined: “Can’t drive all the way up here, not take a looksee at God’s country.”

In the end Didi negotiated a compromise with the lady: Vic would go take a looksee at God’s country, Tomaso would go up in the airplane with Red, Didi would go back to their pickup to make some very important phone calls that needed his immediate attention.

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

Remly was helping Alan Singleton from his walker onto the bench of a park table under a tree when Jon Vanbastian grinned and said, “Not this one, that one,” pointing to a table that was two tables away, in the shade of another tree. Remly shrugged, helped Singleton back into his walker, and followed the others, Vanbastian and Leonard in the lead, Leonard trailing cigarette smoke.

Billy and three similarly dead-faced young men had slipped from the Citation; Remly watching them without watching them as they deployed—Billy remaining across the street, near the Skyport fence, the other three spreading along the sidewalk at the park. Once in place they checked their communications, seeming to speak to the empty air before them and pressing a thumb to an ear as they listened to the response.

It was a weekday, the only other occupied table at the far end of the grass; two chess games, four old men playing and a small group of spectators; no one at the horseshoe pitch and the weather too warm for jackets, really, and Leonard had taken his off and dropped it on the table. The F.O. removed his suit jacket, turned it inside out and folded it twice, and put it fastidiously onto his lap—Remly and Vanbastian kept their jackets on. Across the street, Billy, the security man, leaning against the Skyport fence and scanning the park with pocket binoculars; the other three filtering into the park and sitting at separate tables. Vanbastian placed a blank notepad on the table.

The surprise that Remly and the F.O. had plotted was not to be sprung immediately—to be sure, the essence of the surprise was that it wasn’t to be sprung at all, but only played closely and deceptively, luring Leonard and his side farther and farther down a garden path of facts, demi-facts, and thoroughly delightful fictions. “Bullshit and poetry,” as Alan Singleton had it.

The F.O.—now in his full glory as a practitioner of misdirection—spoke

in the bumptious voice of a village vicar, droning on about Remly's nocturnal adventures in Las Vegas, though relating them out of sequence, so that Remly first was at the vacant lot where Alf Noles was shot, then he was in bed being awakened, then at Alf's Tiltin' Hilton, then the gunfight, and again at the vacant lot, then Alf telling Remly about the photos of Remly and Eddy Johnson.

While the F.O. spun out his monologue, here and there doubling back to repeat himself, Jon Vanbastian listened bemused, as though to some befuddled Pickwickian archetype, until, goaded by a foul look from Leonard, he interrupted in theatrically patient tones: "Ken, I think we got it, okay?"

"Just concerned I've covered everything—the shootout?"

"Yes yes," Vanbastian said, hovering between exasperation and boredom.

"And the dead informant? And Mr. Johnson's fatal mishap in the car?" the F.O. asked.

"Yes, you covered both of them, Ken. What's your point?" Then, with a grin, "Let me rephrase that: *Is there a point?*"

And at this Remly remarked to himself that the F.O. hadn't mentioned Eddy Johnson's death, only Remly's activities of the night. And Remly further remarked, as he and the F.O. had earlier concluded, that Simon d'Angelo must have gone to the Campus with a tale about their meeting at the Montecito estate. There were more questions to be answered, and Remly looked forward to seeing F.O. surface them with his inspired bit of improvisational theater.

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## . . . MARIPOSA COUNTY

The Cessna was an old, original square-tailed version—the '58 model—but with short take-off modifications, and vortex generators on the wings like fins on a fish. Yet despite its age and faded paint, like everything else on the Maclendons' place the plane sparkled.

"Why are you selling?" Tayyib asked as he and Red approached it.

"Got me an ultra-light," Red said. He opened the pilot-side door. "Got her parked in the barn. Only thing I need baby here for, flying down to Merced for shopping. Ultra-light, she's way cheaper to maintain, easier to park. Way I got the Cessna modified, it'll take off in about seven hundred feet, landing rollout of maybe five-fifty, maybe six. But, shoot, the ultra-light? Take off on a tennis court—'cept we ain't got one." He laughed and slapped Tayyib's shoulder, then entered the plane. "Ultra-light, actually land her in some a the back country."

Tayyib went to the other side door and into the cockpit.



“What we do,” Red said as he strapped himself into the pilot’s seat, “we got to look for strays and mavricks. Clingy gets herself on the six-wheeler ATV, follows me out while I’m scoutin around, find a stray out in the middle of wheresomever. Cows’re dumber than horses, and horses are the onliest of creatures that’ve got a negative IQ.” Red put key into the dashboard and turned the engine over, its exhaust popping. As he waited for the gauges to stabilize, Red shouted, “Leave a cow on its own, some places out there it’d die a thirst before it got up the good sense to walk back to where I got the big water troughs.”

Tayyib got lost in the logic of the IQ comparison, abandoned the thread, and asked, “Do you have all the maintenance records? Title? Manuals?”

“Got the whole shebang ...” As he spoke, Red went over a laminated checklist, interrupting himself here and there to focus on the page. “Anything you need to know later, you decide you boys want ta buy her, you can always give me a call.” He turned over the engine. “Glad to be of help.” Red killed one magneto and listened to the engine, watching the tachometer, then renewed the magneto and killed the other one, again listening and watching carefully for a fouled plug. “Me and the missus,” he shouted, “we put on shooters’ earmuffs, we fly down ta Merced. One noisy dang airplane, the one seven two. You want muffs, I got ‘em in the back seat. Otherwise, we oughta be able to deal with it, you got questions to ask while we’re up there.”

Tayyib shook his head, thinking of the noise level in the AN-2. “How about fuel?” he asked. “Small airport around here?”

“Go down ta Merced in my pickup, come back with a few barrels of it. Included in the price—barrels, av gas, and all.” Red was done with the checklist. “You ready for it?”

“Just one thing,” Tayyib said. “I understand the service ceiling is a little over thirteen thousand feet. What’s the plane’s effective ceiling, before the climb rate starts flatting out?”

Red said, “No idea. Might look it up in the manual, might wanta check with a 172 flying club.”

“How high have you had it, then?”

“Not much. Just enough to look at the Sierra peaks, over them mountains we got.”

“Never took it over the Sierra?”

“I may be a dumb country boy,” Red said, “but sure in hell I’m not crazy.”

Tayyib smiled politely, saying nothing.

As he pulled out the throttle, Red said, “Whatcha fly in Italy, Tomaso?”

You're twin-engine rated, right?"

"Big and small," Tayyib shouted back. "Cessna twins, Piper Cherokee." With reason, he didn't mention the Antonov. "But I'm not checked out in a 172."

"Piece a cake. You'll have the feel of her in no time." And with that Red revved the engine and began accelerating down the hardpack runway, pressing them back in their seats.

“Craft must have clothes,  
but truth loves to go naked.”  
Thomas Fuller

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S   V E G A S

If anything, the F.O.’s attire, incongruous for the situation, lent an air of authenticity to his performance—the well-fitted suit, the superbly-knotted necktie—a man out of time and distinctly out of place, seated on a Las Vegas park bench and dithering about ominous goings-on, but outfitted for tea in Hancock Park or Montecito. “Yes, to the point then ... ummm, well ...” The F.O. cleared his throat and continued somewhat pompously, “With this Kurskov fellow rattling about loose in Las Vegas, and Carl at risk, you can imagine our concern.” He rambled a bit, hinting that he and Carl suspected that Kurskov was the dark presence behind all this recent violence in Las Vegas, but not explicitly saying so.

“For Godsake, Kenny ...” Alan Singleton began, but went silent when Remly kicked him sharply under the picnic table.

And still the F.O. droned on, until Leonard interrupted: “What are you saying, Ken? Aleksandr Kurskov orchestrated these attacks?”

“Difficult to think otherwise,” the F.O. responded. “After all, had Carl’s and Mr. Johnson’s photos in his car. Had their addresses. But we haven’t been able to nail down the engine that drives him, so to speak.”

“Nail down the engine,” Vanbastian said, his serious expression fronting a repressed grin.

“Some feelers out, actually,” the F.O. said. “We know Kurskov’s been in London rather a lot of late. Could he have some business there that has to do with Las Vegas?”

A sharp nudge from Leonard and Vanbastian shot out his sleeve and consulted a bright gold Rolex and said, “London. What have you dug up about London?”

“In London,” the F.O. began, turning to his elegant notebook, bound in fawn-colored suede, “in London, it seems ...” He flipped up three pages, one at a time, seeming to skim over them with his glance. At the forth page he said, “I know the material is in here, fellow he was seeing in London.”

Remly, feeling Singleton going tense beside him, reached under the table to pull at Singleton’s shirt.

Throughout the F.O.'s tedious soliloquy Remly casually noted Leonard's posture of relaxed disinterest, Leonard first hiding his face behind a veil of smoke then—having dropped his smoldering cigarette onto the grass—behind tented fingers, his elbows on the table before him. The only indication that there was, in fact, any human life inside of Leonard came when he glanced impatiently at Vanbastian, as though urging him to hasten the show.

"Somewhere ..." the F.O. said, flipping more pages, then going back to the first page again. And Remly tensing his stomach to keep from laughing and the F.O. saying, "Some fellow in ... in London? Yes, I'm quite sure it was in London, some other Russian fellow."

"Levanov," Vanbastian said.

"Ah *ha*!" the F.O. said, "the *very* person. Now, what can this Levanov fellow have to do with Kurskov, insofar as ... does he relate to Kurskov's backing of these violent attacks in Las Vegas, I wonder. And, in fact, *was* Mr. Kurskov the genesis of these assaults? Now ..." And again he began flipping back and forth among his pages, all covered with indecipherable scribbles.

Now Vanbastian intervened, "Ken, we at the Campus have found this to be a sort-of ad hoc marriage of convenience. General consensus is that Kurskov has been laundering money for Levanov in Vegas. Unfortunately for him, Moscow caught up with Levanov, blew him up outside his house in Knightsbridge. So, no money man behind him, Kurskov's not going to be showing up in Vegas anymore."

"Was there some other fellow, too?" the F.O. said, still flipping back and forth in his notes. "Seems to me ... was there someone else Kurskov might have been contacting there?" It was, to study his face, a complete riddle to the old man.

"Ken, we don't have anything on any other Kurskov contacts in London recently," Vanbastian said. He said it slowly, with the maddening solicitude of an attendant in a geriatric ward.

The F.O. said, "You know, I think you may be right. I'm probably thinking about that issue of—was it in 'eighty-five?" He sounded tentative.

'Three down,' Remly thought. 'Three to go.' Across the park a cheer went up. One of the elderly chess players stood on his bench, and even at this distance Remly could hear him shouting, "Queen me!" Someone else was marching to checkmate as well.

"Kenny for krisake ..." Alan Singleton began, and Remly said, "I'd like for us to stay on message here, okay? Look, the bottom line is that Kurskov is trying to kill me. As Ken said, he's had Eddy Johnson and this former freelancer of ours murdered, and his people attacked me with a shotgun.

What I'm trying to do is get some help from Virginia to ..." But his cell phone interrupted him, not with Satie's *Gymnopédie* but with a strong jangle. Remly brought the small phone out of his jacket and unfolded it.

"Stellenhoff!" said Vanbastian as he reached across the table to grab the phone out of Remly's hands.

"How the shit . . . ?" Singleton said, but softly, and once again Remly kicked him under the table.

The phone stopped ringing as Vanbastian studied it. He sighed and asked, "Can you imagine the bucket of trouble you've gotten yourself into, my friend? This is classified government property." And Remly, though looking at Jon Vanbastian, noted that Leonard, behind his teepee fingers looked satisfied for the first time since they'd sat down. Vanbastian turned to nod first at the F.O. then at Alan Singleton. "We know that you two have a couple more of these, right?"

"Well ..." The F.O. cleared his throat. "These were gifts from the manufacturer, you really haven't any right ..."

Leonard snapped alive, his voice a smoker's rasp: "Ken, who the hell do you think you are dealing with here? Budgeting a Citation, the crew, a pod of security boys, Vanbastian and me to piss away a day flying out here? We've got every fucking right to do anything we want, and you don't have a breathing permit as far as I'm concerned. Now you listen to this man."

At this, Vanbastian softened—the classic look of a child who wants the earth to open up because his geeky parent was acting, well, geeky during open house at third-grade homeroom. He had turned the phone over and was copying the serial number on his notepad, and he continued in warm, almost humid tones: "We do need those other two back. Send them priority mail, you know the address, my attention, 'Jon Vanbastian.'"

"Bullshit," Singleton said.

"Trust me," Vanbastian said, "you don't want to test me—you'll have federal marshalls on your doorstep within ..."

"Look," Remly interrupted, "screw it. Let them have the phones. What I want is someone from the Campus to deal with Kurskov. Make him persona non alive-a, shoot him, put a bag over his head and rendition him out—just get rid of him. He's out to kill me, and all this talk gets me nowhere. What exactly can you offer?"

Vanbastian looked at Remly as though he'd stumbled across a Martian.

Remly said, "I'm family. I put in twenty-five years—get someone up to Las Vegas and look after me. Virginia *owes* me."

Leonard came alive again. "Owes you? Weatherstone, you're off the page. No one *knows* who you are, no one *cares* who you are."

Then Vanbastian came in like a tag-team wrestler leaping over the ropes to hit Remly from the other side ... but smoothly, that humid voice: “Carl, ask yourself, why would Aleksandr Kurskov want to harm you? Or want to harm this Noles character? Or Johnson for that matter? Kurskov’s laundering money. Have you been interfering with him? Has Johnson? Noles?”

“Three men with the shotgun,” Remly said. “They spoke Slavic—Russian or Ukrainian. Alf was shot with a 5.54mm pistol, Dzerzhinsky Square assassination special. Kurskov had photos of me and Eddy Johnson in his car, my address and the name of the road where Eddy had his quote accident unquote. What more do you want?” By now he was sure his face was red, and he wondered if his display was overly histrionic.

“So, the police have all this evidence?” Vanbastian asked.

“I have it.”

Vanbastian nodded sadly. “As Ken tells it, you burglarized Noles’s camper. Left a mess. Now, if this is murder and attempted murder, as you say, do you think the Vegas police will be pleased to get this critical evidence from you? This evidence that you stole?”

Remly looked at Vanbastian, flexing his gut to keep the blood in his face. “This is something for *Virginia* to clean up!”

“And you reported the attempt on your life to the Las Vegas authorities, yes? Or ... not? I wonder, is that something your local cops will enjoy hearing? That you withheld reporting a felonious crime? Attempted murder? How’s that going to look in the newspaper here, reporters on the police desk come across it.”

“So bottom line—what are you telling me?”

“We think it’s a good idea for you to just forget about it,” Vanbastian said. “You look pretty healthy to me, there hasn’t been a second attempt on you. Go home and relax, you’ll be fine.”

Remly said, “I’ll take my chances.”

“I wouldn’t advise it, my friend. You’re living under the name of Charles R. Remly, who doesn’t exist. You so much as squeak about Kurskov—about anything relating to this—you’ll be outed to every agency in the state of Nevada, public and private. Motor Vehicles, bank loan, credit cards, voter registration. *Gun* registration in Clark County. You have a carry permit? You know what the penalty is for . . . ?”

“Well *fuck* you very much,” Remly said, now rising and putting a leg back over the bench as though to leave.

Leonard spoke sharply: “We’re not done, Weatherstone. Sit down.”

Remly sat, but with a great show of reluctance, red-faced and straddling the bench.

“Here’s what I’ve been reading about you,” Vanbastian said. He brought a large manila envelope from his leather-bound note folder. Stamped on it, under the RH—NO DIS stencil was CARL WEATHERSTONE. And under that, “WestCentRegion11.” The Cancer Ward.

As Vanbastian opened the envelope, Remly muttered, “Brasch!”

“Ralph Braschler seems to think you were a bit of a problem child, Carl.” He flipped through the pages and said, “Very unfortunate job performance reports—ideas that don’t square with the reality that we see in Virginia. After reviewing this, I don’t think it will be a stretch for us to disavow any connection to you, you start talking about Kurskov and the Vegas authorities contact the Campus to verify your bonafides. Something you wouldn’t want to happen—especially when you try to explain why you’re using this ‘Remly’ nom-de-guerre.” Nodding at the F.O. and Alan Singleton, he said, “And you wouldn’t want to bring your friends down with you, now would you?”

Remly worked up more emotion than he’d felt in a long time, again saying “*Fuck* you” and again rising from the bench.

“You’re pension is paid out of Virginia’s accounting department, my friend,” Jon Vanbastian said. He pointed at them one at a time. “You ... Singleton ... Burlingame ... you don’t want us to shut off the tap. Make your direct deposits dry up.”

Remly made a point of not looking at the F.O., for fear he’d break out laughing. Yet for himself and Singleton he considered the consequences. Holding his gut tight he sat again.

“You son of a bitch.” It was Alan Singleton, speaking slowly and popping each consonant. “Both of you, you paper-pushing cunts, you rancid shitballs. One of your own, you’re hanging him out to twist in the wind, you slime-sucking desk jockeys, you syphilitic scum. You puke-faced dung bugs, you ...”

Singleton continued, Remly not stopping him but containing his own laughter and even reconveying it as anger, and wondering if he should be writing down these ripe epithets for future reference, his face all but purple, still monitoring Alan Singleton’s words, lest Alan slip into forbidden territory. Yet neither Leonard nor Vanbastian reacting, each secure in his skin and certain of his value, which could not be diminished by any opinion Alan Singleton might express, Singleton an old man out to pasture and no longer *inside*—no longer part of the fraternity.

“... all this way to give you some straight intell on Kurskov, on Val- ...”

And Remly interrupting, “That’s enough, Alan,” speaking over Singleton. “Done with, let’s drop it.”

“Goddammit ...”

“Let it go,” Remly said.

“Enough, Alan,” the F.O. said. “Enough.”

Singleton turned to stare bitterly at Leonard, whom he believed to be the author of Vanbastian’s challenge to Remly. For a moment Remly was afraid that Singleton intended to spit at Leonard, but it was not to be, Singleton simply pursing his lips in loathing.

As though nothing had happened, Vanbastian turned to the F.O. “Ken, you and Alan made a few calls recently to mutual friends on the Campus. Called them at their homes, asked about some Iraqi. What was that all about? What’s your interest in this man?”

And with this, Remly thought, the F.O. truly found his stride. Rather than answering, the old man looked confused. “Iraqi? Now, I made some calls about Kurskov, wondered what the chap was up to. But ... Iraqi?” He looked from Vanbastian to Leonard, then to Remly as though he might prompt him. “I’m a little ... you see, I’ve been focusing on my notes for this meeting ... Leonard said he was about to call me ...” Yet he looked, if anything, entirely unfocused.

“An Iraqi ex-pat?” Vanbastian prompted.

The F.O. shook his head.

“Perhaps you’ll remember the name: General Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi. Ring a bell?”

“Ah!” the F.O. said. “*That* one. Yes. A hatful of names, people connected here and there to this Kurskov fellow—this dur-Shamshi would have been one of them. Seems to have bought guns from Moscow on Saddam’s nickle—rather a lot, in fact, during the Iraq-Iran dust up, Brother Kurskov there as Dzerzhinsky Square’s hardman on the transaction. Other chaps I looked into were, well, I imagine there was Levanov, of course ...” He began thumbing through his indecipherable notes again.

Leonard said, “And that’s it, Kenny? This Ashor dur-Shamshi was just one of Kurskov’s connections?”

The F.O. did not answer, but his expression said it all: What other reason, after all, *could* there have been?

Speaking to Remly, Leonard said, “You—all of you—you drop this and forget Kurskov.” He’d started another cigarette, his third, and now he pointed the smoldering end at Remly like the muzzle of a pistol. “And you especially. You can’t imagine how close you are to being pulverized. Skip Kurskov, go home. You keep trying to play with the big boys, you will be ruined.” Then, to the F.O. and Alan Singleton, “Those phones, both of them. On Jon’s desk by this time next week or you’re facing federal lockup, you two.” And with that he swung his legs over the picnic bench and stood.



As Vanbastian rose to join Leonard, the F.O. also stood and went around the table to speak to them: “Terribly sorry that you won’t be doing anything for Carl here.” His suit jacket slipped from his arm onto the grass, yet he seemed not to notice. “But I’m pleased, truly, that you shared your valuable time with me. Quite flattering, actually.”

“Your jacket,” Vanbastian said as he stooped to retrieve it.

The F.O. looked first at his empty hands, then realized that his jacket was on the ground. Also bending, he bumped Vanbastian, then steadied himself against the other as they both rose and Vanbastian gave him his jacket.

“Next week,” Leonard said, then turned and walked away, leaving Vanbastian to trot after him, catching up.

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### . . . M A R I P O S A   C O U N T Y

Actually, for Viktor the tour was interesting. He had uncles and aunts with farms down in the Vinnytska, south of his home in Kiev, and he found pleasure in comparing this modern American ranch with the more utilitarian farms of his own people back in Ukraine. The sanitation was wonderful, and so easy, Red and Clingy had even piped hot and cold water to the barn and the animal pens around it; the turn of a tap and they could scrub down a sheep, or hose down barn, pens, everything. There was even a miniature tractor for scooping out droppings or lifting an obdurate, 150 kilo pig.

The lambs, as Clingy had promised, were prize-winners. One of them, with an indelible purple spot sprayed onto its wooly rump, was especially fat and handsome. “Fifteen dollars a pound, the bid at County Fair down in Merced, he pulled the blue ribbon. Turned ‘em down, putting him out for stud, he gets a few more months on him.”

As she spoke, the sound of the airplane got louder, Viktor looking up to see it approaching the rude landing strip. He said, “That is well for water?” He pointed.

Clingy laughed. “Our ‘Just In Case’ well. Keep it for World War Three, the electricity fails and the generators go dead.”

Viktor, obviously curious, walked to it, and Clingy followed him. “Well has plenty water?” he asked as he leaned over the circular brick wall that surrounded the opening.

“Sure does.” Clingy joined him and looked into the well.

With a casual motion Viktor reached into his jacket and pulled out the Makarov and shot Clingy in the ear. When she collapsed onto the brick wall, he lifted her knees and tilted her into the well. Only when she splashed did he think to scold himself: What if she wasn’t fully dead? Drowning

head-down—a horrible way to go. He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and crossed himself ... then said a prayer over the well and got on with it.

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. . . L A S   V E G A S

“Astonishing,” Remly mused, watching Leonard and Vanbastian leave, their security force falling in behind. To the F.O. he said, “Beautiful performance.”

“What?” Singleton asked.

The F.O. said, “For a while there I wondered if I was going a bit over the top, as the saying has it.”

“Not at all,” Remly said.

“Waitamminute,” Alan Singleton said. “This was a setup?”

“Anhh ...” Remly said, “I’m afraid so, Alan.”

“Shit, Kenny, I thought you were having a senior moment. Why’n hell didn’t you give me a heads-up? I wouldn’t’ve flown off the handle like I did.”

“Exactly,” Remly said.

“Wonderful theater, Alan,” the F.O. said. “At one point, you looked as though you were going the vault the table and throttle Leonard.”

“For krisake you know I’m no good at putting on an act, Kenny. Whyn’t you two tell me what you were up to?”

“Wonderful,” the F.O. said. “Golden Globe performance.”

“Well done, Alan.” Remly patted Singleton’s shoulder.

Singleton looked at the F.O. and looked at Remly and slowly grinned and then began laughing. “Should I ...” Singleton coughed, leaning over the picnic table, then the laughter got bigger, lung-racking laughter, starting somewhere around his groin, and finally Singleton leaned back and gulped air. “Should I feel used?”

“All for a good cause, Alan,” the F.O. said. “All for a good cause.”

With that, Alan Singleton collapsed onto the table. “Oh *shit!*”

The F.O. said, “What is it, Alan?”

Remly reached for Singleton, held his shoulders. “Your back?”

“What the hell do you think?” Singleton said. He turned his face to Remly, tears streaking down his cheeks. “Fucking park bench.”

“The whole time?” asked the F.O.

“What the hell do you think?”

Remly said, “Why didn’t you say something, Alan?”

“Never let the bastards see you flinch!” He twisted in Remly’s hands. “Help me down here. Something under my head, give the spine a rest.”

At the distant table of chess players a cheer; shouts and one man yell-

ing, “Josh, kiss my ass. C’mon, said you’d kiss my ass I could mate you three games straight. C’mon, kiss my royal butt!” And more shouting, and Alan Singleton painfully half-stretching from the bench to look at them. “Jesus! They’re older than *we* are.”

One of the chess spectators rose—not young, perhaps Remly’s age, but demonstrably younger than the others—and carrying a briefcase to the nearest picnic table and sitting at it and, strangely, placing his cheek on the tabletop to reach under it and retrieve something, put it into his briefcase, then going to the next table and again doing the same, and to the next and the next. Remly, like the departing chess spectator, put his cheek to their picnic table, reached under it, and came up with a slim-jim transmitter that had been wedged between the thick planks of the tabletop.

“The whole fucking park?” Singleton asked.

The F.O. brought forth a familiar-looking folding cell phone as Weaver came to them with the other slim-jim transmitters.

To Alan Singleton, Remly said, “You know Weaver, Alan?”

Weaver said, “I’ve heard about you,” and thrust a hand at Singleton.

“Our electronics voodoومان,” Remly said of Weaver.

The F.O. handed Weaver the phone, asking, “You have mine as well?”

Weaver nodded.

“And you were able to erase the memory?”

“No problem,” Weaver said. “Total amnesia. This one too?”

“Immediately,” the F.O. said.

Alan Singleton asked Remly, “That’s why your scrambler rang? He called you from Kenny’s?” When Remly nodded, Singleton pointed to the phone in Weaver’s hands, just received from the F.O., and said to Remly, “That’s your scrambler?”

Now it was the F.O.’s turn to grow impatient: “What in heaven’s name do you *think* it is, Alan?”

“Jesus!” Singleton said. “That’s dicey, Kenny.”

“Yes,” the F.O. said, rather absently. “For a moment I considered slipping off his pretentious Rolex as well, but one’s sense of caution prevailed over one’s sense of humor. Do clean it up quickly, Weaver, in the event Mr. Vanbastian inventories his pockets before getting to his airplane.” As Weaver worked on Remly’s scrambler, the F.O. continued, “Time for tea, I should imagine. Let’s retire to more civilized quarters and analyze our plunder.” And to Weaver, “You brought the voice stress analyzer with you?”

“In my laptop,” Weaver said as he handed back the cleared phone. “It’s strictly software now, sir. The old VSAs are all obsolete.”

Singleton said, “If it works, it’s obsolete—that it?”

The F.O. dropped the clean scrambler under their picnic table. “Away from here quickly, now. But casual.”

“Shit, I’m obsolete,” Alan Singleton muttered as he shuffled his walker alongside the F.O., and Remly and Weaver followed.

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## . . . MARIPOSA COUNTY

As the small Cessna finished its rollout and circled the graded turnaround at the end of the airstrip, Didi stepped from the cab of the pickup.

Viktor, alone, was walking toward Didi, Viktor’s right hand down at his side, suppressed Makarov out of sight of the airplane. Didi pointed at the plane and Viktor altered his direction and Didi also started for the spot at the close end of the strip where the Cessna would come to park.

They waited for the propeller to stop spinning, then came to the airplane. First Tayyib got out, then Red stepped through the other door after finishing his shutdown routine and came to stand by the plane.

Red patted the fuselage and said, “Well, boys, we got a deal?”

Didi asked Tayyib, “What do you think. Can you fly it okay?”

“Like Red says,” Tayyib said, “a piece of cake.”

Viktor shot Red once in the throat and the string went out of Red’s legs and the Cessna key fell from his numb fingers—he relaxed onto the compacted dirt. Viktor shot him twice in the ear and popped out the Makarov’s magazine and slipped in a fresh one.

Tayyib said, “The paperwork is in a cabinet just off the kitchen, a ‘break-fast nook’ he called it. Maintenance records, manuals, title. An after-market instruction manual, too. While I’m getting those, please get the fuel for me.” He pointed toward Didi’s Ford pickup. “Its in the barn. Red has av gas in barrels. He said they’re marked.”

As Tayyib went toward the house for the Cessna’s paperwork and Didi to the truck, Viktor, with Red slung over his shoulder, went to the well. After he sent Red down to join Clingy, Viktor spoke a brief prayer and walked to the barn to help Didi winch barrels of fuel into his truck. Once loaded, the pickup sagged dangerously.

Didi said, “I’m taking my life in my hands, driving back in this. I’m a rolling bomb.”

Rather than getting into the truck with Didi, Viktor waved him back to the plane, then went outside to the lamb pen and shot the prize-winning lamb and slung it over his shoulder and also returned to the 172.

Tayyib came to them from the house with a large, heavy grocery sack.

Didi, just this side of laughing, asked Viktor, “What do you have in mind with that?”

“Shish kebab,” Viktor said. “We’ll let the Arabs butcher it—does that make it kosher for them?” To Tayyib he said in English, “Shish Kebab. Every body has share.” He was about to throw the lamb into the plane when Tayyib stopped him.

“Halal,” Tayyib said. He took the lamb from Viktor, then handed it back, hanging head down. “Hold him like this.”

Viktor took the lamb’s hind hooves while Tayyib drew a knife from his pocket and swiftly unfolded it. He told Viktor, “Hold him away from you,” and cut the lamb’s throat from ear to ear. “Let him bleed out, it makes him halal.”

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

In the Skyport parking lot, as they were leaving—Remly and the F.O. in Remly’s small pickup, Singleton joining Weaver in a more comfortable Buick rental—they saw Jon Vanbastian dodging through traffic, jay-walking at a quick trot to the park, followed by Billy. The F.O. looked over his shoulder as they drove from the lot.

“He find it?” Remly asked.

“It would appear so,” the F.O. replied. “Looks entirely satisfied with himself ... taking his sweet time walking back.”

“It is a truth perpetually that accumulated facts,  
lying in disorder, begin to assume some order when  
an hypothesis is thrown among them.”

Herbert Spencer

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

Charles Remly headed for the 215 beltway, followed by Weaver and Alan Singleton in Weaver’s rented Buick, the beltway taking them south. The F.O. gloomily considered the landscape as they sped across it, speaking as much to the scene beyond as to Remly: “It really *is* the city of the future, isn’t it. All of this hyperactive construction, this aggressively tasteless post-modernism. Was it like this when you moved here?”

“Three years ago this was tumbleweeds and lizards,” Remly said. “There weren’t even streets, this end of town.”

The beltway angled east, traffic jamming up as they went across the southern verge of the Strip, jamming again as they approached Henderson, the F.O. contemplating the passing scene in funereal silence. As they crossed the Green Valley development he said, “And the heat. All these new air conditioners, black asphalt streets, all the traffic. In this desert! Has no one ever commented that all this development actually generates *more* heat?”

“Someone did, a couple years before I got here.”

“And the city planners? They didn’t listen?”

“Oh they listened,” Remly said. “They hanged him.”

The 215 became Lake Mead Drive and they continued on it to the Lake Las Vegas turnoff, then to the Ritz-Carlton where the F.O. had taken a suite.

For Rainer Telemann these Americans were a riddle. Back home, no matter what kanton, always there was the good municipal oversight. Always the safety inspections at every step. Every quarter-step, actually. Here ... a complete riddle: America, Nevada, Las Vegas. This fellow who was supposed to be inspecting the clock and its platform—SUPERVISOR on a metal badge—this Supervisor was in fact supervising nothing. He was having a discussion with his cellular telephone:

“Jimmy, Jimmy, listen to me. I’m there right now.”

“Here?” Rainer asked, but the Supervisor ignored him.

“Yeah yeah yeah, I know you’re there. But I’m there too, you got that? Write me in for that, okay? I’m right there with you—right now.” The man looked frustrated, holding his hinged phone with one hand while digging a cigarette packet from his shirt with the other. “Look, it’s taken care of. Forget the holes in the firewall, you didn’t see nothing, just sign the goddam thing off, will you? I’m telling you, they took care of us. Yeah yeah yeah, guys from the top floor, took care of us, okay?” He plugged a cigarette into his face and excavated his pants pocket. “Just sign off on it, I’ll meet you at Skreski’s, over on Decatur.” He found a lighter, used it on his cigarette; he squinted through the fresh smoke, still talking: “I’m on this thing over on Fremont, La Fontaine, this Swiss clock thing. It’ll take me maybe a half hour from here over to Decatur. Yeah yeah yeah, see you there. I’ll sign off on the ‘Super’ line, you punch in the time for me, conforms to your own time okay?”

Rainer stood patiently on the scaffolding while the Supervisor closed his phone and sucked smoke from his cigarette. They were nearly three storeys high, just under the canopy at the edge of the plank that extended out from the clock over the street below. Rainer had the rolled plans in one hand, in the other an inspection sheet on his clipboard. It was to be the first inspection, even the plans had not been looked at since their initial approval. Rainer unrolled the mechanical plans, held them out. He pointed through the side door to the clock at the large critical gears that controlled the movement of the actors.

“Who’s the actors?” the Supervisor asked. He looked at the plans, but to Rainer it seemed the Supervisor didn’t know what he was looking at.

“It is until now for the Helvetic clocks that our firm does the manufacturing. The workings have the mechanical actors. They are usually in Switzerland the Knight, the Maiden, and Death.”

“Howzat?”

“The actors that come out from the clock on the hours. For Mr. Granter it is the Slot Machine, the Poker Hand, the Roulette Wheel. Here they are coming out on the half-hour. The wheels in the Slot Machine spin, all come up bells. The Poker Hand fans out, it is the royal flush. The Roulette Wheel spins. These are the actors.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” the Supervisor said. “Sounds great. Gimme the sign-off sheet.”

Rainer asked, “You are not inspecting the gears and the safety mechanics?”

The Supervisor had been reaching for Rainer’s clipboard, but stopped, his hand mid-air. “You tryin to tell me my job?” He looked directly into

Rainer's eyes and his mouth was not pleasant.

Rainer smiled, shook his head.

The Supervisor said, "I been doing this since 'eighty-six. How long you been in this business, kid?"

"We are in the business from actually the year of sixteen seventy-four," Rainer said. "Before this, the founder's grandfather's grandfather made for the Zeiteckenturm of Eiggensstadt a fine astronomical clock in July of the year fifteen fifty-eight, precisely."

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## . . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

In the F.O.'s suite at the Ritz Carlton, a rolling tea table from room service: Guacamole sandwiches, melon with prosciutto, an ice bucket filled with bottles of Pilsner Urquell. They briefly admired the view of the lake and its faux Pontevecchio Bridge, then closed the drapes and brought out their laptops and notepads.

"Knowledge," the F.O. said as he uncapped his Montblanc pen.

Remly and the F.O. were seated at the dining table—crowded with food, pilsner, and their work—while Alan Singleton sat in a heavily-pillowed club chair between them. On the couch, Weaver fiddled with his computer and a digital recorder, his massive headset plugged into the computer and the computer connected to the recorder. As he worked, he ate absently, alfalfa sprouts and drops of guacamole dotting the coffee table.

The F.O. turned to Weaver and said, "Are you with us?"

"He's running the voice stress analysis," Remly said.

"Some issues must wait on the results of that, one imagines."

"Yes."

"Well then," the F.O. said, "let us chase after the fish that can be caught, eh? One, we know that our former comrades-in-arms are relying exclusively on Simon d'Angelo's own view of the universe—essentially a geocentric tableau with sun, planets, and stars whirling around his flat earth." He noted this with only a few illegible marks on his pad. "Two, Simon did *not* mention Mr. Valeri Sergeivich Voshch, because this would have diluted his theory that Brother Kurskov visited London only to conspire with Mr. Levanov—of recent memory." He looked about at Remly and Singleton. "This is confirmed insofar as neither Leonard nor his minion Mr. Vanbasian brought up Voshch's name. Are we on the same page, here?"

"No problem," Remly said. "Valeri's in the clear."

"This going to take up a lot of time?" Alan Singleton wanted to know.

Ignoring Singleton's remark, the F.O. continued: "We know that Simon also told them about Dieter Stellenhoff's magnificent little telephonic de-



vices. And we know that Alan and I will next lose ours to the forces of evil.”

Singleton said, “Oh *shit* no!”

“Oh excrement *yes!*” the F.O. countered. “Mr. Weaver will first erase the memory, then you will place the device into a Priority Mail box to be posted directly to this Jon Vanbastian.”

“Not going along with this one, Kenny,” Singleton said.

“Roll with it, Alan,” Remly said.

The F.O. said, “It’s not up for vote, Alan. Did you bring it with you?”

“In my valise.”

“So,” the F.O. said, adding “4” to his pad. “So. We know as an absolute that Virginia is leaving Charles to twist slowly in the wind. And that all three of us are under threat of being poison-pilled by our errant brethren, should we inquire further about Aleksandr Kurskov. Which of course leaves the burning question—is that *in fact* the reason why they took the time, spent the money, to fly out here? It hardly seems rational, eh?” He turned to the couch. “Mr. Weaver, are you ready to join the human race?”

Remly went to the couch and tapped Weaver on the shoulder and Weaver peeled off the headset. Remly said, “You have enough for us?”

“I was just re-running your voice,” Weaver said. “You and the F.O. Wanted to check the areas that *they’ll* be checking on their flight back.”

Weaver separated his laptop from the recorder and carried the computer to the dining table where he settled it for a show-and-tell session—Remly following with Weaver’s food and beer. On the screen there were vertical squiggle graphs, five in all, each labeled for the person speaking. “That’s them,” Weaver said. “Jon Vanbastian on the left, Leonard next to him. Not much of him, more Vanbastian actually. Then there’s Charley, then you,” he nodded to the F.O., “and here’s Alan. One through five, left to right.”

“All very well and good,” the F.O. said. “But we don’t really need the scientific detail. Just tell us the context.”

“I haven’t typed up an actual transcript,” Weaver said. “But here, look at this ...” he scrolled the graphs up “... where Vanbastian and Leonard are telling Charley he’s on his own. Their frequency modulation is flat, as though they’re reading this from a teleprompter.”

Alan Singleton barked a laugh. “So they had this one scripted in front.”

“That’s what it looks like. They were ready to toss Charley to the wolves before they left Virginia. Material from Brasch and probably Simon d’Angelo was with them from the start—you can see where they don’t emote to it. But, here, look at this. This is interesting.” Weaver scrolled the screen and pointed at the far right graph. “This is Alan, his modulation al-

most going off the paper after they put the hex on Charley.”

Alan Singleton leaned forward, admiring his range of emotion.

“Now, here,” Weaver said, “look at Vanbastian and Leonard.”

And here Weaver marked Vanbastian’s left graph, and after that the F.O.’s, and finally the graphs of Vanbastian and Leonard.

“Your voice has been consistent throughout,” Weaver said to the F.O. “You have a lot of irregular tensions, a lot of false positives, to throw them off the track when they run you through there own VSA. I’m guessing you were throat-clutching on them. But here, look at Vanbastian and Leonard.”

“It doesn’t look right,” Remly said. “The spikes are sharp, but they’re inconsistent. The basic pattern is bland.”

Weaver said, “What they’re asking here—they have a lot of emotional capital invested in this, but they’re trying to put a calm face on it. This will be the major reason why Leonard wanted to talk to you three. Why he was willing to fly out here, actually.”

“Don’t leave us hanging,” the F.O. said. “What is the *context*?”

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## . . . L A S V E G A S

Andrei stood measuring the height, based on man-lengths, the scaffold for the new clock almost third floor level, just under the Fremont canopy. A drop of eight and a half meters, perhaps nine—enough to do the job.

Half of the scaffolding was shrouded, hiding the clock from the street, the naked half with a ladder that led not down but up, through the Fremont Street canopy. Two men in yellow hardhats emerged from the construction shroud, one smallish and neat, carrying large rolled blueprints, the other bullish, finishing a cigarette and throwing it to the street below. They spoke for a moment, then parted, one to return with his blueprints to the shroud, the other going up the ladder and out of sight above the canopy. The smaller of the two now came away from the clock shroud without his blueprints, then up the ladder also. Andrei went into La Fontaine to wait for them at the elevators.

They came down one at a time, first the cigarette smoker, in a rush. Andrei noted the car he came from, then went to it: No public access. It had a Bramah lock rather than a push-button, no problem—in Andrei’s kit there was a Hobbs tool for picking Bramahs. Andrei waited for the other one, and was relieved to see that the man had, indeed, left his blueprints behind.

Leaving the elevator at its top limit, Andrei adjusted his yellow hardhat and walked through the door marked ROOF. A short flight of stairs, another lock to pick, he was on the roof, pausing to orient himself. To his

left there was a one-man lift cage beyond the roof, and as he walked to it he saw that it descended down toward the Fremont Street canopy. At the edge he looked down and, yes, the cage went to the breach in the canopy to the clock's scaffolding.

The lock to the clock's small access door was a conventional Weiser, not Swiss-made. Andrei probed into the lock with his tumbler tickler, lightly rotating right and left to feel the minute changes of resistance as one pin after another clicked squarely into its follicle. When the final pin slipped he was able to turn the cylinder, and at that point stopped to write down the pin heights by number. When he returned he would have a proper key—or really, he chided himself, an improper one—and would get through the door without investing so much labor.

Andrei took the clock plans to the CopyKing just east of downtown on Maryland Parkway, where he made full-scale duplicates before having a key cut. He got the plans back to the clock, no problem.

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## . . . L I S B O N

In May and June, while waiting for Colonel Kurskov to formulate the plans for Las Vegas, Ashor had spread a certain amount of cash in official circles to get up-front tickets to *Rock in Rio* for his entourage's younger set: The bodyguards' teenage kids, Daphne's staff, Garrett's secretary, even the clerks in Ashor's own office. The nights that Sting, Britney Spears, and Peter Gabriel played, Nasirpal and Hanin also went, as well as Daphne herself. It was a drain on the security, having key bodyguards accompany the family to the music venue, leaving new hires at the apartment complex, yet it helped reconcile the young generation to their continuing exile, albeit now in Lisbon.

Then through June and into early July it was *Euro 2004*, more pressure on security as nearly everyone in the entourage—even the security force itself—lobbied Ashor to get prime tickets to the games. For the final match, however, Ashor insisted that the entire group remain at home, watching the football on a giant TV screen in the compound's community playroom. It was to be Portugal versus Greece, and Ashor's concern was that there would be alcohol-fueled celebrations after the game, should Portugal win—or, worse, alcohol-fueled riots if they lost. He didn't wish to sit waiting with Talia for the family's safe return through Lisbon's streets, which would be jammed with boisterous sports fans and a complement of international street criminals, along with the city's already large cast of local thugs and pickpockets. He was proved wrong when the Greeks won in a 1-to-0 shocker, and there was only sporadic violence. Traffic came to a standstill in some bairros and

campos, particularly in the Alfama, but the streets remained little more dangerous than otherwise.

As the months wore on, following the last football contest, Ashor noted his family's and entourage's affection for Lisbon cooling, particularly amongst the women ... and especially in Talia, now that she'd given up on the flamings and had seen to the draining of her private lagoon.

None of Ashor's staff or family had learned more than a few rudimentary phrases of Portuguese—at best a strange and difficult language, with no apparent relation between its spelling and its pronunciation. And despite the city's ravishing beauty—abundant trees and lush tropical plants, flocks of wild parrots and in fact all sorts of vivid and exotic birds, ancient buildings rubbing up against brilliant shopping centers—despite all this, there were everywhere groups of men who whistled, clacked their tongues, grabbed their crotches, honked horns, even hissed at the women. The absolute end, as far as Talia was concerned, was the day when she and Hanin exited Louis Vuitton onto the broad concourse of Avenida da Liberdade and two men on a moped slowed to ogle them, the front rider whistling loudly while the pillion passenger shouted, “Nice ladies, we give you good fucking!”

Rafiq had taken to carrying a heavy cane on these outings, and he thrust it at the moped spokes, but too late, the two men speeding away, while men lounging nearby laughed outright.

Later, still shaking with rage, Talia said to Ashor, “Even in Maastricht, nothing like this! If not for Rafiq and Arvan, those hooligans standing nearby would have said something too.”

Ashor dipped his paper to nod sympathetically, then retreated again behind it.

“Men like that,” Talia said, “they should be shot!”

“Perhaps I can have them shot once we're home again,” Ashor said in an abstracted voice, making a great show of being immersed in *The Financial Times*.

“Even in Maastricht,” Talia went on. “Even *there*, all those drugs cafés, nothing like this. And, my *God!* Right in front of Louis Vuitton!”

“Himself?” Ashor said, still abstractedly. Then, folding his *Financial Times* and putting it aside, he asked, “And what beautiful things did you bring home today, darling?”

Talia retrieved her purse, which she'd yielded to the couch when she came in, and stood in the center of their livingroom, one foot slightly forward, posing. “You didn't notice?”

If he'd learned nothing else in forty years of marriage, Ashor had fully grasped the theological significance of brand names, and—thinking ‘Vuit-

ton’—said, “Why of course I noticed, darling. Shoes and purse, stunning.”

She dropped her purse on the couch again and joined it.

Continuing in his bemused tone, Ashor said, “You know, darling, I have never fully understood why you waste so much time and money in these shops. After all, you ...”

“What would you have me do?”

“Darling ...”

“Go out in rags?”

“Dearest ...”

“Have me wear cast-off sandals? My feet callused and bandaged like a leper’s?”

“What I’m trying to say, I don’t see that these people—this Vuitton, Manolo Blahnik, Trussardi—I don’t see that they know as much about fashion as you. After all, you pick and choose carefully among them, while their own tastes are not good enough to create an entire ensemble that you approve of. A dress here, a blouse there, shoes here, something else there. If any one of these fashion houses had really perfect taste, you wouldn’t have to go journeying from one to the other to put together a complete outfit, now would you?”

While Talia considered this, Ashor reached for his *Financial Times* and snapped it open. Returning to his vaguely preoccupied tone he said, “I wonder sometimes if we shouldn’t simply hire a staff of designers for you. Turn out your own creations. Call them—oh—what have you—call them simply ‘Talia,’ for instance.” Burrowing deeper in his paper, he imagined his wife on the couch, chewing this idea. After a moment of silence between them, and still ducked behind the financial news, he added, “Clothing just to start with, I would think. Then all the things a smartly turned-out woman needs in fashionable metropolitan centers—handbags, shoes, hats, jewelry, headscarves.”

“Belts,” Talia said. “Gloves. Lingerie. Sunglasses ... eyeglass frames! And housewares. Linens, fabrics, draperies. Even children’s wear!”

Ashor now turned in truth to his reading, for he knew the bait had been taken and that it was only a matter of time before Talia came to him for the money to finance her new enterprise. And that the next step would be to show her the advantages of having her design office as well as her workshop in Baghdad, where the wages were low and she could direct her staff in Assyrian, French, Arabic, and English. Rather than in this pesky Portuguese, which even the Spanish found bitter on the palate.

"It's the Iraqi, Ashor dur-Shamshi," Weaver said. "They were prepped for the scrambler phones, and were obviously emotive in their modulation about getting those back. But the major theme for them was Ashor dur-Shamshi. Like Charley says, on dur-Shamshi's name the pattern is bland, but the irregular spikes are big."

"Bottom line on that ..." Remly nodded toward the F.O. "Did they buy Ken's explanation?"

"Yes." Weaver scrolled down a bit more, and pointed at the squiggles. "Here Leonard is speaking about Dieter Stollenhoff's phones again, but he's not modulating the way he did at first on the dur-Shamshi issue. It's over for him, all he wants now is to get those scramblers back and go home."

"In short," the F.O. said, "we are off the hook on that particular issue."

Weaver said, "I'd say yes."

Singleton exclaimed, a certain glee in his voice: "Operational!"

"No, Alan, there's ..." Weaver began.

"Operational, Kenny!" Singleton insisted.

"... there's more."

"Kurskov," Remly said. "Why the 'No Touchy' notice?"

The F.O. spoke with strained patience: "I was coming to that."

"I think I have the answer," Weaver said, pointing again at his computer screen. "Here's Vanbastian saying Kurskov's name before Ashor dur-Shamshi is mentioned, and here's Vanbastian saying 'Kurskov' again, *after* they've brought up dur-Shamshi."

Alan Singleton said, "Looks the same to me."

"But look, here's Kurskov again. See the difference?" He opened another window on his screen and dragged the graph to it, then converted the dragged graph from black to red. He scrolled back to find the earlier instance of Kurskov, marked by the timing numerals, and superimposed the red-graph window over the black one.

"Kind of different. What's the point?"

"The calm one—the black one—is when he's relating to the F.O.'s conversation. Pretty much the same when he says 'Kurskov' to Charley. The red one, with the tension spikes—that's *after* he's talked about Ashor dur-Shamshi. Vanbastian brings up dur-Shamshi, then the F.O. repeats the name. Then the next time Vanbastian says 'Kurskov' you get these funny modulation spikes. The general *tone* of his conversation is valid—I mean, that he doubts that Kurskov is up to anything in Las Vegas. No spikes on Kurskov there. But in the context of dur-Shamshi maybe being connected

to Kurskov, look how strange these tension spikes are. It's like maybe he's not sure if the Russian and the Iraqi might have some kind of hankypanky going on. But at the same time he's tensing up a little on the word 'Kurskov' in this context, like maybe he's suspicious that they *might* be in cahoots on something. And he doesn't want you messing with Kurskov 'cause it might drag dur-Shamshi into the mess."

"I don't see it," Singleton said.

"No, *here*, Alan, watch closely." Weaver pointed his pencil at the screen—a dagger to the heart of truth, the way he did it. "The vowels. The *vow*-wells! Early on, where he's obviously emotive, his vowels spike all over the graph. But here, notice—'Kuuurs-kov.' The first vowel is tight, he's emoting. The second vowel is relaxed, he's gotten control over himself again. But also the hint that he's conflicted about this. *Is* Aleksandr Kurskov in cahoots with this dur-Shamshi? Or ... *isn't* he? Now, this is only gut feeling, but I'd say yes, Vanbastian and Leonard suspect there just might be some kind of tie between the two."

Alan Singleton said, "Sure'n hell *this* brings out the sun." He tapped Weaver's computer screen with his finger.

Weaver reached to pull the laptop back, but too late—Singleton had already touched it. "Please don't, Alan! They lose their pixels if you tap them."

"Jesus! I don't want you to lose your pixels!"

"This leaves a couple of questions," Remly said. "First ..."

"If you *will* be patient," the F.O. interrupted. "I was coming to this — Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi. This was Leonard's principal reason for piddling away buckets of money on the Citation—and the full day it takes to fly here and back—for an otherwise insignificant meeting. They are *very* touchy about the general. He's their man, no doubt about that, yet I wonder—does Leonard know that dur-Shamshi is running enough guns and matériel to Iraq to field an army?" To Remly he said, "Perhaps you should tell Alan about the purchases Mr. Kurskov made on General dur-Shamshi's behalf."

Singleton said to Remly, "Just gimme the short form."

To Alan Singleton's credit—and much to Remly's surprise—Singleton didn't go ballistic that he'd been kept in the dark about the arms shipment now making its way across Georgia. If anything Singleton seemed energized by the tale, particularly by the thought that Aleksandr Kurskov was dur-Shamshi's facilitator—and even more by the fact that Valeri Voshch had no idea that Kurskov was little more than a straw-buyer for Ashor dur-Shamshi, the real purchaser.

As Remly spoke, Alan Singleton shifted in his chair, as though trying to

make himself taller and perhaps more prominent. He said, “The guy was an army general. Who’s bankrolling him—these big purchases from Voshch. Nuclear materials from Kurskov. All the fucking logistics, moving a crew of Slavs and Arabs from Europe to South America, probably to the States. Even Virginia hasn’t got that kind of money in loose cash.”

Again restricting himself to Singleton’s short form version, Remly told of Saddam’s looted fortune and dur-Shamshi’s position as Saddam’s bag-man.

Singleton said, “And your pal Voshch didn’t give you a hint, how much money stayed in dur-Shamshi’s sticky fingers?”

“He didn’t have any means of knowing, Alan. But figure Ashor dur-Shamshi lifted at least ten percent—that puts him into seven billion dollars. Maybe twice that, if he’s as smooth as Valeri makes him out to be.”

“Nice bankroll,” Singleton said. He turned to Weaver, “Kid, open another cold one for me.” While he waited he tipped back his current bottle and drained it, then traded the empty to Weaver for a fresh bottle of Pilsner Urquell.

As Singleton negotiated his beer ration, the F.O. brought them back to the point. “Obviously Virginia is unaware of the nuclear materials issue, but the question remains—does Leonard know about the arms shipments? And, whether or not he’s current on that, the further question remains ... what does Virginia have in mind for General dur-Shamshi? Agent in place? Or perhaps something more proactive, like a military coup?”

“Coup!” said Singleton. The word broke the air like the crack of a rifle, followed by the echoing ricochet of his beer bottle banging decisively onto the table. “You were piddling around at the west coast office, Kenny, when Leonard started getting frisky in Virginia. By ‘seventy-three he was a junior guy on the Campus’s clandestine Allende Solution Study Group. Couple years later Leonard was forwarded to Santiago to liaise with Pinochet’s national police training center. Ever since, when Virginia’s thrown a little regime-change celebration, Leonard’s been part of the catering service.”

The F.O. said, “And ... the Tajikistan coup?”

“Fiasco, you mean. And, yeah, he was the deskman for that, back in Virginia, while I was out on the front lines with a bunch of our paramils, getting our balls fried—and Leonard’s last in, first out. And now Iraq, with this character dur-Shamshi.” Alan Singleton paused, and in the silence his expression was not so much bitter as wistful, as though he wished he’d been called back by Virginia to consult on this suspected coup in Iraq.

“A coup,” Remly said. “Interesting to speculate about, but it’s not what we’ve convened for here.”



"I imagine you're right," the F.O. said. "At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"At the end of *my* day," Remly said, "all I care about is getting Kurskov off my neck. Finding out if he's got a nuclear headache planned for Vegas."

Alan Singleton said, "Think Kurskov's planning to nuke you? You gonna glow in the dark, kid?"

Remly offered Singleton a humorless smile. "And this brings up the second question."

"Exactly," the F.O. said, his Montblanc pen poised over his notepad. The F.O. waited and Remly waited and the F.O. said, "The second question."

"Nuking Las Vegas," Remly said.

"Ah!" the F.O. said. "*Cui bono*? Of course! Shall we say it's General dur-Shamshi who bought our friend Kurskov's nuclear materials? And shall we further say that Kurskov is transporting the radioactives along with his new set of thugs—this Dmitrovsky that Valeri told Charles about, along with the others on that flight out of Odessa—shall we guess that Mr. Kurskov's ultimate destination for them is Vegas. Who then is going to ben- ..."

"Wait wait," Weaver said. "What Charley told me—Valeri tracked them to Anunci3n, they disappeared. Could have gone anywhere. Why Vegas?"

"Kurskov's here," Remly said. "Eddy Johnson got whacked here and I got almost-whacked here, because we're the only ones who could connect Kurskov with dur-Shamshi and Valeri. Kurskov has been in town off and on since January, and he's got at least two teams here, as well as his personal goons. Where else will he be sending these others?" Again that smile, a quick and meaningless lift of the corners of his mouth, as quickly dropped.

And again the F.O. asked, "*Cui bono*? Who benefits? Say Brother Kurskov's people unleash some kind of nuclear headache on Vegas, what does this dur-Shamshi fellow get out of it?"

"That's great to speculate on," Remly said. "Maybe we'll have a symposium someday. For now I want to know if the men and weapons-grade radionuclides are actually in the Vegas area. And if so, where? And if we find out where, how do we stop the threat?"

"However Byzantine the ties between Las Vegas and Baghdad, this entire matter has the strong fragrance of a coup in the making." The F.O. looked round the room, taking the measure of each of them as though gathering their expressions for a straw ballot. "This dur-Shamshi might well have major-league mischief planned for Iraq."

"So what?" Alan Singleton leaned painfully forward and looked from one to the other, much as the F.O. had done. "Anyone here really give a

shit?”

After a brief silence, Weaver spoke up shyly: “It’s not just real estate, Alan. It’s people.”

“Name one.”

No one responded.

Singleton said, “That’s it, then. We’re good to go on Kurskov and his mugs. What they’re up to in Vegas. We’re operational.”

“Let’s return to that troublesome consignment in Georgia a moment,” the F.O. said, hastening over Singleton’s words. “This load of guns, field pieces and the like. Charles promised our gun-running friend Voshch that he would pull the plug on the shipment.”

“So what?” Alan Singleton had been finishing the remains of his guacamole sandwich. Now he looked up.

Remly said, “So, I want to keep the faith with Valeri. Promised him I’d get the shipment interdicted.”

“Fuck honor.”

“It’s not honor, Alan, it’s business. We may need Valeri, I want him to owe me one.”

The F.O. said, “Charles’s point is well taken, Alan.”

“We can get this shipment stopped without going through Virginia,” Remly said. “Anyone have a good connection at Foggy Bottom? Tell them about an arms cargo moving through Georgia—motivate the poobahs in Tblisi to get off their duffs and interdict it?”

“Not State, Charles,” the F.O. replied. “Anything whispered at Foggy Bottom will be fairly screamed at Sixteen Hundred. However, I *can* call on a friend or three at Wallnerstrasse No 6<sup>1</sup>. They still have observers in Georgia.” He turned to Singleton: “Alan? Is UNOMIG<sup>2</sup> still monitoring the various cease-fires there?”

“General Michaud’s an old co-conspirator of mine,” Singleton said. “Used to practice black arts at Fort Two Thousand<sup>3</sup>, then was with UNOMIG in Georgia. Retired to Provence. I’ll phone him, get him rolling if the old fart hasn’t gone completely senile.”

“That covers Valeri’s backside, then,” Remly said. “All that’s left is Kurskov.”

Singleton said, “What’re we gonna need for the operation?”

<sup>1</sup>Wallnerstrasse No 6 - Headquarters of OSCE (Organization for Security and Coöperation in Europe) in Vienna. In Autumn of ‘04 OSCE maintained observers in Georgia.

<sup>2</sup>UNOMIG - United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia.

<sup>3</sup>Fort 2000 - DGSE (Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, General Directorate for External Security), the French espionage and counter-espionage service, is located at the Fort of Noisy-Le-Sec, affectionately referred to in the trade as “Fort 2000.”

“An over-arching strategy,” the F.O. said.

“More people,” Remly said.

“Guns and ordnance,” Singleton said. “A *lot* of guns and a *lot* of ordnance.”

Weaver spoke: “Alan, I don’t have a workshop. If you want this done right,” and here Weaver nodded to the F.O. “I’m going to need a complete electronics facility—shop and laboratory. I’ll be competing with Virginia, as well as with Kurskov’s crew.”

Singleton said, “Gonna take some real time and money, kid, putting together a shop like that.”

“Not really,” Weaver replied. “Do you still have friends in the black-bag trade?”

“In life there are meetings which seem like a fate.”

Owen Meredith

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

For Charles Remly it was a time of maddening quietude: The F.O. was settling into a safe-house he'd leased and Alan Singleton and Weaver were off on a supply run, Remly left to shift from one foot to the other.

He sat for a while in his home office, his desk cluttered with travel guides and hotel brochures, and with newspaper articles and internet news print-outs of Ashor and Talia al-Tigris dur-Shamshi's visit to Washington. After stacking the paperwork in a neat pile, a brochure for Hôtel Lisboa Do Rei on top, he briefly thought to call Morris Berman, but he had no specific agenda for the call—no list of questions relating to Kurskov.

As Remly scrolled through his options, inspiration struck. Something to brush them all out of his mind—enemies and allies alike, from Kurskov to the F.O. himself. An escape from the world of spies and conspiracies, of fun-house mirrors and the cosmos of negotiable reality. A chance to rejoin the human race, if only for a night. His problem was that he'd been nonhuman for too long—first living only to restore the motorcycles and catch up on his reading, more recently getting dragged into someone else's fight—and he'd lost the easygoing insouciance that had once been second nature to him. He wasn't sure he knew how to say the right thing, or if he was indeed capable of saying anything intelligible.

“I meant to call earlier,” he said, or at any rate thought he'd said, feeling as though he'd pulled a shoe onto his tongue. He had wanted to say “I want to be with you,” but for some reason he ended up saying “I meant to call earlier,” and it seemed he was speaking gibberish—that damned shoe. Maybe he actually *had* said “I want to be with you.”

Pru said, “Are you okay? I mean, I've been so *worried* about you. You left Mimi's luncheon so—you know?—so abruptly.”

He wanted to tell her, “I would love to take your clothes off and stay in bed with you for a week.” Hoping he was speaking clearly around the shoe on his tongue, what he said instead was, “Are you working this evening?”

“Well, kind of,” Pru said. “I mean, it's my night off but I'm covering for one of the other girls.”

“Oh,” Remly said—an “oh” that to his ear might have been the last word of a dying man.

“But you know?” she quickly added, “I know a couple girls who only get part-time at La Fontaine. Would love to get the hours.”

“Maybe take you to dinner?”

“Oh, God, a restaurant? After slinging drinks all week?”

“Oh.” Again the wheeze of a corpse-to-be.

“But, I mean, you know? I mean, not going out for dinner?”

“Oh?” Was something happening here?

“*Love* to see your collection of old English motorcycles. Do you have a nice kitchen?”

“The nicest,” he said, relieved that the shoe had slipped off his tongue.

“They’ve got fresh salmon on sale at Trader Joe’s. Wild caught? I could stop by on my way over.”

“Salmon sounds fine.”

Pru said, “Oh, *fish!*”

“Sorry?”

“I kind of fished around—about this Mr. Kurskov? What he’s getting for his money?”

“Yes.” It was like cold water. Remly grabbed a pencil, pulled a pad of paper to the ready.

“Nothing,” Pru said. “All I heard—one of the girls dates this guy, he works upstairs in marketing, she says that the guy she dates says George had some people in marketing get up a bunch of early photos of the property. Photos they’ll be using for this new campaign—celebs who played the main lounge, pictures of the original exterior, some really old shots of La Fontaine getting built. Ground breaking, framing, topping the steel. Then this girl—this *other* girl—sees Mr. Kurskov walking to the parking garage with all these photos. So, have you got fresh veggies?”

“Of course,” Remly lied as he pushed away the pad, on which he’d doo-dled a number of large question marks. He would make a quick run to buy vegetables. Was the kitchen clean?

“I’ll phone one of the part-time girls. I know she’d love to get the hours. Any of them would.”

Remly asked, “You’ll call me back?” He would have to put on fresh sheets and pillow slips, that was a given.

“Only if I can’t find someone to fill. Give me your address?”

A strange conversation—strange in the way conversations with women often were, or so they’d been in Remly’s experience. Telling her his address and laughing at himself as he hung up, laughing in fact at both of them and thinking, ‘Motorcycles. Absolutely!’ And of himself: ‘What I want, I want to

show you my motorcycles.’ And again, ‘Absolutely!’ Understanding that Pru had something a lot more organic than motorcycles in mind—something a lot more orgasmic, actually. But then, so what? ‘So do I, kid. So do I.’ And understanding that Pru also understood what he had in mind, and wasn’t that how relationships got started ... each double-talking the other? Each fully aware of their lefthanded conversation and wanting to get at each other’s body, but verbally dancing around any outright admission of raw lust, the dance as formal as a pavane.

And the question, now more forcefully asked than previously: Raw lust aside, was Pru in fact the one he’d been looking for? The bewitchment of his imagination?

As Remly rose from the desk he answered himself aloud: “Only time will tell, my friend. Time and ...” But he let the thought trail off, and feeling in his pocket for his keys and heading briskly to the door to the garage he returned to more practical matters, asking himself what sort of vegetables a woman like this might want. If she would accept his word that the shot-gunned armoire door was just badly worm-eaten. And whether there were bits of clothing absentmindedly dropped around the house.

Another long day, filling in, what you did you got to where you wore the necktie. Kinda made you wonder, picking cotton was such a bad thing. Lugging suitcases at Union Station like his granddad, back in the war, into the ‘fifties.

Elvis clocked out, still in his work suit—black slacks and blue blazer, big La Fontaine crest on the breast pocket. Got himself four ready-made sandwiches from the biscuits and cheese food court to take home for supper. Was stepping out the employee entrance when he heard a fuss around the corner, went and peeked around it, see what was the action.

What it was, Mr. Granter having some kind of publicity photo, up at the new clock. Photographer was up on a cherry-picker, had a girl with him, off to one side holding a big silver umbrella with a photoflash in the middle. Mr. G on the plank that came out from the clock.

Had to admit, the property’s new look made it stand out from all them others on Fremont. “Nostalgia,” like they told at the employee pep talk. “Gangster glitz” most everyone called it. This clock the last piece to get added. Just this morning they took down the scaffolding, took away the construction shroud around the clock. Nothing to see though, just Mr. G smiling at his big clock. Elvis had put in his overtime for the day—two hours and twenty-three minutes extra, unpaid—and getting home was all he had in mind. Getting home, settling in with the TV. Maybe ask that sweet little

Janet, she wanted to come over. Share a couple fancy French sandwiches.

Elvis turned back, started for the bus stop, he heard a crash and a whole lotta people screaming. A good grip on his sandwich bag—Crescents et Fromage, La Fontaine—he sprinted to the corner, turned it, and there was the clock up there with it looked like half the damn works sticking out like sprung guts, and down on the ground Mr. G laying there with a big roulette wheel on top of him and blood pooling around his head, and some folks rushing to him and everyone else, it looked like, yelling into their cell phones. Elvis wondered should he go over, see could he help? He wondered—he really want his photo in tomorrow’s Review-Journal?

Elvis stepped back around the corner to think about this. Mr. G lived, saw a picture in the RJ—Elvis standing there holding his sandwich bag, wearing the blazer with the La Fontaine crest—what would Mr. G think? Seeing him around the property in his blue jacket after that? It remind Mr. G of the fall? But say Mr. G didn’t live. Whoever bought the property—they be reminded of the fall every time they saw his face, he got his picture in the RJ? On the scene when Mr. G got killed? Some kinda jinx?

Elvis hurried past the bus stop and walked across the street and up a couple more blocks before crossing back to catch the next bus, well north of La Fontaine. Was already on his cell to Janet, time the bus crossed Bonanza.

Not really sure what Pru would like, he’d bought arugula, rappini, bean sprouts, fresh basil and oregano, bok choy, and tomatoes, and had put the sack onto the sink counter. As he was bringing out a colander to wash the vegetables, the gate-chime rang. The monitors were in the pantry; he recognized the white soccer-mom van and the stern woman from the Home Owners Association at the gate, her finger hovering at the block pillar. The chime sounded again.

Thinking of Pru, Remly told himself to make it quick as he skipped down the steps and hurried along the winding slate path to the gate.

The HOA lady was at the walkway gate, her white van parked on the stunted remainder of drive between the sidewalk and the driveway gate, its door open, engine idling. Remly recognized the gray hair, the pinched mouth, the owl-lensed glasses. She held a large purse before her in a death grip, and she looked as though she was going to have him stay after school to wipe the blackboard and beat erasers. Behind her a man had stepped from the van, briefcase in hand and smiling apologetically, nodding a greeting as he walked to the gate.

As Remly tapped a code to open the iron-barred walkway gate, the

woman said in a clutched alto, “Sir, we are the Architectural Committee of the Home Owners Association.” As she spoke, her stern expression softened, and Remly immediately understood her shift of attitude, the desire to rebuke evaporating when it came time for the actual nose-to-nose confrontation. She said, “About this wall ...”

“I got that,” Remly interrupted. He swung the gate open. “I’m expecting company, I don’t have time right now. Do you have a card?”

She reached into her purse but rather than bringing out a card she brought the purse swiftly down and even before he saw the gun Remly recognized the threat—the purse dropping—and punched his left fist into her throat as his right hand slipped behind for the kidney-holstered P7, thumbing up his shirt and feeling the grip under his fingers and watching her gray wig fly away to disclose an equally gray brushcut as she stumbled back, clutching at her throat—glasses flying and the purse dropping away—and the apologetic smile dissolving on the man with the briefcase, the man shouting “*Yolki palki!*”<sup>1</sup> a pistol suddenly in hand, and Remly seeing the van behind the two of them, now another man emerging, huge, almost a monster, with a small rifle in his hands ... and the adrenaline dump, the familiar though thank-God-not-often-experienced hot blushing of his skin, the world moving slowly and the weird tunnel of vision showing only the big man with the rifle, and Remly’s pistol surprisingly light, as though made of tissue, but the sight-picture hell to acquire because his hands were not simply shaking but wildly rattling and it was taking too many years to slowly and desperately bring the gun around to the van while the rifle bucked slo-mo in the other’s hands—oddly yet not unexpectedly without sound—and a chip of mortar sprayed dust and silent sparks from the block pillar that separated the two gates.

<sup>1</sup>“*Yolki palki!*” - “*Holy shit!*”



“Tous les hommes aiment à s'appropriier le mien d'autrui; c'est un sentiment général; la manière seule de le faire en est différente.”

(All men love to appropriate to themselves the belongings of others, it's a universal feeling. Only the manner of doing it is different.)

Le Sage

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . F A I R F A X V A

Weaver was riding in a large stolen step-van from Prince Georges in Maryland to a location just outside Fairfax, Virginia, with Alan Singleton and three Boston felons, Alan's black-bag specialists, Stevie, Buck, and Blazes. In Gothic type on its side panels the van claimed to be GOULD & KAPPELL PIANO MOVERS.

Inside the step-van's cavernous maw, along with Weaver's electronics kitbag and Alan Singleton's industrial-size gun safe, were the tools of the three burglars' trade—BERT stenciled in vivid dayglo red on the Jaws of Life, power winch, oxy-acetylene cutting torch, and other large pieces. During the drive over from a rundown wrecking yard in Prince Georges County where the three men now based their business, Alan explained the significance of the BERT tools to Weaver. Along with this huge van, the three men had acquired their gear in those early days of post-911 nerves, when anti-terrorism programs were being cobbled willynilly by local communities, and the three, from South Boston, had got swept up in the frenzy.

As Singleton had it, Buck and Blazes had been arrested something like nine times between them, but Stevie just once, and that only for possession of stolen property as opposed to the breaking, entering, public intoxication, and battery that Buck and Blazes had racked up. And—once—Buck's optimistic assault on five arresting Boston cops. Yet despite the arrests—and in Buck's and Blazes's case two convictions each—through the grace of God the three had gotten jobs with Boston Emergency Response Team.

From behind the wheel Stevie contradicted Alan. “Less God's charity than it was the intercession of Skipper O'Hanlon on the Commission, who slipped us in with the rest of that frothing pack of Southies.”

Buck got into it then, arguing that Skipper himself had only got on the Commission through God's grace—and Blazes supporting him—while Stevie continued a retreating action, which he based on the father and mother of futility: Logic and fact.

“So you resigned from BERT,” Weaver asked, “with the heavy tools for

a major black-bag business?”

Stevie said, “It wasn’t so much a resignation.” He sat and drove and stewed. “And they never had a fucking thing on us—no arrests, no indictments, no evidence we’d been within grabbing distance of the missing stuff. And the van long gone to my cousin in Maryland.” Another brief angry silence, then, “And not a penny did we see of our two-weeks severance, the bastards.” It was obvious that for Stevie the formalities of procedure were sacred, never mind what they’d actually done.

Weaver recognized a dark streak in Buck and Blazes, two burly men who actually could have been piano movers. Where Stevie was quick to anger, he was equally given to ironic laughter. In Buck—whose front teeth had gone missing—and in Blazes, neither anger nor humor showed, only an undercurrent of resentment, as though they had been unjustly condemned to sit with Weaver and they wanted to be anywhere but here. Other than speaking to Stevie, they remained silent, leaving Weaver with the feeling that he was suspect, reluctantly allowed to go along but a potential enemy all the same. At one point during the ride over from Maryland Weaver had said to Buck, “What tools have you brought for the job?” Buck looked at Weaver then looked away as though Weaver hadn’t spoken. From behind the wheel, Stevie said, “We’ve got enough, don’t worry about it.” Weaver shot a concerned glance at Alan Singleton, but Alan only gave a small shake of his head and settled himself more comfortably in the reclining chair that had been specially rigged for him in the vast emptiness of the back of the van.

They stopped briefly in Annandale where Alan rented a big Lincoln, using one of his throwaway credit cards. Wearing latex gloves, Weaver removed the Lincoln’s glovebox door and put in a digital de-coding scanner. And from Annandale to the target building Alan had followed the van, while Weaver sat in uncomfortable silence with the three black-bag men from Boston. Alan had offered Weaver a ride, but Weaver preferred to stay in the van where he could keep a close eye on his electronic tools and equipment.

Ideally they would have preferred a moonless night—heavy cloud cover, a thick ground fog, perhaps a major disaster at the far side of the county to give the cops employment. What they got was nocturnal clarity and a basking moon you could read by. And to Weaver’s distress a jam of radio-frequency traffic in the neighborhood, which kept him from getting a take on any specific transmissions that might be coming from the target building: His frequency finder showed a smorgasbord of strong r-f signals, ranging

from birdies in the 30-MHz zone up to trunked digital two-ways in the microwave spectrum.

As for the squat building that interested them, it was in a ragtag industrial district that lay just south of the I-66, and if you didn't look closely there was little that distinguished it from its grubby neighbors. Yet to Weaver's suspicious eyes the building's most significant traits were the glints here and there in the louvers of the vent pods on its roof.

They'd parked the piano-moving step-van in the yard of a bigrig tire shop on the street parallel to the target, separated from the target by an alley. Buck had easily gotten through the tire yard's chained gate with bolt cutters, and now, standing on the shop's roof, Weaver scanned the target with night-vision binoculars.

Weaver said, "You reported cameras were only at the front gate." He brought the camspotter from his shirt pocket and swept the louvers, getting red positive blips at each of the vents.

"You can't see the roof cameras from the ground," Stevie said. "And we were going by quiet as cats, not making a big show of staring at the fucking place."

"If you're on the ground," Weaver said, "the cameras can see you. So you should have seen the cameras when you did your walk-by."

Stevie ended it. "What would you have us do? Ask the tire people, could we please get on their fucking roof and case the building across the alley?"

"One way or the other," Weaver said, "we're out of it for tonight."

"We could pinch a cherry picker," Stevie said. "Drop in from above. Those cameras, the way the lenses are angled, they haven't a view over to this yard. They're aiming down at the alley."

Weaver gave a bitter look at the broken chain on the tire-yard gate. "Tomorrow's too late. We've poisoned this place as an entry port—and there's nothing else around close enough, even if you get a cherry picker." Speaking softly in a regretful tone, he added, "We're out of business."

As though to confirm his grim opinion, Weaver's earphone transceiver buzzed and Alan Singleton asked, "How long till kickoff?"

Weaver pressed the earphone on. "Looks like the game is canceled."

In the pause that followed, Weaver saw a long stretch of disaster, an unravelling that began here and extended all the way back to the F.O.'s safe house in Lake Las Vegas. When Alan finally spoke, it was in a voice Weaver hadn't heard before—cold and utterly flat: "That is not an option. What is the time until kickoff? You have sixty seconds to answer."

Through his night-vision binoculars Weaver looked at the distant Lincoln, Singleton luminescing green through the lenses, then lowering the

glasses Weaver turned to listen to the three burglars conferring in mumbled tones, Stevie saying, "... time we pinched it, got it back to here ..."

Buck said, "The circus routine?"

Stevie considered it, but briefly, and said, "I'm willing." He turned to Blazes: "Have you a taste for it?"

"I'll get the ladder," Blazes said. He waited for Stevie to speak.

Stevie fingered a thin gold chain at his neck, then pulled at it to retrieve a large gold cross. "Go for it then," he said, then kissed the cross and let it fall back into his shirt.

Unsure what they had in mind, Weaver spoke into his earphone: "It looks like kickoff, maybe ten minutes—maybe twelve, fifteen."

The ladder was extended to its full length, its sliding sections were wrapped round and round with heavy duct tape to reinforce and secure them. Weaver had climbed the ladder and in the clarity of the moon he was clinging to its tip on the underside, with Blazes at the ladder's foot, steadying it against a standpipe on the tire shop's roof. Stevie and Buck were left to hold the loose end of a rope that was bowlined onto the top of the ladder, tipping it over the alleyway.

With only the rope securing its top rung, the ladder swayed and shivered as it approached the roof of the other building, Weaver forcing himself not to look down. He looked straight ahead, which is to say up at the sky, ignoring the low industrial skyline and the distant expressway. When the ladder stopped tilting, he ventured a downward glance over his shoulder. They'd positioned him directly above the roof, though toward the edge.

Rope climbing wasn't within Weaver's general résumé, but the way Stevie had set it up it was only a matter of keeping one hand on the descent brake: Clutch it tight, go down—release, stop the descent. Even so, Weaver had stuffed his freq-finder into a small backpack with his other gear, and kept his free hand on the rope in the event the descent brake failed. The rope dangled, Weaver swayed gently on it as he slipped more and more from the ladder, and when his toes felt the roof he squeezed hard on the brake and released himself from the sling harness and watched the ladder tip back, the slack rope whipping above the alley. He'd made the roof, yes, but if anything went sour on the roof he wasn't sure he could get back into the harness quickly enough—or even that the Boston burglars would stand firm and help extract him. He tugged at his surgical gloves and got to work.

Unzipping down its sides, Weaver spread his backpack like a peddler's display and selected the freq-finder. Ducking low as he walked, and with the

finder at its weakest setting, he moved the instrument slowly back and forth ahead of him, close to the surface of the roof, as though searching out coins on a beach. He caught a blip, but it was a common birdie at 30.135-MHz. He dialed back the sensitivity until the birdie dropped off the screen, and continued scanning. Toward the center of the roof, next to a standpipe typical of a sink-drain vent, he caught two separate signals, both in the trunked microwave spectrum. One would be for the building's general alarm, the other for its video signal.

Weaver spoke softly into his earphone. "I've got the output sigs."

"How much longer to kickoff?" Alan wanted to know.

"About two minutes to verify and replicate the signals, another seven, maybe eight minutes to set up the spoof."

By Alan Singleton's actual count it took exactly six minutes, thirty-seven seconds before Weaver's voice came into his ear: "Kickoff!"

At the front of the target, along the street, there was a heavy link fence and a rolling gate. At Weaver's "Kickoff" the piano-moving van backed out of the tire yard, the ladder still extended and strapped onto its roof, to whip down the street, twice around corners, and up the target street. Weaver went to the edge of the roof to watch as Blazes wrapped a magnesium sweatband around the heavy tungsten-steel chain that secured the rolling gate. Buck stood beside him with a bucket of sand poised over the sweatband. Blazes set off the magnesium fuse, and Weaver closed his eyes.

There was a furious hissing and the sound of the chain clanging against the chainlink gate. When Weaver turned to look, Buck had already emptied his bucket over the puddle of magnesium and steel, and the sand and a section of the chain were on the ground, bits of sand metamorphosed into stalagmites of freshly melted glass.

With no threat of alarm or video, the three Boston black-bag men began working in energetic harmony, while Weaver climbed down the relocated ladder, carrying his bag of electronics.

Stevie started pulling the ladder away from the roof, but Weaver stopped him: "Leave it. I've got equipment up there."

They all wore latex surgical gloves and they worked madly ... all but Alan Singleton who was parked down the street, monitoring the scanner in the Lincoln's lidless glove compartment. Besides the police and security channels, Weaver had programmed the scanner to read signals from the two spoofers he had placed on the building's roof, the signals translated to patterns on an attached screen. Any shift in the patterns would give Alan advance notice that the spoofers had failed and alarms had been set off.

The roll-up warehouse door was bolted and barred on the inside. Blazes attached a chain to the iron security gate that covered the front walk-in door and hooked the chain onto the rear bumper of the piano-moving van. As the hook clinked into place, Stevie drove briskly, ripping the heavy iron gate out of the building's framing, leaving splintered door studs. Buck and Blazes smashed through the metal door with a 2-man slam ram, on the flat top of which BERT was stenciled in dayglo red.

They tumbled inside and unlatched the roll-up door but left it closed. They set up three battery powered quartz-halogen work lights, and waited impatiently for Weaver to inventory Dieter Stellenhoff's workshop to see what he wanted to take.

"Everything okay?" Alan Singleton's voice in Weaver's earphone.

"So far so good," Weaver responded. But after a quick look around, he began to wonder.

Anything he might need as development and testing equipment was here—a few items simply duplicates of what he already had—but the prizes he'd come for weren't visible. At the least he'd wanted advanced, geo-positioning scanners and bumper beepers, and more auto-ranging scrambler phones like the ones that Vanbastian had taken back. And—as Weaver understood Dieter Stellenhoff—there would be other electronics even more imaginative and considerably less legal. But it wasn't here, none of it.

Motioning to Stevie to listen in, Weaver spoke into his earphone. "It's a dead loss—only tools and instruments, Alan. The goodies aren't here."

While Alan said, "Keep looking, dammit," Stevie said, "Bucko, crapper," and pointed at a door in the far wall. "Supplies closet."

Buck went doubletime across the shop and through the door to the toilet. There followed a smashing noise, and Buck reappeared. "There's fuck all in the supplies closet. Mops, crapper paper, towels."

Stevie said, "How deep is the fucking thing?"

Buck went again into the restroom, then reappeared and paced off the floor along the wall from the restroom door, stopping well short of the far corner. "There's a ghost closet, Stevie-boy," said Buck. He bent over to study the floor in front of him, then behind. "Look at the fucking floor, it's all clean here in front of this part of the wall. Something's been scraping over it."

"Bring in the shit," Stevie said, and Blazes rolled up the door while Stevie went through it in a crouching run to get into the big step-van.

Even as the van was backing through the open door, Blazes jumped on its rear platform and rolled up the van's rear door.

Setting the brake and running back from the drivers' side, Stevie shout-

ed, “Move it, boyos!”

Buck jumped into the back of the van and rolled out a fat-tired platform dolly that bounced when it hit the deck, careening wildly into the shop. Buck followed the dolly with a shower of large plastic storage bins—milk crates—that tumbled across the concrete floor.

By then Weaver had inventoried the general contents of the room, slapping bright red adhesive tags on the loose electronics. As Weaver scooped off work benches and dumped his take into the storage bins, the three others emptied the Jaws of Life, the hydraulic press, a fire axe, and a massive Saws-All from the van, hustling them to the wall next to the restroom door.

“Hey, you,” Stevie called.

Weaver turned. Yes, Stevie was pointing at him.

Stevie said, “C’mere. This electronic?” He was at the wall, feeling it.

The wall that Stevie was feeling had a hairline seam running nearly to the ceiling. Weaver put his latex-gloved fingertips to the wall and went across it for a little over four feet to find a second seam.

Weaver said, “It’s electronic, I couldn’t tell you how to open it.”

“Fuck it,” Stevie said. As he spoke, Buck was lifting the fire axe.

The swinging axe went no deeper than the drywall and stopped with a loud metallic clank and Buck said, “*Fucking shit!*” and let go the axe to press his hands in his armpits.

Blazes picked up the axe and began ripping out the drywall. Once he’d jerked out the insulation pads they saw that a massive metal compartment had been bolted into the very framework of the building. Blazes banged at it with a hand sledge, and reported, “It’s the quality of good gun-safe steel.”

“Fuck you,” Stevie said to the cabinet, his voice cold and Weaver hearing in it the furious determination of a zealot.

“Progress?” came Alan’s voice in Weaver’s ear.

“It looks like we found the mother lode. How’s the scanner traffic?”

“We’re clean, for godsake. What do you think I’m doing out here?”

Stevie dashed again to the van to move it out, closing the high roll-up door on his way back in. As the door closed, Buck began hacking through the wall studs with the industrial Saws-All while Blazes battered at studs on the other side of the metal cabinet with the fire axe. Weaver was busily loading up the plastic milk-crate bins with the items he’d selected. And Stevie was jamming a pinchbar under the metal cabinet, smashing in a rage at the pinchbar with the sledge. Between whacks Stevie said, “Bolted.” Smash. “To.” Smash. “Floor.” Smash. “Fucker.” Smash, smash. “Fuck you!” The banging stopped, Weaver looked again to Stevie, whose pinchbar was—quite amazingly—jammed under the metal cabinet. Now Stevie got the

hydraulic separating tool from the Jaws of Life kit and slipped it into the narrow gap. After starting the pump, he activated the hydraulics and the big metal locker began to tilt back—slowly, to be sure, but moving in response to the Jaws wedge.

Weaver had his collection of Stellenhoff's tools and electronics crated and on the platform dolly, which he began moving to the roll-up door. The sounds of sawing and axing stopped. He turned back to see Buck rushing toward him, shouting, "Bring up the fucking door." Weaver pulled the door's lift chain hand over hand, the door rolling up and Buck ducking under it to the back of the open van. Blazes also went through in a crouching dash, heading for the driver's side. Stevie was still on the hydraulic wedge, the pump whirring in the sudden silence. Weaver looked back. The cabinet had tilted visibly, the building's wall studs creaking. Buck ran through again, dragging a heavy chain from the open van, Weaver stepping aside quickly as Blazes began backing the van into the shop.

The three Boston men had cleared Weaver's cache of goods and their own BERT tools into the van and wrapped three loops of chain around the metal cabinet, hooking the free ends of the chain not to the van's bumper but to its very frame. The first run brought down a shower of plaster and drywall. On the second pull the cabinet seemed to move—certainly it tipped. Before his third try, Stevie backed deeper into the shop and leaned out the driver's window and shouted, "Get the fuck out." And Weaver, imagining what it would be like if the chain snapped and whiplashed around him, ran for the door and stood outside, well away from the van.

"What's going on there?" Alan Singleton wanted to know.

"It's a little tight right now, Alan," Weaver explained. "I'll tell you when the dust settles."

At this point the dust, far from settling, became a cloud inside the shop as Stevie revved the engine and made a power-on acceleration and there was a sound of beams snapping and of metal grinding on concrete as the cabinet came out the big open door and the roof behind collapsed into the shop.

"What the hell's happening over there?" Alan's voice, sharply in Weaver's ear.

"Did the alarm go off?" asked Weaver.

"Alarm hell, it sounds like you're demolishing the whole building."

Weaver said, "That's kind of what happened, Alan. My electronics came down with it, the spoofer isn't over-riding Dieter's sending units. Alarm's probably going off too."



“Get out of there now!”

Weaver removed the earphone and pocketed it and went to the other three to lend a hand, resetting the chains around the big cabinet so they could tumble and winch it into the back of the van.

By the time Alan drove into the front pad of Stellenhoff Electronics, they were closing up the van and Stevie was again behind the wheel. Weaver opened the passenger door to get a better view of Alan, and Alan was looking with undisguised wonder at the rubble of the building that had collapsed in on itself.

“I couldn’t get my spoofer back, Alan,” Weaver said.

“Fingerprints?”

“No, I was gloved. I’m not too worried—it was something I pinched from the supply room at the Cancer Ward.”

“Jesus!” Alan laughed hard enough to show pain. “Dieter’ll recognize the sourcing on it. That’ll drive him nuts, thinking that Virginia black-bagged him.”

The van jolted as Stevie drove away, jumping the curb and hastening after the retreating Lincoln.

Though the night was cold, Weaver was dripping warm sweat. The other three seemed at peace with themselves, Buck and Blazes getting cans of beer from a cooler that had BERT stenciled across its lid. They popped open a beer and passed it to Stevie. Without speaking, and almost grudgingly, Buck offered one to Weaver.

Weaver accepted the beer, asking, “Is there an interior light, here in the box?”

Blazes flipped on a dim interior light and Weaver studied the big metal cabinet that lay like a defeated fighter in the middle of the van. There was no obvious lock—neither keyed nor combination—though there was a small thin slot that Weaver took to be a magnetic card reader. Yet even with that, if he took the time to make a series of mag cards, there was always the chance that Stellenhoff secondary internal latch that would snap into place if a false card was slipped into the reader—exactly the failsafe that Weaver himself would build into a security system.

The hinges were on the outside, however, as the door was designed to swing out rather than in. Indicating the hinges Weaver asked, “What would it take to cut through these?”

“He’s talking about the hinges on the fucking safe,” Blazes said to Stevie.

“Depends what’s inside,” Stevie said over his shoulder. “What’s the chance of frying the contents?”

Weaver said, “We can’t risk anything inside.”

“Half a day, the least of it,” Stevie said. “We’ll have to freeze up around the hinges, use a cutting torch, work against ourselves, d’you see.”

“But it can be done?”

“Anyfuckingthing can be done, you put your mind to it.”

Later that night, after dumping the rented Lincoln, Alan joined them in the step-van, and at a lonely exit ramp off US-211 just beyond Manassas they washed away the piano-moving signature from the van’s side panels. From there it was a team rotation, driving west to Lake Las Vegas, except for Alan Singleton who stretched out on the reclining lounge in back, plotting his next coup.

*Alligator Blood: The player who holds up  
under pressure is said to have “alligator blood.”*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

The civil engineer’s name was Ghazwan but he accepted that Tayyib called him Scout: It was close enough to the Arabic meaning of his name—a man on an expedition—and certainly this voyage to Las Vegas was an expedition. Today they were surveying Tayyib’s target.

The pickup was backed into a parking slot and Tayyib had dropped its tailgate to create a table, Scout spreading the La Fontaine framing photo and unrolling a large sheet of paper on the tailgate surface. The Russian Dmitrovsky sat at the wheel of the F-150 truck, scanning a great, dim, concrete cavern—low-ceilinged and echoing hollowly of traffic on Las Vegas Boulevard where it crossed Fremont—only the Ford pickup on this top level of the parking garage, the entire building empty above the first floor.

The sheet of paper next to the poster-sized photo was an equally large structural sketch that Scout had made. Scout had highlighted certain points on his drawing: A large red circle where the plane should collide to cause the greatest damage; orange lines and arrows showing the effects of the impact throughout the framing, green swatches to indicate how Scout imagined La Fontaine would collapse as a result of the buckled framing.

Scout told Tayyib, “You must strike the building and use its own frame to bring it down. You see these beams that go from the upright corner framing to the center struts?”

“These?” Tayyib asked. He indicated the horizontal beams in Scout’s drawing with a finger.

Scout said, “These aren’t exactly floor supports. They serve as stabilizing beams from the outer uprights to the center ones. They’re not ‘link beams’ exactly, but let’s call them that for the sake of convenience. Now, notice in the drawing . . .” he pointed at the large photo. “Notice that these aren’t load-bearing horizontals; they go directly to the center columns. So when one of these link beams is struck with enough force, there won’t be any other connections to absorb the shock. All the energy of the strike will be transmitted directly to the uprights of the structure. And this will cause rupturing of the building’s main supports, collapsing all the upper floors into the center. Do you understand this?”

“I’m not quite as stupid as I look,” Tayyib said drily. “What I also see from the photos, the corner must be struck directly ... that is, perfectly horizontal and in direct line with the link beam. They all go straight from the corners to the center. Hitting any of them a glancing blow, that won’t transfer energy to the center of the building.”

At this Scout looked disappointed, as though Tayyib had stolen his lines.

Tayyib noted the impact points on the drawing and looked again at the photo of the hotel’s actual framing. “Now let’s see the real thing,” he turned to the rail at the open garage wall for a look.

Once they were at the opening to study the target, Tayyib noticed that Scout looked at the long canopy over Fremont Street Experience rather than at La Fontaine, and the more Scout looked at the canopy, the more agitated he became. It was as though Scout was previewing his own future down there.

Scout asked, “What will it be like, do you think?”

“It’s not something to think about,” Tayyib replied. “You just do it.”

Before them, rising above the canopy, the upper storeys of a few hotels, La Fontaine a clear target.

Scout said, “Painful?”

“No thinking.” Tayyib pointed at the corner of La Fontaine. “This impact point of yours, it’s below that canopy. I’ll have to strike the hotel at least two floors higher in order to clear the canopy. Will this bring the building down?”

“Certainly. Striking on the corner, this is the key.” Scout looked briefly at the hotel, then again at the white canopy over Fremont Street Experience, five blocks long. “What if God wills events to go wrong, Tayyib? What if things don’t come off as these Russian fellows say?”

“Don’t think about it. These fellows are very efficient, I’ve seen their plans.”

“But ... what *if*? What if God wills it otherwise? Do the Russians take us home to Iraq if it is God’s purpose that this is not to come to pass?”

“It will happen,” Tayyib said. “Stop worrying about it. Look at the hotel. What is the highest possible point of impact that will cause the upper building to collapse into itself?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Scout said. “The lower you make it, the sooner it will all collapse in on itself, topple to the weakened side.”

“Let’s go back, then. We’ve seen enough here.”

But Scout lingered, staring at the canopy.

“We’ve seen enough.” Tayyib took Scout by the elbow and pulled him

back to the pickup where the Russian Dmitrovsky waited.

As mortar dust sprayed into Remly's hair and his left ear, the part of his mind that had been standing outside, analyzing his tachypsychia episode, shut down and only the core reptilian responses remained, leaving him to stare down the long tunnel of vision at the huge man at the white van while focusing on the front site and waiting for the exhale to squeeze squeeeeeze slowly and the gun silent but jerking up and twisting slightly off to the right and a red spot in the big man's cheek just beside his nose and the man slo-mo flinching off to the side, twisting, arms spreading as though he'd had a spasm between his shoulders, the small rifle floating off off off to one side and his head bouncing on the edge of the van's doorframe as a spasm went through Remly's chest like a lance, stabbing into his spine, Remly staggering back and his visual tunnel dropping to take in the HOA lady, now the HOA man, who scrambled for his purse, then taking in the man behind the HOA man, who was now running back to the van, briefcase clutched and a black pistol in his free hand, and Remly getting behind the block pillar, collapsing, his left hand fisted, pressing against his chest at the joining of his ribs while he struggled to breathe—the world around him sucked free of oxygen—no question of getting off another round, though suddenly discovering a bizarre core of religious belief as he prayed that he wouldn't die although he knew he was doing exactly that, dying, his heart failing, sweat pouring off his chin into his already sopping shirt, trying to lift his right hand, gun still squeezed and cocked, trying and failing, praying, his head cracking back against the block pillar and at that moment his hearing returned with the sound of car doors slamming and the van backing into the street, tire screeches as it whipped away and Remly began the slide out of his hyper-adrenal state, the pain intensifying as his limbs came alive and his vision broadened, sweat fogging his glasses, pain in heart, spine, back of his skull, would anyone have heard the gunshots?

As he lifted himself to his feet, Remly realized how heavy he'd gotten, too much for his legs to carry, asking himself if his knees would last. What was the mechanism of a heart attack? If he could stand and walk, if he was aware of the chill of his sweat-soaked shirt, was this fully a heart attack or a near miss? If pain itself was any indicator, this was a massive attack—he felt as though a stake had been driven through him, even shattering his spine. Yet based on the fact that he was walking, though perhaps not well, he had to believe that he might live after all.

And still the question ... would the neighbors be out to see who was shooting whom?

At the open gate Remly tried holstering the gun but could no more hit the Galco holster than he could pitch major-league, finally stuffing the P7 into his pants and flapping his shirt over it. A brief look up and down the block, no one in sight, Remly imagining that the triple-insulation of these new houses coupled with the hum of air conditioners had blanked out any gunshots—that and the probability that most of his neighbors had the television running. The HOA man’s wig was where he’d dropped it. Remly scooped it up, started back through the open gate, hesitated, then, still pressing a fist into the middle of his chest, still dripping sweat in fact, scoured the drive through his fogged glasses for spent rifle brass, then for his single 9mm case.

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. . . N Y E   C O U N T Y

It wasn’t a disaster but the shish-kebab meal had not gone well, and when they returned to their concrete dormitory the two Alis—Pops and the Kid—after pinched looks at Tayyib, went off to speak quietly to each other in a corner, while Scout confronted Tayyib directly.

“These Russians are dogs and pigs,” Scout said. “More and more I wonder if we are doing God’s will, attacking satanic America on the Russians’ behalf.”

Tayyib said, “I thought you were doing this on behalf of God.”

“The Russians are equally satanic! Satanic people cannot work in God’s name.”

“But it is the Americans that you contracted to destroy. Are you going back on your word?” The dormitory was clean and neat, prayer rugs rolled up and stored on end in a corner, each man’s gear folded beside his canvas sling bed. Though the windows inside were spotless, their outside grime had been left untouched for camouflage, and the any light that miraculously came through from the setting sun was oddly mottled, as though storm clouds were gathering outside. The room’s neatness, its utter lack of personal identity, the dim and mottled light, all contributed to the sense that this was a prison, the men condemned, Tayyib understanding that the room was magnifying the fear that had begun eating at Scout when he looked down on the Fremont Street canopy. Tayyib said, “Let’s talk about this tomorrow. Go outside when the sun is shining and talk it over.”

“We offered to share our food with their shish kebab—sharing in the name of God and in the name of the Prophet, who calls on us to share. They refused. Their shish kebab, they only shared it with us because they had so much; this isn’t sharing, it’s giving table-scraps to the animals. And they eat with their left hands—unclean in God’s eyes! Then this Russian Slava, this

Russian lights a cigarette and doesn't offer them around."

"You don't smoke," Tayyib said.

"This Russian, he doesn't know this. He shows his contempt for us by not offering."

"He didn't offer to the other Russians," Tayyib said.

"He knows they don't smoke," Scout responded. "To not offer to us was intended as an insult."

Tayyib sat quietly, there was no arguing.

Scout said, "I am thinking it would be a good thing to see if God would grant that the Americans would shelter us if we did not do this thing, Tayyib."

At this Tayyib said, "You made a contract. Doesn't the Book tell you that God insists that pious men honor their contracts?"

"The contract was made in good faith," Scout said. "It is only later that we learn these Russians are satanic, and God forbids us to make contracts with the devil."

"So you will give back the money, then?"

"The money was accepted in good faith. It is our money now."

"And already in the bank for your wife and infant boy," Tayyib observed.

Scout's face was set, he said nothing.

"And you believe that you'll somehow join your wife and son, if you can somehow get away from here."

Still, Scout sat silently, now looking away from Tayyib to a cloudy window across the spartan room.

"Then think on this, my friend," Tayyib said. "Let's suppose that you don't follow through with your job. You think this will go unnoticed?" He waited, but there was no response. "Do you think the powerful man behind all this doesn't know how to find your wife and infant boy? There are still countries in the region they can be sent to, your wife a whore and your son a eunuch."

Furrows of tension showed in the back of Scout's neck.

Tayyib said, "Hate these Russians if you will, but don't use that as an excuse to back out of your agreement. Whatever comes, a man must follow through on his agreements and obligations."

"'Tis not seasonable to call a man  
traitor that has an army at his heels.  
John Selden

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . HUELVA HARBOR

On his impressive motor yacht *La Virgen del Sol*, charter captain Gutermann had hosted industrial magnates, sports royalty, movie stars, and rock-and-roll deities. Yet through the years, evading the questions of cops and declining the bribes of gossip journalists, he had famously seen nothing and had heard even less: For all his questioners could tell, Gutermann had been born blind, deaf, and mute. His current passenger claimed to be a businessman and Captain Gutermann with his infinite capacity for belief accepted this with not a trace of doubt.

The gentleman had sent excellent references from respected personages of Lisbon, and had paid for the charter with a certified check drawn on a bank in the Seychelles. Quiet to the point of shyness, the passenger along with his entourage had kept to the grand salon on the cruise from Lisbon to Huelva, and Captain Gutermann respected his client's taste for privacy.

The captain also believed that the eleven gentlemen who joined his distinguished passenger were businessmen, very erect businessmen and very successful, Gutermann supposed, to judge from their obviously expensive, well-tailored suits and their gold wristwatches. The gentlemen seemed almost to march rather than walk, their backs quite straight and their shoulders squared—men more inclined to give commands than to make requests. Captain Gutermann had brought *La Virgen* to anchor in the harbor of Huelva, just inside Spain south of Portugal, and the gentlemen came out to the yacht in a motor launch. Once they were in the grand salon with the client, two of the client's retainers came out to the deck and stood quietly at the door to the salon—not obviously guarding it, but at the same time not inviting courtesy calls.

As Ashor watched, the launch brought men who had not been together since the Yanks began rolling into the airport, April of last year. First off the boat and up the ladder, quickstepping across the deck to the salon, was Darwish Abdul-Haqq, back then on the general staff, now taking anything to supplement the allowance that Ashor sent him every month.



It was General Darwish who'd been dispatched to the airport to confirm the news of a great victory over the Yanks—a victory broadcast worldwide when the Information Minister, Muhammed Saeed al-Sahaf, reported that the airport was back in the control of Iraqi forces and only four American tanks had survived the Iraqi counterattack. Darwish came racing back along the Matar Saddam Al-Dowli, his outriders diverting other traffic into the ditches.

“Four tanks?” General Darwish screamed when he crashed into the situation room at HQ. “Is that idiot Sahaf out of his mind? The whole damned American army is at the airport!”

It was at that point they'd dispersed, generals and colonels, and this meeting was like a homecoming to all of them, Ashor could see it in their open camaraderie: They hadn't yet refamiliarized themselves with each other, the old rivalries and backstabbing just beginning to warm up.

Once in the salon they greeted Ashor with quiet respect; two former generals, eight one-time colonels, and one cashiered colonel of the internal-security police. Perhaps overdressed for a yachting luncheon, the men wore their best clothing and most expensive accessories in the Arab tradition, maintaining their honor while showing esteem to their host. And Ashor, anticipating this, had had a new suit made and was wearing a necktie Talia had purchased at Louis Vuitton. His watch however was his trusty old Longenes.

Under Nasirpal's direction five dining tables of the salon had been put together to form a single one, and as the men chose chairs according to their pecking order around the long table, coffee, tea, pastries, and fresh fruit were brought out. As a courtesy ashtrays were also provided; as a further courtesy, the men who smoked didn't do so, out of regard for Ashor.

Around the table Nasirpal had placed large speakers, and now he put a white-noise CD in the player and tuned the volume up to a point that was bearable but sufficient to blot out any microphones in the room. Ashor was at the head of the table, Nasirpal went opposite him to the foot.

Had they been in an actual war Ashor might have said there was much to be covered, and like an American dispensing with the pleasantries gone directly to the heart of the campaign. But this was not a crisis, and Iraqi etiquette was in order—Ashor with the fleeting thought that this was where the Yanks constantly got it wrong. Nothing less than robotic in their blunt military debriefings, Americans marched immediately to the core of their business, then as abruptly ended and marched away, leaving bruised egos in their wake.

Though the men at the table all knew each other—and though they had

all quite obviously been renewing acquaintances on the trip to Huelva—Ashor began by introducing all eleven one at a time, starting at his right, then left, then zigzagging to the foot. He spoke not merely of each man's accomplishments and former stature, but praised his family's accomplishments and honor going back at least two generations. He spoke of the connections each had with important men within Iraqi society, and—particularly in the case of the Muslims, who were in the majority—of his great piety and fidelity to his faith. And as Ashor spoke, the others nodded and voiced their satisfaction with the courage, wisdom, and generosity of the man being addressed. Ashor concluded each introduction with a personal thanks and an expression of his own good fortune to have such a fine man at his side in this campaign—a campaign not yet defined by Ashor, yet intuitively understood by the men around the table.

Facing each other across the table at Ashor's right and left were the two generals, and next to Darwish Abdul-Haqq sat Ashor's former adjutant, Colonel Fawzi Mukhlis al-Musa'id, a short, round, bald man with the face of a well-fed cherub, always verging on a smile. Although notepads and pencils had been placed for them around the table, it was Fawzi who scribbled the most, and the most furiously—ignoring his amber worry beads—as though transcribing the gospel of great events.

At the far end, right and left of Nasirpal, were a former brevet-colonel of the army and Sami al-Saqr, a once-colonel of the Mukhabarat—the latter in fact a pleasant enough fellow who had charged only a nominal sum to help Ashor defect with family and entourage some six years previous.

"The reason for this meeting," Ashor said, after running the course of his panegyrics, "is to lay the groundwork for military operations that will maintain government stability if the Americans lose control of the situation back home." But this was only Ashor's secondary goal; what he did not reveal was his primary purpose, judgements which Ashor, Fawzi, and Darwish would determine as the meeting unfolded.

Ashor continued, "By now you've all heard the Yanks are pressing the Interim Government to pass out amnesties to former Ba'ath members who are needed to shore up security and civil-service infrastructure back home—I'm sure you've all gotten the shaku maku of the streets. When your turn comes and you're reinstated in the army ..." a gesture toward Sami, the former secret-police colonel "... to internal security, your first task will be to identify others in your branch who are unhappy with the present government, but are not committed to any of the religious paramilitaries. When the time comes to move, I have arranged arms and personal equipment for seven élite battalions—rifles, boots, helmets and body-armor, haversacks,

and more. We'll recruit former foot soldiers, but you'll also be expected to pick non-coms and subalterns from among the active military—probably the men who will join up following the amnesty.”

“And the arms?” Darwish asked, though he knew the inventory as well as he knew his sons’ names.

“Only a few field pieces, but enough to bring down the armories where we can get more of everything big and small. As for rifles, we are getting eight thousand new Al Kadesiah, with date-palm embossing on the receivers.”

The brevet-colonel slapped the table. “That’ll give ‘em spine.”

From the middle of the table Colonel Hashim spoke, “Seven battalions? To take over a nation?”

Ashor’s adjutant Fawzi said, “Not the nation, the army.”

Darwish broke in: “The Yanks collapsing, what will you face? As it now stands it’s an army of inexperienced boys and desperate men who need a job, any job ... they grab at anything, poor bastards, just to put food on the table. Once the center core of the armed forces is taken, this amateur military will collapse in on itself.”

“But, we are colonels,” Hashim persisted. “We should be leading brigades, not battalions.”

Before Ashor could speak, Darwish intervened again. “Can you not understand that General Ashor is expecting you—*yourself*—with a hard-core élite force, to expand your battalion into a brigade? Read your history, Hashim! A rolling military juggernaut picks up volunteers like a bee collecting pollen.”

Farther down the table, near Nasirpal at the foot, another colonel—Thomas Mansour, an Assyrian—said, “Just by calling on my old majors and captains I can personally turn a battalion into a full brigade of volunteers with accountability and vertical loyalty down to the squad level. A few more brigades, a few raids the regional arsenals, we can take over key divisions and corps in two days or less.”

Hashim said, “You say ‘the Yanks lose control’ and ‘when the Yanks collapse.’ What if they don’t? What then?”

“Some things, my good friend,” Ashor said, “you must trust to your leadership.” And with this Ashor saw in his mind’s eye the American response to a general military callup following the Las Vegas event—the protesters in the streets, the university campuses ablaze—and offered up a sedate expression neither smug nor sanctimonious, but nonetheless selfassured.

Colonel Hashim still looked skeptical and Ashor, unnoticed by everyone but Darwish, Fawzi, and Nasirpal brushed an imaginary mote of dust from

the notepad before him.

The men in this salon were more reliable than the run-of-the-mill former Iraqi general staff, but when he was done vetting them Ashor had brushed off another colonel, only five colonels remaining to head seven battalions. Later, as the men were leaving, he took Darwish and Fayyad, the other general, aside to tell them they would have to command battalions until the dust settled and they were at last free to run the entire military establishment.

“And Hashim and Mustafa?” Darwish asked, adding the other doubting colonel.

Ashor simply nodded grimly.

“It’s done,” Darwish said.

“Before they get back to Iraq,” Ashor said. “No telling who they’ll speak to, if they get home alive.”

“It goes without saying, sir.”

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## . . . L A S V E G A S

Remly was shirtless and feverishly towelling his hair when the gate chime rang. In one motion he dropped the towel in the tub, ran a brush more or less over his head, swept the fresh shirt from the bathroom door hook, and grabbed his glasses as he went into the bedroom where the security monitor showed a bright blue Miata at the driveway gate, its top down and Pru behind the wheel, holding a cell phone away from her face to speak into the security box: “Charley? Open the gate please?”

Without responding, Remly reached for the gate remote next to the monitor, and without waiting to see the gates open he slipped sockless into loafers and dashed for the front door. Halfway there, in the middle of the hall and the pain rising, he stopped to press a fist into his chest, forcing himself to breathe deeply and regularly. He saw it again—the big man’s face, petals of blood blossoming from the small red hole beside his nose, the man spasming, arms flailing, his small rifle flying. When the pain sank to a bearable level he started again for the door, regulating his breathing and working up a smile. Pru was already at the bell, ringing.

And now, a hand on the doorknob, no choice but to confront it—how to disengage from her without getting rid of her for good? Romance be damned, and given the state of his emotions and body sex out of the question, Remly wanted only to slide between fresh sheets and sleep for a week.

Pru in the open door more attractive than he remembered and more sensuous than he could deal with at the moment, her hourglass figure gen-

erous at the hips, a wheat-colored dress in some sort of jersey-knit fabric showing the rounded contours of her body, a wide belt accentuating her slim waist and a bit of cleavage peeking at him from the dress's wide, roll-over scoop neck. In one hand she held a big canvas-and-leather purse, along with an even larger paper shopping bag from Trader Joe's, her left hand pressing a cell phone to her face, her expression intense and fixed on the hall behind Remly.

"I'm here," she said into the phone. Then, flashing her dazzling smile at Remly, "I'm so sorry, is there a TV?"

As Remly stepped back, Pru walked in, her body moving provocatively under the fabric of her dress, thrusting Trader Joe's sack at him.

"Living room," Remly said, at the same time pointing toward the room and taking the sack which smelled faintly of fish.

Pru indicated the sack: "Kitchen." Then, after another "I'm so sorry" and traveling to the living room, she continued speaking to her phone, "What channel? Is it live coverage?"

After dropping the fish on the counter next to his still-unwashed vegetables, Remly went to the living room where Pru had managed to turn on the small TV, but was struggling with the remote unit; on the screen, a re-run on the History Channel. "How do you get Channel Four?" she asked.

He took the remote and brought up Channel 4.

It was Fremont Street, La Fontaine barricaded off, behind the barricades a crowd bristling with video cameras and microphones. The view panned up to show a clock on the casino's façade. Pasted across the top of the screen, CASINO OWNER GEORGE GRANTER UNTIMELY DEATH, and a voice-over "... can see from here, the entire action of the clock has ..."

Remly said, "Pru, what's happened?" but Pru was saying to her phone, "... do they want everyone, or just . . .?"

"... major Swiss clockmaker. Creating animated clocks since the year fifteen fifty-eight ..."

"... so is it just food service wait staff, or do they want casino beverage too . . .?"

"... blocked off Fremont Street. Fire and Rescue are pulling out their vehicles, Metro is expanding their Do-Not-Cross ..."

As the scene unfolded on the news, and as Pru continued on her cell, Remly began to understand that his problem of disengaging from Pru without seeming to reject her had been solved.

As Pru took the phone from her ear and touched off the call, Remly said, "Is the casino calling in . . .?"

"Wait, wait," Pru said. She tapped the keyboard and held the phone to

her ear again, looking from Remly to the TV screen and again to Remly. “Wait.” She listened intently. “Prerecorded.” She looked at the television.

Police were sweeping back the crowd and expanding the line of barricades.

“... the press! Press credentials, officer . . . !”

Pru turned to Remly, her eyes wet. She melted against him and cried into his shoulder.

The feel of her body, the warmth, her scent of lavender—Remly felt the stirrings of desire.

“Oh, Charley, I want so much ...” She pulled back and bit her lip. “Poor George. And his wife pregnant. Poor Ginger!”

“You have to go to the casino?”

Pru said, “It’s ... they’re holding ... Metro is pulling everyone who was on duty into the big auditorium. Questioning. Everyone else has to go in—all us senior girls—senior people—go in, keep the property going ... customers not getting questioned, just quick ID checks. Have to go keep the property alive.”

“I’m sorry, Pru. I was looking forward ...”

“Oh, God, me too. Me too! I wanted so to be with you tonight!”

With that she stood on tiptoe to kiss him hard and soft on the mouth, then pushed away. “Have to get home. Into work clothes. When can I see you again?”

Before he could answer, Pru turned and picked up her large purse and started for the front door.

“Tomorrow?” Pru said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” Then as she slipped out the door, “But cook the fish tonight. It’s fresh caught.” And she was gone.

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## . . . N Y E C O U N T Y

Andrei stood in the open doorway, Mikhail tall behind him, Andrei’s features glossy—the feverish glow of a small boy whose face had gotten a vigorous scrubbing. Before Andrei could speak, Yuri stood and started toward him. “We got to talk about this nuclear shroud of yours. Yesterday you were supposed to deliver ...”

To Didi, Andrei said, “Come outside, we have to talk.”

“This fucking shroud of yours ...” Yuri began.

“Not now, Yuri,” Didi said. He recognized in Andrei’s expression something beyond the usual businesslike set of Andrei’s mouth—something deeper, perhaps even tragic. To Andrei, Didi said, “Step outside, we’ll talk.” And over his shoulder, “Viktor, keep everyone inside until I return.”

It was obvious to Didi that Andrei was on the verge of emotional disintegration. Didi stood with Andrei and Mikhail in the shade of the overhang in the shallow cave, Didi's pickup to one side and Andrei's white van behind them. Andrei was working hard at appearing cool and professional—working hard and failing. Mikhail looked little better, holding a pained smile like a man with a toothache.

Didi said, "I am going to guess that something has gone very wrong, my old friend."

Andrei gave a tight nod and said, "I was setting the Yank up for an event. There is a fraternal lodge building some distance from his house, where his association of home owners has meetings. I was preparing him to come to this building when it was not occupied, to see a committee about his new wall. The fraternal lodge is isolated, almost no traffic, no nearby buildings, just empty acreage all around. Once the Yank is in the parking lot, completely out in the open, Mikhail hits him with a cyanide dart from an air gun. No bullet wound. Then we tow his car to an overpass out in the desert, give him an accident with plenty of gasoline fire."

"I take it this didn't come to pass."

"The Colonel!" Andrei's façade began to collapse.

"Steady, old friend," Didi said. "Just the simple details."

"The Colonel!" Andrei said again.

"And that fucking Georgi!" Mikhail added. "He's in the van." Mikhail was smoking a cigarette like a greedy infant at its mother's breast—he couldn't seem to get enough of it.

Didi said, "And the Colonel?"

"I told him it's not what I do, shooting. My God, Didi, look at the screw-up by that break-in crew on this same Yank. I do *smart* jobs. *Smart!* Look at London. Everyone said it couldn't be done, *look* at it. *Smart!* My clock tower job at the Fontaine casino, came off today just like a mousetrap! The hospital job in Las Vegas two days ago—*smart!* Last year, my bomb at Moscow Rocks—I made Chechen handwriting all over it. *Smart smart smart!* This morning the Colonel calls, he's in some kind of rage. Tells me, 'You got to get this Yank right now.' I can't say a thing, he's crazy angry. Says, 'No more screwing around, you go shoot that Yank right now today.'" Andrei was trying to light a Marlboro, but his quivering hands betrayed him.

"Did he say anything about Tblisi?" asked Didi.

Andrei shook his head.

Even so, Didi thought, there had been a phone call yesterday, a rant from the Colonel about 10,000 dollars American he'd had to send to Tblisi for no good reason. Didi had bobbed and ducked in his responses, giving

the Colonel nothing to hang him with, and he supposed that Andrei had gotten the full load of the Colonel's wrath instead.

"The way Andrei had it worked out," Mikhail said, "originally we was going to be in a big, open parking lot, thick trees all around, you couldn't see us from the street. This is dicey as hell, the way the Colonel has us doing it, shooting this man in his own neighborhood, houses all around."

"Bad enough the Colonel has us going in shooting," Andrei said. He'd got the cigarette lit, but now had trouble inhaling smoke. "He says we have to take Georgi with us."

"Fucking Georgi," Mikhail said. But to Didi it seemed as though Mikhail was offering a well-rehearsed congregational response to a priestly invocation. "The Colonel thinks we need some kind of heavy muscle for this. The only muscle Georgi has is between his fucking ears."

"And the details," Didi said, still patient, speaking to Andrei as though to a child. "The details."

"Everything was going fine—as well as could be expected, given the job. Mikhail and I are at the Yank's gate, he is opening it to talk to us. I'm smiling, Mikhail is smiling, the Yank is smiling."

"Everyone is happy, then?" Didi said.

Mikhail said, "Until Georgi."

"We leave Georgi in the van," Andrei said. He gave up on his Marlboro and tossed it aside.

"No trash," Didi said. He stepped away to retrieve the cigarette, spat on the smoldering end, and put it into a pocket.

"Georgi," Mikhail said. "This isn't a guy you take with you to make diplomacy."

Didi said, "So you two are at the gate, the Yank is there, everyone is smiling at each other. Now what?"

"The Yank looks past us and stops smiling," Andrei said. "I turn, I see Georgi standing in the open door of the van, aiming his 9mm carbine at the Yank. The Yank says, 'Who the hell is that?'"

"I turn around," Mikhail said, "I see fucking Georgi, too."

Andrei said, "Next thing I know, there are two gunshots ..."

"And Georgi?" Didi asked, though certain that he already knew the answer.

"How could we have guessed?" Andrei said.

"This Yank," Mikhail said. "This guy is some shooter. One round, Georgi gets a hole right in the middle of his face. Some kind of hot load, a big hole at the back, it takes out a big piece of Georgi's skull, it's all over the back seat."



Didi said, “And now Georgi is in the van?”

Andrei said, “At the sound of the two shots, I turned to see the Yank ducking behind a concrete post. At this point I didn’t want to start a gunfight in the middle of this neighborhood—bad enough two 9mm shots were fired. Mikhail and I ran back to the van, no hesitation, and got out of there.”

“And that’s exactly the way it happened?” Didi asked Mikhail.

“Absolutely,” Mikhail said, a bit too quickly. “Every detail on the nose.”

‘And Georgi conveniently unable to give his side of the story,’ Didi thought.

“What can we do with Georgi?” Andrei asked.

“We have a place for him,” Didi said, thinking of the long vertical shaft in the mine, with Fyodor already down it. “It’s the colonel I’m worried about.”

“What am I going to tell him?” Andrei said.

“The Yank simply disappeared. You went there, he wasn’t home, you have other obligations. End of story.”

“And Georgi?”

“Georgi disappears later, when we set off the nuclear volcano.”

Andrei said, “What if the Colonel calls, tells me to go back to the Yank’s house again?”

“Forget it,” Didi said. “I will call, tell him we had a crisis on the nuclear volcano, we can’t spare you. I’ve dealt with him before, I can handle him on this—it’s a matter of keeping the principal job in focus. I’ll think of something more lasting later on.” To Mikhail he said, “Now let’s get Viktor and deal with Georgi, eh?” Then to Andrei, “And you’ve still got work to do on that nuclear shroud of yours, my friend. I’ll tell Yuri to be patient with you, but you’d better get ready for some verbal abuse if you don’t get it to him soon.”

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## . . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

There were three gates to get through; the first with an armed guard into the country-club estates, next a code box into the private enclave of massive homes, finally the residence itself, where Remly leaned out to speak into the security box. “It’s me, Charley.”

“Yes, my boy.” The F.O.’s voice, but robotic—and the huge, heavy, double-gate rolling slowly back.

Up the cobbled drive to the rented house, Remly counting its amenities: A five-car garage, and beyond that a tall motor-home garage—perfect for Weaver’s new laboratory and workshop. A direct overview of nearly all of

Lake Las Vegas from both the downstairs and upstairs windows. And, from what he could tell, the house itself large enough to billet the entire team—plus any additional bodies they might recruit—and still seem half-deserted. He passed a tennis court and a broad expanse of lawn close-shaved for major-league croquet, and saw the hint of a swimming-pool cabaña in back.

The salmon was beginning to sizzle on the cooking island's barbecue grill, the vegetables were sautéing nicely in olive oil with pressed garlic and bruised leaves of oregano and basil, and a gray wig rested at the edge of the granite counter.

The F.O. stood watching, an impressive wine glass in hand. He gently swirled the pinot noir, sniffed it, and took a sip. He said, "Suppose I should crack open a *vouvray pétillant* for your fish. *Vouvray* good for you?"

"Another water," Remly said. "A squirt of lemon juice."

"Ruin of your stomach, water," the F.O. said. "Oxidizes things—rust and corrosion. God alone knows what it does to the soul."

Remly stirred the vegetables with a large wood spatula.

The F.O. said, "You're not going to collapse from this, though, eh?"

"Collapse? I *float* on water."

"You looked like death-warmed-over when you walked in, my boy."

"I'm not certified in black arts," Remly replied drily. "Going to the range gives you delusions of competence—paper targets don't shoot back."

The F.O. prodded the wig with a large cooking fork. "You did well enough—took coup as it were. What do you intend for it? Hang it on your belt like an Apache?"

Remly rewarded him with a patient smile.

"And you're certain this woman—this fellow—is 'a little light in his loafers' as you put it?"

"He's done drag before," Remly said. "Ran off on spike heals like an Olympic sprinter. I've got my hands full with the veggies—think you might turn the fish?"

"Not my forte, cooking," the F.O. said, pronouncing it *fort*. "I shall open the wine, however." Rummaging about in the wine cooler of the massive walk-in pantry, he added over his shoulder, "Never clearly understood why so many people pronounce it 'four-tay.' Lord knows, the French don't."

Remly asked, "It has gender, French? Maybe it's the feminine."

"Even in its feminine form, no *accent aigu* over the ultimate vowel. But the word's come into the English—been adopted—and should be pronounced 'fort,' just as the French instructed us." The F.O. thought about it for a moment. "Italian!" he said. "Must be. Italian, 'loud,' as in 'forte-piano,'

meaning ‘loud-soft.’ As opposed to the French ‘forte,’ meaning ‘strong.’”

Remly offered the F.O. a wry smile. “So people are confusing noise with strength.”

“I imagine so,” the F.O. said. “Great deal of that going round, or so I’ve observed.”

Remly turned to the barbecue and flipped the salmon over to crisp the other side. He saw the running man in the dress again, and the large man with the red hole in his face going backwards, and he breathed deeply, taking in the odors of garlic and oregano and salmon, and he wanted a hit of the F.O.’s *vouvray*. He reached instead for his glass of lemon-spiked water and took a long drink.

“Odd coincidence,” the F.O. said, “that fellow at the casino going like that.” There was a pop as a cork was pulled. “Have you given any thought to the possibility that there might be a connection? Kurskov dealing with this fellow Granter, then Granter going like that.”

“Not my fight,” Remly said. “I’ve got enough on my plate, just trying to put together a Who’s-Who of the people I already know about.”

“Reminds me,” the F.O. said. “Owe you an apology.” Remly turned to look at him. He was finishing the pinot noir, the huge glass tilted well back. “A moment.” He found another glass, though not so large, and tipped a splash of *vouvray* into it. “A moment.” The F.O. tested the *vouvray*—Remly could see him bringing the wine back to his palate, savoring it—then poured a proper amount for himself. “An apology. Alan sent me that report he’d got from his major in Riga, the old *Zemessardze* operative. Was to have brought it to the house in Montecito, Alan was, but our plans changed—or so we led him to believe, eh?”

The F.O. settled his glass on the large cooking island and scurried from the kitchen. When he came back he had a Mac PowerBook.

At the sight of the computer Remly said, “I thought you were the industrialized west’s last holdout against these dehumanizing contraptions.”

“Now now,” the F.O. said as he found a spot on the cooking island for his new acquisition. “Now now.” He fussed for a moment with the laptop, then asked, “Have you any idea how to open this thing?”

## KNOW THYSELF

First of three maxims inscribed  
on Apollo's Temple at Delphi.

"Know thyself" is ridiculous. More  
practical to say 'Know others.'"

Menander

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

The cooking island was smaller than a whaling skiff, though not by much. Remly pulled the sauté pan off the unit and stopped the gas all around. After removing the salmon he addressed the F.O.'s Mac laptop, which lay between a disorderly pile of notes and an elegant Coach attaché case. He opened the laptop, confessing, "I'm a PC kind of guy. Do you know how to retrieve E-mail in a Macintosh?"

"What exactly do you take me for?" the F.O. asked.

The screen demanded a password. "Password?" Remly asked.

"Password," the F.O. said.

"What is it?"

"Password! Are you listening?"

As Remly typed in `p a s s w o r d` the F.O. opened his attaché and prodded about in it, extracting a hand-written note on his monogrammed linen letterhead which he handed to Remly.

Remly read aloud: "Open case have Charles go to the doc have Charles click on McMale."

"Exactly." The F.O. was deep into his *vouvray*.

There was a list of applications along the left side of the screen, among them Mac Mail. Remly clicked on it and the E-mail utility came up.

"Password?" Remly asked again.

"As I said."

There were two E-mails: A welcome from the F.O.'s 'net service, the other from w.j.weaver. Remly clicked on the second, which opened an encryption program, then the message ... though not a message from Weaver but a report from the Latvian counter-espionage service. On the face sheet DMITRI DMITRIEVICH DMITROVSKY with a grainy photo.

Remly asked, "Have you read this?" He spun the PowerBook around for the F.O. to see the screen.

"I've been kept rather busy, attending to all this." The F.O. swept his

free hand around, as though offering the mansion and grounds for Remly's consideration.

Remly went to the F.O.'s side and began scrolling briskly through Dmitrovsky's personal details—age, education at the Dzerzhinsky Square Academy, wife, son, daughter. Resignation from the service after the failed '91 coup, to work freelance for Aleksandr Kurskov. Remly went through Dmitrovsky's post-Soviet activities at a more leisurely pace. He asked, "This is from Alan's contact in Riga?"

"Direct from *Zemessardze*. Not overly fond of the Russians, these Latvians."

After skimming over a number of early assassinations of Russian oligarchs, Remly read from the screen, "'Orchestrated a series of kinetic energy<sup>1</sup> events—Moscow, St. Petersburg, Volgograd—which were falsely put to the doorstep of Chechen terrorists by the Kremlin's nomenklatura. Home Guard analysts however directly link such blasts to Dmitrovsky, working for Kurskov, perhaps outsourced by Moscow's Security Services; perhaps by Kremlin elite.'"

He scrolled further, slowing at other bomb events blamed variously on Chechens and, in one instance, to Western-leaning elements in Ukraine.

"Is any of this documented?" Remly asked.

"As I said, they're not overly fond of Moscow. Alan seems to think the overall picture is reasonably valid, however."

Remly stopped scrolling and said, quite loudly, "That's her!" He pointed at a new photo, as grainy as the first but immediately recognizable. Under the picture, DMITROVSKY TECHNICIAN—ANDREI PIERREVICH STEPANENKO.

"Appears almost oriental," the F.O. said. "Crimean, it says?"

Remly said, "The Home Owners lady, no question." Then, reading from the screen, "'Facilitator for the above mentioned DMITROVSKY. Electronic- and mechanical-engineering student, Dzerzhinsky Square Academy. Designer of sophisticated electronic triggering devices, remote-controlled mechanisms.' Where did they get this information?"

"Look here," the F.O. said, pointing at the screen. "He seems to have worked for a while at SBU—*Sluzhba Bespeky Ukrayiny*, Ukraine espionage. Documents there for sale on a wholesale basis, so Alan tells me. I imagine our Latvian friends dropped a dime on this fellow Andrei."

"Electro-mechanical robotics. Photo-electric activators. He sounds like Weaver's mirror-image."

"If so," the F.O. said, "it's a very dark mirror indeed. Obviously it was  
<sup>1</sup>"kinetic energy" – Bomb explosion.

this Andrei Stepanenko's fine hand in the London kinetic energy event—loss of a perfectly good Bentley.”

Remly turned off the laptop and closed it. “I think we have enough to read them—recognize their fingerprints—do you think?”

The F.O. was tipping his glass back, but nodded all the same. He swallowed and said, “We’ve enough to go on for the moment, my boy. This mad electronics genius has a taste for lipstick and high heels—and he is definitely here in Las Vegas, that’s a start.” Obviously pleased with their find, the F.O. said, “As for his being a little light in his loafers, I suspect I have just the person to smoke him out.”

Remly looked up, not sure what the old man meant.

The F.O. cleared it up. “I’m off to Beverly Hills tomorrow. A well-considered expedition, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ah, Beverly Hills. Just stay buttoned up.” Remly turned to his cooking. “How do you want your fish? Overdone, or fully cremated?”

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## . . . L I S B O N

Two weeks previously Nasirpal had said to Ashor, “These old Soviet scramblers from the Colonel should be in a museum, Papageneral.”

“I see,” Ashor said, settling back in his chair and waiting for the proposition that was sure to follow.

“We’re okay using them around town for security communications, but when we try to talk to Baghdad they break up so badly we may as well be speaking Sanskrit.”

Still Ashor waited.

“Also, there aren’t enough for our people back home.”

Ashor said, “Aannndddd ..?”

“I have an idea,” Nasirpal said.

And so Nasirpal took up internet blogging, and in Iraq, Ashor’s cheery adjutant Fawzi Mukhlis did the same, though neither acknowledged the other; to anyone stumbling across their blogs they were separate, entirely disconnected youngsters—Joao in Lisbon, Muhammad in Iraq. And like mindlessly nattering teenagers they wrote innocently and not very well about girls, teachers, pals, sports, arms shipments, who was to be targeted next for killing, and the security status of various military facilities.

“Papa looks 4ward 2 Big Homecoming soon,” Nasirpal blogged. “He will coach a nu Home Team, if they have the rite Equipment.”

On his own blog, in the midst of chat about his new girlfriend, Fawzi Mukhlis wrote, “My homeboys have already 4med a gr8 after-school league, 7 teams only, but ready to expand once we get our uniforms and equipment.

My own after-school team is fully-formed and ready 2 play. Very good players, but 0 equipment. And we can't play until the 4en Xchange Teachers start to leave."

Then, just yesterday, came the blog from Fawzi that Nasirpal had been waiting for: "After-school league 2 be equipping soon. A charity has donated uniforms and equipment."

The arms shipment had arrived. Now there was only the wait for America's playground to get nuked.

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## . . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

As Remly got into his pickup to leave, he slipped the P7 from his kidney holster and loosened his belt to carry the gun in the front of his pants as he drove home. After clicking himself into the shoulder-harnessed seat belt, he adjusted that to secure the P7 even more: In a collision or a panic stop it was a given that loose guns took shelter under the clutch and brake pedals.

A rent-a-cop was waving him through the final gate when his cell phone rang; Morris Berman's number on the screen.

"Hello, Morris, I'm here for once. Meaning to call you."

"So I'm holding my breath, waiting to hear your voice."

"What can I say?"

"After you've said you're sorry? Hey, I'm up to my schnoz in schnauzers. You been watching the action at your buddy bud's casino?"

"I have a friend?"

"Ha ha."

"With a casino?"

"La Fontaine, schmucko. George Granter does a back half-gainer off a third floor clock they're installing, gets himself deader'n Kelsey's nuts."

"Sorry to hear that. You're up to your nose in this?"

"What we got, we're putting the property into conservatorship for accounting irregularities. A lot of little cash exchanges that take place real close to each other. Put 'em together, it looks like someone's moving big money around without filling out the state Gaming Papers and federal tax forms. I'm still at the property—we're locking down the file cabinets, pulling total disk copies offa the computer network. Like I said, up to my schnoz."

"Gaming Control pays overtime?"

"They don't, I'm outta here like a shot." Then loud but away from his phone, "No no no no no. Nobody talks to the media, okay? Gloria, honey, Glo, get those cameras outta here. Get Metro in here if you hafta. Barricade those mikes and cameras back. That uniform still out there? Tell him, get his ass in here and stick a gun in someone's face, I don't give a fuck it's

the *RJ*, get ‘em outta here.” There was a silence, Remly guessing that Morris was watching people dance to his tune. “So, look, reason I called, we got tickets to The Pavilion, me and the wife, couple nights from now. But this Fontaine thing is sucking the life out of me. I tell the wife, she should take Pru with her, I’m gonna be doing ten- twelve-hour days for a couple weeks at least. So the wife says no, whyn’t we give the tickets to Proosie and Charley, they can have a real date.”

“That’s good of you, Morris, but I’m going to be a little ...”

“Looks like a fun show,” Morris said. “Cultural exchange thing—like Cirque de Soleil with gauchos. Call it Ópera Rústico Anunciación.”

Remly said, “Anunciación?”

Remly went back through the armed gate, again through the digital one, and once more announced himself at the F.O.’s oversized villa. When he pulled up to the front portico, the F.O. was waiting for him, a glass of vou-vray in hand.

Remly got out of his small pickup and asked, “Did Weaver say he was leaving a carton of dosimeters?”



“My lad, if thou wouldst win success, join  
thyself to some unpopular but noble cause.”

John Greenleaf Whittier

## AUTUMN 2004 . . .

## . . . BEVERLY HILLS

In reality the salon wasn't on Rodeo but around the corner—one of those cross streets that slip diagonally down to Wilshire as though hoping to merge into it without getting caught. On the salon's right flank was the brushed stainless-steel façade of a bondage and lingerie shop that the F.O. at first took to be a hardware store. As for the salon itself, it was entirely unremarkable—nothing in its outer architecture to distinguish it from the stone office building that rose above it or the vacant store at its left. The salon was called, simply, *Chevelure Rodeo*. There was a nicely scripted sign in the curtained window that claimed, “Paris, Cannes, Aspen, Beverly Hills—M. Louis-Christophe, propriétaire. Appointment only, no walk-ins.”

After an astonished study of the window of the haute sex boutique next to *Chevelure*, the F.O. entered the salon, whose small reception area was as empty of furnishings as it was of receptionist. A single glass case displayed bottles of French hairdressing formulas, their price tags turned demurely aside; on two walls there were watercolors of Paris, Cannes, Aspen, and what looked like the upper end of Rodeo Drive, with a single horsewoman riding a sorrel hunter on the grassy median's bridal trail—an image from the city's simpler past.

As there was no bell, the F.O. stood uncomfortably in the middle of the little room, wondering if the clientele being groomed beyond were entirely presentable, or if his intrusion would cause a stampede of squealing, half-naked women. At last he moved to the curtains that preserved the modesty of the salon's working parts and called, “Hello? Someone to attend to me, if you please?”

The large, florid-faced woman who stepped through the curtains wore a stained rubber apron, her gloves similarly stained; to the F.O. she looked more like a plumber or the mistress of a medieval abattoir than a hairdresser. She said “Yes” not very patiently.

“Do forgive me,” the F.O. said. “Didn't mean to take you from your activity. The name is Burlingame. Burlingame of Hancock Park and Montecito. I believe Jean-Francois will see me if you will pass this information on to him.”

The woman measured him as though for a noose: “Mr. Louis-Christophe doesn’t do men.” She turned to the curtain.

Repressing a laugh that emerged as a cough, the F.O. said, “Jean-François will not be unhappy if you will kindly pass along my name.”

The woman turned back to stun him with another sour look. “Burlingame,” she said.

“Hancock Park and Montecito. He will know.”

She disappeared through the curtains and shortly after a tenor shriek came from inside the salon proper, and a man—the same tenor—cooing, “Jeanette, darling, please finish coloring darling Rebecca for me. My favorite uncle has just arrived from the provinces.” A pause, and the voice continued, “Rebecca, darling, please please forgive me. I *promise* I’ll do you entirely next time. It’s my *very* favorite uncle and I *mustn’t* put him off.”

The curtains parted again, and this time a small man—as small as the F.O.—appeared. His hair was artfully tufted and tipped with blond highlights as though beach-bleached by the summer sun, and he stood peeling off his gloves and smiling hugely and fighting back tears. “My God!” he said, his trim van Dyke beard quivering. “It’s really you!”

“Hello, Xavier,” the F.O. said. “Tell me, please—how has your excitement index been lately?”

“My God!”

“Do you think it might be amusing to take a little vacation from the shop? A brief return to the trade—get your heart pumping again?”

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## . . . L I S B O N

Ashor was busily preparing for his return home in anticipation of the Las Vegas event, tutoring Nasirpal on the friction he should expect between Daphne and Garrett, and—perhaps even more important—how to keep Talia misinformed about Ashor’s exact whereabouts and activities, once he got to Iraq.

As they spoke, Ashor’s intercom rang, a flashing dot at Talia’s line. Ashor tapped the speaker phone off and lifted the handset.

“Yes, darling,” Ashor said.

Yesterday’s crisis had been the salary demands of a young woman—a girl, actually, in Talia’s eyes, recently graduated from the Fashion Institute in Los Angeles, California—whom Talia had considered hiring as a designer. “These infants want to be instant millionaires,” Talia complained. Ashor had settled that with a list of other design schools in Brussels and Madrid. Today it was about Hanin: “I think she’s pregnant again,” Talia said.

With an eye on Nasirpal, Ashor asked, “Has her doctor confirmed

this?”

“How could she have?” Talia demanded. “I only noticed it this morning.” As though it was she, rather than Hanin, who was under suspicion of negligent pregnancy. “She threw up, then she wanted only sweet-cakes and tea for breakfast!”

Ashor said, “Well, that’s wonderful if true.”

“Wonderful?! My God, I’m going to depend on her to help with my atelier. What will I do if she’s passing out all the time?”

As they spoke, Nasirpal had been studying something on his laptop. With a wave of his finger he asked for Ashor’s attention, and spun the screen around for his father to see: It was a new posting on Fawzi Mukhlis’s blog.

The blog read, “Gr8 news! Followers of the late Harun al-Asrag have new leader. Al-Asrag and Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi were 2 gr8 Iraqis who could bring all sides of the country 2gether in peace, then Harun was martyred. Now al-Asrag movement is gathering strength, Harun’s nephew taking on leadership.”

To Talia, Ashor said, “She a modern young woman, darling. I’m sure she will hold up and continue working until she comes to term—it’s what they do nowadays.” At the same time he looked at Nasirpal, pointed his free forefinger at the computer screen, then put his finger to his temple and dropped his thumb a number of times as though shooting himself. “Just keep giving her love and encouragement, I’m sure she’ll deal with it nicely.”

“Yes, sir,” Nasirpal said, and rose and started for the door. “I’ll get Rafiq. We’ll need one of his facilitators, another bomb probably.”

With a hand over the mouthpiece, Ashor said to the departing Nasirpal, “Tell him to think of hiring a female shaheed. A burqa, she’ll be able to get in close.” Then, to Talia, “Yes, dearest, I’m listening. The real concern is for Hanin and the child, if indeed she is pregnant. If it comes to that, and she can’t balance it all—work and pregnancy—we’ll just have to hire a personal assistant for you.”

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## . . . L A S V E G A S

For Remly it had been a day of collecting equipment and wardrobe.

He had his own tools but, as there was the possibility of leaving them on the spot, he gathered new supplies from a number of different sources—a cordless drill here, a large cookie-cutter drill-bit there, bolt cutters, a reel of dental floss, road flares, a dozen rolls of 35mm film, a carton of surgical gloves from CVS, avalanche cord from the REI wilderness outfitter. To these he added four large sacks of marbles from Target, a slingshot from Kmart, and four games of jacks from WalMart.

For his costuming he bought a faux-gold ID bracelet, black velveteen pants, a long-sleeved T-shirt in iridescent lavender, glossy patent dancing shoes, a pinky ring from a pawn shop, and at an indoor swapmeet a counterfeit Rolex wristwatch. Once home he got into his new finery to accustom himself to it and wore it for the remainder of the day, often looking at himself in a mirror and fighting back laughter. The problem was that Xavier, who should logically have been dealing with this issue, would be tied up with other business—business of a sort that Remly wished to do even less than he wanted to go out in public dressed like this.

As he gathered his tools and equipment in preparation for making his rounds, the phone rang—Pru.

“Charley? Oh my God. Everything seems to work against us, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Remly said. “Does it?”

“It’s Li’l Mikey,” Pru said. “They didn’t tell her until this morning.”

Remly said, “They didn’t tell her.”

“He died two *days* ago. No one told Mimi until this morning, and she’s supposed to be the Committee’s hospitality chairperson.”

“Hospitality?”

“She says the ladies on the Committee are planning the funeral. It’s going to be big, you know? Poor little guy, he was kind of a cultural icon for Vegas.”

“A cultural icon,” Remly said. The call-waiting ring beeped, he let it go to voice-mail.

“But, the thing is? Between everything at the casino and this funeral thing—did I say about Carman?”

“The mayor?”

“Did I say?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Osgood Carman is declaring a day of mourning. For Li’l Mikey? And a city funeral, with a funeral parade and everything. Right down Fremont Street Experience? And Osgood in the lead car, right after Li’l Mikey’s hearse. Maybe in front of it, you know how Osgood is when the lights go on and the cameras start rolling.”

Remly said, “You started saying something.”

“I did?”

“Before you asked if you’d said anything about Carman.”

“Oh. The thing is, all the hours I have to put in at La Fontaine, all the preparation for the funeral? We won’t be able to get together until after Li’l Mikey’s funeral.”

He brought up his left wrist and checked the counterfeit Rolex. He would have to start cooking the dosimeters soon. He said, "Think I can call you sometime tomorrow? I'm a little tied up right now."

Pru said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I just wanted to let you know? I'm not really avoiding you, it's just—you know?—everything seems to be happening at once."

"It does, doesn't it?" Remly said without a trace of irony.

But he was not to be left alone, the voice-mail message was from the F.O.

"Charles, unfortunate news. I'd rather you called, that we might discuss this person."

He punched the return-call key and the F.O. came on as though he'd been hatching the phone: "Dear me, this was waiting for me when I arrived back," came the F.O.'s voice. "Somewhat unpleasant news—I should have tested for my own messages earlier."

Remly said, "Yes?"

"Clive Bartlet—my chap at Wallnerstrasse No 6?"

"OSCE," Remly said. "He's stopping Valeri's arms shipment to dur-Shamshi."

"Exactly," the F.O. said.

"He didn't stop it."

"It becomes complicated," the F.O. said. "It's not so much a matter of *didn't* as of having someone trump the card he played. He put a great deal of pressure on the Tblisi government, who in turn stopped a convoy of smugglers' trucks."

Remly waited.

"Georgian security forces checked the papers, everything looked in order—or so they claim. They then stopped a second convoy, whose papers were not in order."

Remly still didn't respond.

"It seems ..." The F.O. cleared his throat. "It seems the arms they confiscated were not as your friend Voshch described, though the first convoy—given the general description—the first convoy, which got through, was certainly Voshch's lot."

Remly said, "What you're saying, someone got through to Tblisi with cash."

"It *is* Georgia, after all. I'm sorry, Charles."

“Many shall run to and fro, and  
knowledge shall be increased.”

*Daniel*, xii,4

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

Xavier loved Vegas, though not blindly. He adored the town for the carny it was, here and there a pretentiously upscale carny for the rich marks who didn't fully understand that was all they were—marks—albeit overburdened with money. And all of Vegas—the Strip as much as bumtown—all of it America's own carny-made-large, its distillation the Fremont Street Experience. As an experience, Xavier thought of Fremont as a convention of hedonists from Keokuk, awestruck by the blinding glitz, like jacklighted deer a blink away from becoming roadkill. Fremont's center concourse was closed to vehicles, jammed not with cars but with the carts and kiosks of knickknack vendors. And he loved all of it—this vast stoned-out hallucination without benefit of drugs.

Xavier threaded his way around Fremont's vending obstacles—graceful headshakes as he declined wash-off tattoos and playing cards the size of bath towels. Slipping by a pushcart that was pregnant with rhinestone-studded sunglasses, he arrived at the caricaturist's stand, where the artist was finishing the portrait of a small Viet woman whose age could have been anywhere between twelve and forty—God but they were *marvelous* that way, these tiny Indochinois, forever young; he only wished he'd been granted the gift. The vending hut was decorated with bobble-headed, pastel-pencil lampoons of Sinatra and Dino and Dietrich, of Sammy and Elvis and Liberace.

In the Viet woman's portrait her oversized head teetered on the body of a diminutive, melon-breasted Vegas showgirl. When her picture was finished and she stood giggling with her family to admire it, Xavier handed a grainy, black-and-white likeness to the caricaturist and asked, “Can you do one of me with my special friend? His eyes are blue, the hair is salt-and-pepper. I want us sitting at a sidewalk café.” With this he handed across a photo of a bistro table, two heavy little glasses and a bottle of Ukraine vodka resting on it.

“That Japanese?” the artist asked. He showed the café scene to Xavier, pointing at the Cyrillic label on the bottle.

“Actually it’s a variation on a *Russian* theme. Can you do it?”

“Extra charge—customer’s landscape, doing a twosome.”

“*Well!*” Xavier said, “I *always* pay extra for a *twosome!*”

The deeper he moved into this impromptu franchise the more it seemed to Charles Remly that he was acting not so much by choice as in the service of some capricious destiny. In terms of tradecraft the masquerade was entirely beyond Remly’s area of competence; he accepted his self-assigned task only on the basis that he had successfully humbugged his way from Warsaw to Bucharest during the wintery seasons of the Cold War and that he would get through this alive as well. Then as now he relied on the minimalist effect of Zen haiku—of dropping a single leaf and leaving it to the observer’s imagination to create the tree in full. Beyond his costuming and a few judiciously dropped hints, he would add no details of where he was coming from, much less where he intended to go.

He had done his homework—reading an article in the online *Review-Journal*, phoning the box office about showtimes, and spending five minutes studying the posters along the halls leading to The Pavilion’s main theatre—and if he wasn’t fully rehearsed to ingratiate himself into their midst, he was nevertheless prepared to bluff his way in and pry his way out.

There were close to a dozen food venues at The Pavilion, but Remly easily guessed that the Ópera Rústico people would take their meal breaks in the cafeteria-style restaurant, a big family-themed place where the cashier told him, “They’re really nice people, should be coming through about twenty minutes. Dancers and acrobats, they can’t eat too close to showtime.”

And so, when they came down for dinner—a pod of small, dark-skinned performers and musicians, and large, even darker roustabouts—Remly slipped into their brightly-garbed group in the cafeteria line. Despite his his jewelry, his iridescent lavender shirt and black velvet pants, he felt like a moth among butterflies. As he selected the components for his salad, Remly looked twice to his left at the young woman behind him.

On his third turn to the left, reaching perhaps a bit desperately for Xavier’s tone and vocabulary, Remly said, “You’re Isabela! The *marvelously* athletic ballerina.”

“*Como?*” the small woman said.

Remly repeated himself in very bad Spanish, adding in English, “I’m a dancer too. Darling, only a dancer could fully appreciate what an absolutely *brilliant* artist you are.” And then, “*All* of you, really. Such artistry, such imagination.” And when three others around him turned to listen, he gave

them an abbreviated version of the review he'd read.

By the time they got to the dessert station Remly had a lively exchange going with a group of six of them. At the beverage dispensers he said, "As a professional dancer, of course I see all of the great shows on Broadway in New York. I tell you, you are every bit as good as the great dancers and acrobats there. Better!" And as the Ópera Rústico group started toward the large table that was reserved for them, at least twelve of them insisted that it would be an insult if the Señor Carlos did not join them for dinner.

At the big table the troupe's conversation ran to comparisons of American-style dancing as opposed to the form of ballet-mixed-with-tango that had been developed in Anunciación, as well as the obvious separation between the wild acrobatics of the native *indigena* and the gymnastics that one saw in the competitions on the Yanqui television—their show less opera than a sort of muscular, abstract-expressionist ballet. When Remly complimented the indigenous acrobats on their fine style, others in the company translated his English into Spanish, then others still from Spanish into Guarani.

"And what genius, that you do everything with so few sets," Remly added in all innocence, basing his comments on the disconnect between the hallway posters—with their lush, elaborate scenery—and the review he'd read online, which had noted the almost bare stage on which the company performed.

With this the mood around the table visibly cooled, and one of the roustabouts said, "*Mierda*, Señor Carlos! If you are liking this show, you should see us with *all* of the sceneries and the equipments! If the Ministerio de Cultura does not displaced our settings with so-call cultura mierda on the other airplane, we would put on the show most *portentoso* for you!"

Rather than jumping at this morsel, Remly let it pass, turning to the small dancer Isabela to discuss the latest issue of *Dance* magazine, a copy of which he just happened to have in his carryall folder—and which he brought out for her to see. Poor Isabela hardly had a chance to look at a few pictures when *Dance* was snatched from her, and then was snatched again by the next person, and in this manner made its way around the table. As three people directly opposite Remly were looking at *Dance*—and others were leaning to try to grab it—he spoke casually to the roustabout. "Ministerio de Cultura?" The Ministry of Culture? Wouldn't let you bring all of your sets?"

"All of our settings? Señor, we are lucky to bringing our costumes and properties. First we hear, is very nice. Diplomático pasaportes, no frontera searches, everything is *libre de derechos*—no customs duties—no nothings.



El Segundo to the Ministro himself is with us flying, to make smooth everything. Is wonderful! Then we get told, there is going to be more people and they got to bring their own cultural stuffs. They use so much room on the other airplane, these people with these so-call cultural stuffs, we got to leave all our settings in Anunciación!”

“All for the good of your country, though, giving over room on the airplane to more cultural affairs gear.”

“Good of my nación *mi culo!*” the roustabout said. “These fellows disappearing with all their stuffs at the first truckstopping, we are over the frontera into this State of the Nevada.”

Remly said, “That would be at the border? Primm?”

“The Preemm, the very place Señor Carlos. This fellows who flown up in the other plane with these gears, they taken it from our big truck trailer and put the crates into some other big truck and driving off, like we was some kind—you call—freighting service for them.”

And with that Remly let the subject drop for good, only marking time and finishing his chicken salad. As he put down his fork he said, “Gotta run. I’ve got something cooking.”

As he walked from the table Remly caught a whisper behind him, it sounded like Isabela: “*El Señor Carlos no camina como el danzador.*”

And a man responding, “*Mas como elefante.*”

Every city has its districts, even if unremarked by officialdom, and though it is not so well-defined or heavily populated as West Hollywood’s Boys Town, the Fruit Loop in Las Vegas is a byword coast to coast.

With his fresh caricature—now folded and scuffed as though carried for some time close to his heart—Xavier headed immediately for the loop of seven bars on and around Paradise Road, a block south of the Hard Rock.

Carl had often ... ‘Charley!’ Xavier corrected himself ... Charley had often complimented Xavier on his psychic skills, and Charley was the only one who really got it. Bassett, Weaver, the others—even the F.O.—thinking it was purely sex; only Charley understanding that it wasn’t so much sex as it was a matter of getting inside the other guy’s head. Asking yourself what your adversary desperately wanted. Getting in there to see what made him hurt, which rock to turn over so you could expose his soft pink fears. What he lusted after—insinuating yourself into his very soul. And Xavier had recognized early on that this was a trait he had in common with Charley. Years back, when he was first posted to SoCal SubSection, they’d had a long bull-session—boozy philosophizing into the small hours—Charley telling him that all great fieldmen had a gift that some referred to as “mindfucking”

but Charley preferred to call “manipulative empathy,” an honorable skill in the trade—though next morning at the office Charley denied he’d said any such thing. “You’re psychic pure and simple, Xavier. Open a palmistry shop in NoHo<sup>1</sup>, you’d make a fortune.”

Psychic? Perhaps—but Xavier preferred “manipulative empathy.” Lessons painfully learned during childhood, Xavier defending himself as the smallest kid in class, and later as the first to recognize and fully accept his true sexuality.

As for this Andrei, Xavier had only the biograph Alan Singleton had gotten from *Zemessardze*, the Latvian security service—the biograph and Andrei’s hopeful expression, apparent even in the grainy photograph ... the look of a man who seemed to be peering around the edge of his ambition to see if the world would give him some degree of validation. And based on this sketchy information, Xavier now put it to himself: ‘I’m Andrei, not quite Russian and not even entirely Ukrainian. Ambitious but not completely secure about my place in the world. What sort of bar will I gravitate to, here in Sin City?’ Would it be something exotic—exotic anyway to a Crimean—because it was wholesomely American? Like a biker and leather joint? Something sissy-prissy? Something ..?

And then Xavier saw it, glowing violet and chartreuse in the twilight: BYRD’S PARADISE ULTRALOUNGE.

*Ultralounge!* Xavier loved it. The utterly shameless *phoniness* of it! So *Vegas!*

And, better still, the narrow parking lot that separated the ultralounge from the sidewalk was filled with BMWs, Lexuses, two Hummers, two Escalades, and one each Dodge Viper, Plymouth Prowler, and one of those ugly little Cadillac sports cars. No question about it, an ego-massage parlor.

Xavier parked his rented Porsche Boxter in the status-heavy lot and walked boldly into Byrd’s Paradise with little more for defense than a SIG .380 in an ankle holster, a pocketed switchblade, and his well-honed sense of the ridiculous.

Multicolored lights beamed up from the floor like stalagmites, subdued neon crown moulding defined the ceiling all around, and ascending layers of hardwood ringed the dance floor on three sides like the Steppes of Central Asia. There were four courses of Steppes in all—the lower three just wide enough for small cocktail tables and chairs, the uppermost layer supporting plush, high-backed booths, the booths deepset in darkness while the dance floor and the wide, descending, hardwood tiers were bathed

<sup>1</sup>NoHo - North Hollywood arts area of San Fernando Valley, a suburb of Los Angeles.

in moody ceiling lights that shifted from blue to gold to pink to violet to sparkles to chartreuse and back again to blue. And to Xavier's disappointment—for he'd hoped that here, in this madhouse of a city, they'd have the grace to be innovative—to his *grave* disappointment, oozing from ceiling speakers, the ungetawayfromable canned disco. The bar itself was against the far wall, softly illuminated, and Xavier headed for it, walking directly across the lightly populated dance floor, turning heads at the cocktail tables and imagining that he was also being measured and judged by unseen eyes in the tall dim booths.

Xavier ordered a draft.

There were two middle-ageish men at the bar—heavy in the stomach and obviously hawks, not ingénues—and a spectacularly pretty young blond in tight black pants and a gold lamé blouse at the cocktail waiters' station. All three looked over with raised eyebrows to study Xavier.

As the bartender drew his beer, Xavier took out his wallet and placed a five dollar bill on the bar. The buffed bartender put the beer glass beside the bill and turned away as though he'd seen nothing—and would defend that in a court of law. Taking back the five, Xavier put down a ten and got three dollars change, one of which he left for the bartender.

Reaching for his glass Xavier said, "Quiet tonight."

"Stay awhile," the bartender said. He was muscular and his shirt seemed to have been air-brushed onto him. "The band comes on at ten. Dancing, it gets hot."

Xavier put down the beer untouched and squinted at his watch. "Do you have a flashlight?"

"It's eight-twenty," the bartender said.

"A friend promised he'd meet me here tonight. Around eightish?"

"A regular?"

This was business, and Xavier was a consummate professional. In a straight environment he might have come off as an investment banker or a dentist. For this situation, from among the multitude of characters he kept ready in the greenroom of his mind, Xavier chose *The Rich Twit*: "Not *actually*," he said, putting a bit of flounce into it. "He's only been in Vegas a month or so. We were together in Odessa—you know Odessa? *Marvelously* decadent! We met up again in London." And with "Odessa" and "London" he caught a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye, the waiter coming to attention. "And *they*yun ..." drawing it out "... I had to go to Scarsdale—money, family—family, money—you know how it goes." By now he had a rapt audience of three, leaning toward him to get the next chapter of his odyssey, mysterious and meaningless in equal parts, while the waiter,

though listening, made a show of ignoring Xavier. “And then I’m off for my left-coast beach house, Point Dumé—you know Point Dumé?—and Andrei happened to catch up with me by phone, he has my cell number, and he said he’d been here in *Vegas* for—actually, I imagine—for a month or so. And why didn’t we get together? We’d had *so* much fun in Odessa. London. And I thought, *weyyell*, Southwest planes are just like *busses* nowadays—stop in Vegas every half-hour or what have you—and I said, ‘I’d *love* to see you, darling. When and where?’ And Andrei said, ‘*Weyyell*, there’s this *marvelous* place Birds of a Feather or some such’—except he didn’t actually spell it *out* for me—and I’ll be there tomorrow night. Eightish?’ And stupid me, I *totally* forgot to get *his* cell number!”

From his trouser pocket Xavier brought the pastel drawing and unfolded it on the bar. “Do you know Odessa? That marvelous little sidewalk café above the Potemkin Steps?”

Xavier turned the caricature around for the bartender to see, and the two paunchy customers slipped off their stools for a look, but the gorgeous blond cocktail waiter for some reason had turned away after only a brief glance at the picture.

The muscular bartender said, “Been in a couple times.” He turned to the beautiful waiter. “Second Saturday, Jerri. This look like your student prince?” He pushed the drawing to Jerri, who turned it to catch the light.

Jerri sent the caricature back, sliding it along the bar with a flick of his finger. “Not my type.”

In those three words Xavier heard something familiar, something he couldn’t exactly pin down. Not entirely southern—Texas perhaps ... even a hint of TexMex.

“Second Saturday,” the bartender said to Xavier. “Dress-up night. Like halloween, except no ghouls.”

The moderately fat customer said, “But *lots* of *witches*!”

The heavier one said, “That’s Odessa? I would *love* to try it some time. Have you been to Tunis?”

But Xavier, in the code of pick-ups and put-downs, acted as though the man hadn’t spoken, saying to the bartender, “Student prince?”

“The operetta.”

The moderately fat customer sang, “Come, boys, let’s all be gay, boys.”

“Except he didn’t have a student cap,” the bartender said. “Bright cadet uniform, with a black beret. Some kind of sword insignia.”

Xavier noted the sword insignia—the emblem of Dzerzhinsky Square. He said, “Remember when he was here last?” At the edge of his vision he saw the waiter walk from his drinks station and up the Steppes to the cock-

tail tables, although no one had called him.

The bartender said, “Not since Second Saturday last month.”

Xavier sipped at his beer and took in the light show. He looked up to the tall booths on the highest tier of flooring, above the beautiful lurking waiter. “Is there service in the private booths up there?”

“They’re always open for service,” said the muscular bartender. “Fifty dollar minimum.”

Xavier “Send my drink up. Do you have a kitchen?”

“I’ll send Jerri up with a menu.”

As with the twosome surcharge that Xavier had paid for his caricature, Charles Remly was similarly paying extra, although for him the cost was in nerves, not actual coin: A matter of reaching into his emotional capital to keep a cool spirit and an observant eye. Though he’d had the training—it was a given that even deskbound agent-runners got black-arts schooling—he’d used it seldom, and that in the dim past. He’d arrived at an age more suited to calming others’ fears than confronting his own. Common sense, of course, would have him wait for Alan and his black bag team ... yet the reality of the moment argued for action.

The street was Pavilion Access Way, less a street than a broad, stunted driveway that deadended at the loading dock of The Pavilion At Pavilions, where sets and properties were delivered. Because it branched off of one of the Strip’s minor sidestreets, and because it ended abruptly, Pavilion Access was largely free of traffic. Off to the side, 30 feet before the loading dock, there was a gated and guarded parking lot for dropped trailers and employees’ cars and pickups, and the lot’s chainlink fence had a convenient flap, recently cut. The street was clear and Remly, now more comfortable in Wranglers, black knit cap, and a black sweatshirt—along with a fannypack and surgical gloves—cut away the dental floss, pushed through his chainlink flap, and bent it back into place, securing it again with fresh lengths of floss.

The trailer was in a row with four others, all with their rear doors backed against a high concrete wall. It was a trailer that had been scuffed from years of hard use, the large ÓPERA RÚSTICO sign on its side as fresh as yesterday. Before sharing a meal with the Opera’s cast and crew, and understanding that the long vertical scuffs on the trailer’s sides had been caused by its internal framing, Remly had early found a soft entry point through the aluminum midway between the scuffs. Now there was a jagged hole large enough for a man to slip in both hands and a slingshot, which was exactly what he had done. Two lengths of thin avalanche cord dangled from

the opening.

Remly settled into a semi-uncomfortable squat to check the security. He could see under the trailer and under the five trailers beyond it to the guard shack, and he monitored the light traffic coming and going through the guarded entry gate. He brought up his left wrist to pull back his sleeve—according to his watch the dosimeters should be well-cooked by now—and he rose creakily.

It was the early hours of night, clear and a little too warm, Vegas autumnal, and he was sweating under his sweatshirt, Kevlar skivvies, and tight latex gloves. And in this clear night he heard footsteps crunching along the unswept paving. He squatted again, again creakily, to see a flashlight beam washing back and forth under the trailers, the beam seeming to tow a pair of uniformed legs, marching along the broad aisle. Gathering up his avalanche cord, Remly crabwalked painfully under the Ópera Rústico trailer to its tandem axles and climbed up on them, slipping once because of the grease but getting back to lie on them, gathering up the slack cord after him.

The footsteps got heavier then lighter and the flashlight's beam poked mindlessly and, as much as Remly could tell, blindly, and the guard and his light were away. Remly lay on the cool, greasy axle, calming his heart, his black, aptly-named sweatshirt now soaked through.

He returned to the ground, cursing softly and scrapping futilely at the grease on his knees, and sat and pulled his fannypack around to the front and opened it to have quick access to his defensive retreat supplies. He brought out the road flare, wrapped with five lengths of 35mm film, and removed the striker cap. With one brisk scrape across the lighting end, the flare would quickly become a smoke bomb, which he could spin under the nearby trailers as diversion. He put the flare into his sweatshirt's kangaroo pocket, then he put a hand into the fanny pack to stir the jacks and marbles.

Retrieving the front dosimeter, checking it with his small pocket flash: Nothing—or, more accurately, only somewhat warm, the color of the last indicator patch difficult to separate from the others. A look under the other trailers right and left, and he tugged at the avalanche cord that led to the rear of the trailer, and very nearly whistled when the dosimeter emerged. As the Ópera Rústico roustabout had guessed, whatever had been back there was not cultural, not by half. After only two hours of cooking, the dosimeter showed a level of radioactivity that would have been normal in about a week. Pocketing both dosimeters, he rose, massaging the stiffness in his legs and wishing he was twenty years younger.

Remly had approached this task with the understanding that if he was

confronted it would be a two-hundred-yard dash to his pickup around the corner, and he was in no shape to outrun determined pursuers. And so, after closing the fence flap behind him, he walked briskly along the sidewalk dribbling jacks and marbles from his fannypack, a broad path of trouble for anyone giving chase.

The booth was tall and bathed in dim light—and so secluded, Xavier imagined, you could strangle someone up here and until the cleaning crew came next morning no one would be the wiser. To make it more private still, there were full drapes which could be drawn. With that in mind, Xavier checked the upholstery for stains, but none could be seen in the mottled pattern on the curved high-backed bench, the velour fabric an artificial fiber for easy cleaning. Without making an issue of it, he looked around and above for mikes and cameras, and to his relief found none of the telltale signs.

To his further relief the canned disco was more subdued within the booth, and the lights outside stayed outside, scattering their kaleidoscope colors on the cocktail tables and dance floor below. Xavier looked to the bar, where another cocktail waiter was at the station—Jerri would not have the pressure of having to return to his post.

Squatting in the center of the table, a small lamp in the shape of a mushroom, which Xavier took to be an aid for reading menus. He placed his drawing in the lee of the mushroom and felt around the lamp for a switch. Finding none, he pushed down on the mushroom cap and the light came on just as Jerri arrived with Xavier's draft, the menu, and a wine list.

Xavier took the menu and ignored his beer, now on the table, repositioning the caricature to place Andrei more directly in the halo of light, his own image in shadow.

To judge by Xavier's face he was in a benign mood, yet behind his easy-going façade he was nothing less than a forensic psychologist, busily measuring Jerri's expression and calculating where to find the young man's tender spots. If there were leverage points in Jerri that could be exposed with a little manipulative empathy, Xavier intended to root them out and exploit them. The odd thing was that the emotion that Jerri displayed as he studied Andrei's caricature wasn't petulance, as Xavier had expected, but a look of self-pity that verged on the tragic, as though Jerri was attending his own funeral.

And it was as much Jerri's stance as his expression that intrigued Xavier. The waiter—in tight black pants and a gold lamé blouse with long, gusseted sleeves—seemed not so much to be standing as posing, a languorous posture that might have been appropriate in a fashion magazine, though it

hardly evoked “customer service” ... and contrasted radically with Jerri’s undisguised desolation.

Xavier said, “*We* look grim, *don’t* we? What is it, presh?”

Jerri remained silent and sad.

Playing against Jerri’s emotion, and still performing The Rich Twit, Xavier thrust the knife deeper: “Such a *wonderful* person, Andrei. Thoughtful and generous to a fault, I’m sure he’ll show up tonight. He *said* he would.” And watching Jerri, Xavier reached for his beer, at the same time sorting out what the magazine-spread pose was about.

Although he held his artificial posture, at Xavier’s words Jerri’s look transformed from tragic self-pity to what might almost have been a sneer, an expression of would-be tough cynicism.

Jerri said, “This time, you know—I really *believed!*”

“What ... that it was the real thing? *Love?*”

“Oh, *God*. What do you take me for?” He sat heavily opposite Xavier. Resting his head against the high padded back of the bench and looking up blindly, Jerri went on, “Everyone promises.”

“What did Andrei promise you—a fabulous life in Lala Land?”

Jerri gave a look that was unmistakable in its contempt, as though Xavier not only didn’t get it, he probably never would. He said, “Oh *God* do they promise.”

After a pause, Xavier said, “And they never deliver.” It was as much a question as a statement.

Jerry turned to look into the dark ceiling, as though hope was to be delivered from above, like an air express package. “I really thought he *was* different. That he *would* help.”

“Andrei.”

“Who else do you *think?*”

“You ...” Now Xavier spoke tentatively, exploring. “I get the feeling you aren’t a cocktail waiter. I have this image of you as a fashion model.”

“New York. Do you know what it costs to get established in New York? Get someone to handle you—Eileen Ford? Maybe Elite, DNA? Twenty thousand? Thirty? Just for a few months, getting established?”

Yet a closer look and Xavier saw Jerri’s beauty as superficial and even flawed—or perhaps more properly that Jerri seemed to have flawed his own beauty. He had slight bags under his eyes caused by sleep deprivation—or worse—and his heavy makeup only partially hid the bags and his premature wrinkles. Here was a young man who had lived fast and hard, and was hoping he could duck out on the invoice.

Jerri spoke vaguely: “It’s a trap, isn’t it—the Life?” Another pause while



he gazed blindly at the roving, ever-changing colored lights in the ceiling outside the booth, which at this elevation transformed the cigarette smoke into psychedelic swirls. “And next morning you wake up in your car here in the parking lot, still broke and knowing you’ll never see him again.”

Xavier spoke softly, again twisting the knife. “And what was it that made you feel so—so *simpatico* with Andrei?” asked Xavier. “What, that you actually *believed* him?” Jerri’s tragic expression was giving way to doubt, and Xavier pursued him like a wolf. “One single night, and you thought this time it would be different. What was it—the E-tabs<sup>1</sup>?”

“It wasn’t just the E!”

And now for Xavier it began falling into place: The posture ... the self-pity ... the hard face not really softened by cosmetics ... the pose of tough cynicism, which Jerri hadn’t the smarts to maintain for more than a minute at a time ... the sense in Jerri’s every word and expression that he’d found himself trapped.

Xavier—born in McAdoo, east of Lubbock—had Jerri’s accent down cold. Could almost pinpoint the county where Jerri had learned to speak TexMex, somewhere closer to the border as it carried as much Mex as Tex. And Xavier openly felt for the boy, trying so hard to liquidate Jeraldo in order to give birth to Jerri—trying and failing. Better in Xavier’s experience not to destroy his own original but to simply add it to the constantly-growing cast of characters that he sheltered in the vast greenroom of his mind. He had become a chameleon and had used the talent profitably from puberty on. Poor Jerri on the other hand—twisting his native tongue to speak plain-vanilla American. Deluding himself that a willowy body and once-fresh good looks could vault him out of the fate imposed on him by the realities of economics, class, and his sad lack of smarts. Yet despite his pity Xavier put all this together and began probing for an entry point, where he could split Jerri open like a hard-shell crab. He took another sip of beer and picked up the menu.

“So, why didn’t you ask for the money up front, darling, instead of waiting till after?” Xavier’s tone was distracted, but he held the menu without really looking at it.

“What the fuck do you take me for?” Jerri was up from the bench and leaning on the table, both hands fisted, knuckles down.

‘Ah, now we are getting to it, aren’t we, presh?’ Xavier thought. With

<sup>1</sup>E-tabs: MDMA (“Ecstasy”) - 3-4-methylenedioxymethampheta-mine. A synthetic, amphetamine-like, hallucinogenic drug. Users report intensely pleasurable effects, including peacefulness, empathy, infatuation, and enhanced self-confidence and energy. Prolonged use results in muscle breakdown, insomnia, anxiety, depression, and kidney, liver, and cardiovascular failure.

Jerri beginning to crack, Xavier fed him some slack line, as all wise fisherman do, once their prey is hooked. “I *am* sorry, I really shouldn’t have put it quite like that.” He moved into the light, reaching out to touch Jerri’s clenched hand. “Please do sit and chat for a while. I’m really quite an empathetic soul, once you get to know me.”

“Merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to a bald and unconvincing narrative.”

W. S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

The shabby house was one of those holdouts common to haphazard industrial districts, its owner content to rent it out at depressed commercial rates rather than selling it for the value of the land alone, and like most such places it needed paint, roof repair, and a severe window-washing. There was a stout chainlink fence around its weed-infested yard, and if you looked down the drive along the fence, a shambling, double-doored, unattached garage would glower back.

A large electroplating shop was at one side of the property, on the other side—taking up the remainder of the block between the chainlink and the next cross-street—were the vast yard and warehouses of Showsville Vegas Props & Displays. And rising above the high fence around Showsville, a giant piano topped with a candelabra, a dinosaur, and a showgirl with amazing breasts, exactly as they had appeared on the ‘net and in the Yellow Pages. On the off-side of the large polystyrene statuary in the Showsville lot there was a bank of high-intensity security lights, which cast a knife-edged shadow of the dinosaur onto the ramshackle house.

The other side of the street was dominated by the block-long warehouse of a plumbing-supply distributor.

As Xavier had it, “Andrei’s got the kid convinced he’s on a major toy design project for Russo-American co-production that can’t be named, very hush hush, operating way off the grid to maintain security. He tells Jerri it’s a multi-million dollar project, the money is flowing like coke at a Bev Hills law firm. And both sides, Yanks and Russians, are, like, nervous in the service that Hasbro or Mattel will get wind of it—so Andrei’s doing the engineering here in Vegas, in this magnificent neighborhood.” What Jerri remembered of the place was that it was secure and humble in equal parts, and that there was a monster next door.

Eighteen hours earlier Weaver had arrived with Alan Singleton and his black-bag team, all of them haggard and unshaven, waking the F.O. who in turn woke Remly to deal with them. Remly buzzed Alan’s team through the

gate, showed them the kitchen and their assigned bedrooms, and returned to bed himself, leaving the five grizzled men to eat and sleep at their leisure. This morning Remly and Xavier were first up, Remly making coffee and cleaning up the empty beer cans and scraps of pizza that five arrivals had left across every surface of the kitchen, while Xavier began cooking a massive breakfast for the team.

The F.O. and the new arrivals came downstairs, introductions were made—Buck and Blazes unsmiling and silent, curt nods their only concession to civility, while keeping their hands close to their sides. Once the Boston Southies' step-van was unloaded into the estate's vast motorhome garage, Remly told Alan Singleton what else would be needed for the night's run, and Singleton after a roll of his eyes went out with his burglars on a minor crime spree in Las Vegas. Then, an hour prior to the run, Singleton rooted through his luggage for Dexedrine, Modafinil<sup>1</sup>, and mega-tablets of caffeine. By the time they found the house, Remly, Weaver, and Xavier were alert, Singleton was edgy, and the three burglars were wired on Dex.

With Weaver and Xavier, Remly had made his initial drive-by in a small Chevy freshly stolen from a used-car lot by Alan Singleton's black-bag team. Now they did their walk-by, Remly and Weaver scanning while Xavier stood near the gate with a black, suppressed sub-machinegun clutched tightly to his side, Xavier peering right and left with a look only a hair this side of paranoid.

In terms of tradecraft, Remly saw it as a disaster in the making. An untried team—he, Weaver, and Singleton the only ones with experience as raiders since graduating from the Farm, and none of that experience recent.

Nor was Alan Singleton any more comfortable, particularly regarding his Boston burglars, about whom he had said, "The boys aren't fully housebroken."

On the drive over, Weaver characterized the Southies more succinctly: "Neanderthals."

Yet here Remly was, on the sidewalk, the minutes ticking.

With the F.O. and Singleton, Remly had cobbled together a hasty plan, more a sketchy outline, really, their goals clearly defined but the details and tactics to be determined as events unfolded—like a jazz ensemble improvising against a melody they were making up on the fly.

Their overarching goal was to eliminate the dual threats to Remly and Las Vegas, and toward that end they'd agreed that destroying Andrei's lair,

<sup>1</sup>Modafinil ("Go pill") – 2[di(phenyl)methylsulfinyl]acetamide. Non-amphetamine Schedule IV prescription drug ("wakefulness-promoting agent") with mood-elevating properties, routinely prescribed by U.S. military physicians for flying crews on long-range missions.

along with all of its contents and occupants, solved nothing.

As the F.O. put it, “Too many eggs, not enough basket.”

Remly had counted three men at his front gate—now reduced to two—and theorized Andrei and his crew had been in town early on, putting Eddy Johnson’s car over the cliff on Serenity View while three others were gunning for Remly in his bedroom. The three from the bedroom gunfight were history, as well as Andrei’s giant goon in the soccer-mom van, leaving a net total of two, following the gunfight in his drive. However, there were the five Slavs and four Arabs who had come across on Valeri Voshch’s Ilyushin. A total of eleven men, and unlikely they all would fit into the small house that Singleton had pinpointed on Zillow.com—too many eggs for this basket.

And thus whoever was in the house would have to be taken alive in order to track down the rest of the crew—and perhaps to locate Kurskov and his bodyguards as well.

Smoke bombs had been considered and as quickly ruled out, on the basis that the residents would be attracted to the smoke in order to extinguish the fire. CS<sup>1</sup> and pepper gas were dismissed as blatantly-obvious attack media, which would put Andrei’s crew on the alert. Finally it was Weaver who came up with the solution. Since retiring to Portland, he had gone varmint hunting a few times—coyotes, primarily—on his wife’s brother’s farm down in Clackamas County. The coyotes were wise, having played this game for a dozen or more generations with the humans who had invaded their lands, and they had developed hunting techniques of their own. Rather than directly approaching the bait, they would circle it at a distance—a radius of nearly a hundred yards—sniffing the air for human presence. Thus, whether the hunters were upwind or downwind of the bait, the coyotes would sniff them out. To overcome this, Weaver’s brother-in-law resorted to a masking scent. A dozen or so bottles of it should clear the house. “*Eau de skunk*,” as Weaver put it.

“At better hunting outfitters nationwide,” Alan Singleton added with a laugh. And he offered his own contribution, a non-lethal control.

Remly came quickly alert: “Tranquilizing dartguns, Alan?”

“Better and worser,” Singleton replied. “The chemistry is instant knock-out, the delivery’s gotta be hands-on.”

Remly shrugged and accepted. In a catch-as-catch-can world, any donation was welcome

Along with the spontaneous nature of the raid and the question of his team’s general competence, the issue of weapons had the effect of hornets buzzing around Remly’s head, Singleton passing out suppressed sub-ma-

<sup>1</sup> CS Gas—2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile (C<sub>10</sub>H<sub>5</sub>CIN<sub>2</sub>) – “Tear gas.”

chineguns like party favors. Weaver had turned down the MAC-10 subgun in favor of a suppressed 9mm pistol, though Weaver's principal weapon was one he'd brought with him, a blinding spotlight no bigger than a cigarette lighter. Remly rejected both the subgun and the suppressed Beretta. "The muffler hides the sights, Alan. I like to hit what I aim at."

With that, Singleton gave Remly a handful of sub-sonic 9mm rounds with Teflon-tipped explosive mercury hollowpoints.

As he accepted the lethal ammo, Remly dubiously watched Buck and Blazes posture with their subguns, the two Southies obviously unqualified to handle anything more sophisticated than brass-knuckles and blackjacks.

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## . . . L I S B O N

He wasn't entirely sure why, but he had to go shopping in the do-Norte district—no compromise, Talia insisted on it—and so Ashor was now shopping with his wife in the do-Norte. Or if not shopping, exactly, at least walking with her along the narrow lanes that branched off of Rua do Norte, teeming with browsers and tourists. Talia had dressed comfortably for the outing in slacks and fashionable running shoes; Ashor and Nasirpal flanked her, Nasi with a leather folio of the morning's work that Talia had interrupted. Hanin, perhaps pregnant, had been left with little Joseph and two bodyguards back at the compound. And enveloping the dur-Shamshis, their security pod—Rafiq in the lead—creating a tight plug of humanity that took up fully half the width of the narrow cobblestone byways.

The lanes were too close and too steep for vehicles and they were edged with whitewashed old buildings whose upper storeys seemed to tilt over the walkways—in spots the dur-Shamshi entourage collapsed in on itself to squeeze between oncoming pedestrians on one side and shopfronts on the other. Though the lanes and byways tilted sharply uphill, the shops were cut horizontally into them with an effect of gargantuan steps. Banners of red and green stretched overhead from building to building, every shop had its own symphony—whether the chirping of caged birds or sorrowful fado from CD boomboxes—and the smells of roasting fish and lamb accented their progress.

As it unfolded, this was less a shopping trip than a show-and-tell session that Talia had planned for Ashor, ignoring the couture boutiques but looking in at the remnant-fabric shops where she held bright prints across her generous frontage. "Beautiful?"

Perhaps they were—Ashor confessed ignorance of this—yet he nodded appreciatively. Talia draped herself in jungle birds, vivid flowers, exotic vines, astrological maps, stripes, circles, cones, squares, triangles, splotches,

even pyrochromatic fabrics that showcased every possible color, including many that Ashor would rather not have put his eyes to.

With each new fabric Talia said, “And look, the edgemark.” And of the identifying printing, eight out of ten said, TÜRKIYE. “Bursa,” she said. “Where all the silk and woolen mills are. And I’ll want to travel to Adana and Tarsus for the cottons.”

It was not a request to be denied. For Talia’s security Ashor would contact—and here he stopped, asking himself, ‘Am I getting old?’ What was the man’s name, his old acquaintance? But no, Ashor conceded, it wasn’t age that was defeating him, he simply had too much on his plate at the moment; he would look the man up in his files when he got back to his office. His acquaintance, a politically-connected chieftain of an Alevi Zaza clan in the Sayhan plains above Adana, would surround Talia with a dozen tough young men carrying Uzi machine-pistols under their big leather jackets.

Having made her point, Talia ... it would be hard to say, exactly, that Talia dismissed Ashor, but she seemed to have lost sight of the fact that he was beside her as she turned back to Rua do Norte itself, where the one-off boutiques offered elbow-to-elbow originals. Sensing that he’d served his purpose, Ashor kissed his wife on the cheek and said, “Rafiq has the keys to both cars. I’ll walk home and have Daphne look to your travel arrangements, darling.” And took Nasirpal and Govan with him as he returned on foot to the compound on Rua do Lisboa Occidental.

As they walked, Nasirpal opened his folio and continued the session that his mother had interrupted earlier. He said, “The estate agent found three possible properties in the Mansur, a couple in Mutanabi.”

“Nothing inside the Green Zone?” Ashor asked.

“There are waiting lists for them, Papageneral. One of the properties in the Mansur looks good, near the equestrian center, pretty close to the hunt club.”

“Stir the real estate people a little, get more listings. Once we have three that look near-perfect, we’ll let your mother do the negotiating.”

Nasirpal noted this. “I went through the list of MPs you gave me. It still looks iffish, getting you back on the general staff. Each of them tells me it’s not so much the discretion of parliament, it’s the Interim Prime Minister’s office that has the final word on this.”

“Refine the list, winnow it down to the ones most likely. I’ll have Daphne and Garrett write up speeches for them about my loyalty to our people, my sympathies toward the Kurds—concern for the Kurds *especially*—my patriotism and so forth and so forth. See how much it will cost to get a few to stand up during a session of parliament and speak out for me. This puts

pressure on the *PM*.”

They were on the last uphill leg, the compound in sight, and Govan was gasping for air.

“We’ll rest a moment,” Ashor said. He touched Govan’s elbow but spoke to Nasirpal. “And the feedback about the others? Are my colonels back in the army?”

“Almost all of them,” Nasirpal said. “He’s not back yet, but it look like General Darwish Abdul-Haqq will be reinstated pretty soon too.”

“Civil servants?” Ashor asked.

“They ...” Govan huffed. “They ... I get from ... from blogging ... blogging with Fawzi ... most are back in ... in government.”

“Everything’s falling into place,” Nasirpal said. His grin couldn’t have gotten brighter.

Ashor said, “We shall see, Nasi. We shall see. Nothing is done until it is done.”

They reached the tall complex, Govan again chuffing as he tapped an entry code onto the keypad beside the gate, when Ashor’s slim scrambler phone rang and he opened it. “Yes, Jon.”

“You’ve been trying to get me at unholy hours. You know what the time difference is, Lisbon and Virginia?”

“I’m fully aware, Jon. I wanted to be first on your answering machine, once your hours became sanctified.”

“Something hot?”

“My people back home have captured a low-level Jund al-Iraq facilitator.”

“*Now* we’re getting somewhere.” The passion was obvious in Vanbastian’s voice. “Wait a sec, I want to record this.”

“Jon,” Ashor said, “I’m disappointed. I thought you recorded *all* of our conversations.”

“Ha ha, go ahead. You’ve snatched a major player in Jund.”

“*Minor*, Jon. *Minor*. My people have been sweating him. They’ve loaded him up with drugs, they’re applying pressure, but he honestly doesn’t know a lot. However—here’s why I wanted to get you right away ... this man has disclosed that an attack against the U.S. is already in the works.”

“Where? Another asset in the the Gulf?”

“On your homeland, Jon. They promised to bring this war home to you, now it seems they’re trying to do it.”

“What’s the target, specifically?”

“From what we’ve been able to deduce—and this is all speculation, mind



you—based on the man’s rambling revelations I’m guessing either Orlando, Florida, or Anaheim, California. He carried on about a major entertainment playground, and I’m guessing that these two targets fit the bill.”

“Jesus!” Vanbastian said. “Or maybe Universal City in Los Angeles—they’ve got an entertainment park there, too. And, Jesus, entertainment parks all over the States! What’s the delivery system? What’s the specific ordnance?”

“This is all I have, Jon. And I doubt that this man has anything more to tell us.”

“Shit!”

“I’m pressing my people in country to track down all of this man’s contacts, in order to land another, even bigger fish.”

“I’m flying to Lisbon,” Vanbastian said. “I have to be there when ...”

“No, Jon, you are not flying to Lisbon. You fully understood our agreement—arm’s length.”

“Dammit ...”

“I will keep you immediately posted, even on the least significant detail. You must trust me on this. And now I must get back to work.”

As usual, Jon Vanbastian rang off without saying good-bye.

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

There was no security patrol to be seen, no other residences or signs of life on the street. The house was dark, the garage was dark, and as they walked Weaver held a camspotter to his eye, sweeping the house. “No red POS blips, Charley. The place is a camera free zone.” Nor were there any motion-detecting lights. Weaver asked Xavier, “Your friend Jerri said the lights went on automatically when he and Andrei drove up to the gate?”

“What he said,” Xavier replied without looking at Weaver. His eyes jerked from one end of the street to the other, as though preparing to shoot his way out if it came to that.

Remly asked, “But he could’ve been hallucinating, yes?”

“The kid is something of a chemical freak,” Xavier admitted. “But the dinosaur next door wasn’t a doped-out vision.”

Weaver dropped the camspotter into his utility bag and brought out an infra-red scanner. As Weaver scanned, there was a soft click in Remly’s ear. Remly pressed at his earphone transceiver.

“How long till kickoff?” Alan Singleton’s voice.

Remly said, “You’ll have to wait, Alan. We’ve got some sticky items here.”

“I don’t give a popcorn fart about sticky items. How long until kickoff.

You have sixty seconds to respond.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” said Remly. And if Singleton hadn’t been their lookout around the corner, Remly would have unplugged the phone jack from his scrambler. His glasses were retained by a strap around the back of his head; he pulled them forward to let them hang under his chin, and brought out night-vision binoculars to scan side-by-side with Weaver.

“Garage,” Remly said.

Weaver turned his IR pickup toward a small quick flash at the garage. “Feral cat, Charley.”

Trailed by the jittery Xavier, Remly and Weaver reached the edge of the property, where it joined Showsville Vegas. They stopped and considered the side of the house where Andrei’s bedroom would have to be, the shadow of the dinosaur shading it.

“No one home,” Weaver said.

“How do you know there’s nothing behind the window shades?”

“They’d have to be dead,” Weaver said. “I tweaked the sensitivity on the scanner all the way up. Even if they were sleeping, I’d get some kind of response around the edges of the rollups.”

In Remly’s ear: “Your sixty seconds are up.”

“You’ll have to wait, Alan.”

“Don’t fuck with me, kid.”

“Alan, I’m working—stop interrupting.”

“Kid ...”

“This is my turf, I’m setting the pace, and all due respect I’m telling you to shut up until I get back to you.” Surprisingly, Alan Singleton didn’t respond.

They returned now to the gated drive, where Singleton and his burglars would be pulling in. At the chain that held the two swinging driveway gates Remly said, “Weaver, look at this.”

As Weaver looked at the small, cheap lock, Remly turned to Xavier and asked, “Your guy Jerri said there was heavy security? Heavy chains, heavy locks?”

“You heard my tape,” Xavier said. “What’ve we got?”

By then Weaver had picked the cheap lock and the light chain was falling away from the gate.

Remly said, “Okay, Alan, it’s kickoff. Pull into the drive, the gates are open for you.”

Earlier there had been a discussion about wearing masks. Alan and Remly vetoed the idea, masks limiting vision and response. They agreed though that surgical gloves were unavoidable, and along with the gloves they were

wearing Kevlar underwear, though the Boston burglars wore theirs outside their clothes, as they had no oversize shirts to cover the bulky body armor. And each was badged front and back with radiation dosimeters. Weaver, more accustomed to gloved work than any of them, was already at the side door, picking the lock.

Thumbing up his shirt and reaching to his Galco kidney holster, Remly drew his P-7 and said to Xavier, "Come stand where I can see you."

"You don't trust me behind you?"

"Not with that subgun in your hands," Remly said.

Xavier came forward to stand beside Remly as a large, newly-stolen commercial van and a Lincoln town car with false plates pulled into the drive, parking near the gate.

"I'm sweating under this ridiculous Kevlar lingerie," Xavier said.

Ignoring him, Remly told Weaver, "What they've got, says Valeri—Kashnikovs and suppressed pistols from the FSU<sup>1</sup>. Maybe an RPG."

"There's nobody home," Weaver said. "That's an absolute, Charley."

"How about booby traps?" asked Remly. With his free hand he fingered the shooter's earplugs in his pocket, wondering if it would be practical to put them in. An explosive booby-trap, would they be any use?

Weaver said, "Always a possibility, from what *Zemessardze* told us about this guy Andrei."

Alan Singleton was getting out of his rented Lincoln, working himself upright with the help of two canes, the Boston burglars waiting for him to stabilize himself.

Xavier spoke softly: "Booby-traps? Send the Neanderthals in first."

In Remly's earphone, Singleton's voice: "What the fuck're you doing bunched up on the porch? You and Xavier are supposed to be covering the off side."

Remly looked down at Singleton, who was slowly approaching and motioning his Southies to cover the near side and back of the house. Remly said, "Forget it, there's no one home."

"Kid ..."

"Alan, bring your boys up here. The place is empty."

"Kid ..."

"That's not a request, Alan. Bring your boys up here."

When Singleton and his three Southies came to the porch, Remly said, "Don't point those fucking guns at me."

Singleton paused to look at the three. "Muzzles up, goddammit. Keep your finger *outside* the trigger guard."

<sup>1</sup>FSU - Former Soviet Union

Stevie's subgun was already pointing up—he was pulling at a neck chain, bringing up a gold cross which he kissed and let fall back inside his shirt.

Weaver had the door open.

Remly said to Singleton, "Take a look. No one home."

Weaver reached around the open door to place a sticky-light on the inside wall. "Ready?"

"Go for it," Remly said.

Weaver turned on the light and stepped aside and Remly stepped through and immediately off to one side, out of the kill zone, making a show of holstering his P-7. He turned to the others. "Don't just stand there."

Weaver and Xavier were at either side of the door, leaving a passage for Alan's burglars to crowd through. Once inside, Buck and Blazes stepped aside to let Stevie through, Stevie sweeping the room with the muzzle of his MAC-10.

"Go check the rest of the house," Remly told them. "See what else they left behind."

As Weaver and Xavier came through the door, Remly took in the room. "*Shit!*" He turned to Xavier. "Your waiter! How stoned out was this Jerri?"

Xavier looked around without replying.

"Jerri got his love nests mixed up," Remly said. "This is the wrong house!"

Weaver said, "But next door, Charley—it's the only giant dinosaur in town."

Elbowing Xavier and Weaver aside, Alan Singleton went painfully through the open door, teetering on his two canes and taking it all in. He said, "Jesus peezuz, what is this? Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves?"

- F O U R -

B L A C K   A R T S

“Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.”

Henry David Thoreau

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

Better than any psychological profile, the raid on Andrei Stepanenko's lair illuminated the differing personalities of Remly's team.

As they drove away from the old house Alan Singleton seemed torn between joy and rage, one moment gloating over their haul, in the next breath cursing their timing, for he had obviously wanted to return with a hostage or two, and perhaps a dead body slung over his shoulder.

Despite the uneventful nature of the raid, the simple fact that he'd actually been on a raid had energized Xavier. At SoCal SubStation, Xavier had been a talent scout—a calling with more than its share of pucker-factor moments, granted, yet never the mind-blowing rush of raiding an armed camp with a submachine-gun in his hands. In fact, the subgun itself figured significantly in Xavier's adrenaline surge.

Alan Singleton had brought his industrial-size gun safe to the Lake Las Vegas estate in the Boston burglars' step-van, and had decreed as an absolute that the team was to standardize on a single caliber, which he further decreed was to be 9-millimeter. Xavier, however, was devoted to the .380 SIG in his ankle holster, and argued for a variance. At first Singleton resisted, calling Xavier's SIG a “mouse gun.” In response Xavier opened the sliding door to the estate's swimming pool, threw a half-empty beer can into the water, and in one smooth motion drew his ankle gun and fired six rounds in quick succession at the bobbing can, missing with every shot, bullets ricocheting off the water into the lush vegetation that ringed the pool.

While Remly still had his thumbs in his ears, Alan Singleton—in a rare moment of compassion and helpless laughter—yielded and brought forth a MAC-11 in .380 caliber from his gun safe, a down-sized version of the MAC-10. The dull black gun had a suppressor that looked like a moped muffler, and the entire package became an extension of Xavier, who from that point forward kept it always at hand.

In contrast to Xavier's obvious bliss, Weaver seemed distracted before, during, and following the raid. As the team was scooping up everything but the furniture from Andrei Stepanenko's lair, Weaver took a scholarly inter-

est in a spindly contraption abandoned in the garage, along with a mechanical drawing that was the pattern for the large tinkertoy. Remly imagined that, to Weaver, life in general was an opportunity for analysis, whether or not bullets were about to fly.

As for Alan Singleton's three burglars, Remly guessed that nothing short of the apocalypse could have distracted them from the sound of their own drummer: They had a sociopathic gift for selfabsorption, rendering them immune to much of the world around them, and the operation seemed no more important to them than a trip to corner bottle shop.

While Xavier and Singleton reacted to the abortive raid with an open show of emotion, Remly swallowed his own response: He felt like a Keystone Cop after yet another farcical chase, and "frustrated" was too mild a word for his state of mind. If anything he wanted to be left alone to kick a wall until his toes turned blue. Tonight they were to have put an end to this bad dream, eliminating Kurskov's surrogates and finding the nuclear material. They'd eliminated nothing and what they'd found simply led them deeper into the labyrinth. Yet despite his inner stress he remained outwardly calm, if distant, keeping his team moving and focused as they beavered diligently in the industrial district then drove to the Lake Las Vegas estate, the stolen commercial van loaded with everything they could carry away from Andrei Stepanenko's house and garage.

Remly dumped the Chevy that Stevie had stolen from the used-car lot, with no more damage than an odometer that was 36 miles beyond the sales sticker's claim. He rode back to the estate with Alan Singleton, who muttered darkly to himself about the team crawling home with its tail between its legs.

The F.O. on the other hand received them warmly when they arrived just before three in the morning. The old man stood in the yawning door of the estate's enormous motorhome garage as the newly-stolen van pulled in, and he was pink-cheeked and smiling as though Christmas morning was about to dawn and he was eager to get at his presents.

Remly had already phoned him via scrambler about the mission—no one home, but a truckload of inexplicable items—and having covered the floor of the huge Winnebago garage with clean sheets, they spread their fresh plunder on the white linen like distressed goods at a yard sale.

The F.O. stepped gingerly through the jumble of oddities and rubbish, prodding at things here and there with the toe of his tasselled shoe, commenting over and over, "Well done, boys. What a fascinating puzzle. Well done." Once they'd gotten it all out, most of it in piles on the floor and Weaver's spindly tinkertoy onto the garage's workbench, he said, "Looks

like you've been shopping at a street bazaar in Damascus, all this Arabic rubble. Some connection, do you suspect, to the four Arabs your friend Valeri spoke of? Embarked from Odessa with Mr. Dmitrovsky?"

"That's the theory," Remly said.

Going to the workbench, the F.O. continued, "And this doodad? Whatever can this be?"

Weaver had returned from the raid in the back of the van with the Boston burglars, in order to muse over his tinkertoy. He said, "I have a pretty good idea." The tinkertoy was a cage-like assembly of wooden dowels, a mysterious mechanism within. Weaver had taped a dosimeter badge on the framework.

"Time out," Alan Singleton said. "You boys getting sleepy?" he asked of his burglars, who were standing stone-faced along the garage wall speaking quietly to each other.

"Still up on the dex," Stevie responded, and went back to his conversation with Buck and Blazes.

Earlier it had been agreed that the less the Boston burglars knew, the happier everyone would be, and so Singleton took the three inside and directed them to the rented estate's private movie theater with a handful of DVDs, along with three microwaved pizzas and three sixpacks of beer from the kitchen's walk-in refrigerator. Singleton returned, scooting along carefully in his walker; Remly waited for him to settle in a fat chair that had been padded out further with pillows.

Still smarting with frustration over the raid, Remly said, "Everyone still functioning?" It would be sunrise soon enough, but he was angry and awake, wired on chemicals and emotion. "We can take three, four hours for a siesta, come back to this later." He imagined his smile was robotic, and very honestly he didn't care.

Singleton said, "Hell, stay with it while it's still fresh." He had opened his laptop and spoke without looking up from it.

"Okay, from the top," Remly said as he went to the tinkertoy on the workbench. Since returning from the raid he'd washed down two of Alan Singleton's caffeine mega-tablets with a large mug of coffee, and now his ears, toes, and fingers were beginning to go cold on him. Putting a hand on the tinkertoy, he continued, "Let's have Weaver tell us what this is about."

The F.O. and Xavier followed Remly to the workbench, Xavier still hugging his MAC-11 and carrying a string of amber worry beads he'd discovered in a pile of cast-off Arab clothing on one of the sheets on the floor.

Alan Singleton looked up from his computer but remained in his overstuffed and over-pillowed chair. "Stand a little to the side, give me a look



at it.”

The tinkertoy was two long rails surrounded and supported by a cage of even longer bars—the device, overall, eight inches by eight inches by three feet long—and between the rails a row of ratchet teeth. At one end there was a small piece of sheet aluminum bent into a U, each of its three sides about three inches square. “The rabbit hutch,” Weaver explained. The back and both sides of the U sat on a three-inch square of cardboard on which a rough, gray ball of what could have been plumbers’ putty was settled, the ball about one inch around. “And this is the girl rabbit.” He touched the putty ball. At the far end from the rabbit hutch, resting on a small carrier that was made to run along the rails, there was a similar hutch-like U, though on this one the aluminum squares covered the top and bottom, rather than the sides. Weaver indicated a putty ball in this other hutch. “And this is the boy rabbit.”

On the garage wall behind the workbench Weaver had taped the mechanical drawing that was the tinkertoy’s pattern, and now Weaver pointed at the drawing. “The diagram shows an explosive canon behind the boy rabbit’s carrier to propel it—a cylinder and piston, with a spot for a 12 gauge shotgun shell.”

“First you take out the shot,” Alan Singleton offered. “No surprises there—standard propellant in the trade.”

Weaver continued, “There’s no canon on the tinkertoy prototype, just an indication of a stationary platform for it. Now, behind the canon, here on the diagram, this looks like shorthand for a radio-frequency receiver, obviously to fire the canon. Based on the figures here,” he tapped the drawing, “the prototype is half-scale. The finished product is going to be two meters long—just over six feet. Now, watch what happens when I shoot the imaginary canon.”

As they watched, Weaver pushed the boy-rabbit ball of putty and its U-shaped carrier along the rails toward the girl rabbit’s aluminum hutch at the other end. As the carrier traveled down the rails, the ratcheting teeth let it move forward but clicked up to keep it from moving back. “Watch closely,” Weaver said, pressing the boy rabbit’s carrier into the rabbit hutch. As he did so, the two rabbits were placed side-by-side, almost touching, and the boy rabbit’s U locked into place around the other U, forming a closed aluminum box.

“What would they want to enclose with aluminum?” Xavier asked.

“Not aluminum.” Weaver tapped the drawing again, now touching a scattering of scientific notation. “Aluminum’s only for the prototype, I don’t know what the whole formula means, but this is the symbol for tungsten

carbide, WC.”

The F.O. laughed. “The loo!”

“It doesn’t mean ‘water closet,’ Kenny,” Singleton said. “Tungsten carbide, it reflects radiation back on itself. Years ago at the Virginia Campus toy factory, our elves were onto something like this—but a bitch of a lot higher tech. Used it to develop the notorious man pack.”

“The notorious man pack?” Xavier asked.

Singleton said, “You don’t have clearance—you didn’t hear that.”

“And what are we looking at?” asked the F.O. “A nuclear bomb?”

Weaver said, “It doesn’t have the right elements for a bomb. But it could be a mini-Chernobyl ... what’s called a critical event.” After thumbing down the rail that held the ratchet teeth, he moved the boy rabbit’s carrier back, exposing the two grayish putty balls. “What you saw was two lumps of enriched radionuclides being put close beside each other, and enclosed with what you could call ‘radiation mirrors.’ The result is a serious melt-down.”

“Melt-down hell,” Singleton said. “Chernobyl ended up a nuclear volcano.”

Weaver patted the tinkertoy. “This would do the same, just on a smaller scale.” Touching the dosimeter, he continued, “It’s not even warm. So I’d say this guy Andrei was working someplace separate from the actual radionuclides—which means they have another workshop and hideout somewhere else.”

Remly was about to speak, there came a crash and shouting from inside the house, Alan Singleton saying “Shit!” and shifting into his walker to scoot across the garage and through the door into the kitchen.

Once Singleton was gone, Remly turned to Weaver. “You’re a mess—you’re asleep on your feet. Go catch some shuteye.”

“I can’t,” said Weaver. “I’ve still got to inventory the stuff we got from Stellenhoff, then I have to figure out how to use it.”

The F.O. had been studying the tinkertoy closely. “Chernobyl.” He looked over his shoulder at Remly. “More and more I question our wisdom, going at this on our own.”

“The poison pill,” Remly reminded him. “Vanbastian and Leonard.”

The F.O. said, “Oh *fuck* Vanbastian and Leonard!” at which Weaver actually blushed. The F.O. went on, “Get it off to some other agency— isn’t there a joint task force of some sort? All hammer and tongs after terrorists, all that?”

Remly looked around the garage, at the piles of swag they’d gotten at Andrei’s lair. Then again at the tinkertoy. “Even with the vague scientific notations, Andrei’s plan for the nuclear shrouding machine doesn’t spell

out ‘Nuke Vegas Now.’ And the rest of it ... Alan and I talked it through on our way back. Dig deeper into the meaning behind all this abandoned evidence, it’s obvious that the rubble’s been carefully selected to present two faces to the world, depending on when it’s discovered. When we get around to the stuff on the floor, you’ll see what I mean. None of it can be taken to the authorities as evidence of an impending attack against Las Vegas. Say Xavier made the call—he’s not on the nut-notice that Vanbastian and Leonard have out on you and me ...”

“And Alan,” the F.O. added.

“Say Xavier calls, tells them about this. Would the task force actually get a warrant? Send out a team, based solely on the word of a tourist from Beverly Hills?”

No one answered.

“And Xavier can’t give them anything really concrete without exposing himself to a breaking-and-entering rap. And what excuse does he give for being interested in Andrei’s hideout to begin with?”

“Steal a car,” Xavier said. “Put it in the drive at the house and set it on fire. Then the cops could go in.”

Remly said, “Okay, say the cops get into the house, where we’ve returned all this junk. What then? There’s not a thing here that says ‘Nuke Vegas Now!’ But the genius of what they’ve done is this: Say Vegas *does* get nuked,” he waved at the floor, at the tinkertoy, “then all of this will be seen as corroborative proof that the people in Andrei’s lair were responsible for the attack. Brilliant. Especially when you consider that so much evidence was left behind in such a conspicuously lax state of security.”

The F.O. said, “You sound bitter.”

“Only when I’m awake.”

“What, then, did you discover in all the rest of this debris?”

“Let’s wait for Alan,” Remly said. He glanced over to the laptop that Alan had placed on the workbench. A website was on the screen: “M. W. Schofield, Assessor.” The Clark County Assessor’s splash page, with Alan’s cursor hovering over the dropdown for looking up ownership of a property address.

As Remly studied the computer screen, the door to the kitchen opened and Singleton came shuffling through on his walker. “Dexedrine and beer! And some fucking movie called *The Road Warrior*. They got out of hand—pulled out a couple of those plush seats in the theater, Kenny.” He had a small bottle in hand. “Xanax. Any luck, they’ll go down pretty soon.”

Alan resettled himself and got onto his computer again. Remly led the F.O. to their take, spread out in piles on the sheets. “What we’ve got is this:

Arab detritus—includes cooking utensils, clothing, games, food, newspapers. Iraqi coins and paper money. Our friend Andrei left behind Arabic set decorations.” He pointed to a pile of ice cream wrappers and cartons that they’d segregated from the rest of the waste in a large garbage bin. “Mr. Freeze, a local company.”

“Ice cream wrappers?” the F.O. said. “What on earth are *they* about?”

“They’ve got pushcart vendors around town,” Remly said.

Weaver said, “I counted ninety-four ice cream wrappers, four empty cartons.” He held one up: Pad-stamped on the cardboard, 24 COUNT CHOCONUT.

The F.O. picked up a handful of canvas pieces. “Whatever can this be?”

Xavier said, “I looked at them, we were throwing ‘em into the van. They’re cut for a man’s vest. A canvas vest, with big pouches all around. It closes up the back, rather than the front.

“Semtex boutique vests,” Alan Singleton said, “Fashionista-wear from Iraq.”

“A trunk show!” Xavier sang. “Pakistan to Afghanistan, and then we play Iraq. But don’t you know, wherever we go, we bomb—our rags are schlock!”

“So we’ve got suicide bombers on foot,” Remly said. “Plus there are the aeronautical charts for San Francisco and Las Vegas. A couple of phone cards.”

“A moment,” the F.O. said. “The aeronautical charts. Do we assume from this that they have an airplane?”

“Probably the delivery vehicle,” Remly said.

“With an Arab pilot?”

“That’s what it looks like,” Remly said.

“San Francisco?” the F.O. said.

Remly said, “It covers the airspace from the Oregon border down to Lucia, just below Big Sur. East into Nevada.”

“And the Las Vegas chart?”

“Most of Nevada, a big chunk of Utah, a slice of Arizona.”

“Rather a bit of real estate,” the F.O. said.

“Thanks,” Remly said bitterly.

“Here’s the owner,” Singleton said. He sat forward in his overstuffed chair to tap furiously at his computer keyboard. “Guy who owns the dump we raided, he’s a small-time real-estate macher. Google says he has a website, bless his soul.”

At a pile of cotton garments, Remly lifted a long, white item that resem-

bled a night shirt, and turned to Xavier. “Your friend Jerri didn’t mention seeing anything that looked Arabic, the night he spent with Andrei?”

Xavier said, “Nothing, no.”

“And except for the ice cream wrappers, everything that’s recognizable in this stuff is Arabic,” Weaver volunteered. “Nothing Russian or Ukrainian in anything that I saw.”

Singleton asked, “What’d you expect, empty borscht bottles?” then returned to tapping at his laptop’s keyboard.

“Jerri remembered a Russian newspaper, the night he was there,” Xavier said.

“It’s not here,” the F.O. said. He was delicately sifting through the litter like an archaeologist. “Arab newspapers and a book in Arabic, I’m afraid that is it.”

“Wait!” Singleton called. “Whoa there. I got the guy’s website. That house, he’s got it listed as available pretty soon. Something about current rental agreement expiring. In three days he goes to the property, puts on a new roof. After that it’s available—lease or short-term rental.”

“Three days?” Remly asked.

“You got it, kiddo.”

And with that, Remly heard a nail being hammered down. “In *two* days the news cameras will be rolling on Fremont Street.”

“Yeah,” Singleton said. “Vegas gets nuked, they’ll be all over the place like vultures.”

“No,” Remly said. “It’s an opportunity for this Didi and Andrei, the cameras will already be rolling. A civic event—funeral parade for a local character, Li’l Mikey McCoy, the honorary mayor of Fremont Street.”

Alan Singleton said, “Nice coincidence. How’d they know to end the lease on a day when the cameras were already rolling?”

“The other way around, Alan. Why did Mikey McCoy die so conveniently?”

“Could be conspiracy,” Singleton replied, “could be it’s just more bullshit and poetry. Let’s get back to these ice cream wrappers, see if we can divine the fucking future from them.”

Yet the only future Remly could see was one he didn’t care to inspect too closely.

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## . . . N Y E C O U N T Y

Andrei woke in the dark wondering if he could tiptoe downstairs without waking Papa and Mama—get some varenyki and a glass of milk before the rest of the household began stirring. When he heard Mikhail snoring in

the other cot he came fully into the day and sat up to review where he was, and what was on his plate.

Mikhail had wanted to stay in one of the small concrete buildings, but Didi explained there wasn't room for two more in the dorm he shared with Viktor, Yuri, and Slava, and he refused to evict the Arabs from their building.

"It's only for two more days," as Didi put it.

"Then it won't be so bad for these Arabs," Mikhail protested. "Let them sleep in the shack."

Didi said, "These poor fellows from Iraq—in Christian charity we owe them whatever comfort we can give, the next couple of days."

And so Andrei and Mikhail were put up in the remaining wood shack, drafty and dusty, dim light filtering through broken windows.

Andrei rose and dressed thoughtlessly in yesterday's clothes; soon enough he would be assembling the nuclear volcano with Yuri, stripping down to his skin to get into paper undergarments and a beta-radiation suit. Little chance for varenyki, but he knew that Didi had a good coffee machine in his dorm.

At the door of the shack he stopped and saw Georgi again, slack-mouthed in sudden death, staring with dilated pupils into infinity, a dripping 9mm hole beside his nose under his left eye, the first time Andrei had lost anyone—previously it had always been the target who went away—and this image of Georgi clung to him waking and sleeping.

"Go *down!*" Spoken harshly if almost silently, the words rasping in his throat. "*Leave me.*"

Yet as he walked from the doorway of the shack into the chill morning darkness Georgi's dead gaze followed him accusingly.

“Iterque et mutata regio vigorem dabunt.”  
 (Travel and change of place impart vigor.)  
 Seneca

## AUTUMN 2004 . . .

### . . . LISBON / ROME / KUWAIT

Nasirpal had set his heart on traveling home with his father; in gentle tones Ashor confronted Nasi with reality. “Not with your mother in Turkey, haggling with the fabrics barons.” Unthinkable, Ashor said, to leave the pregnant Hanin alone with only little Joseph and the entourage for company. And with no dur-Shamshi in residence to keep them in line—“change their nappies,” Ashor put it—relations between the factions within the staff would degenerate into open conflict, and poor Talia would find the entourage thoroughly Balkanized on her return.

Now at Da Vinci International in Rome it was 17:45, Ashor facing a two-hour layover while the Gulfstream was refueled and the charter flight crew did a routine mid-route check on the plane.

Another six hours to Kuwait International in the Safat suburb, landing at 03:45 in a black morning. A further delay while Ashor charmed their way through customs and security. For the trip Ashor had chosen four key men from the original security force he’d brought into exile: Arvan, Fadil, Govan, and of course Rafiq—cool, courteous, and lethal. Once out of the quarantine area they found Ashor’s former adjutant Colonel Fawzi Mukhlis al-Musa’id waiting for them with a small fleet of armored Toyota Land Cruisers: Two to lead, next a heavy stretch model for Ashor and Fawzi, the last as chase car.

Fawzi stood rigidly near the stretch Land Cruiser, clutching his ever-present worry beads and holding himself in, his Iraqi heart corked up by a soldier’s discipline. Ashor on the other hand went quickly to his cherubic adjutant and leaned down to throw his arms around Fawzi, kissing him on the cheek. With that the dam of Fawzi’s emotions broke and he first hugged Ashor then stepped back to pocket his beads and take off his glasses, wiping his eyes and saying only, “Home, General. Soon you are home!”

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### . . . NYE COUNTY

Every assignment was a barbed trap, that was a given. All too easy going in, no small feat to exit with grace and a whole skin.

The way Didi had it planned, they would extract themselves like col-

lapsing dominoes, Andrei and Mikhail falling back to where Didi would be waiting with Yuri, Viktor, and Slava. The six of them would then join up with the Colonel and his bodyguards on the least expected and only logical escape route, Didi anticipating that the entire county would immediately be placed under security quarantine by a local anti-terrorism task force ... the airports locked down and roadblocks everywhere once the nuclear volcano was set off.

With this fellow Tayyib as his interpreter, Didi had grilled the other expendable Arabs about their simple assignments, catching them unawares at odd hours over the last three days and giving them snap quizzes. What if *this* happened? What if *that* came to pass? The school teacher's name was Ghazwan, though the pilot called him "Scout," and he was the least of Didi's worries. It was the two men named Ali who troubled him, the younger one having become more and more withdrawn and dark-faced as the days passed, the older one slow to understand how he was to respond if things didn't go smoothly. Even so, the two Alis had little to do other than let themselves be blown up, and despite their personal complications it was hard to imagine them jeopardizing the project. If they didn't explode at the optimum location, still they would explode, creating havoc wherever they happened to be.

As for Tayyib, Didi was confident the pilot would deliver his deadly payload without fail. Tayyib had shown Didi where La Fontaine was to be struck in order to buckle its framing and guarantee that the hotel would collapse in on itself as the nuclear volcano was activated.

They destroyed the mine shack—an artistic job, it could have been the work of vandals—leaving shattered, sunbleached planks. After draping the Cessna 172 with a camouflage net lightly studded with twigs of desert growth, there was no further need for extreme subterfuge: Today was their goodbye kiss to Las Vegas. Once done with the day's business they would return home.

And home seemed their common coin, Didi and Viktor talking about their families while Yuri puzzled aloud whether his Tatyana would happily move with him to a farm in the warmer climes of the Ukraine. Yet Didi lost all thought of home when he saw the three religious Arabs at their final prayers—kneeling and bundled forward, heads touching the elaborate rugs Didi had gotten for them at a flea market. Taking up his well-thumbed bible, Didi retired to the privacy of his Ford pickup truck to read and calm his mind.

When it was time to go a change of mood settled on them like an eclipse of the sun. Where there had been nostalgia on the part of his Slavs and piety



in three of the Arabs—and before that a certain glee in the trashing of the mine shack—all of them now pulled somber looks, even the unflappable Tayyib. Andrei developed a mild tremor, and if one was to judge by his grim face Mikhail was about to depart on a grave-robbing expedition. Yesterday, fun-loving Yuri had been on edge as he and Andrei assembled the nuclear volcano. Today, as the attack was about to begin, and with no real function, Yuri seemed to lose his color, his eyes flicking nervously from the Arabs to Andrei to Didi and again back to the Arabs, who were being escorted by Mikhail into the back of a large rented truck.

With that it was time to go. There were no good-byes—no final comments like a verbal drumroll—only silent departures ... gray-faced men thinking of little more than the road ahead.

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### . . . L A K E   L A S   V E G A S

As Didi's crew drove off to attend to their final chores, Charles Remly's team was similarly occupied, though in honesty they were fanning out with a more ambivalent agenda, their only sure knowledge that an attack would be launched by a group of Slavs and Arabs using Semtex, an airplane, and a critical nuclear device. And that the explosion and meltdown would take place during Li'l Mikey McCoy's funeral parade sometime around noon, in order to benefit from the television coverage. Beyond these bare facts they were feeling their way in the dark.

As with Yuri musing about his Tatyana, Remly absently speculated about Pru Littleton, thinking that she was bright if not terribly focused. And wondering further if, because he *was* thinking of her, perhaps he was connecting with her inside his psyche—supposing even that he had a psyche. Yet as quickly as Pru came to mind Remly shook off thoughts of what he might do if he lived, and concentrated instead on the lethal conflict before him.

Weaver had been living almost exclusively on coffee and caffeine tablets—having declined Alan Singleton's offer of a bottle of Dexedrine—and despite being thoroughly wired he had succeeded in connecting Dieter Stelenhoff's GPS technology with a computer that drove the home theater's giant screen, turning it into a virtual plotting map with numbered blips for the transmitters carried by each man on the team. The F.O. and Singleton, fitted with comfortable earphones, would thus monitor and guide the men in the field as the day unfolded. And for all of his bluster against dehumanizing electronics, the F.O. had fallen on the system with childlike glee: During Weaver's catechism of the layout, the old man seemed one step ahead of the lesson, flicking his laser-pointer adroitly at spots on the map and bringing up the remote communication lines almost by instinct.

Alan Singleton, with his lifetime in black arts, had become by default the team's archbishop of logistics and evolving strategy, which at first worried Remly, as this was a direct intrusion into the F.O.'s sacred territory. Yet the F.O. was engaged like a videogame zealot with his giant plotting screen and seemed blind to the fact that his authority had been preempted by Singleton.

The theater's first row of overstuffed loge seating had been removed, replaced by two long library tables. Scattered on the tables were the tools and paraphernalia the old men would be relying on—their laptop computers, open and running; two trucker-sized coffee mugs filled with pencils and cigars; an ashtray like an overturned hubcap, which Alan Singleton moved with much ostentation from a spot between them to the far end of the table away from himself and barely reachable by the F.O.; attaché cases; notepads; and between them a touchpad control panel with its menu of different views on the theater's big LCD screen, along with communications toggles.

Beneath the tables were the electronics that drove the integrated systems, a jumble of devices stacked willynilly, with coax-cables and hookup wires that looked like spilled spaghetti, fresh-cooked by a mad scientist. Weaver had added a bedsheet to the tables—a sort of modesty panel—to hide this mess.

As the team moved out, only the three Boston burglars were more relaxed than the F.O. and Alan Singleton. They had not been told that nuclear materials were at issue nor that there was enough Semtex to bring down fully half of Fremont Street Experience, even forgetting the nuclear threat.

For himself, Remly, by now a confirmed fatalist, was perhaps on edge yet strangely indifferent about his destiny, feeling in his gut that there was no alternative but to go forward and discover what the world had in store for him.

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## . . . K U W A I T / I R A Q

Despite Fawzi's enthusiasm, they were not to be home soon. It was an hour and then some from the airport to Kuwait border control, Iraq border control as a follow-on and then the British army's security check-point; more papers shown, visas stamped, reassuring words spoken. They faced another four hours driving from the border to Fawzi's fortified farm compound beside the river Shatt 'Afak, longer than it would have taken had they landed at Baghdad International—though even that was in dispute, as the Matar Sadam Al-Dowli road from the Baghdad airport had become a proving ground for the insurgency's IEDs<sup>1</sup>. The way north from the British sec-

<sup>1</sup>IED – *Improvised Explosive Device, ie home-made bomb.*

tor, though more distant, was considerably less exciting, which meant Fawzi could bring Ashor up to date on the shaku maku while they caravanned along Highway-5 from Kuwait.

It was all wonderful news, Fawzi told him. That fellow Bremer of the Coalition Provisional Authority had left a brilliant legacy. Unemployment was at 70%, and before he ran away, this Bremer had said he didn't give a damn about Iraq's underclass.

"This Bremer actually said such out loud, right to the very face of Mr. Ali Allawi—*brilliant!*—it was immediately all over Baghdad, then the shaku maku spread even to the smallest villages. Seventy percent unemployment! And the Bremer didn't give a damn! It drives the people crazy!" Fawzi beamed, his bald head glowing pink. Even better, he said, auditors were reporting that Bremer's CPA had never kept books of accounting—over twenty billion dollars in Iraq oil revenues and American grants had gone missing.

Fawzi said, "Can you imagine how well this plays into the employment demonstrations we've planned?"

Rafiq was in the front passenger seat, he tapped on the soundproof window. Fawzi heard the rapping and turned in his dickey seat to unlatch the window and slide it open.

"Coffee?" Rafiq asked. He'd been brewing strong French roast on the utility hump.

"Thank you," Ashor said.

Rafiq passed a large thermal mug through to Fawzi, who had to get up to pass it along to Ashor. Taking the second mug for himself, Fawzi nodded his thanks and sealed the sliding window again.

Fawzi continued speaking after a sip of strong coffee: "The American Marines fighting Muqtada's Mehdi militia in An Najaf have reduced the entire main market and the wholesale food market to rubble. The city is ripped up all over, and all but empty of any kind of civil life."

"I read that," Ashor said.

"But there is the shaku maku that these journalistic news fellows don't report."

"And that is ..?"

"The middle classes, the businessmen of An Najaf—the shopkeepers, the professionals—like the many bloggers, they are calling for the return of General Ashor. It's not that they hate the Yank Marines, many of these Americans are good young men. But the professional people want an end to these power struggles and a return to doing business. It is the same in other major cities. Even in Baghdad ... though the shaku maku for General

Ashor is much subdued there, because of government informers and the various militias and death squads.”

And was there any word about conditions of the Kurds, Ashor wanted to know.

“We are getting is the same news that you also are getting,” Fawzi said. “But the shaku maku is that the Kurds in the Autonomous Region are very unhappy that so many in the rest of the country are calling for your return. Even General Mihrivan at the KDP in Erbil has spoken out against you. The Kurds, they fear an Assyrian coming into any kind of power in Baghdad—especially an Assyrian from Nineveh.”

Ashor nodded silently. And here again was where Saddam had got it wrong, for the Kurds’ weakness wasn’t military—the Peshmerga<sup>1</sup> had proved that again and again. No, their weakness lay in their territorial ambitions. They wanted to rule over as much Iraqi territory outside of Iraq’s Kurdish Autonomous Region as they already controlled inside of it, and their Kurdish brothers in Syria, Turkey, and Iran wanted to be annexed to the KAR. As Ashor saw it the key was to stir up the Kurds living outside of Iraq, getting the Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian Kurds bombing and demonstrating to become part of Greater Kurdistan—encouraging the governments in Ankara, Damascus, and Teheran to cut off Kurdish roads and Kurdish oil and gas pipelines at the borders. Let the Kurds choke on their own ambition.

In the Parliament however, Fawzi reported, three MPs had stood and called for General Ashor’s return and reinstatement on the army’s general staff.

Ashor asked, “To which the general staff replied . . . ?”

“As you can imagine,” Fawzi said. “Like a bomb had been dropped on their personal heads. Despite them, it looks as though you will be allowed back. General Darwish Abdul-Haqq is already back, and all of your colonels, though General Darwish has been reduced to a single star.”

“That will be fixed soon enough,” Ashor said. “And if you’re to be my adjutant at the presidential palace in Baghdad, you’ll need a star for your own shoulder boards.”

Fawzi turned his face away. Dropping his worry beads in his ample lap, he lifted his glasses and dabbed at his eyes.

They were stopped nine kilometers north of the border by Fawzi’s fifth armored Land Cruiser. Ashor’s men emerged and took up the Kalashnikovs and Heckler & Koch USP pistols from the waiting Toyota, along with boxes of ammunition. Four of Fawzi’s own armed men came from the new Land

<sup>1</sup>*Peshmerga – Independent Kurdish military force in northern Iraq.*

Cruiser to keep watch while Ashor's men caught up on their sleep, and they continued on as a five-vehicle convoy.

Rather than dozing off, Ashor looked hungrily out the window at the landscape of home. As they approached the cutoff expressway to Al Basrah he was startled to see a heron skimming low beside the highway.

Ashor turned to Fawzi. "Is the water back?" Before Fawzi could reply they were upon it, the southern shore of Hawr Al Hammar.<sup>1</sup>

Fawzi said, "You didn't hear? The people pulled down all of Saddam's dikes and dams last year—started wrecking 'em right after the Yanks invaded. Flooded the marshes again."

"I'd heard, yes," Ashor said, yet the reality was a shock after thinking 'desert' for so many years. Now Highway-5 tilted west, hugging the southern shoreline of the massive marshland, the rising sun glistening metallically on the water through the thick reeds. There were herons by the score, and dozens of birds Ashor couldn't identify, and he turned to Fawzi, asking, "And the frogs?"

"By the millions, it sounds like sometimes." Fawzi laughed, a thing he did easily and often. "You'd think they never went away—just squatting low in the desert for twelve years, waiting for the waters to return. Just as there have been so many men waiting for General Ashor to come back."

"And the meetings you've arranged?"

Fawzi grinned so widely that his dimples extended almost into his bald scalp. "Everyone wants to meet General Ashor, and I have had my cutouts schedule them at different places—all secure places. I have Dr. Mohammed, the economist. Many many meetings have been arranged with high-ranking men, for you to thank for their loyalty. Many physicians, I cannot recall all their names. Many booksellers and writers from Mutanabi Street, and many of their intellectual friends. Five separate delegations of mullahs and clerics. Even a faction of computer manufacturers from Taiwan—they want to set up assembly plants here, with Iraqi co-ownership, to make Arabic computers. Even they have heard that you are the man to deal with, although you were in Lisbon at the time." Fawzi gave a cheery laugh. "It is like as though you are a sheikh, and are holding your own majlises."

"No, loyal Fawzi. It is more as though I must be humble and attend to the advice of these wise visitors—just as I must go into the countryside and bend my knee to the sheikhs at their majlises before we secure the country completely." With that Ashor handed back the empty coffee mug and drew the lap robe to his chin. "For now, let me catch up on my sleep. We begin

<sup>1</sup>*Hawr Al Hammar—Al Hammar Marsh, the shallow (highest at 3-meters in spring) 1,3500-sq-kilometer lake and marshland between Al Basrah and An Nasiriyah.*

monitoring the television sets tonight at twenty-one hundred.”

Fawzi opened a window and threw both coffee mugs out. “It happens so late at night?” he said, not really believing it.

Ashor said, “Las Vegas time, it will be ten hundred in the morning. The fireworks start an hour or two later.”

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

In life Michael McCoy had been a source of aggravation to the cops who picked him up for public drunkenness and to the charity workers who routinely put him back on the street when his nocturnal serenades drove everyone at the shelter into a rage. In death, however, Li'l Mikey had become a beloved and even iconic local character, remembered for his leprechaun grin and bright green top hat as he sang and high-stepped along Fremont at the head of the St. Patrick Day Parade.

At the moment—despite that it was to be Mikey McCoy's day in the sun—the actual beginning of Li'l Mikey's last ride went unreported by the television cameras, as there was nothing entertaining about his casket being pushed into a hearse at the back entrance of Marnelli Funeral Directors. This is not to say the activity wasn't being watched—it was, though from a distance.

As the loaders were getting the coffin aboard, the driver taped a green top hat onto the hearse's hood. That done, he slipped into his black suit jacket, combed his hair a final time with the aid of the sunvisor mirror, started the engine, backed into the alley, and was off to the funeral parade's shape-up rendezvous. As he approached the middle of the alley, a large rental truck entered from the street. The truck was too wide to be passed. The hearse driver honked and put his hand out the window, motioning that the truck was to stop and back up to let him through. The truck stopped, but remained in the alley while a large man stepped down from the passenger side, briefcase in hand and smiling apologetically as he walked to the hearse.

“There's a sign,” the driver shouted. “One way street, you're going against the arrow.”

“I am very sorry please,” the man said. A funny accent, the driver thought, not from around here or the Coast. “We get lost.” As the man came to the hearse, he opened the briefcase. “I got a map, maybe you can help?”

“Mister, this is a mercy vehicle and I'm on a schedule. Go back—you understand English?”

The large man brought a gun from the briefcase and shot the driver

once in the throat and again in the middle of his chest, catching the dead man as he fell forward toward the horn pad on the steering wheel.

That accomplished, Mikhail tipped the driver to the passenger side and opened the door of the hearse, waving an okay sign at the Arab, Ghazwan, behind the wheel of the big truck.

“Der Ball ist rund, und das Spiel dauert neunzig Minuten. Alles andere ist Theorie.”

(The ball is round, and the game lasts ninety minutes. Everything else is theory.)

Josef “Sepp” Herberger

## AUTUMN 2004 . . .

## . . . LAS VEGAS

There were certain rituals that Weaver performed when he was away on assignment, the most sacred of which was phoning Hilda twice a day, mornings and evenings. Yesterday evening and this morning his tasks—magnified by pressure and compounded by fatigue—had overwhelmed him, and he lost track of both time and wife.

Driving to his triangulation station in a counterfeit Clark County utilities van, Weaver finally remembered Hilda, yet even then he didn’t call. There was too much on his plate as it was, and he knew his voice would sound strained and artificial if they spoke, which would upset her more than his silence, a silence she would attribute to security issues of his current job. Still, Weaver felt a twinge of guilt, which added measurably to his case of nerves.

Yesterday Charley had asked again if he shouldn’t take a break and catch up on his sleep, the F.O. adding, “You look like death warmed over.”

Weaver shook his head, gesturing at the contents of Dieter Stellenhoff’s massive safe. “Three days of work, just sorting out what we’ll need. Another day to put everything together. So what time is kickoff tomorrow?”

The Boston Neanderthals had stolen this small van and over the last day had modified and re-painted it. On the roof a rack for six antennas and a small microwave dish. Inside—and this was another of the reasons why Weaver had become a poster-boy for sleep deprivation—inside there was a serial array of communications and geopositioning screens beside and behind the driver’s seat, the screens and the electronic components that drove them secured on racks that the Boston burglars had welded into place. Weaver had sacrificed hours of sleep to assemble, configure, connect, and test the integrated systems. Twenty minutes ago, for the finishing touches, they’d driven the van to a road that deadended at a barricade, raw desert beyond and a sign that announced an upcoming sale of 160 acres by BLM and GSA. Here they fitted the antennas and microwave dish to the roof and put Clark County insignia on its doors, then applied counterfeit EX government plates front and rear—metamorphosing the work van that had driven through Lake Las Vegas’s security gates into a different breed altogether,



with no ties to the F.O.'s rented estate.

As Weaver drove along the I-15 past Mandalay Bay, the northbound freeway traffic began jamming up around him. Beside him on the van's doghouse console he had a thermos of coffee, a trucker-style bubba mug also filled with strong coffee, and two small paper cups, one with a half-dozen caffeine mega-tablets, the other with a single Modafinil—as though he wasn't already sufficiently strung out.

Unlike Weaver, Xavier was rested and eager for things to heat up. Aside from learning his route and putting to memory Charley's fluid game plan, Xavier had had no real chores prior to kickoff.

Weaver had sent him to the ham radio shop in Boulder City for a scanner frequency guide, and he'd spent a period of time in the kitchen, cooking for the team, and had helped unbolt a row of theater seats to accommodate the F.O.'s and Alan's command center. Finally Charley sent him to help Weaver again, Weaver at that point madly sorting through the electronic goods from Dieter Stellenhoff's workshop. And it was here that Xavier watched Weaver verge on breakdown, for the huge cabinet was disgorging more plunder than Weaver could have single-handedly identified, much less catalogued, in the time allotted to him. Weaver passed the obvious items over to Xavier for tagging and listing in a laptop spreadsheet: GPS bumper beepers; broad-frequency scanners, with GPS directional positioning reception; the auto-ranging scrambler phones that Charley had told him about earlier, along with wireless earphones for the scramblers; a handful of stolen throwaway cell phones and nearly four dozen programmable counterfeit SIMs, which could be slipped into any cell phone to spoof the caller ID. As Xavier tapped more information into his laptop, Weaver puzzled over the things that didn't openly broadcast their meaning and use. Toward the end, Weaver began sorting his own finds into two categories—the items that were necessary and which he recognized, and a carton of mysterious objects he would decipher later.

Much of the recognizable loot had been put to use in the estate's movie theater and Weaver's utility van, other components were shared with the rest of the team. On the dash of his rented Porsche Boxter, Xavier had taped a small television monitor, tuned to Vegas-4-news; and next to the monitor, looking suspiciously like a radar detector, he'd placed a Stellenhoff broad-freq scanner with its directional pickup. Like all of them save for the Southies he wore an unobtrusive earphone for his auto-ranging scrambler phone, the phone taped to the instrument panel so he could watch himself changing his location, one moment in La Paz, the next in Stockholm. And

under a sweater on the passenger seat, kept close at hand, the suppressed MAC-11 subgun. There was a canvas shopping bag on the floor at the passenger side, filled with more tools from both Weaver and Alan, but it was the ones within reach that he anticipated using most, based on the drill that Charley had laid out.

Although the triangulation could have been done with only two geo-directional receptions, the problem as Weaver explained it was one of proximate angle: Two receptions, focusing with only a few degrees of angle on a frequency—creating a narrow isosceles triangle—could give the general direction of the source, but couldn't judge distance or real positioning. A third receiver was needed to set up a wider angle, in the event that the source was too closely in line with the original two pickups. As a result, Xavier and Remly served as points on broader triangles for Weaver, Xavier now heading for Blue Diamond Road to the southwest.

As Xavier turned off the 215 southbound onto the I-15, cars streamed north from California like a caravan with no visible end, as though Vegas had somehow become the promised land.

Along the entertainment corridors of the Strip and Fremont Street time is entirely speculative. Clocks are unknown and mornings neither begin nor end but are merely an indistinct compromise between darkness and noon. Locals on their way to work pass tourists carrying plastic beer cups and drinks with miniature umbrellas, the umbrellas presumably to keep the sun from melting the ice. As noon approaches, the workaday lunch crowd coexists with exhausted visitors heading for their hotels to sleep and begin the cycle of fun eight hours later, breakfasting on ham and eggs with hash-browns and Margaritas before catching a show at sundown.

In the downscale section of Rancho Boulevard northwest of the tourists mornings end more emphatically, the tacoterias and hamburguesas prontos filling quickly as noon approaches.

A little before eleven on this particular morning, the Mexican barbacoa shack where Weaver had stationed himself teased his nose with roasting pork and chicken. And as the parking lot began to fill, Weaver forced himself not to return the stares of people lining up at the takeout window, telling himself not to get paranoid—a van like this, an antenna garden on the roof, it made sense people would stare. But when a plainwrap Chevy with two young cops drove twice around the block it was hard not to worry—who were they monitoring? A third pass, they parked across the street at the red curb in front of a coffee shop, where no other parking was available, Weaver watching without directly looking at them until they went into the shop.

Weaver angled the rearview mirror down and confronted himself, his face gray and his eyelids red-rimmed, his eyes vivid pink where they should have been white. Twisting the mirror back in place he spoke aloud to himself. “Relax. Nothing new, I’ve been here a hundred times before.” But that was then, when he was young and had the full resources of the firm behind him. Now, if he was to be candid with himself, the chance of failure was at least equal to any hope of success—the project slapdash and their resources capricious.

A couple at the door of the barbecue shack looked at him, then looked quickly away when he turned to them. Somewhere in the van he had a parabolic sound grabber. Use it? Then telling himself again not to be paranoid.

‘I have to move,’ he thought. ‘I have to stay.’ He considered the busy street. ‘I have to make a decision!’ Move to get away from the stares? Stay to maintain his base and catch the first scrambled transmissions? Hyped up on caffeine and fatigue, Weaver continued sitting and twitching. Blind to the barbacoa and the cops across the street, he concentrated instead on his electronics and on the television screen which promised live coverage of Li’l Mikey McCoy’s funeral procession. He drank coffee and ate apple strudel and watched his comm screens for scrambled and encrypted voice traffic. As police and Air Force transmits appeared in the system, he tagged them and blocked out their frequencies. In the midst of the silence a hot possibility showed itself as a scrambled transmission in one of the higher frequencies, almost into the microwave range, but when he unscrambled it with Stellenhoff’s software it turned out to be traffic from Vandenberg AFB on the California coast, reflected down to Las Vegas by a stray atmospheric anomaly. He blocked it.

In the past ten years Overlook Country Club had been losing members—some to mortuaries, others to long-term care—and the board of directors couldn’t pin it down, why their marketing efforts weren’t bringing in new, younger players. The club after all had one of the finest views in Vegas, from its hillside vantage facing west across the valley, the view extending almost into Nye County. The board recognized that competition had increased—three new country clubs opening recently—but none were the sort that any of Overlook’s board would want to join, the new courses flaunting celebrity-chef kitchens, tournament-level fairways, and membership fees to match. If Overlook’s facilities were a little old-fashioned, perhaps a little glossy and worn with age, that bespoke tradition. The clubhouse menu was equally traditional, staunchly so in fact—good, solid, American family food, meat and potatoes. And the membership and greens fees were among the lowest this

side of Boulder City. In fact, ignoring the advice of a marketing consultant who said that lower prices reflected a perception of lower value, the board had dropped the fees even more in order to attract new members, and still nothing. The board resolutely marketed, younger players resolutely ignored them, and Overlook barely made its monthly nut on the strength of the top-floor banquet facility, with its panoramic windows and jaw-dropping view.

The most recent banquet had been a wedding reception two weeks ago, catered by an outside service. As contracted, the caterer had cleaned up all signs of the meal, even to vacuuming the faded carpets, but the decorations had been left in place, bunting in the form of crêpe paper ribbons strung along the ceiling, and a large banner, one end dangling loosely, that read “Aldrich and Johana—Only Just Begun.”

A single foursome was on the course, three women and a man scooting along the paths in an electric cart with the insignia of a nearby retirement trailer park emblazoned across its scalloped canopy. But both the pro shop and the clubhouse were closed, not to open until the weekend.

Like the younger members who failed to materialize, Andrei would have preferred somewhere other than Overlook. But there were only two competing possibilities and, though they offered a better view into Nye County and were more convenient to his escape route, they were popular attractions—one called Skyview Bistro in a place called The District, the other a park for dogs and their walkers in the Calico Ridge subdivision.

Until the gunfight at that Yank’s security gate Andrei had never done hands-on work, preferring instead to use his mind, and viewing every job as a dispassionate engineering problem. And so he was now parked at the foot of Overlook’s long drive, having waited over five minutes for Mikhail—who was to do any hands-on work, if it came to that—checking his watch and drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, more and more impatient. Mikhail didn’t have a scrambler, nor could he be raised on his pre-paid cell phone, but Andrei wasn’t overly worried; most likely Mikhail was in a sticky bit with those three Arabs, the oldest and youngest not easy to deal with.

After another twelve minutes and one last glance at his watch, Andrei realized it was time to get into place, no more waiting. Up the drive, parking near the service entrance and picking the lock. He would have everything ready when Mikhail arrived.

He’d scouted the clubhouse earlier, the lock was something from a by-gone age and he was through it in ten seconds. Once inside he went directly to the employees’ break room where he knew the elderly watchman would be seated with a small portable television set and a can of Keystone beer.

The old man was napping, his head thrown back and his mouth open, snoring, oblivious to the Channel 4 news of the coming funeral parade on Fremont. Andrei put the muzzle of his Makarov's suppressor an inch away from the watchman's head, just behind his ear, then closed his eyes and turned his face away as he squeezed the trigger. This should have been Mikhail's work. When Andrei opened his eyes he saw the old man still slumped in his chair, little changed except that he'd stopped snoring and had an ugly red hole in his head.

Andrei brought in his own small TV, along with his canvas equipment bag and the blue canvas tube with the Igla missile, and rather than leave anything downstairs for Mikhail to bring up, he carried his equipment to the banquet room, three trips in all. everything would be in place, ready for the game to begin when Mikhail arrived after dropping off his Arabs. And though Andrei didn't openly confront it, the physical work helped take his mind off the old man he'd killed in the break room.

The large banquet hall had been cleared, the tables bare, though bunting still hung in tired loops from the ceiling. Along the walls chairs had been stacked and covered with clear plastic sheeting. One long series of banquet tables ran close to and parallel with the panoramic view windows, and here Andrei set up his equipment. His phones—both the scrambler and pre-paid cell—were laid out to his left; to his right the Igla, which he'd uncased and armed, ready to defend the Cessna if an American interceptor was dispatched. In front of him was the transmitter, now with all four antennae raised, though he had not yet flipped the toggle that connected the battery and brought the circuits to life.

The building was old, dating back to a time when windows could be opened, and now Andrei opened two of them, one for the surface-to-air missile, which Mikhail might have to use, the other to give him a clearer view to the west. He could almost see the notch in the mountains where the Arab Tayyib would fly the Cessna, coming in low and under the radar of both McCarran International and Nellis, the Air Force base in North Las Vegas.

Now he was ready and now there was nothing left but to wait.

Remly had been offered a stolen car but turned it down, renting a Mustang instead. He'd mapped an overarching strategy with input from the F.O. and Alan Singleton, but aside from that he'd had nothing to fill his time while waiting for this moment. Accepting a suppressed Beretta from Singleton, Remly then purchased 20 boxes of subsonic 9mm ammo, a thousand rounds, and spent his hours in the estate's back yard, getting friendly with

the gun. From his training at the Farm he recalled how to use the shape of the slide—though now the slide with a fat suppressor in front of it—to home on the target. By the time he ran out of cartridges he was hitting grapefruit at 25 feet with snap shots. He cleaned the Beretta and applied the lightest coating of gun oil before loading it with Singleton’s exploding ammo and setting it aside.

He’d put down a layer of paper towel under the gun on the passenger seat of the Mustang, and now was pulling off the 95 onto Russell Road in the southeast of the valley.

He parked and waited.

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### . . . I R A Q

When Ashor woke, the day was full upon them, undulating waves of mirage at the horizon. Rafiq, ever alert, had seen Ashor stirring and brewed more coffee, mugs of it passed into the back compartment, along with a wash cloth dampened in rose water.

Before taking the coffee, Ashor wiped his face with the cloth, then exchanged cloth for mug. Fawzi accepted the wash cloth, opened a window, and tossed it out.

A sip of strong coffee; Ashor asked, “The employment demonstrations tomorrow? Your last blog, Nasi said you’ve arranged for two dozen or so.”

“As you ordered, a little less—twenty-one, exactly. Enough for your charity trucks to supply the demonstrators with flags and effigies. Enough places to make them seem like everywhere for the cameras of Al Jazeera and CNN.”

Ashor contemplated the searing countryside, imagining tomorrow’s employment demonstrations transforming spontaneously into celebrations and anti-American protests when news of the attack on Las Vegas broke.

“And the flags?” Ashor asked.

“Seven hundred little Iraq flags for waving, fifty big American flags for burning. I got a good price on them—Chinese.”

Ashor put his chin to his chest and peered at his adjutant through his eyebrows.

“Not a matter of cost, General Ashor. Time. The flags from China were already sitting in a warehouse—arrived a month after the American invasion.”

Ashor accepted it, but asked, “And the Uncle Sam effigies, Fawzi. Also from China?”

At this Fawzi laughed and stopped fingering his worry beads. “Your old tailor in the Mansur district. He was happy to get the work and we were hap-

py to get him to stop sewing up counterfeit uniforms for the insurgents.”

And there had occurred, by grace of God, the most wonderful accident. The brother of the son-in-law of one of Fawzi’s cousins on his wife’s side had come across a huge papier-mâché replica of America’s famous Statue of Liberty, four meters tall, made by a sculptor who’d studied for a while in a place called Rochester New York.

“And ... he purchased it?” Ashor asked.

“What a sin!” Fawzi said, his eyebrows hovering on his forehead. “Encourage this artist fellow to make more of these spiteful things?” Fawzi’s wife’s cousin’s son-in-law’s brother, with the help of a small crew of equally patriotic friends, broke into the artist’s studio and liberated the big statue, which now rested side-by-side with a dozen protest signs and seven chickens in the barn of his wife’s cousin’s son-in-law in An Najaf, all but the chickens ready for distribution to the demonstrators.

“Papier-mâché,” Ashor mused.

“Highly flammable,” Fawzi agreed. “Maybe just a little diesel fuel for help.”

Ashor heard a high wail of sirens coming up on them from behind, and twisted to look through the Land Cruiser’s back window.

“American patrol,” Fawzi said. “They know my caravans by now, they won’t stop us. They go quickly, sirens screaming, to get others to pull aside for them. Nice boys on the whole, General Ashor. I send to their forward outpost sometimes big buckets of tabbouleh and hummus that my women have made. Once a lamb.”

As the patrol of Humvees sped past, Fawzi’s driver honked a greeting, and the other drivers as well, and Ashor imagined the response of these soldiers to the demonstrations tomorrow. And more significantly the response in the streets of the United States: First to the attack on Las Vegas—a building brought down, a nuclear meltdown, suicide bombers in Semtex vests—to the anti-American celebrations in Iraq, indeed throughout the entire Arab world, American flags burned, effigies of Uncle Sam being hanged on lamp posts, pelted with hundreds of shoes and burned. And in the aftermath, all of America driven into a rage, leaving only the question of how long it would take before America’s leaders accepted the idea of a military coup in Iraq—and a government in Baghdad that assured stability, as opposed to this current chaos masquerading as democracy.

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

Jesus-save-the-children, the money, the *smell* of it. People coming in from the four corners of earth to leave their cash behind like crutches at

Lourdes. Even in this Fremont Experience, like walking through the counting room at Boston First Fed.

The boyos wanted to relocate, all this money pulling at their noses, Stevie asking them straight out, “You think you’re the first? It’s outside your fucking comprehension, every guy on the make who comes here, he doesn’t get the same idea? Settle in, grab his share of the cash? You think the casinos aren’t wise to every scam in the book?” But it was in their eyes, they’d got their heads twisted by Vegas fever. He said, “Say we pull something off, have to get out like scalded cats. How many roads out, you can take your tools with you? Three? Four? And nothing but desert between here and God’s own civilization, where you can melt into the crowd.” Do a job back in the Corridor—anywhere from Boston to the Beltway—five seconds later you were part of the landscape.

He’d got them off that, then they wanted to rip the geek’s electronics, Bucko especially. They’d pulled off the Fairfax job fair and square, they had a right to the goods. “We’ll think about it,” Stevie told them. What he wanted was to get the paycheck from Mr. Singleton for this—honest work, earning it instead of just taking it—and get back east. About ripping off the geek, “We’ll think about it. First this shit we contracted for.”

When Mr. Singleton told them about this part of the job, Stevie said, “No way. We don’t whack people, not our specialty.”

“You put them to sleep,” Mr. Singleton said. “They wake up two hours later, don’t know what happened.”

Stevie looked at the boyos. Buck shrugged while Blazes said, “Long as we’re getting ours, what the fuck.”

“Arabs,” Mr. Singleton said.

Stevie wanted to know, “Tall? Short? Fat? Thin?”

Mr. Singleton said, “Probably.” He explained about canvas vests the Arabs would be wearing.

“And how many Arabs, then?”

“Two, maybe three, it’s not nailed down. Maybe four.”

Stevie said, “Jesus, you don’t half make it easy for us, do you?” And getting back to the vests, could Mr. Singleton give a closer description?

“Like smuggler’s vests,” Mr. Singleton replied. Big pockets all around for carrying flat packages—four, maybe six packages, one kilo each.

‘Carrying flat packages,’ Stevie thought. And what would you smuggle that came in flat packages? That you could slip into a canvas vest?

Mr. Singleton went on to describe what they were to do with these men and Stevie went on wondering what was in the vests, all thought of ripping off the geek forgotten.



Nothing happening at his end of Fremont, east near Las Vegas Boulevard. Tourists. Guys managing the knick-knack kiosks looking zoned out, like they didn't give a rat's ass no one wanted their made-in-China collectibles. The vending kiosks had all been moved to the side to make room for the parade. Stevie was passing the rhinestone sunglasses vendor for the eighth time, maybe ninth, bored, he couldn't resist. The vendor was at the other side of his cart, there was a mirror up high at the corner and Stevie could see the back of the guy's head in the mirror. He slipped three of the battery jobs under his shirt—sunglasses with blinking LEDs around the frames.

Walking east from the kiosk he dropped the sunglasses into his *What Happens Here Stays Here* shopping bag and before the sunglasses hit bottom he saw a big-nosed dark man shriveled by age peddling down 4th Street toward Fremont on an ice cream vendor's tricycle—Mr. Freezee—peddling toward a big empty place called Neonopolis at the corner. Stevie ran against the red across 4th, dodging a honking car.

When the scrambled Russian transmission came in, Weaver was pouring coffee from the thermos into his bubba mug, and when he realized what he was catching he nearly emptied the coffee onto the scanning console. He logged the frequency and tagged it for constant scanning, and captured the entire transmission—a two-way conversation—digitizing it and running it through Stellenhoff's decrypting software. It was Russian language, that much he understood as the conversation hummed back in plain speech over a speaker, but as he had no Russian he had to put this part of the task on hold while he triangulated on the two parties transmitting.

"Charley," he said almost desperately, "Xavier—I'm sending two frequency coordinates. Give me your fixes."

As he waited for their responses, Weaver forwarded Russians' conversation to Alan Singleton. As the binary 1s and 0s streaked across the controller's screen, Weaver heard a helicopter overhead. He leaned into the windshield and looked up—someone monitoring him? 'I'm paranoid.' But ... what if they *were*?

Mr. Singleton was one sharp old bastard, give him that. What Stevie had expected—a blackjack. What old Singleton gave him—a spring-loaded hypo syringe, which Stevie smacked against the Arab's shoulder as they passed. The guy went silent and slack before Stevie could catch him—what was in it? The shriveled old man collapsing onto his trike handlebars.

Stevie pushed him back quickly, said, “Couple chocolate nut bars,” and held the old guy up until a couple in shorts and tank-tops went quickly down 4th, heading for Fremont. The couple passed, 4th was empty, Stevie held the wrinkled old Arab up and rolled him trike and all into the Neonopolis.

This fella Charley Foureyes, acting like he was running the show—even in front of old Singleton—this fella had said Vegas was a strange place. You’d be on a street, crowds of people, plenty of action. Turn a corner, you’d think you were on the moon—empty sidewalks, no cars, nothing. All that commotion on Fremont, 4th was empty and Neonopolis was more than empty—a fucking vacuum. No one going into it, no one there once he rolled in with the ice cream vendor, the place huge, an open, indoor plaza, dozens of vacant shops. Big empty glass windows, nothing displayed, no one home. Like Charley Foureyes said, “What’s fifty to one in Vegas?” The little Mex fag guessed, “Roulette?” Charley Foureyes said, “Ratio of shops to customers at Neonopolis.” No one laughed. “Inside joke,” Charley Foureyes said. Now Stevie got it. Except this was more like zero shops to zero customers, at least down this walkway. Nothing but For Lease signs in the windows.

There was a twist and a turn, more empty shop windows, Stevie’s footsteps echoing hollowly as he pushed the trike up close to a post and let the old man drop forward. He sliced through the back of the Arab’s white smock with a box cutter. There was the lump, something with wires under the canvas vest, some kind of walkietalkie Mr. Singleton said. Stevie cut it out and dropped it into his plastic *What Happens Here Stays Here* shopping bag.

What this was about—and Stevie had this cold just seconds after Mr. Singleton told them about the Arabs and the smugglers’ vests—it was about millions of dollars of coke, obvious. Maybe not so obvious—maybe smack. Why else would they be renting a big mansion near a private lake? Why else the raid in Fairfax? The flosweat about getting these two smugglers’ vests? There were—what? Five of ‘em? Charley Foureyes, Mr. Singleton, the little old fart with the cigar, the little Mex fag, and the geek. How would they be splitting it? Five ways, heavy at the top? Ten million dollars?

Mr. Singleton wanted the vests, but—please Jesus—coke? *Smack*? Four kilos? Six? Jesus Mary and Joseph—six kilos of sniff? Four to six more, in the other Arab’s vest? Stevie asked himself, ‘How many millions are we talking?’ Five, at least. Save-the-children, he and the boyos could retire on that. Live like kings somewhere warm. Spain.

Stevie pulled the old geezer upright again to rip down his Mr. Freeze smock, buttons popping, then sliced down the front of the canvas vest with the box cutter, then across each shoulder, letting the old guy flop forward

and stripping off the entire vest. It would be their 401-k. Spain. Maybe South America.

Thinking, ‘Don’t waste it,’ he opened the ice cream box and got a chocolate-coated vanilla bar with nuts and was off to drop the vest in the BERT step-van.

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## . . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

A voice capture came through from Weaver, Alan Singleton pressing a thumb against his earphone and grinning wolfishly. As he listened to the Russian transmission, the map on the theatre screen developed a red circle, unlike the blue squares that denoted his own team. The red circle was marked “A.”

“My geospotting come through okay?” Weaver’s voice on the overhead speaker. “You should have two red spots.”

The F.O. replied, “I have Mr. Red-Circle-A just a rock-throw east of us here in Lake Las Vegas. He’s near Lake Mead.”

“Just before the Park Ranger station,” Weaver said.

“Exactly,” the F.O. said. Then, to Alan, “Your friend Stevie seems to be moving east on Fremont, away from his post.”

“In a second,” Alan Singleton said. “Mark Red Circle A as ‘Didi,’ as in ‘Dmitri Dmitrovsky.’ Didi tells Circle B—that’s Charley’s buddy Aleksandr Kurskov—he tells him they’re ready to kick off. Just watch the funeral parade, he says. Watch when it comes to the La Fontaine casino.”

The F.O. said, “Mr. Kurskov is off the map.”

Weaver’s voice came back on the overhead speaker, “Scroll your map to the left so you can see the right-hand side, the east end of Lake Mead over in Arizona.”

“I have Mr. Kurskov,” the F.O. said. “South Cove? Is that a marina?”

“It’s a marina.” Remly’s voice. “Lake Mead, the Arizona shore.”

“Whatever is he doing in Arizona?” the F.O. asked. “Mr. Dmitrovsky is at the Lake Mead Ranger station here in Nevada, just down the street from where I’m sitting.”

“It’s a lake.” Remly again. “They have boats on it.”

“Scroll it back,” Singleton said to the F.O. “Pick up Stevie.” The map showed Fremont again, Stevie’s blue square moving. “Stevie, where the fuck are you going?”

“Gotta take a piss,” Stevie replied. “Place called Jillian’s.”

“No Arabs yet?”

“Not a sign, boss. All that coffee, I really gotta go. I’ll be out in a flash.”

“Tactics don’t get made up on the fly,” Alan said. Hearing his friend’s sharp tone, The F.O. turned to look. Alan’s face was sharp as well. “I want wall-to-wall coverage of Fremont. Get back to your position.”

“No way I’m gonna pee in my pants, boss. I’ll be back in a flash.”

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

Weaver’s attention flicked in agitated jerks from his radio-frequency scanner to the helicopter overhead to the geopositioning monitor to the television screen, to that helicopter again, and back to the rf scanner, his eyes gritty and his mouth dry.

Activity drew his apprehensive eye to the TV, a hearse arriving at a large parking lot, on the hood of the hearse a green top hat. It pulled to the front of a line of celeb convertibles, backing up to get in front of a red Corvette. Titles across the bottom of the screen read LI’L MIKEY McCOY FUNERAL—SOON.

Two women and a man were negotiating something with the large-breasted showgirl behind the wheel of the red Corvette, one of the women on the short side with a generous butt, the other thin and angular. The showgirl had started an end run to get in front of the hearse, urged on by a balding guy who sat on the Corvette’s ragtop lid, his feet on the passenger seat. Now the Vette was stopped, half out of line with the rest of the convertibles and a marching band. The camera closed in on the balding guy. He needed a shave; a cocktail waitress beside the car handing him a big martini glass.

Weaver snapped away from the TV as another scrambled transmission came through on Didi Dmitrovsky’s frequency, Weaver capturing it and closely watching both the rf scanner and the geopositioning receiver to see who responded. The conversation was in Russian, but Weaver caught the word “Andrei.”

“Got him, Charley,” Weaver said. “It’s your guy, Stepanenko. Is the freq coming up on your set? Xavier, you got the freq?”

“Yo,” Xavier responded.

“Got him,” Remly said. “Here’s the geo-coördinate.” The line flashed on Weaver’s mapping screen.

“The angle’s too narrow,” Weaver said. “You’re too close to him, Charley. Xavier, what’ve you got?”

Another green tracer flashed on the screen, and Weaver zoomed in on the crossing lines, his and Xavier’s.

“What I’ve got, Charley, it’s down near you, nothing much around it, near the intersection of Hilstrom Road at Whistletree.”

The F.O.'s voice came to Weaver over the speaker: "I have a Red Circle C at ... my screen gives me 'Overlook Country Club.' Is that correct?"

"I don't get destination details," Weaver said. "Are you showing Hilstrom Road and Whistletree?"

"Exactly," the F.O. said.

Remly's voice: "Mark him as Andrei. He'll have the controller for the Semtex vests and the nuke volcano."

"You're moving," the F.O. said.

"I'm going after him," Remly said.

"Charley," Weaver said, "I need you for triangulation."

"I'm rolling."

"Charley ..."

Remly said, "You've got Xavier." Then, "Alan, you on?"

"I'm here, kid."

"How are your Southies? Find any Arabs yet?"

"They're on the job, no sweat," Alan Singleton said. "No Arabs, but they're on the stick, kid."

"Thanks. Weaver?"

"I'm here, Charley."

"In Stellenhoff's goodies," Remly said. "There was something you can use to jam specific transmissions, without screwing up the entire frequency?"

"Depends," Weaver said. "What do you have in mind?"

“Der den Augenblick ergreift Das ist der rechte Mann.”

(He who seizes the moment in the blink of an eye is the right man.)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . S H A T T ‘A F A K

In Lisbon and in Maastricht and before that in The Hague, where Ashor had served his exile, light pollution whited out the richness of the night sky. Now Ashor stood looking hungrily into the desert heavens, the Milky Way an overturned bowl of blinking pinpricks, and among the stars and planets the occasional flash of a meteor and the trudging progress of satellites. The village of ‘Afak was to the north and the bank of the river—the Shatt ‘Afak—defined the eastern margin of Fawzi Mukhlis’s heavily-fortified compound, 20 hectares, previously his family’s farm dating back to the time of the Ottoman Turk. Frogs along the river serenaded the moon.

Desert climate is fickle. The day had been hot, now it was 25 degrees colder than at mid-day; to view the stars Ashor had shrugged into one of his old olive-drab military sweaters. On his wrist his faithful Longenes had been replaced by a good 24-hour military chronograph, a gift from Fawzi, the Longenes packed away like a forgotten resolution.

Fawzi—short, round, and bubbling with joy—stood beside Ashor, also drinking in the panorama above them. He said, “Hold this to your heart, General Ashor. When we take Baghdad, there is no such show. Even during electrical blackouts, Baghdad’s nighttime glow blinds us to the heavens.”

Ashor reminded his adjutant, “Patience, Fawzi. We’re not there yet.”

“Even so, I haven’t seen General Ashor this happy since the end of Saddam’s war with Iran!”

Ashor checked his watch: 21:38 here, 10:38 in Las Vegas. “Let’s go in and monitor the news, Fawzi. This wake-up call begins soon.”

Fawzi had already set up the televisions in his command office. They went in to watch the attack as it unfolded.

Fawzi’s command center had formerly been a dining hall for farm workers, now furnished in military-requisition green—metal desks, washable upholstery, file cabinets with hasps and padlocks—in the middle of the room a large conference table and an even larger plotting table with maps rolled up at one end. Along the wall were four TV monitors, two of them alive, one tuned to Al Jazeera, Fawzi fiddling with the remote to capture a satellite

feed from CNN. As Fawzi worked, Ashor opened his large boxy document case and fished a handful of file folders from it.

Spreading his folders beneath an articulated brass lamp on the conference table, Ashor said, “I need some light here for my work.”

“At once, General Ashor.” Clutching his ever-present worry beads Fawzi skipped to a wall switch to bring up the ceiling lights.

In cool tones Ashor added, “But calmly, Fawzi, calmly. This is an operations center, not a dance hall.”

His work area now illuminated, Ashor neatly railroaded the file folders on the table, their tabs showing. These were the post-meltdown chores, some to be accomplished within hours of the nuclear event, beginning with a phone call to Jon Vanbastian.

Fawzi now had CNN running and both of the live screens muted to a low mumble, but on neither was there news of Las Vegas. He adjusted a computer monitor on the table in front of Ashor, beyond the spread of file folders, tuned to Nasirpal’s internet blog.

Despite the cool night, the air conditioner had clicked on. There were voltage converters plugged into wall outlets to reduce Iraq’s 220-volts to an American standard of 110/120 in order to run the computers, two office copiers, and the multi-camera security system—the converters and appliances heating the room.

“And the Las Vegas station?” Ashor asked.

“I am searching it out now, General Ashor. This is a separate satellite dish from the downlink for Al Jazeera and CNN. Sometimes it needs a little patience to be found.” The screen blinked to life, Fawzi asking, “This is the one?”

Ashor nodded. As Colonel Kurskov had explained, this was the local Las Vegas station that Kurskov’s team would be playing to—Vegas-4-News—its cameras rolling on a funeral parade when the plane exploded into the casino and the nuclear meltdown began. At the moment the monitor showed a man and a woman sitting behind a desk, a bright green shamrock on a wall-sized screen behind them, and beneath the shamrock in gothic type LIL MIKEY McCOY FUNERAL SOON.

“It is to happen at this funeral?” Fawzi asked.

Ashor said, “The Las Vegas channel will give us all the details, if their sending units aren’t knocked out by the meltdown. It puts out powerful radio waves.”

The frogs stopped croaking and in the abrupt cold silence Ashor heard a distant caravan of vehicles over the hum of muted newsreaders’ voices in English and Arabic.

A warning buzzer sounded and with a remote controller Fawzi enlarged the active quadrant on a large security monitor: The outer gate of his farm-turned-military-compound, two kilometers distant, and a flashing orange circle beside it on the screen.

“Toyota pickup—a machine-gun carrier,” Fawzi said. “Two armored Hummers, an armored Range Rover.” He rushed to the communications console at his desk along the wall. “We can overpower them.”

Ashor spoke sharply: “*No, Fawzi!* This will be Darwish.”

The security camera scanned, and behind the Range Rover Ashor saw two more Hummers and a Toyota machine-gunner as tail cover.

“General Darwish?” Fawzi’s voice was tense. “There will be others?”

“Only the three of us, Fawzi. I didn’t wish for you to prepare for him.”

“But, General Ashor ...”

“Enough that the shaku maku is already out that I’ve returned. Your women preparing rashers of food for Darwish’s entourage as well? No! Advance gossip that Darwish was visiting your farm ..?” Ashor shook his head. “Too many wagging tongues as it is. Certainly it will get out tomorrow. But the events in Las Vegas—tomorrow’s demonstrations—people will have more to tittle-tattle about than my meeting with Darwish.”

Fawzi remained rigid, Ashor wrote it off as simple possessiveness—a childlike refusal to share a parent with others. Perhaps a response to Ashor’s secrecy, an insult taken, Ashor not trusting Fawzi with his agenda.

“Chin up, Fawzi,” said Ashor. “It was a military decision, not a personal one. More than anyone, you should know that.”

The screen went close on the right-rear window of the Range Rover, the window opening and General Darwish Abdul-Haqq’s weathered face appearing. Fawzi pressed his remote and the flashing orange circle became solid green, General Darwish’s armored caravan starting through the double set of outer gates.

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## . . . L A K E   L A S   V E G A S

Alan Singleton leaned close to his old friend and asked in a rasping whisper, “Any open mikes in the room, Kenny?”

“Only if you planted them, Alan.” The F.O. was intent on the large theater screen.

Easing back to the comfort of his padded chair, Singleton said, “I’ve been thinking about this little project of ours—the money you’ve sunk into it. The time all of us’ve pissed away.”

“Hardly pissed away, Alan.”

“What I’m thinking, all the sweat we’ve put in, we should get something



out of it.”

“I’m quite enjoying myself,” the F.O. said.

“Be a lot sweeter we were doing it on the clock—a consultancy contract. Getting a couple hundred K a year out of Virginia’s hide.”

“Not really,” the F.O. said, reaching for his cigar. “I find the game enormously amusing.” He struck a match. “Reward enough, actually.”

“How about when the game’s over?”

The F.O. warmed the ash, which had gone cold, lovingly rolling the cigar in his fingers. “This,” he said, taking in the theater with a wave of his cigar, “I’ve been thinking—something like this—a pleasant addition to the Montecito house.”

“Jesus, you’re kidding. The room looks like a Shanghai whorehouse. Lissie’ll kill you!”

The F.O. supposed the theater’s decor was typical of what passed for luxury in this strange place, but once beyond the outlandish taste the overall venue had been thought out remarkably well—stacked rows of plush seats in a gentle arc, the sound system an auditory delight. He imagined he could talk Lissie into letting him install something similar, if only on the basis that she could hold weekend movie matinées for her many cousins and their abundant progeny.

Alan Singleton interrupted his friend’s reverie: “So you put in a big home theater—that’s it for you? Sit around in your bathrobe watching re-runs on TV?”

“Oh,” the F.O. said, “I suppose one could rustle up some sort of entertainment in a setup like this.”

Weaver’s voice came suddenly from the theater speaker: “I’m moving south to back up Charley. Here’s a new take for you to translate, Alan—Andrei calling Didi.”

As Weaver finished speaking, a flash of digitized conversation came through, and Singleton played it back on the communications pod, translating on the fly. “What we got,” he told the F.O., “this Andrei needs backup. Some guy named Mikhail has gone missing, and Andrei’s got—*oh shit!*—there’s the Igla. Andrei’s got the SAM, but Andrei needs another guy to handle it ‘cause Andrei’s gonna be tied up with the explosives controller. Andrei’s boss Didi is sending out a heavy, name of ‘Slava.’ Get this over to your boy Charley, Kenny. Toot sweet!”

“In a twinkling, as the saying has it,” the F.O. said. “Your Bostonian Stevie, can you see his marker? Hasn’t moved an inch since returning from his potty break. Has his positioning transmitter gone to puppy heaven?”

Buck was holding down the center of Fremont Street outside a place called Fitzgerald's, Buck rocking from one foot to the other—Buck with his well-knuckled mug and ugly expression looking like a Mick bouncer that Fitzgerald's had hired for atmosphere.

Stevie came up, finishing his vanilla ice cream bar. "Where's mine?" Buck said.

Stevie went over it with Buck—the new drill, what Buck was supposed to do—then went over it again and put it to him, "So now what are you going to do, you see one of these Arabs on his ice cream tricycle?"

"Nothin, just call you."

"How?—tell me that."

"The fuck you think—I'm getting up on the terrace there and fuckin shout I got me a fuckin Arab?"

"The throwaway cellphone," Stevie said.

Buck responded with a look that was pitying and contemptuous, fifty-fifty.

"Good lad," Stevie said. "Nothing on your onylsome, we're a team." Patting Buck's cheek he added, "Now give me that little spotting transmitter the geek put on you."

Stevie dropped Buck's transmitter into a trash barrel and was off to find Blazes when his earphone beeped softly—Mr. Singleton.

"You okay kid? You haven't moved an inch since you got back from your pissing safari."

"Fine, just fine," Stevie said. "It's a terrace table I'm sitting at, nursing a glass of ice tea. I get more coverage from up here than if I was wandering on the street with the tourists."

"No sign of any Arabs?"

"Not a hint boss. You sure this is the time and place?"

"Keep a sharp eye," Mr. Singleton said. "You see 'em, give me a heads-up and keep an open phone link so I can follow what you're up to."

"Absolutely, boss," Stevie said, continuing to Blazes at the far west end of the Fremont Experience, a little over a half block beyond the crowd that was waiting for the parade.

But when he got to Blazes it was already coming unglued, another ice cream Arab on a trike, this one young, maybe twenty and big-nosed like the other—a ton of anger and fear on his mug—and a Mex mall-cop in his face. "Your license!" The Mex showing off on one of those pantywaist side-wheeled scooters, just balancing in place. He said, "¿No hablas inglés?"

¡Enséñame su licencia!”

The growing crowd over there ignoring the Arab and the Mex, waiting for the funeral parade to arrive. At the edge of the crowd watching the rent-a-cop and the Arab, Blaze opening his cell phone to get Mr. Singleton.

Stevie caught Blaze by the elbow, ducking in anticipation as Blaze turned and swung at him, saying, “It’s me, be cool. Don’t call old Singleton, you never saw any Arab, we got some work to get done. Call Bucko on your cell. Get him quicktime down here, but cool, no running. We get over to that ice cream Arab, give him a little pat with that gizmo Mr. Singleton gave you.”

As Blaze tapped at his throwaway phone, Stevie scanned the crowd for real cops, plainwrap or harness bulls. None he could recognize, and he had the nose for them. Big black dude in a La Fontaine blazer, eating lunch from a paper bag that said *Crescents et Fromage*. Two broads—one short with a nice ass, the other tall and all elbows and knees—the two with some kind of official ID badges, plastic. Black mourning armbands with a big green shamrock, both of them standing in front of the crowd-containment barrier, out with some other official types. No cops, nothing he couldn’t deal with. Pulling Blaze behind him like a little red wagon, Stevie moved through the crowd to the ice cream Arab and the mall-cop. The Arab looked scared and angry, like he was into something he couldn’t handle. Like a switch? Like getting his vest to some Mr. Big? The Pope-of-Vegas dope distributor?

Blaze on his cell, saying, “... yeah, fuckin fast, but cool. No runnin.”

And Stevie tugging at the gold chain around his neck, bringing out his cross.

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. . . S H A T T ‘ A F A K

A brisk rap on the door, Fawzi said, “Come,” and his hallway sergeant opened it, stiffly announcing General Darwish Abdul-Haqq. Behind the sergeant and Darwish, Rafiq came to view, letting Ashor know that he was monitoring the compound’s usual security force.

Like Ashor, and quite unlike his fashionable appearance on the motor yacht in Huelva harbor, Darwish was dressed in casual off-duty pants and an olive-drab sweater, only the star on his black beret indicating his rank.

Where Saddam would have remained seated to indicate his superior position, Ashor rose to show his high regard for General Darwish. Ashor returned Darwish’s salute quickly, as though brushing it aside, and came around the conference table to shake hands and embrace him, then to shake hands again.

There was a hardness about Darwish—even the hint of a smile would

have cracked his face, a grin might have shattered it—yet it was difficult to take offense with the man. When he entered the military academy, Darwish Abdul-Haqq had been as warm as any young man facing the prospect of career and opportunity, yet over the years Ashor had watched Darwish’s slow retreat from humanity as he clawed his way up the ranks, turning in on himself with every challenge. Ashor—from childhood instinctively on guard—had always maintained an outer presence of calm cordiality, the bequest of being an Assyrian in a land that was no longer Assyria, and a Christian in an Islamic world. Darwish on the other hand, somewhere in his early twenties, was vaulted unprepared into a milieu of threats—threats that magnified greatly as Saddam became more powerful within Ba’ath, ultimately taking over the nation. Yet despite Darwish’s cold response, Ashor acted as though Darwish had returned his embrace as warmly as Fawzi had earlier.

“You have eaten?” Ashor asked, a brotherly hand on Darwish’s elbow, leading him to the conference table.

“What I am hungry for ...” General Darwish said, but indicating the television screens rather than finishing his sentence.

Ashor said, “You’ll be well fed tonight. It begins in about thirty minutes.”

Fawzi had also stood, worry beads in his left hand, rigidly saluting Darwish. Following Darwish’s return salute, Fawzi remained standing, and Ashor noted again a tension in his cherubic adjutant that was entirely out of character.

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

The parking lots were empty, one marked Members, the other Guests, Remly drove slowly past them. In the distance a golf cart was leaving, heading down a narrow path that led to a trailer court’s back gate. Rounding the corner of the clubhouse Remly saw a bank of high windows, like a glass wall covering the entire side of the building at the second storey, two of the windows obviously open because they showed no reflection. Seeing this, Remly stopped and quietly reversed out of sight of the windows, then turned and went around to the other corner. Behind the clubhouse only two vehicles were parked in the Employee lot—a sun-scalded Ford Escort with an Overlook parking decal in the back window, the other a white soccer-mom van with no parking sticker, official or otherwise.

Pulling tight against the building, Remly got Weaver on the phone. “It’s me. I need ...”

“Not close enough yet, Charley,” Weaver said, his voice tight. “Did the

F.O. get . . . ?”

“Listen to me. I’m here, I’m going in. I’m not a lock-picking guy, I need help. Just step me through it.”

With Weaver guiding him Remly finessed the lock on the service-entrance door with a tumbler-tickler. Pulling on surgical gloves, he moved the door very slowly, stopping to listen, moving it again, the opening now wide enough to get in comfortably or get out fast. Door entries are dicey, but since this was an exit door and it opened out, toward him, there wouldn’t be anyone hiding behind it—at least there was that. He went through, the suppressed Beretta held tight against his side in a two-handed shooter’s grip, but pulled back more than was comfortable, so the suppressor didn’t stick out like a handle, inviting someone to grab it.

It was ridiculous of course, walking solo into this against Andrei Stepanenko and probably that other survivor from the driveway attack—maybe one or more others as well. Ridiculous on the face of it. Years past, running a duck-shoot for the firm, he’d have called in a three-squad team, at least fifteen men: Two squads of inside men, one outside group for quick extraction in the event things started unraveling. The first set of inside men would clear the ground floor, which would logically be Andrei’s primary line of defense. The others—the hard cases—would move upstairs to those broad windows, which Remly recognized as the only practical attraction this place could have for Andrei’s purposes.

Ridiculous or not, the reality was that no one else was available for the job, and so Remly soldiered on, now through the open door and into the narrow hall beyond.

He went in soft-shoe, sliding his back along the wall, ready to drop and shoot. Closed doors, more closed doors, and a door ajar, just ahead, his side of the hall, and someone talking beyond it, a television voice, the news—Li’l Mikey McCoy’s funeral coverage. Remly slipped across to the other side of the hall, peering through the door—BREAK ROOM it said—a chair, a bald old head tilted back, a small red burst on it like a rotten strawberry. A thin stream of blood pooling on the collar of the man’s light blue uniform shirt.

Remly didn’t go in.

Elvis Dennison stood at the edge of the crowd thinking he should cut his lunch-break early, get back to work—short-staffed again today like always. He strained over the folks in front, looking east. Osgood on his way? All those celebs in the parade—fixing to stop in front of La Fontaine? Put on a show? Nothing happening, he could see. But over there on the other side of the barricade, up with the official folks, a familiar butt.

“Pru,” Elvis called. “How ya doin, hon?”

And Pru turning to look, smiling. A little wave, mouthing a silent “Hi, Elvis.” Nice bright smile on her, that girl.

Wasn’t like Mr. G’s funeral, this one.

Mr. G’s ... a whole bunch from the casino turning out, a few of Mr. G’s people from Chi, his pregnant widow Ginger. Mr. G?—no celebs, no parade, no nothin. Little derelict Irish mutt, “Honorary Mayor of Fremont Street” so-called, drinks and smokes hisself t’ death. Mayor and most a the town’s show folks throw him a parade. Justice.

Something going on over there to his other side, Elvis turning—an ice cream guy, Fremont security kid on a Segway, couple other guys. The security kid looking mighty pissed off, one of the other guys a priest, gold cross on a neckchain, saying something to the security kid. Fella with the priest reaching out to pat the ice cream kid on the shoulder. Another newsworthy day at Fremont Street Experience.

Time to get back, man the stand-up desk—grin big for the guests. Make ‘em feel wanted.

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#### . . . S H A T T ‘ A F A K

As it happened, Darwish Abdul-Haqq’s hunger for Las Vegas news had to be put on hold while Fawzi’s sergeant brought a jasvah of coffee and small cups, Rafiq following with a tray of kleicha cookies and two dozen figs.

At their appearance Fawzi dimmed and silenced the Las Vegas television, Al Jazeera only a barely audible mumble, a financial roundup, the European stock markets only recently closing for the day. On CNN, before Fawzi killed the sound, two sports newsreaders had been debating the season’s most significant event, whether it was the hockey league lockout that immediately and ironically followed the World Cup of Hockey or the Japanese baseball players’ strike. As Fawzi brought down the sound, one of the newsreaders confessed that for him the topless Minoan priestess at the Athens Olympics—her amazing breasts shown full-frontal on European TV though modestly obscured for American viewers—was the sports highlight of the young century.

The sergeant and Rafiq left; Fawzi brought up the picture and sound of Vegas-4-News, though muting down the voices of the two newsreaders.

“Still only preparing,” Fawzi said.

Darwish, seated directly across from Ashor, glanced briefly at the Las Vegas television set, then opened his own big document case, pulling out a weathered army folio and unclasping it. Now, Darwish was military top to bottom, utterly without cunning and no more diplomatic than a bull in

the field, qualities that Ashor required in the man who was to become his Chief of Military Services, once they took down the current government in Baghdad. Bringing a lined sheet from his folio and consulting it, Darwish spoke bluntly. "I have some questions, General Ashor. Contrarian questions about the plan." He checked his watch. "They will take not much time to ask."

Fawzi protested to Ashor, "This is no time to express doubts, sir, is it? We have much work, the situation is still fluid."

"Calm, Fawzi, calm. I will hear General Darwish."

Darwish brought a blank lined pad and a side-clicking mechanical pencil from his document case, placing them beside his list of questions. He had spent much time in the open—at war and in field exercises under the unforgiving sun—and his face and the backs of his hands were weathered to a leathery texture. Picking up the pencil, he drew a checkmark next to his first question, and asked, "Supposing that these men who demonstrate tomorrow for employment have all these protest signs, all their flags and Uncle Sam effigies, following the Las Vegas event. Supposing even that, what is to stop the televisions from featuring only those who are waving Qur'ans? This then turns the celebrations about the attack on this Las Vegas into a series of religious protests, not politically focused as we've planned."

"Fawzi?" Ashor turned to his fuming adjutant. "This relates to your own preparations. I think it's fitting you should address them."

At this Fawzi's distress faded, as he was no longer muzzled by his master.

"General Ashor and I have completely discussed this, General Darwish. Even with a flag in everyone's hand, the Arab television news will play very greatly to the religious theme, men holding up their Qur'ans. Televisions from here to Yemen will show this, even into Islamic North Africa and Indonesia. But our audience is not in the ..."

"Ah!" Darwish interrupted, a throaty grunt as though he'd launched a javelin. Ignoring Fawzi he spoke directly to Ashor, "And how many millions upon millions of people does this represent, general? What steps ..."

"But this show is *not* for the Arab world," Fawzi interrupted in turn, emboldened by his sense that he had both logic and General Ashor on his side. "These demonstrations—these protests—they are all for the American audience, to make them crazy with anger against Iraq. And you must ask yourself what is more ..." And here Fawzi paused for effect, putting forth a newly acquired word, which he'd gotten from Ashor who'd gotten it from Daphne Logan. "What do you think will be more *telegenic* for the Yanks' sensitive TV stations: Political protests, with colorful Iraqi flags wav-

ing in the air? The burning of American flags? People throwing shows at Uncle Sam effigies, which they've hanged on lampposts? People burning the Uncle Sams? A big Statue of Liberty, pelted with shoes and set ablaze? Or ..."

Here Fawzi made a dismissive gesture with his hand, brushing the backs of his fingers across his other wrist, a gesture Ashor recognized as one of his own idiosyncrasies, a sort of filial regard. "Or do you think will be more telegenic for American audiences to show Muslim anger, which would make it seem that these Yankee news TVs are promoting an anti-Islam crusade?"

When Darwish didn't answer, Fawzi said, "My general and I think the shoeing and burning will be the choice of the American televisions."

Darwish nodded, accepting Fawzi's answer, neither approving nor contradicting, only nodding. Ashor on the other hand gave Fawzi a gentle nod that said, "Well done."

Ashor glanced at the Las Vegas television monitor, where the funeral parade was still being promised but not shown, then looked again into Darwish Abdul-Haqq's weathered, unyielding face. "Your other questions?"

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## . . . L A S V E G A S

Weaver was closing on Overlook Country Club when a new scrambled take started, the one they'd been waiting for, and he dodged recklessly across honking traffic into the huge lot of an even huger new industrial park, the buildings rising bright and solemn around him like a post-modernist Stonehenge. A woman screaming out of one of those yupped-up Cadillac pickups, thrusting her middle finger. He glanced at her only briefly, found a parking spot in the mostly empty lot, the digital recorder grabbing the scanner take and his GPS plotter showing a narrow tracer line against Xavier's position to the west. The one they were waiting for, the unscrambled voices in English, not Russian, and the words "preflight check" coming through clearly.

"Xavier," he said, cleared his tight throat with a small cough and said it again, now clearly, "Xavier!"

"Yo," came Xavier's voice.

"I'm sending you a coördinate. It's a narrow fix. We're too close together on a north-south axis, the geoposition is almost due east of both of us. Take your time, we have to shave this one close."

"Gotcha."

"Whatdaya have, kid?" Alan Singleton asked.

Singleton's tone—was it threatening? Weaver didn't like the sound of it, but correcting himself, 'I'm cracking up.' That's what it was.



“In a minute,” Weaver said. “We’re triangulating, just me and Xavier ... Charley’s off the grid.”

When Xavier’s coördinate came back, it formed a narrow band to the east, the two lines crossing in a long ribbon into the next county, about three miles deep. What was he going to say to them, Singleton already sounding pissed off? There was a drop of sweat rolling off the tip of his nose. He wiped at it with the back of his wrist.

Weaver tapped his numeric keys to connect to the F.O.’s command central and said, “I’m sending the coördinate numbers, but they don’t cross tightly. Sending over the unscrambled take, too. Do you read me, Alan?”

“Yeah.”

“Here’s the voice take, in English. I think we got our airplane. Mr. Burlingame?”

“Yes, my boy.”

“Can you spot any airstrips along the band of the intersecting lines? This is from Didi talking to a pilot named Tah-yeeb or something. Tah-yeeb’s freq is coming back too. Can you put a red circle on him? It’s over in the next county.”

“Absolutely—bringing it up now. But as you say, the geopositioning is rather a tenuous issue. The landing strip could be almost anywhere—your coördinate fix appears to be well over two miles long, end to end.”

“I have to roll,” Weaver said. “Charley needs me. You monitoring this voice traffic Charley? We’ve got the airplane?”

“Yes.” Charley’s voice, his tone indicating he wasn’t in the mood to talk.

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## . . . L A K E   L A S   V E G A S

In the improvised command center Alan Singleton listened to the unscrambled voice take while pulling up the Nye County Assessor’s property-tax rolls on the internet connection of his laptop.

“Come on come on *come on*,” he said, his voice sliding up the diatonic scale from C to C-above-C in undisguised frustration. Then to the F.O., “Not a hint what kinda plane this goddam Tah-yeeb is flying. All we’re getting, he’s done his preflight, he’s ready to take off the minute Didi gives him the go-ahead. But no ... wait wait wait wait *wait*,” now descending the scale back down to C. “What I’m getting on my laptop, Kenny—there’s an airstrip in that slim corridor you pulled up. Abandoned mine with a private airstrip and oh-shit-oh-dear, Kenny boy, can you guess who the fucking owner is?”

“Alan, I am fully prepared to guess that I cannot guess who the fucking owner is.”

“Our guy, owns the La Fontaine. The late George Granter, host extraordinary to Charley’s pal Alex Kurskov.”

“Certainly *that* nails it down,” the F.O. said. “Have you a plotting intersection for it?”

As Singleton gave him the exact map coordinates, the F.O. set them onto the large screen and saw that Xavier was closest to the mine, an unfortunate prospect. Weaver, he saw, was moving south toward Charles, and Charles was otherwise engaged. There was no alternative.

“Xavier,” the F.O. said. “What is your current status?”

“Sitting with a hotdog and a box of popcorn, waiting for the game to start.”

“Go west on Blue Diamond toward Nye County, can you do that?”

“Something hot?”

“The airplane with the nuclear material is at an abandoned mine. Here are the numbers for your GPS screen.”

Once he’d received the intersection, Xavier said, “This is the plane with the nuke volcano, right?”

The F.O. simply said, “Yes.”

“On my way like a scalded cat.”

“Forget that shit!” Alan Singleton said. “You got enough stuff in your car to put you away for fifteen years, federal firearms rap. No fucking speeding tickets!”

“Like a *veh-ry* dis-*creet* scalded cat.” Hard to tell if Xavier was mocking or doing high camp.

Singleton said, “You get there before he takes off, don’t lift a finger. Call me, I’ll tell you what to do.”

“Oh my *God*—you’re so con-*troll*-ing,” Xavier said.

On the map, Xavier’s blue square began to move west along Blue Diamond Road.

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## . . . L A S V E G A S

Remly went up step by cautious step, up through the square stairwell shaft. Along the walls FIRE EXIT arrows stenciled in red urged him to go back, Remly wondering if they knew something he didn’t, then pausing at the the second-floor landing. The stairs continued onward to a door marked ROOF, but he considered the upper door only briefly. His instincts now told him that Andrei would be somewhere behind those second-floor panoramic windows—specifically behind the open ones—not on the roof. And so, slowly and carefully, he opened the door to the second floor.

As before he worked without haste, verifying that the hall beyond was

empty, then moving into the hall and pressing his hand against the sprung door to let it close silently.

There had been two others with Andrei when they attacked him at his front gate: The giant, shot in the face and probably dead, but the other large man—yelling “*Yolki palki!*” as he ran back to the van—still a potential threat. Would Andrei have replaced the giant? Would it be Andrei alone, or two men? Or three? Or more? And what would they have—pistols only? Shotguns? Subguns?

“Kismet,” Remly said very softly to himself, now holding the suppressed Beretta slightly ahead, two-handed ready to shoot, and moving softly down the hall.

Directly ahead there was a door marked EMERGENCY ONLY with a big red bar handle and an ostentatious alarm above it. This would open to the exterior stairway he’d seen from the employee parking lot. To his left along the hall was a series of big double doors—which he guessed would lead into meeting rooms or a single convention or banquet area. Down the hall past the double doors, a wide single door, KITCHEN / SERVICE EMPLOYEES ONLY, and again the cautious entry drill until he was standing in a big commercial kitchen, the only light coming from two rectangles at his left. He moved to the light, big stainless-steel sinks to one side of him, a long stainless-steel counter on the other. Pots, pans, mixing bowls, and colanders hung dimly above the counter like a Calder installation at the Art Institute. Thick rubber mats underfoot. The rectangles of light were windows of scuffed plexiglas in two swinging doors, the right door telling him YES—SI and the left NO.

And now it was the moment—fatalism, no going back. Alan Singleton had given him a shoulder holster for the Beretta, but with the suppressor screwed onto the gun’s muzzle the holster was a dead loss. Remly leaned down, put the gun on the rubber floor, and put his glasses next to it. Using his shirt tails he firmly wiped the oils and sweat away from the bridge of his nose and above his ears where the temple bars of his glasses rested. He then wiped the nose pads and temples of his glasses before returning them to his face and settling them firmly. He peeled off the surgical gloves and wiped his sweating hands. Re-gloved, he took up the Beretta and stood again.

Getting into position at the side of the NO window, he slowly moved to take in the large bunting-draped room beyond the scratched persplex. There were long, naked banquet tables of particle board and panoramic windows that seemed almost to form a glass wall, and in front of the windows a series of tables placed end-to-end and as he scanned further he saw on the tables a large tubular device—it could have been a state-of-the-art

bazooka but given the circumstances it was more likely the Igla surface-to-air missile—and then as he moved just an inch more, there was Andrei Stepanenko, standing at the table and looking out the window, his back to Remly.

“Charles, are you there?” The F.O.’s voice, startling him.

Remly inhaled deeply.

“*Charles?*” Now demanding.

Remly thumbed off his earphone and pushed silently through the door and brought his Beretta up with both hands in a shooter-ready isosceles hold, placing Andrei in the sight picture, Andrei’s center mass directly down the line of the Beretta’s slide and suppressor and his head and shoulders just above, and now his head turning, but turning away from Remly and Remly hearing a door bang open to his left.

“Slava?” Andrei called as he twisted to look to the door.

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. . . L A K E   L A S   V E G A S

Seeing Xavier’s blue square moving at an improbable speed across the screen, the F.O. slapped Xavier’s line open. “You must be going a hundred.”

“Eighty-seven, actually.”

“What is the speed limit there?” the F.O. asked.

“Thirty-five,” came Xavier’s voice. “It’s a construction zone.”

“For heaven sake, slow down.”

“Sir, I can’t. They’ll kill me.”

“Goddammit ...” Alan Singleton began.

“I’m caught in the middle of a herd of stampeding pickup trucks,” Xavier said. “Speed limit’s thirty-five, they’re doing close to ninety. This Boxter I’m driving, I barely come up to the shins on some of these bigfoot four-by-fours. They’re *huge*—a lot of ‘em cowboy trucks. One’s got a load of haybales, sticks up three feet above the roof of his truck.”

“Ah, well, then,” the F.O. relented. “Carry on.”

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. . . L A S   V E G A S

Remly turned to see a compact, blond man enter, the man taking in the room—both Andrei and Remly—and reaching into his jacket while Remly spun to face him, bringing the Beretta around to center on the newcomer.

The blond froze, one hand holding back his jacket the other on a shoulder-holstered gun.

“*Shoot I blow up Las Vegas!*”

Keeping the gun on the newcomer Remly moved his eyes just enough

to see Andrei Stepanenko with an electronic device in one hand, his other hand hovering over the mechanism's switches.

“Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.”

*Romans, xii, 20*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

‘I should have run off years ago,’ Stevie thought as he worked the Mex on the sidewheeled scooter. ‘Made a name for myself in showbiz.’ He nodded at the ice cream vendor. “He’s one of my flock, Pedro here.” Stevie laying it on thick. “But God’s mercy on ‘im, he goes astray here and there, don’tcha see.” Laying it on with a trowel. Heavy Southie with a dram or two of dubious Dublin he’d picked up as a kid, watching Barry Fitzgerald movies with his granddad. “A good lad, y’see, but afflicted with troubles you ‘n I’ll never know.”

That much was true, for when he’d arrived the Arab kid was frozen in place like a cornered mongrel, radiating terror and rage. Last time he’d seen anything like it was a lifetime ago, Jimmy Flynn about to get beaten half to death by the O’Hanlon brothers, Skipper and Maurice, after school one day. At first, while Skipper and Maurice were just slapping Jimmy around, Jimmy looked to the other boys, pleading. And when none of the boys came forward, Jimmy had that look, terror and rage, and the O’Hanlons starting in on him, beating without mercy, and Jimmy never again showing up, having been sent off to a parochial school near Brookline. And now that same expression on the poor Arab boy.

“In the name of the holy,” Stevie was saying to the mall cop, “don’tcha think it’s better for us to get poor Pedro back to the shelter, instead a putting him into the system?”

He had the Mex rent-a-cop’s full attention, and behind the cop Blazes was patting the ice cream Arab on the shoulder—catching him as he slumped forward.

Stevie said, “The minute they got the citizen complaint—the Mr. Freeze people—why, that very minute they called the shelter and the shelter got me on my cellular. Brother Boylan . . .” he nodded at Blazes “... he was here for seeing the parade, he’ll give me a hand getting poor Pedro back to the shelter.”

“You a priest?” The rent-a-cop on the sidewheeled scooter had a face like a rock, unbelieving. He peered suspiciously at the cross suspended around Stevie’s neck. “You don’ look it.”

The Arab was tipping again, Blazes propped him back up.

“Dearest Jesus save us, I’m not *supposed* to look the part. I’m just a simple street priest, minister to the homeless and helpless. Never wear the dog collar. The lost souls in my flock, it gives ‘em the heeby jeebies, a fellow in uniform ya see.”

Blazes listening. Rolling his eyes.

The Mex said, “I never seen you aroun before.”

Dear Jesus what did it take, get this rent-a-cop moving in the right direction? The rest of the dope was there within reach, in the Arab’s hidden vest. Just a matter of rolling this Mex out of the picture.

“My flock is all on the streets, up around the shelter. Brother Pedro here, we had hopes for him. Got him this job on the ice cream bike, thought he’d sorted out his life, ya see. Used to be, it was just Satan in a bottle, and the lads not able to say, ‘get the behind me.’ Now it’s a whole shelf of chemicals—just look at the poor fella.” With a small motion of his hand he offered the stupefied Arab as evidence.

“The Mr. Freezee people,” Stevie went on, now close to sweating, the money so near, “a citizen complaint—Brother Pedro here, zonked on the job. Good Christian people, Mr. Freezee. Hire a few lads from the shelter, God bless ‘em. No need to call in the police, we’ll get ‘im back to the shelter. Mr. Freezee’s sending someone already for the trike, y’ see.”

The rent-a-cop’s reserve broke. “Sure you don’ need no help with him, padre?”

And here came Buck squeezing through the crowd, taking it in.

“God bless you,” Stevie said, “but here comes Brother Mulligan to help. Between the three of us, we’ll make do. Just let us move him away from the crowd, the shelter has a car coming to pick us up.”

Then the three of them quick-rolling the trike away, a few yards west down Fremont, then south on Main.

“Now there was a fine load of shit,” Blazes said. “They ever let you into church again, you’ll have to light so fucking many candles they’ll call in the bucket brigade.”

“Hollywood’s loss,” Stevie said. “Go get the van, bring it back—that corner down there. This lovely Arab lad here has got our retirement money on him ... four, five kilos worth, uncut.”

“Jesus! You’re saying . . . ?”

“Get the van, there’s time later to talk it out.”

Buck in the meantime had helped himself to an ice cream bar. Now he was finishing it and reaching for another. “Neapoleon,” he said. “Who wants a Neapoleon ice cream sandwich?”

Had anyone asked why his heart wasn't pounding heavily and painfully, Remly could not have answered clearly. It might have been his newfound sense of fatalism, or perhaps he'd returned without qualification to the professional he'd been years ago, when his training kept him from internalizing threats, only holding them at arm's length for analysis. And so it was with this tableau in stone, three men frozen in place: The intruder Slava with a hand on his shoulder-holstered gun, and in his look that pout of injured innocence which only the truly guilty can invoke. Andrei Stepanenko with the remote controller in one hand, his other hand hovering over it. And Charles Remly with his suppressed Beretta aimed at Slava's middle.

In the flash of perhaps one second Remly recalled Andrei's biography from *Zemessardze* and Xavier's intuitive evaluation of Andrei, as well as the clues about Andrei that Xavier had collected in his conversation with the waiter, Jerri. Here was a man proud of his accomplishments and vain about his looks, yet doubtful about his status and needy of others' validation—a misfit carrying a bitter kernel of resentment—and Remly assembled the pressure points in Andrei's psyche that he might use: Fear, self-pity, vanity, self-doubt, need, envy. He took another full second to consider how to apply pressure without being obvious, and Remly prayed that Andrei would recall his one-shot kill of that huge man, looming in the open door of the soccer-mom van.

In calm, almost academic tones Remly said, "Think clearly, Andrei. Ask yourself what you want to be famous for. Set off the nuclear device and you'll sign your own death warrant."

"If you shoot Slava, I will open the gates of hell on Las Vegas."

Remly chanced a quick glance out the window toward the mountains, where the plane would be coming from, then snapped his attention back to Slava. He said, "Your nuclear device isn't on target yet."

"But it is close enough," Andrei said.

"We're both professionals, Andrei." Remly chanced another quick side-long glance away from Slava, then back, angling more toward Slava but keeping Andrei in view. "Just so we can talk, why don't you set that transmitter aside? Does your friend here understand English?"

"No," Andrei said. "Even Russian he doesn't speak well."

Focusing on Slava, Remly said, "Just set the transmitter aside, Andrei. I've been authorized to make you a very attractive offer." A quick look at Andrei, then back again to the central threat.

Still conflicted, with an expression that spoke as much of defiance as of fear, Andrei gestured with the transmitter. "If I put it aside, I have nothing



to bargain with.” Above Andrei the colorful bunting fluttered cheerily in a mild breeze from the air conditioning, a bizarre counterpoint to his grim expression. “Then you will shoot me all the same.”

Remly said, “*Shoot* you? They’ll shoot *me* if I harm you.” Another quick glance.

Andrei couldn’t have looked more disbelieving.

“We need you,” Remly said. “We want you to join us. Let us talk to you about a career change.”

With a bitter laugh Andrei said, “You are crazy or stupid, Yank.”

Remly had to clear his throat, but spoke over his need, not wanting to seem unsure of himself: “You can’t get out of this alive, we both know that. The best you can do is nuke Las Vegas, then I’ll have to shoot you, after I’ve shot your friend. But even if you *could* get out alive, what would you return to? Odd jobs from your friend Didi? With Aleksandr Kurskov paying your wages? What it’s like, having someone like Kurskov at the top of the food chain?”

“The top of the food chain, that is a good saying. Very funny.” Andrei had a three-point range of attention—from Li’l Mikey’s funeral-staging area on the silent little TV, to Remly, then to the panoramic windows and the view of the mountains beyond the Vegas Valley, moving from one to the next to the next in mechanical rotation, taking them all in.

“We know a lot about you,” Remly said. “We know for instance that you got kicked out of the Academy back in ‘ninety-one for no good reason, other than that you’re Crimean.”

“I congratulate you on your sources of information.”

“And because they didn’t trust you, right?”

“No more than anyone ever has,” Andrei said, his voice flat, as though this was no more unexpected than birth or death.

Remly said, “*We* trust you, Andrei Pierrevich.”

“*We*?” How many of you, exactly, who trust me?”

“Your friends with their shotgun attack—you heard about it? After that farce in my bedroom, we’ve been tracking down you and Didi Dmitrovsky.”

“No!”

“And now we’ve got locations for all of you—you and Didi, and Kurskov over at the end of the lake in Arizona. Along with your pilot in Nye County. But you’re the only one we want.” Remly threw a snap glance at Andrei, to take the measure of his face.

If Andrei had seemed conflicted before, his expression at this point was that of a man at the precipice, a pack of hounds at his heels. No longer that

look of self-pity—in Andrei’s eyes Remly saw a man preparing to make the leap.

Remly took a step to his left, hoping to bring both Slava and Andrei into clear view, rather than having to move his attention from one to the other.

“Stop!” Andrei’s tone verged on hysteria. “One more step and I set off the triggers!”

“You do and I’ll shoot you.”

“I don’t *care!* Can you understand this? *I don’t care!*”

Remly imagined the Semtex vests going off, probably along the Fremont Street parade route. And a nuclear meltdown, even a premature one. Las Vegas was a one-trick pony, more vulnerable to attack than any other city in America. Now the country’s entertainment and tourist capital, it would become a ghost town overnight—Vegas more vulnerable than New York.

Switching to a reassuring tone, Remly said, “Well, *I* care, Andrei. We want to hire you. Dzerzhinsky Square may be ruled by idiots, but my friends and I have an eye for talent. A secure professional position, generous guaranteed salary, and respect.”

“What kind of fool do you take me for?” Despite his words, Andrei’s voice was unsure.

“Obviously you’re not a fool. We appreciate your abilities, and we understand you.”

“*Understand?* What it is to be an outsider even among outsiders? What it is to find your true self in a claustrophobic nameless farming village nearby to Dibrivka? What it is to be held at arm’s length at the gymnasium ... the high school ... of Simferopol, where you have a scholarship for genius but you are sneered at for being the country idiot? What it is to be the Ukrainian—*worse!* the Crimean—at Dzerzhinsky Square Academy in Moscow? With sex needs outside the narrow vision of the apes in cadets’ uniforms? Understand? As I stand before Christ, you are an idiot.” Not said in a tone of self-justification but of resignation, Andrei sounding as though he simply wanted to get it over with—the sooner the better.

Forcing himself to speak like a friend whose advice Andrei had sought, Remly said, “But if you start fresh, if you start at the top, what then? Weren’t you the most elegant—the most popular—masque at Byrd’s?”

“And this is what you wish to hire me for? To play the aging cadet at pickup bars? I would kill myself first. Better I should finish my job here, I am going to die whatsoever.”

On the small TV Li’l Mikey McCoy’s funeral parade was shaping up. A hearse had arrived, a green oversized top hat on its hood. The picture changed to a map of downtown Las Vegas, with a talking head superim-

posed on it, the woman's mouth moving silently. A vivid red line snaked along the map and Remly guessed this would be the parade route, headed for Fremont Street Experience. The gunman Slava, closer to the center of Remly's perception, was still frozen, hand on the pistol in his shoulder holster.

As for Andrei, Remly again heard an echo of suicidal despair in the other's tone and adjusted his own voice to counter it, speaking as though to favorite nephew. "We'd love to have you developing unique electronics in a lab that we will set up just for you ... *your* lab. Your work in Russia, with Chechen fingerprints all over them. Your London bomb—Levanov—which we're guessing you put together with impromptu components. Real genius, Andrei. You're the kind of talent that we're constantly on the lookout for."

Andrei considered this briefly. "And you think I will swallow this—after you tell me you know about the people I have massacred?"

"That's exactly why we want to hire you," Remly said with a laugh, still keeping a close eye on Slava, measuring the other's willingness to bring his gun from its holster. "You'd be amazed at the number of people we think would be better off dead. What we need is a technical wizard to head up the lab."

"This is bullshit," Andrei said.

What Remly was doing, in simple terms, was breaking an agent, similar to breaking a horse, a process that should reasonably have taken a month or more, now compressed into a few pucker-factor minutes. He would need a miraculous inspiration to come up with a two-minute recruitment program—and at the moment Remly was feeling more desperate than inspired. He had to get that first concession from his candidate, in the way that a case officer gets the first innocent and meaningless bit of information from a potential agent, which leads to more and more bits, the candidate more and more comfortable about sharing with the recruiter. In this situation it had to be a concession of greater magnitude—not some innocuous little speck of information but an admission by Andrei that Remly was unquestionably right on one important point, and beyond arguing with. Something to jumpstart the process. Remly seized on the massacre issue, first thinking that he could counter it with facts about mob hit-men who'd been put into witness protection after confessing to dozens of murders. But no. The mob—witness protection—too uniquely a part of the American mindset, and well outside of Andrei's cultural comprehension.

And then it struck Remly ... *'Yes!'*

General Darwish went deeper into his contrarian challenges—heresies to the ears of Ashor's adjutant Fawzi, who now fidgeted, now squirmed, all the while standing at a stiff parade-rest before the Las Vegas television monitor. On the monitor's screen—in the large video panel behind the two Channel 4 newsreaders—there was a hearse with a green top hat taped to its hood, the view zooming up and back to rooftop level, showing a marching band in green tuxedos and a long parade of open convertibles in the making.

After a brief glance Ashor ignored the television monitors; when the Las Vegas event took place there could be no avoiding it. Instead he heard out Darwish's doubts about the Las Vegas campaign, doubts that Darwish voiced with such clarity that it was obvious the plan would fail in every detail. Ashor nodded with each of Darwish's points, making small marks on his own notepad with a gold pen.

Darwish was concluding, "And supposing that this Homeland Security of theirs intercepts all of Colonel Kurskov's squad, including the shaheeds, which will alert the Yanks to an attempted terrorism—even then, failure. Very inconvenient for us, because this news would not be announced, I think, until after their elections in a few months' time. Perhaps not until sometime next year. These political fellows in Washington—for them to let it be known that such a plan got this far along before it was discovered ..." He let the sentence dangle, as though the thought needed no further clarification.

Emptying his demitasse of coffee, Ashor asked, "And this is your final point?"

Darwish nodded, preparing to write on his own notepad as the responses were voiced, while Fawzi, at his end of the conference room, moved away from the wall and relaxed, now freed by a belief that his own general's rebuttal would bring the apostate Darwish back into the fold. Ashor, on the other hand, had a sense that Darwish had not entirely cleared his agenda—that there was something Darwish was still holding in reserve. And if Darwish did not volunteer this final item, Ashor imagined he could gently pry it loose without too much effort.

"I'll be brief on every point, Darwish my friend." Ashor indicated the row of file folders near his left elbow on the big conference table. "We have a long and complex schedule of actions and meetings planned for tomorrow, and they must be considered in detail before we bed down for the night. In order of each occurrence, here is how the plan cannot fail." Ashor

referred to the notes he'd taken. "First, you put the actions out of their tactical order. The initial strike is not the airplane bringing down this hotel—this ..." He drew a blank.

"La Fontaine," Fawzi eagerly volunteered.

"Yes, La Fontaine and all the rest come *after* the shaheeds' Semtex vests are exploded. Kurskov tells me that his facilitator has placed the two suicides at each end of this Fremont Street entertainment zone. The two are blown up by remote radio-control, driving the survivors away from the ends of the zone to its middle, where the hotel is brought down and the nuclear meltdown begins."

Picking up a fig, Ashor rose and walked to the plotting table. The maps here were of Iraq, not Las Vegas, but Ashor looked down on the table as though viewing a three-dimensional model of Fremont Street Experience.

"But supposing the vests do not explode for some reason," Ashor continued, passing his free hand over the imaginary mockup. "What then?"

Darwish and Fawzi remained silent.

"Then, I ask you this: What part of a shaheed is left, even if his vest carries enough plastique to bring down a small house?"

"Shoes!" Fawzi said, punctuating his words with a big, dimpled grin. "A shaheed may take down an entire building with a single Semtex vest, but his shoes are found two blocks away, still good for wearing."

Returning to the conference table, Ashor squeezed the fig to break it open and inspect it for ripeness. "So," he said, biting into the fig. "Supposing the explosions fail. Now there will be two men loose on the streets of Las Vegas, neither of them conversant in English and both wearing Semtex vests. Even if they are able to remove the bombs, do you think they will go unnoticed? Arabs of little education, with no passports? In the middle of Las Vegas, they'll surely come to the notice of the police rather than Homeland Security. And when they are found, it will be seen that each of these men has a certain address on a paper inside the one part of the suicide that doesn't get blown up in these bombings. These poor fellows will have written down this address in case they wandered off and got lost. But, Darwish, my respected colleague, it will be the Las Vegas *police* who find these wandering fellows—the police and the ever-present news reporters. And with this address it is only a matter of time before the shaheeds' so-called 'safe house' is brought to light, cluttered with Arabic goods, as well as a mock-up of the nuclear device, especially significant after the meltdown."

Ashor paused to study Darwish's face, which had relaxed slightly—in someone other it might have been a smile.

Accepting Darwish's small concession, Ashor continued: "As to your

other objections, let us go at them in the order of their occurrence.”

Before Ashor could continue, there was an urgent buzzing at Fawzi’s communications console, and in the same instant Nasirpal’s blog came suddenly alive on the computer screen in front of Ashor.

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## . . . N Y E C O U N T Y

The pickup ahead of Xavier was an F-350, a high-rise 4x4 with a hand-made bumper sticker that read, “If you can’t stop, smile & wave as you slide under.” This didn’t trouble Xavier—from experience he knew that Porsche brakes were more effective than those of a Ford pickup, especially at speeds approaching a hundred. Of greater concern was the old work-tattered Dodge Ram that was tailgating him. The Ram had a power winch as big as a beer keg mounted on a front bumper that had been a cow catcher in a previous life—an ancient ranch truck, Xavier guessing that its brakes were no better maintained than its dented, rusting fenders. Xavier’s imagination—admittedly feverish from the pressure of the situation—presented him with an image of the little Porsche Boxter getting stuffed under the “smile & wave” sign by the aggressive cow catcher, ending as a recycling candidate on the Ford’s rear axle.

“Slow down, you’re coming up on it!” Alan Singleton’s voice, jolting Xavier into the reality of his mission.

“GPS says it’s another three miles to the turnoff,” Xavier protested.

“Fuck the GPS, your road’s in just one mile.”

Rather than applying brake Xavier pulled to the left to see if anything was coming at him. There was, but at this speed—and with the Porsche’s ability to accelerate—he supposed he could squeeze it. And there was a good long empty stretch ahead of the Ford pickup. He flew into the oncoming lane without signalling, dropping to fifth and pressing the gas to the floor, the rear tires squealing and Xavier supposing he’d stripped off a quarter-inch of rubber, then knocking into sixth and accelerating again until the Ford F-350 was small in his rearview and a dirt-road turnoff was coming up fast. Xavier hit the brakes and double-shifted down to fourth, then third, breathing deeply as he moved to the right, romancing the gravel shoulder, his turn-signal flashing and the F-350 pulling left as it screamed past, horn blaring, the Dodge against the Ford’s rear bumper and the Dodge’s brakes smoking and Xavier wondering if he’d have time to stop and pee, once he got well down the dirt road, far enough from the two-lane highway for modesty.

Remly said, “Andrei, please consider—America is famous for giving asylum to scientists and engineers with sticky résumés. Do you recall von Braun?”

Andrei nodded bitterly. “So what?”

“So everything,” Remly said, as though Andrei was encouraging him. “You think you’ve pulled a massacre or two, pal? Twenty thousand concentration camp inmates died, working as slave laborers on the *Vergeltungswaffe-Zwei*<sup>1</sup> project. Over three thousand V-2s were launched against cities in England, killing over seven thousand people. And the technical director of the project, Nazi Party member Wernher von Braun, was working on a system that would send rockets to New York and Washington when the war ended. So ... how did we punish him? Hang him like a war criminal? We brought him to the States to head up our military rocket development—von Braun and about a hundred forty other German military scientists. Later, von Braun set up and ran our space program.”

Remly chanced a quick glance at Andrei who in turn flicked a look to Slava, the blond enforcer. When Andrei met Remly’s eyes again he seemed to be running a math puzzle in his head—a complex and troubling puzzle—yet he remained silent.

“Think about it, Andrei. Von Braun was an *SS-Sturmbannführer*—a major in the Waffen SS—and we rewarded him with the National Medal of Science. Then in ‘fifty-nine a patriotic society called the Daughters of the American Revolution gave him an Americanism Medal. *Americanism!* Von Braun ended up rich, respected, even loved. Granted you’re not so big a fish, but we’re prepared to set you up as the director of your own lab and workshop, Andrei. Think of it.”

Remly risked another glance, and Andrei met his eyes.

“Think about it. We needed von Braun, we gave him a free pass. Now we need *you*.”

“Maybe true,” Andrei said. “But America was all he had, von Braun—America or the war crimes trials.” Yet his voice wasn’t firm.

Sensing that Andrei was teetering, Remly played his trump card. “And your so-called friend Didi Dmitrovsky has thrown you to the wolves, Andrei Pierrevich. We’ve been tracking him. He went to the Arizona end of Lake Mead, got into a car with Aleksandr Kurskov. The last I checked, they were halfway down to Kingman—probably on their way to catch a plane in Phoenix. You’re on your own, pal.”

<sup>1</sup>*Vergeltungswaffe-Zwei* “Retaliationwar-two” – V-2 Rocket

Remly glanced quickly at Andrei, then back to Slava. Andrei wasn't buying it—Remly saw it in the skeptical twist of his mouth.

Staring straight at Slava, Remly went on, "Go ahead, I invite you. Call Didi, see what he has to say for himself."

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## . . . N Y E C O U N T Y

There were ruts in the dirt road leading to the mine, deep enough for the road's middle hump to bend the Porsche's undercarriage and rip into its oil pan. Accordingly, Xavier drove to the right, the sportscar's left tires on the roadway's center hump, while chaparral on the right scraped viciously into the Porsche's paint.

A quarter-mile up the road there was a gate with two signs: A faded tin plaque read, "Argonot Mine Bingo Tansley Prop Traspasers Will Be Shot"—though to the contrary it was the sign that had been shot multiple times, into a state of near-unreadability. The newer of the two signs read, "Johannesburg-Nevada Mining, LTD."

He didn't feel particularly threatened, yet Xavier had to admit he'd been stopped. The gate was chained and locked, though there were signs that the road beyond had been used recently and even frequently.

He pressed his earphone to activate it and told Alan Singleton what he'd come upon. "I'm climbing through the gate, Alan. Going the rest of the way on foot."

"You be careful, now," Singleton's voice half scold, half concern.

"Yo," Xavier said.

"Nothing rash."

"Yo."

He put his folding binoculars and the MAC-11 into his carryall canvas bag, along with two extra .380 magazines for the MAC and a bottle of Evian water. As an afterthought he pulled the SIG .380 from his ankle holster and slipped it under his belt, crossdraw style.

The road up to the mine wasn't steep, the going was nevertheless unpleasant: Xavier, ever fashionable, had brought only his Gucci loafers to Vegas, instead of the comfortable running shoes he routinely wore in the salon. Its irregular surface peppered with rocks, the dirt road was punishing Xavier's feet, here and there confronting him with a grade on which his leather soles slipped, making him bend forward, even touching the ground with his free hand for balance. Around him the scrub was gray-green, and if there had been blossoms on any of the plants they must have died mid-summer, for the landscape was sterile and antagonistic.

He'd begun sweating heavily. As he was thinking of the disconnect be-



tween the comforting reality of Rodeo Drive and the surrealism of the unreal land around him, he heard the airplane engine, unmistakable and revving up, as though preparing to release its brakes to speed down a runway.

Xavier pressed at his ear. "I've got an airplane, Alan!"

"What's it look like, kid?"

"I can't see it, the mine's still up ahead. But I can hear it."

"How many engines?"

"I'm ..." Xavier listened closely. "I'm guessing—it sounds like only one, it's hard to say."

Rather than hurry ahead in his painful shoes, Xavier stopped and put the carryall at his feet and got out the MAC-11 and both of the loaded spare magazines, stuffing the magazines into his trouser pockets.

"What's happening?" Alan Singleton's voice. "Taking off?"

"Revving up bigtime, Alan. Sounds like ... yes, sounds like a plane making a run for it. Really high revs."

Ahead the road twisted left around a small hill, and there was a notch in the terrain and barely in sight beyond that a long, level plateau with yet another hill rising above it, then beyond that mountains. As Xavier turned his head right and left to better locate the sound, an airplane came off the plateau, heading toward him.

"I hear it!" Singleton cried in Xavier's ear. "You see it?"

Rather than answering, Xavier brought up the subgun and thinking vaguely about what he'd ever read or seen about duck-hunting he led the small aircraft with the MAC's suppressor and squeezed the trigger. There were 30 rounds in the magazine, and in less than two seconds the subgun emptied, spewing a trail of bullets in front of the rising aircraft.

Alan Singleton shouting, "The fuck you think your doing?"

Again not answering, pulling futilely at the magazine that descended from the MAC-11's grip. "How do you get the magazine out?"

"Goddammit listen to me. Fuck shooting, what's the goddam plane look like?"

Xavier snapped his attention to the rising airplane, studied it and related what he saw: "It's single engine, wings on top of the cockpit, about as long as—maybe—like as long as ... there's nothing to compare it against, Alan."

"Give it a shot."

"Maybe like a couple of pickup trucks long, maybe a little shorter."

"You got binocs with you? Get 'em! What's the fin look like?"

Reaching into his carryall for his binoculars, Xavier asked, "Fin?"

"The tail. Describe the tail." Xavier focused on the departing plane,

the tail was square. Singleton wanted to know how many windows, Xavier asked, “Including the windshield?” Singleton’s tone was growing impatient; only along the side, for Christ sake! There were two windows on the side, the back one only about half as long as the front one. The fuselage went directly from the back of the wings to the tail and there was no window in the back of the cockpit, and it was at this point that Alan Singleton began cursing in earnest.

“Which way is the fucker headed?”

“He’s not flying very high, Alan, not the way you see planes doing. He’s going opposite the way I came in, but—more north, more directly toward Vegas. I came out along a road south of ...”

Singleton interrupted, “Jesus H Participating Christ! What you got is a little Cessna, probably a one-seventy-two. We got our tit in the wringer for sure.” Even through the earphone, Singleton’s frustration was clear, Xavier realizing it was all his fault.

Xavier said, “I’m really sorry, Alan. I should have practiced with the gun.”

“Fuck the gun, I’m talking about the fucking airplane.”

When Xavier’s earphone went dead he sadly dropped the binoculars into his carryall, and then the submachine-gun and spare magazines. Lifting the canvas bag and retrieving his bottle of water, he began the trudge back to the Porsche Boxter, everything he’d done a failure, all of it for nothing. And the F.O. with a huge repair bill for the rented Porsche.

Arriving at the chained gate, he climbed through, then, having drunk the Evian bottle dry, he stopped to pee, pissing generously on the gate post. And yet, not satisfied with that, he brought up the MAC-11 again, studying the area around the grip and finding a button which he pushed, dropping the empty magazine. With a fresh magazine in place, Xavier turned to face the two signs. Now, with more trigger control and close up, he stitched his initials in the newer one—Johannesburg-Nevada: J F X A—Juan Felipe Xavier Alvarado, emptying both of the spare magazines.

As he was putting his kit into the battered Porsche, the F.O.’s voice came through: “Splendid, Xavier. Well done! Alan tells me you gave an excellent description of this fellow Tah-yeeb’s aircraft. Puts us three giant steps ahead in the game. Bravo!”

Xavier honestly didn’t know how to respond.

The F.O. continued, “You may be needed back here in the Lake Las Vegas area—come this way immediately. There’s yet this boating party of Mr. Dmitrovsky to be reckoned with.”

“Yo,” Xavier said, although truthfully his heart wasn’t in it.

What Weaver wanted was a spot that offered a good view of Overlook Country Club without parking his van where it would attract attention from the club. The antenna farm and microwave dish on the van's roof, though dear to him, were eyecatchers, as was the Clark County signage on its sides.

What Weaver settled for was a new shopping mall anchored by yet another neighborhood Italian supper-club/casino, a little less than a mile to the west of Overlook. This was close to the limits for jamming, but it gave him a direct line of sight to the country club on one side, and a base-station tower on the other.

Once parked he confronted the problem of how to jam without giving away that he was doing so. If it had been only one item—particularly if it had been only Andrei Stepanenko's cell phone—he could have breezed through it. As it was, he had to not only knock out the triplexing cell-phone traffic between Overlook and the nearest base-station tower, but at the same time dampen the non-digital signal of Stepanenko's old Soviet scrambler. And this without interfering with traffic between Dmitri Dmitrovsky and Aleksandr Kurskov on that same frequency.

Among the ready-made devices he'd found in Dieter Stellenhoff's cabinet were two separate cell-phone jammers—a large Nitro-Jam Mk-VII, with freq-grab and tone spoofing, and a smaller portable unit from Net-line. He tested the air for signals, locating the tower within seconds and checking to see what frequencies were being handed off from it in the 1.9-gig range. Once located, the frequencies were automatically logged on the Nitro's screen. Weaver checked them all as active, but didn't yet set the jam to "go."

The other device he brought into play was one of Stellenhoff's own designs, a capture-effect jammer that attenuated the outside FM signal in order to over-ride it with signals that the jammer itself generated. To create an over-riding signal, Weaver first flipped through the Nitro-Jam's menu, finding a directory of Sounds and Birdies. In this he located busy signals, disconnects, and a ring-tone that matched the digitized tone he'd captured earlier from the Russians' scanner traffic, and recorded that on a digital chip, then transferred the ring-tone to Stellenhoff's own jammer. And played it back. Even in his state of nerves, it seemed reasonable to think this sound of a ringing phone was true to its source.

That done, he went to work, flipping the Nitro-Jam to interfere with cell-phone traffic, prepping Stellenhoff's capture-effect so it would send

over-riding ring-tones at the flip of a switch, and monitoring the Russians' scrambler frequency with his broad-band scanner.

Agent recruiting—as taught at the Campus in Virginia, anyway—has more in common with seduction than with rape; but even in seduction there comes a point where continued flirting becomes circular, an end to itself, and patience must have a stop. Remly had arrived at this crossroads. What he needed was action, not Andrei still hesitating, his fingers hovering over the transmitter. From painful experience Remly knew that Andrei would convince himself that, by considering all aspects over and over, he was being analytical when in fact he was simply being perpetually coy. It was time to shake Andrei up a little.

Without looking at Andrei—giving his full attention to Slava, who'd been getting edgier by the moment—Remly said, “If you don't intend to use that transmitter of yours, put it aside and phone your friends. See if you get any response. If you're going to use it, use the damn thing now. Your guy looks like he's preparing to unholster his gun, and I'll have to shoot him if he moves an inch.” And in the corner of his vision he saw Andrei coming to life.

Very slowly and even more carefully Andrei settled his transmitter on the unclad banquet table beside him. Keeping one hand hovering over it, he moved his Soviet-era scrambler phone beside the transmitter. He pressed in a code one-handed, picked the phone up, held it to his ear. He looked at the funeral parade on the portable TV, then turned to the mountains to the east as though waiting for a sign.

In the silence Remly could hear his own breathing. As he studied Slava, he wondered how much longer the man would be patient, holding his frozen pose, hand on gun.

There was movement again, this time Andrei putting the large phone onto the table, moving a folding cell phone nearer the transmitter. Again he went through the ritual of one-handed dialing, again put the phone to his ear.

Where Andrei looked business-like with his neat brush-cut and narrow eyeglasses, Slava looked like a failed military non-com, his short, barracks haircut falling flat onto his forehead, his blond hair seeming to have no body. Under his close-set eyes there were premature pouches, his mouth a perpetual pout—the face of a man destined to make trouble, yet not fully understanding how to carry it off with aplomb. There was no doubt he wanted to kill Remly.

Still looking out the window Andrei said, “Shoot him.”

*Game of Chance: Any contest in which the winner is determined randomly, in the absence of assignable cause.*

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . S H A T T ' A F A K

In Fawzi Mukhlis's command center there was the familiar controlled chaos of a war room in the runup to battle.

General Darwish's cell phone began chiming, and Darwish took it from his large document bag to stare at it in disbelief. "No one has this number," he said.

Fawzi, his worry beads pocketed and forgotten, was busily answering two phone calls at once at his communications console, and Ashor was reading aloud from Nasirpal's blog, interpreting the internet-ese into clear Arabic: "It seems a group of news reporters has begun camping at our front gate in Lisbon. Nasi spoke to them only briefly, but they want to know if I'm in residence there, or if I've traveled to Iraq for some reason." Ashor looked across to Darwish, who was studying his cell phone. "It's late afternoon in Lisbon, and the shaku maku seems to have flown from here to there on birds' wings."

"I have reporters too," Fawzi called from across the room. "On two phone lines, and a report from my agents in town—a van full of men, video transmitting antennae on the roof, heading down the roadway turnoff to here."

"My wife," Darwish said, now holding the cell phone away from his ear. "Noises outside our gates, my security force couldn't shut them up, she woke. Seems there are journalists trying to see whether I am at home."

Fawzi had been checking his own computer screen at the comm console: "My E-mail box is filling up. Questions from all over—even from as far as Damascus—all asking about General Ashor."

Ashor, at the center of it, remained calm. "Tell your wife to go back to sleep, and have your security boys fire a shot or two in the direction of the journalists. But careful not to hit any of them—we'll need them for later. Let's not stir them up by turning six of them into pallbearers." To Fawzi he said, "Turn off your phones and let's focus on the work at hand. Perhaps it would help if you brought out your worry beads, Fawzi—you look undressed without them."

"What do we tell these journalists when they are at the gates?" Fawzi wanted to know. "These men are like hyenas, like vultures waiting for the

living to become carrion.”

“Tomorrow we tell them only that I’ve come home to track down the persons who who paid to have my beloved nephew, Fathi Abdul-Muqtadir assassinated. And that, in a few days, I will travel to Baghdad to take my place on the army’s general staff. When they arrive, leave them barking at the gates till dawn.”

The jasvah had cooled, but Ashor was in no mood to delay his response to Darwish’s misgivings. He poured himself a cup of cold coffee and took a kleicha cookie. After a glance at the Las Vegas news monitor, he turned to Darwish.

“Time is running out, it seems. Rather than considering your points one by one, there is a simple answer to your final skepticism—that the Americans’ Homeland Security will place a lid on news of the attempted attack, should they successfully defend against it. Let us suppose that there is no news from the U.S. about this—what would you recommend we do, eh?”

Rather than respond directly to Ashor’s question, Darwish looked across the room at Fawzi, measuring him.

“Do speak your mind,” Ashor insisted. “You would not have raised these questions if you hadn’t already devised an alternative.”

Darwish—blunt, direct, and military—now voiced the point that Ashor had suspected he’d been holding back: “All respect to you, General Ashor, I am not convinced that these political operations will get us any closer to the presidential palace in Baghdad. The longer we wait, the more time our enemies will have for playing dirty politics and attacking you.”

‘As though there’s ever been such a thing as clean politics,’ Ashor thought. He said, “And you think ... what? That we should launch our offensive immediately?”

“Within forty-eight hours,” Darwish said. “Our battalions are now formed, only waiting for the callup. I have the tactics and logistics already prepared.” He reached into his document case and brought out a handful of file folders, bound up and down and across with red cord. He put the bundle on the table between them.

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

Stevie and the boys had settled the second canvas vest in the step-van and were getting ready to roll out of Vegas when Mr. Singleton called again: “Where the hell are you?”

Stevie said, “Still on the terrace, boss.” Winking at Blazes. “Waiting to buy me an ice cream bar.” They were parked on Main near the bus depot, just south of Fremont.

“Forget Mr. Freezee,” Mr. Singleton said. “The guys on trikes are a sideshow. What we want is in the hearse. We’ve gotta get control of that hearse, get it out of there.”

“With the green topper on the hood?” Stevie said.

“That’s the only hearse there, for krisake! It’s the hearse that’s got the major cargo—forget the ice cream trikes. What can you do to take over the hearse?”

“I’ll get down there, Mr. Singleton. Right now.” He motioned to the boyos to get out of the van again, Buck already in the hold stretching out for a nap.

They tumbled out of the van, Stevie saying, “Put a fire under it. Jesus keep us, it just keeps getting bigger.”

Blazes gave him that look.

Stevie said, “God in his grace has given us the fucking mother lode of dope.”

When he heard “Shoot him” Charles Remly imagined for the briefest fraction of a second that Slava was going to draw his gun and in the next fraction it came to him that Slava didn’t speak English and he shot Slava in the face. The Beretta’s suppressed report was like a sharp handclap, accompanied by the metallic clatter of the slide slapping back against the frame then clacking forward to chamber a fresh round, and in the following silence the *pinggg* of the spent shell bouncing off a banquet table, Slava now limp on the floor, his mouth open and a pool of blood around his head, Remly going to him and shooting him in the ear.

Behind Remly, Andrei said, “And here comes my airplane.”

It was distant, visible through the panoramic windows, skimming low over the mountains in the west. Though Remly’s watch said 11:45, it was still daylight savings and the sun was more to the east than overhead and as the plane flew into the sun it gleamed brightly and was quite easy to see.

“Can we bring it down?” Remly went to the SAM on the table.

Andrei laughed. Now that he’d committed himself he was unnaturally cheery, as though the bunting overhead had been hung specially for him. “The Igla is for your Air Force pursuit jets. I have the key to explode the 172.” He turned from the window to his transmitter and pressed one of the momentary switches and the distant plane became a puff-blossom of flame and smoke.

Remly wondered if the nuclear materials, scattered across the mountains, would create a headache. The fleeting thought was put aside—that was someone else’s cleanup, he had his own to attend to.

As with thunder from a distant lightning strike, there came the delayed boom of the exploding Cessna.

“A new beginning,” Andrei said, ignoring the blast behind him and coming to Remly, hand extended. “Congratulate me.”

Remly slipped the Beretta to his left armpit—in other circumstances a tactical error, Remly was fully aware, as it temptingly provided the butt of the gun to the man he was facing. Taking Andrei’s hand Remly said, “Not just you, I congratulate *us*.” He folded his left hand over their two gripped ones as a measure of sincerity, once his stock-in-trade. “In you, Andrei Pierrevich, we’re getting a real prize.” It sounded stagey and he felt like a horse’s ass saying it, but it was precisely what was needed at the moment.

Andrei’s emotions spilled over. He all but quivered with excitement and unmasked joy, and his smile was at once childlike and vain. He pumped Remly’s hands, folding his other hand over Remly’s two, and Remly imagined that they could have been posing for the photographers.

“This is ...” Andrei reached for words.

“The first step of a brilliant career,” Remly prompted shamelessly, asking himself, ‘Am I really saying this?’ Sincerity was the key. ‘Focus on the sincerity!’

“Just so! Just so!” Andrei pumped Remly’s hands again, then released Remly to go to the table where his equipment lay.

“I’m taking your friend Slava’s gun,” Remly said. “Is there anything else on him I should get? Anything that might compromise you?”

“Only the driver’s license I made for him. Leave it, I don’t need it—Slava maybe uses it later to get where he is going.” Andrei laughed a touch too brightly as he pulled the battery from the transmitter and put the transmitter into his canvas carryall. He began packing his other gear. “I tell you the truth, I will miss your Las Vegas. I enjoyed some moments here. Perhaps I will return for a vacation now and then.”

“No one appreciates you or your money more than Fabulous Las Vegas does.”

“And I love the fantasy architecture.”

When he was done with his carryall, Andrei went to the Igla and flicked a switch, disarming it, then slipped it into its blue canvas tube.

“You all packed?”

“And ready to make a new beginning,” Andrei said. He turned for one last look at the Vegas Valley and Remly shot him in the middle of his back, then shot him a second time as Andrei stood, slumping, then again as Andrei collapsed, his head cracking loudly against the banquet table. Remly walked to him and shot him a final time in the ear.



What they needed was costuming, Father Stevie wasn't going to cut it for this act.

They got lucky, a black stretch Caddy, OSGOOD-1 plate, parked just off Fremont at a red curb under a sign that said No Parking At Any Time. The engine was running, but no chauffeur behind the wheel. A flickering light in the back, dim through dark windows—a TV screen, Stevie guessed. Telling Buck and Blazes to hang back, he pulled out his cross and went to the limo. Smiled big and tapped lightly on the curbside passenger window.

The window flowed silently down and in the back seat a white guy sat in his black suit, white shirt, black tie—the guy about Stevie's size—Stevie thinking, 'The very thing.'

"Yeah, Padre," the chauffeur said. "Help you?"

"I'm hopin' you can, lad," Stevie said, "I'm hopin' you can. Now, a fella like yourself would know this ..." He reached out to as though to confirm that he appreciated what a fella like the chauffeur would know, patted the chauffeur once on the shoulder, high up near the neck, away from the shoulder-pad of his lovely black suit.

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. . . S H A T T ' A F A K

"It is here!" Fawzi said. He clicked his remote, bringing up the volume of Vegas-4-News.

After a glance at Darwish's bundle of plans on the table between them, Ashor looked up at the monitor, the Las Vegas funeral parade coming to a halt before the casino La Fontaine. Yet this was less funeral than celebration. The band that marched behind the hearse was identified as Mrs. Murphy's Chowder and Marching Society, all in green. The hearse with a green top hat on the hood looked like it was going to a party not a burial. Following the band a couple of motorcycle police, outriders to a red Corvette convertible, a balding man sitting on the back ledge and toasting bystanders with an oversized martini glass. As the celebrity convertibles slowed to a stop, it came to Ashor that this wasn't a funeral, as he'd first thought. It was a rolling advertisement for Las Vegas, "The entertainment capital of the universe" as one of the two newsreaders had it, crowds on the sidewalk screaming for their favorite celebs.

"That fellow in the red turban," Fawzi said. "Is that his hair?"

Though Kurskov hadn't provided precise details, Ashor understood that the hotel La Fontaine would be brought down much as the Twin Towers in New York had been, and that there would be a spectacular nuclear event at the same time. A critical mass of radionuclides in a vicious hot spot. What

Ashor saw was a cheery event, now stopped as entertainers in the open cars took turns singing into their wireless microphones, speakers strung along the full length of Fremont Street and the crowd swaying to the music. Yet Ashor wasn't watching the entertainers. The television camera had pulled back for a wide, sweeping pan of the stopped parade, and at the head of it, beside the hearse, Ashor saw three men negotiating something with the motorcycle police. One of the men, dressed in a black suit, white shirt and black tie, had opened the driver's door of the hearse and was getting in.

The broadcast shifted to the Channel 4 newsroom, a man and woman at a large desk, the corner of the screen read "Vegas-4-News—News at Noon with Don and Barbara." The entertainment continued behind them on a large screen, as though they and their desk were floating somewhere in front of this Fremont Street Experience.

His voice tense, the male newsreader said, "This just in. Hundreds of witnesses report a mysterious aircraft explosion in the Spring Mountains near Blue Diamond. Police report that their 911 emergency switchboard has been flooded with calls regarding the incident, and our own Citizen Tipster Hotlines are jammed. Folks, if you've seen this phenomenon, we urge you *please* not to call us."

"Aircraft explosion?" Darwish said.

Ashor silently watched as the hearse on the screen behind the two newsreaders negotiated its way through the crowds and disappeared.

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## . . . L A K E   M E A D   M A R I N A

On the one hand, Didi wasn't given to strong emotions. On the other it was hard not to feel an edge of panic. Mikhail had disappeared, he couldn't raise Andrei or the colonel on the scrambler phone. The scrambler issue wasn't overly troubling; these Soviet scramblers had their own agenda and they either functioned or went on holiday without consulting him. What was disturbing, he couldn't get in touch with Andrei via cell phone either. Did Mikhail reappear? Had Slava arrived? Was Andrei facing a major draw-back? Andrei's phone rang, no answer.

While working futilely at his two phones, Didi stood on the dock and scanned the road for his own Ford F-150, driven by Slava, and for Andrei's white van.

The lake behind him wasn't a lake but a giant reservoir behind a massive hydro-electric dam, and it was drying up very badly, leaving twenty feet of rings along the surrounding rocky cliffs. Where the land was flat and sloped gently down to the water, creating beaches, the water itself seemed out of place, everything beyond was desert, spare and dry. As the water retreated,

the dock had been relocated many times, you could see the evidence that marched up the beach to the parking area.

Only one other boat was being prepared at the dock, no cars were approaching down the long road from the Rangers' entry hut. The houseboat he'd leased was large and comfortable, a final luxury to make up for those weeks of grim penance in the desert. Among its other comforts the houseboat offered a large television monitor, which Yuri had tuned to the local news channel. As if the telephone blackout wasn't enough, there was an interruption in the TV coverage of the Fremont Experience funeral parade, something about a mysterious explosion above the mountains to the southwest of Las Vegas, near the road that led to Nye County. Didi went in to watch.

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### . . . L A S   V E G A S

Remly pulled the Beretta's magazine and took a fresh one from his pocket and slapped it home, then settled the gun on the table next to Andrei's work bag.

That done, Remly bent over Andrei's body, carefully standing outside the spreading pool of blood, and checked his surgical gloves to see if any of his sweat was coming through. No, the gloves were fine, he patted down Andrei's trouser pockets with gloved hands. Finding a wallet, he fished it out and unfolded it on the banquet table next to Andrei's cell. He pulled a few scraps of paper from the wallet and spread them on it. Remly flicked on his earphone. "I'm back on line."

But the F.O. was mid-sentence, repeating himself like an emergency radio alert. Remly wasn't listening entirely, he was studying the papers from Andrei's wallet, the F.O. saying, "... me immediately. If you are listening, get back to me im- ... Is that you, Charles?"

"It's me."

As Remly reached into his own pocket, the F.O. said, "Alan has translated some disturbing traffic. An armed thug, on his way to protect Mr. Stepanenko. Fellow named 'Slava.'"

"I'll keep an eye out for him," Remly said.

In his haste—or perhaps because of sleep deprivation and his tension-induced state of paranoia—Weaver had completely overlooked the blowback<sup>1</sup> factor, which now refused to be ignored.

On the auto-ranging scrambler there had been Alan Singleton and Xavier talking about a small airplane, then the F.O. came on, warning Charley

<sup>1</sup>Blowback - "The Law of Unintended Consequences."

over and over about someone named Slava. And then an explosion somewhere to the west, though by the time Weaver got to the offside window of the van—perhaps three seconds, all told—nothing showed but a giant, expanding puffball of smoke and debris in the western sky. Returning to his post at the bank of electronic controllers and screens, Weaver now realized that a crowd had gathered outside the Italian supper-club casino, the people also looking at the rare explosion. And the odd thing about the small crowd was that each of them had come from the little casino already holding a cell phone, though it hardly seemed reasonable that they all could have known about the explosion in advance. It was at that precise point that Weaver thought ‘Blowback!’ and understood that he had blocked every cell phone in the area when he isolated Andrei by jamming the base-station tower.

Two people at the supper-club door were looking at his van, specifically at its antennas and microwave dish, speaking urgently to each other, when Charley’s voice came through on the Stellenhoff scrambler, responding to the F.O. “I’ll keep an eye out for him.” And Weaver understood that it was over—over at this end at any rate.

He pressed his earphone to the scrambler frequency. “Charley, okay to release the cell phone hold?”

“Cut it loose,” Charley said. “Get rolling to Lake Mead, where you spotted Dmitrovsky. I’ll probably pass you along the road.” Then he heard Charley calling Xavier.

Scrupulously ignoring the growing number of people talking to each other and pointing at his van, Weaver turned off the Nitro-Jam. Equally scrupulous he repressed a nervous laugh when a number of the crowd outside the Italian supper-club nearly jumped, looking in astonishment at their cell phones.

And Charley’s cell frequency coming alive, Charley’s voice-mail taking a message: “So what I’m doing, I’m still playing ‘Where’s Charley?’ You kapeesh? Proosie’s playing ‘Where’s Charley?’ You were s’posed to call her today. What you want, you wanna be more sosh, y’know? Get out more. Rub elbows. Maybe learn a thing or three. Like—how many Russians does it take to play money Maytag at La Fontaine? You’d be amazed, all the baccarat room cash didn’t get reported on state and federal forms. That doesn’t get your pecker up? How’s about ... my pal Ricky Butzek tells me some schmuck played paddywack with that clock that went bananas, had Granter doing a back half-gainer, now it’s a homicide thing. So come on, Charley boy. Gimme a call. What if I come over and sprinkle fish remover in your moat? That get your attention?”

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. . . L A K E   M E A D   M A R I N A

Yuri and Viktor had been watching the news, Yuri translating for Viktor, and now Didi joined them in the cabin of the houseboat, all but holding his breath. The funeral was ending, the marching band had marched off, entertainers now making exits. But nothing more about the aerial explosion.

“What did they say, exactly?” Didi asked. “About the explosion.”

“Nothing,” Yuri said. “Only there was a big explosion in the sky.”

“I heard, ‘Nye County.’”

“In the sky over those mountains, going to Nye County. The hearse is gone, no Semtex explosions. You think . . . ?”

Didi shook his head. “Only wait and see.”

“Jesus!” Yuri said. “The fucking Igla!” He was looking past Didi, up toward the parking lot.

Didi snapped around and coming at them down the dock were two men; one small with a neat van Dyke beard and sunbleached highlights in his hair, a canvas carryall in one hand, the other of medium stature and carrying a long, blue canvas tube, familiar to Didi because he had picked it up in person at Valeri Voshch’s arms dump in Tiraspol just two weeks ago.

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. . . S H A T T   ‘ A F A K

“The nuclear device,” Darwish said. “It was in the airplane?”

“... more later on the mystery explosion over ...” the newsreader was saying when Fawzi clicked him mute.

Ashor stood and stretched, still watching the Las Vegas news channel. “That was only to bring down the hotel, my friend. The nuclear volcano is in the hearse.”

Darwish turned to the screen. “The hearse is gone.” He looked accusingly at Fawzi, as though Fawzi had erased the hearse with a click of his remote.

“You didn’t see it?” Ashor said. “A man came, dressed in a black suit like a funeral employee. This man in black got into the hearse and drove it away.”

Darwish watched silently as Ashor walked beside the length of the table to stand beside Fawzi at his communications console, near the television screens. Peering closely at the Vegas-4-News monitor, Ashor continued, “And of course this is about the point where the shaheeds should have exploded at both ends of the parade.”

Darwish measured Ashor and Fawzi, who seemed not in the least upset about this turn of events. “And who has brought this about?” Darwish

asked. “Homeland Security?”

“It hardly matters,” Ashor said as he turned to look again at Darwish, who once more had the slightest hint of a smile, though now with a wolfish cast. “What’s done is done, we have to look to our own contingencies. You are convinced that now is the time to launch a push to Baghdad?”

Darwish said, “Over the years you’ve shown high regard for my strategic and tactical talents.” He wasn’t trolling for compliments, Ashor understood that. It was simply a flat statement, without guile. “I’ve put everything into a plan that extends from now into the next four weeks. From here to the presidential palace in Baghdad.” He reached for his bundle of file folders, and struggled to loosen the knot of the red cord that bound it.

“And you believe we should sacrifice the goodwill of the Americans in the bargain?” asked Ashor.

“The Americans,” Darwish said as he leaned back to fish into his pants pocket, “the Americans have shown themselves to be incompetent and disloyal. Anyone who depends on their goodwill is in for a surprise.”

“But political solutions must always precede military ones.”

“I say look to our politics, not to theirs.” Darwish had retrieved a pocket knife, and now he slipped it under the red cord and sliced it with a swift motion.

Ashor said, “No matter what happens in this Las Vegas, we must look to the American political establishment for support—there’s no avoiding it. And we still need the demonstrations of tomorrow to justify our campaign.”

Ashor nodded to Fawzi, who was waiting like an eager child anticipating sweets after a fast. Fawzi stepped forward. “There are the orphans ...” Fawzi began.

Darwish gestured at Fawzi as though throwing a ball backhanded at him. “I see a clear and simple line to Baghdad,” Darwish said. Discarding the red cord, he offered the top folder from his bundle of material to Ashor.

“You will listen to Colonel Fawzi,” Ashor said, stringing the words out slowly. His voice was calm, even friendly, but there was no mistaking the steel in his delivery, and Darwish sat and turned to listen to Fawzi Mukhlis.

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## . . . LAKE MEAD MARINA

Remly leaned against the rail of the houseboat to put out his hand. He smiled and said, “Dmitri Dmitrievich—I don’t know if you recognize me. I’m Charles Remly. Last couple of weeks, off and on, friends of yours have been trying to kill me.” When Didi accepted Remly’s hand, Remly held it firmly, not shaking hands but keeping the other from reaching for a gun.

Tilting his head like a curious cat, studying the Russian. “I thought you’d like to know, we’ve been tracking Colonel Kurskov all day. He’s not waiting for you at South Cove, Didi. He took off when Andrei blew up your Cessna, now he’s halfway to Kingman. You familiar with Kingman? It’s down in Arizona on the way to Phoenix International Airport.”

Xavier had put down his carryall and gotten hold of the bow line from the pontoon houseboat, wrapping the line another time around the dock cleat and pulling firmly against the loose end—the boat now locked in place.

Remly released Didi’s hand. “Tell your friends not to shoot me. It’ll make life hell for you—there’s no way out of here, you get the park rangers on your backside. Their boats are faster than yours, and you don’t have wheels, as I understand it. Your Ford pickup is still up in the lot at Overlook Country Club, where Slava parked it.” He smiled across Didi’s shoulder at the other two, then said to Didi, “You want to come with us? We’d really like to talk over a few things with you.”

Didi found his voice: “Where is Andrei?”

Remly shook his head, looked over Didi’s shoulder again. “Andrei and Slava ... you know? You just have to accept it’s part of the game. It could have fallen the other way, your guys killing me—maybe a couple thousand more people in Las Vegas. But no hard feelings, okay?”

Didi Dmitrovsky still didn’t get it, you could see it in his face, he didn’t *want* to get it.

“Strictly speaking, I shot them,” Remly said. “I killed both of them, is this registering with you?”

One of the two behind Didi jerked and looked up sharply when Remly said “killed.” He understood English, Remly figured, and now he was speaking softly in Russian to the big guy beside him.

“What I started saying, Aleksandr Kurskov—he’s already on his way to the Phoenix airport. That was the plan, wasn’t it? Nuke Las Vegas, get out across the lake when all the other exits got shut down in a security quarantine?”

Didi said, “Andrei!”

“Best not to dwell on it. The thing to consider is Kurskov—he’s abandoned you. You’ll never hear from him again.” Remly looked across Didi’s shoulder; the other two Russians were locked in whispered conversation, one translating for the other. Remly said, “What brings me here is this. My associates and I want to give you and your two friends here a free pass to get out of the States. We can give you pocket money to get back to Russia, encourage you to go find Aleksandr Kurskov. Deal with him.”

“You are crazy,” Didi said.

Remly shrugged. "People keep telling me that," he said. "But tell me this. Suppose you get out of here alive. You think Kurskov will let you continue living after you've screwed up on this job? What's your thinking on that?"

Didi turned and began speaking rapidly in Russian to the other two, and Remly brought out his Beretta, keeping it in front of him and out of sight of the dock behind him. He screwed the suppressor onto the muzzle and nodded to Xavier, who brought the suppressed MAC-11 from his canvas carryall.

"Let the rope loose," Remly said to Xavier.

Xavier released the rope from its cleat, the houseboat bobbing a little, now loose in the water.

Remly said to Didi, "The Ford F-150 in the Overlook parking lot is yours—you gave it to Slava so he could back up Andrei. So now what? Do you phone for a cab to get away from here? How about South Cove? South Cove's in the middle of nowhere, Didi, at the end of a gravel road. No taxicabs. You going to cruise over there and walk away from the dock at that end? Wander around in the desert? Or do you think it's a good thing to come with us—have a little discussion about your career plans?"

Still Didi hesitated.

"I'm not a big fan of telling the truth," Remly said. "My experience, it just gets you in trouble. But I'll give you the truth on this one, Dmitri Dmitrievich. I really don't care whether you come along with us or if you sit here and sink deeper into this pile of shit you've created for yourself."

Repressing a smile at his language and his brass, Remly stood and slipped the suppressed Beretta into his belt under his shirt. He picked up the sacked Igla and turned and started walking away, Xavier following.

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## . . . S H A T T ' A F A K

"At first we had many fallbacks," Fawzi said to Darwish Abdul-Haqq. "While General Ashor was still in Maastricht even, we began them."

Now Fawzi had Darwish's full attention, as the very idea of fallbacks was well inside his own field of interest—intensely within it.

Fawzi continued: "Some alternatives were discarded as being impractical, others fell out because they became worthless when their window of opportunity passed. As time went by, I searched around for other fallbacks, always with four or five on the table, ready to be actuated. Then, three weeks ago, when General Ashor told me his schedule for return, I forwarded my best suggestion to him. And he approved it absolutely!"

The way Fawzi said it, anyone would have thought he'd gotten the idea



from Ashor, rather than having dreamt it up and offered it.

“And so now what we have is this—a load of seven armored Hummers that the American security company Strongfort ordered.”

“Strongfort,” Darwish said. “Security contractors in the Green Zone for American government employees.”

“That one, yes! And there are seven of their Hummers—armored and diesel-powered, very desirable—tied up in Customs at al-Faw since a cargo ship unloaded them a little over three weeks back.”

Darwish held up his hand and rubbed a greedy thumb across his fingertips.

“Only a little cash,” Fawzi said. “Mostly for the Customs authorities at the port. In Baghdad I have a friend through my brother’s wife’s best friend’s cousin who is at the customs desk of the tax authority. It was arranged—the Hummers would get lost for a while in a little-used holding shed at al-Faw.”

Darwish said, “You say that seven Hummers for Strongfort *were* tied up. When did they slip their bonds?”

“Only late today,” Fawzi said. “The contractor sent a big contingent of heavily armed men to get their vehicles. They should be starting away from al-Faw sometime after Customs opens tomorrow morning.” Fawzi went silent for a moment, smiling at some secret thought.

Darwish looked from Fawzi to Ashor, then back again to Fawzi. He asked, “And then?”

“Ashor Charities supports an orphanage in An Nasiriyah, General. Tomorrow, starting very early, two buses filled with these children go from the An Nasiriyah orphanage on a field trip to the archeological digs of Tall Qasr, between al-Faw and Baghdad. Do you know the cutoff for the historic site, how it goes?”

Darwish nodded impatiently.

“When Saddam built the highway—this is when he was preparing for the Iran war—when he had the highway built he wanted to put it right through Tall Qasr. But the historical community screamed. The Yanks screamed—this is when they were still feeding Saddam intelligence. Everyone screamed. So the expressway goes around the site, only a little bend, the gate to the Tall Qasr road is almost directly on the shoulder of the north-bound lane. It was promised to the bus drivers that a docent from the archeological site will be at the gate with a key. But when the buses arrive tomorrow morning, no docent. And no one at the site to answer his cell phone—no one there at all.”

Again in Darwish’s face Ashor saw what would have been a smile in

anyone else. “These buses,” Darwish said. “They are quite long?”

“Long enough,” Fawzi said. “Maybe only ten or twelve meters. But the Tall Qasr road is narrow—one bus will get stuck at the gate, the back end of it across the shoulder and into the highway. The other bus will park along the shoulder, but a little into the highway: The shoulders are only wide enough for cars, and they slope dangerously.”

Darwish gestured to Ashor and said, “So where are the snipers? In the median between the north- and south-bound lanes.”

“Yes!” said Fawzi. “Two hundred yards north of the gate to Tall Qasr. Two shooters with Barrett light fifies. The snipers shoot into the windshields of the lead Hummers. Many shots, .50 caliber rifles with long-range scopes. General Ashor and I believe that retaliation by the surviving Hummers will be swift and deadly, and directed toward the only two targets available to the security contractors.”

Fawzi ended, and both he and Ashor waited in silence while Darwish thought.

Darwish stirred, then looked up. “And this happens just about the same time as the demonstrations for employment?”

“A little earlier,” Ashor said.

Darwish went back to thinking and Ashor and Fawzi returned to waiting. At last Darwish said, “I believe I’m developing a taste for these politics of yours.”

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## . . . L A K E   L A S   V E G A S

What the F.O. and Alan Singleton could not understand was the disconnect between the geo-positioning transmitters on Stevie, Buck, and Blazes. Stevie was still posted at the east end of Fremont Street Experience, sipping tea at a terrace cafe, and Buck was motionless at the center of Fremont. But Blazes—or so his transmitter would have them believe—Blazes was speeding north and east on the I-15, heading for Utah on the expanded map that took up the giant theater screen.

“Stevie, this is Alan Singleton. Where the hell are you? Where’s Blazes going? You reading me? Answer your goddam earphone goddammit!”

“We’re on our way in.” But it wasn’t Stevie, it was Remly, his words coming clearly over the Stellenhoff scrambler line. “Xavier’s ahead of me, Weaver’s out of sight bringing up the rear. We’ve got three house guests for you. Out-of-towners. They tell me they’d enjoy chatting with you. Are there spare bedrooms for them?”

“Comfort the afflicted.  
Afflict the comfortable.”  
Carl Ally

AUTUMN 2004 . . .

. . . L A S V E G A S

How it happened—the funeral for the Honorary Mayor of Fremont Street had ended and she and Mimi were overseeing the muscle crew who were putting the kiosks and carts back into the middle of Fremont. Wayne and Céline and Siegfried and Roy had gone, and with them Penn and Teller and the Blue Men and Carrot Top and Rita—all the big headliners—when Morris called Mimi, and Mimi closed up her phone and said, “Prosie, where’s the nearest news TV?”

“What is it?” Pru said.

“You shouldn’t ask.” Mimi dragging her to the La Fontaine entrance.

The nearest news was in the sports book, a screen off to the side away from the door, no one watching it, customers at the main bank of screens watching the playoffs.

It was Vegas-4-News—the noon news with Don and Barbara. They were at their desk, not smiling, behind them yellow text scrolling across a black background screen—NEWS FLASH \* VEGAS-4-NEWS EXCLUSIVE NEWS FLASH \* VEGAS-4-NEWS EXCLUSIVE—Barbara reading off the camera prompter, “... McCoy’s missing hearse has been found, abandoned and empty in an alley near Fremont Street Experience.”

“When did it disappear?” Pru asked, but Mimi said, “Shhhhh!” pointing at the screen.

“Metro also reports that Li’l Mikey’s coffin was not in the hearse,” Barbara said, squinting with concern into the camera.

“That’s right, Barbara,” Don said, “and the hearse driver has gone missing as well. Our mobile unit is moving from Li’l Mikey’s parade venue to where the hearse has been found. Stand by for more, soon.”

“Oh, Mimi,” Pru said. “What can we do?”

Mimi said, “Get something to drink and keep watching the news.”

Don was saying, “... in other news ... what’s this?” Don’s concentration on the camera broke and he looked to his right, where a hand came into view with a few sheets of paper. “It’s not on the prompter?” He read the top sheet, his eyebrows rising. He looked up, into the lens again, now speaking gravely: “Ladies and gentlemen, our producer James Martinez

has just handed me a very disturbing news item. Li'l Mikey McCoy's coffin has been located, and the driver of Li'l Mikey's hearse has been found near it—murdered, shot twice and left in a dumpster, wearing only his socks and briefs. His shoes are left in the dumpster, but his pants, shirt, tie, and jacket are missing. And there's more. Barbara ..." Don handed the second sheet of paper to her, sharing the news-read.

Barbara quickly scanned the sheet. "Also in the dumpster, Metro has found the body of a man. Witnesses have told Vegas-4-News that ... *oh my God, I've never covered anything like this!*" Barbara broke, a hand to her face, turning from the camera.

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### . . . LAKE LAS VEGAS

Charles Remly arrived at the F.O.'s rented estate with his three guests, brief Introductions were made, chores were assigned.

Didi's two men had been identified as Viktor and Yuri, and Xavier had taken them to the estate's kitchen, where all three sliced bread and made cold sandwiches. Xavier explained the various appliances and smiled secretly to himself at the open wonder the other two showed, Yuri activating the ice dispenser in the refrigerator door and catching the tumbling cubes with his other hand. All of the smaller electric devices were cordless—bread knives, can openers, a coffee grinder—and Viktor and Yuri handled them enviously.

While lunch was being prepared, Remly went with the others to the billiards room. He'd first thought to bring Didi to the theater, but after a hurried and whispered consultation with the F.O. and Alan Singleton it was decided that Didi should remain happily ignorant about the details of their operational paraphernalia, on the theory that left to his imagination he would consider their setup even more invincible than it actually was.

At the door to the billiards room Weaver paused, holding back Remly and the F.O. and admitting, "I'm really trashed. Can you do this without me?"

Remly said, "If it's any consolation, you look like hell."

"I'm really falling over, Charley."

"Before you fall," the F.O. said, "just one bit of information. I've been thinking of installing a theater in my home in Montecito. A theater like this one." He nodded down the hall. "Is this something you can do?"

"I'm your guy," Weaver said, "but right now I really gotta crash."

"There is this, however—I mean to have these eavesdropping and decryption systems installed in Montecito as well. I mean to say, we'll use the ones you've installed here. And perhaps more? You said there might be

other, even more sophisticated material in your plunder from Mr. Stellenhoff's lab?"

Weaver nodded.

"And do you think one might listen in on Virginia's busy bees from across the continent—say from the California coast to Virginia—with such a setup?"

"It's an interesting challenge."

"And perhaps even locate Virginia's conversationalists on a giant theater-screen map? Let me keep them in view while I'm listening in on their decrypted chats?"

Weaver smiled, looking at once guilty and pleased with himself. "I think I might pull it off."

When he returned Weaver's smile it was clear the F.O. was equally pleased, though he showed not a trace of guilt.

As with Remly's effort to turn Andrei Stepanenko, their work on Dmitri Dmitrovsky wasn't going straight from point A to any quick conclusion. Like Andrei, Didi had his own agenda, and he demanded to know what had happened to the missing members of his crew.

"I thought we'd been over that," Remly replied. "There was the giant at my home—came there with some other large guy, and Andrei dressed in drag. I shot him and I killed him. About an hour ago I shot and killed Andrei, and I shot and killed a goon named Slava. Who've I missed?"

"Mikhail." Didi put the name forward like a card he was playing, to see if Remly would stay or fold.

Remly shrugged. "No idea who that is. Was I supposed to shoot him too?"

"You would recognize him. He was the other fellow at your front gate."

"Part of the crew that was trying to kill me," Remly said. Except for Alan Singleton in the comfort of a padded swivel chair, they were all sitting on tall billiards observers chairs, which they'd pulled into a sort of ring at one end of the room. Remly felt himself going to sleep, snapping himself upright and rigid on the uncompromising wood seat. He said, "Am I supposed to give a shit about Mikhail?"

Didi sat silently, with the dignity of the righteous, still waiting to hear about Mikhail.

"Trust me," Remly said, "you'll be a lot happier once you've put this behind you." He climbed creakily off the stool, thinking this might help him stay awake. "My friends have a business opportunity for you, let's try to stay on message."

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## . . . L A S V E G A S

The hearse driver was murdered and Pru was wondering if maybe she *should* have a drink, maybe something light like chardonnay. On the screen, Barbara got up from the news desk and ran off camera, crying.

Don got the news sheet back from where Barbara had dropped it on the desk-top, the camera cutting from the two-view of their large desk to a closeup, Don continuing in an unnaturally calm voice. “Our witness—a homeless man who slept in an ally near the dumpster—our witness claims that the unidentified murdered man was tied by the feet to the dumpster lid like a slaughtered sheep, his throat cut ear to ear, causing all the blood to drain from his body.” Don looked up from his script and off to the side of the lens as though speaking to someone beside the camera. “Do we have video feed yet? We need some video on this. Who’s got the mobile unit on scene? Mobile One? Jerome? Is it Jerome?” He looked into the lens. “Jerome, are you live on the scene? Can you hear me? Does Metro have a spokesperson for you to interview? Can you get a shot of the hanging body?”

“Oh my God,” Pru said. “Poor Mikey. What a mess!”

Mimi patted Pru’s hand consolingly. “He got a swell sendoff, honey. Look at it that way.”

A waitress came to them, asking, “Get you something?” Then, recognizing them, “Hi, Pru. Mimi. Little early for a drink. Get you some ice tea?”

“Oh my God,” Pru said again. She dug into her purse for her phone. She had wanted maybe to see Charley tonight, but this changed everything. She wasn’t sure she could handle it.

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## . . . L A K E L A S V E G A S

Remly and the F.O. had gotten Didi rolling in the right direction, focusing on the possibility of returning to Russia and dealing with Aleksandr Kurskov. Now it was Alan Singleton who was off the page.

“... never coulda come up with a budget like this on his own,” Singleton was saying. “Just go back in your mind to the first time he told you about this operation. Recall anyone else Kurskov was doing business with at the time? Anyone who might have bankrolled this op?”

“Beside the point, Alan ...” Remly began.

“Keep a lid on it, kid,” Singleton said, not looking at Remly. “I’m running this end of the debriefing.”

Remly looked at the F.O. and the F.O. gave a little shrug. What could you do? Alan was on a crusade.

“Think back,” Singleton said again. “When was it exactly, Kurskov put

this proposal to you?"

"Only last year," Didi said. "This would be when Andrei and I are coming back from the Moscow Rocks festival. We go to the Colonel to see if any more work is for us."

Alan Singleton leaned forward. "Moscow Rocks—that was your job?"

"Andrei made it look good, like Chechen militants."

"And who was behind it? Who put up the money?"

"I'm guessing someone inside the wall."

Singleton said, "Inside the Kremlin."

"That is inside the wall, yes."

Alan Singleton turned to Remly, then to the F.O. He looked doubtful. Again facing Didi he asked, "So you just got back from bombing the music fest, and Aleks Kurskov tells you about this assignment."

"Only that this Las Vegas operation is likely, not that it is going on for sure."

"You think it's the same guys bankrolling this operation. The same guys from inside the wall?"

Didi raised a shoulder. "This is maybe so, but I do not see it this way. Nothing for them in Las Vegas."

"Kurskov's not doing business with any foreign guys at the time?"

"Foreign?" Didi said. "Like Americans?"

"Like middle-eastern."

"Not that I would know."

Slipping wearily from his tall stool, Remly said, "I need a load of sleep. I'm outta here."

"Kid ..." Singleton began.

"You're doing great, Alan. I'm bone weary—I'll just be a drag on the proceedings." Remly went to the door and out, the F.O. following.

In the hall the F.O. said, "I'll walk you to your car."

"What's eating Alan?" Remly asked as they approached the huge double doors that led to the entry porch. "We know perfectly well who's behind the nuking operation."

"Alan has a flea in his ear," the F.O. said. "He's trying to get hard evidence that dur-Shamshi is the money man on this. Alan wants to blackmail Leonard into giving him a consulting contract. An opportunity for Leonard to experience a change of heart regarding Alan's consultancy contract, as Alan puts it. A consulting contract and an unrestricted security badge that lets Alan wander about the Campus and the Farm at leisure."

Now it was CNN's whack at financial news, 09:00 in New York, a stock-market crawl at the bottom of the screen. On Al Jazeera a rerun of *The Opposite Direction*, Faisal al-Qassem's guest the architect Adrian Smith, and behind them a rendering of Smith's extravagant superscraper Burj Dubai, which had just begun construction. Fawzi had muted the international stations to a level appropriate to their news, but had kept the Las Vegas monitor at a reasonable volume. Another man had replaced the departed woman, the new man in a bright green blazer, tightly buttoned. The screen behind the two Vegas-4-News newsreaders promised BREAKING NEWS—L'I MIKEY McCOY MURDERS and Ashor divided his attention in equal parts between the news channel, Fawzi, and Darwish.

"... Carman's chauffeur in a mysterious coma in the back seat of ..." the newsreader Don was saying.

"... to do with Homeland Security?" Fawzi wanted to know.

And Darwish, "... if they do find a shaheed connection, attempted attack and so forth, I say we should still go with the attack on the orphans. It will double the response to the Las Vegas program."

"... other men found in mysterious comas, two of them in torn ice cream vendors' smocks."

The camera shifted to the man in the beetle-green blazer. "And the connection here, Don, is that another man in a coma was wearing the suit of the murdered hearse driver. And had the driver's wallet, still in the suit jacket."

Fawzi said, "The shaheeds!" His eyebrows rose, looking like twin question marks.

"Right, Hal." The camera picked up Don, speaking as though he was reading something from the camera lens. "Very mysterious indeed. Metro has now blocked off the areas, our mobile units have been shut out, but we'll be getting you pictures soon. The Vegas-4-News chopper has already lifted off from its helipad. Visuals coming up soon, viewers."

"Who would that be," Darwish asked, "this fellow in the hearse clothing?"

Hal, in the green blazer, looked off to his left. "James? Can we get an aerial of the murdered man that was hanged in the dumpster?"

Had anyone asked, Ashor would have denied it, but the room seemed smaller than when he and Fawzi began monitoring the news. And as the walls closed slowly in, he felt something hard in his stomach. "The third shaheed," Ashor said, "the one who was supposed to be driving the hearse. The



other two would have the Semtex vests—ice cream peddlers, no one would notice them while they waited to get blown up. The fourth would have been in the exploding airplane.”

“Homeland Security?”

“Hardly, Fawzi,” Ashor said. “Nor the local police.”

“Virginia?” Darwish asked.

“Does it matter, my friend? There is always the chance the two Semtex shaheeds will be connected to the house with the Iraqi rubble. There’s an equal chance that news of this attempt will never surface.”

“... and in a bizarre twist ...” the newsreader Don was saying.

Ashor said, “Do mute that, Fawzi, if you please.” Then, continuing to Darwish, “Everything is on the table—everything but your assault on Baghdad, my good friend. All attacks internally against American targets, beginning with Strongfort’s Hummers and the orphans’ buses.” He wanted, and wanted badly, to press his fingers into the painful knot in his stomach, but held his tight control, maintaining his benign expression and calm voice. “And—Fawzi? Are you attending me? All anti-Yankee protest materials to be held back until *after* the attack on Strongfort, then we unleash ...”

But what Ashor planned to unleash went unsaid as the lights and the television screens went black, leaving only two computer monitors glowing dimly in the dark.

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## ... LAKE LAS VEGAS

If there was any truth to be learned from the past two weeks, Remly could not find it, other than that the days had passed and he was still among the living. He would never understand why the Iraqi dur-Shamshi wanted Vegas nuked, nor did he particularly care: Vegas was booming, home values were climbing with no end in sight, tourists pouring in, major expansions on the Strip, and the Russians’ nuclear volcano had been capped. At the moment all Remly wanted was a needle-spray shower and ten hours between crisp clean sheets.

They stood on the porch, the F.O. saying, “The way Alan is going, this debriefing will take at least another two days, perhaps three. You’ll be back tomorrow to assist with it of course.”

“It’s over,” Remly said. “Weaver told me Kurskov’s last transmission finally had him moving south toward Phoenix. The airport. You and Alan handle Dmitrovsky. I’ve got other priorities.”

“And did Mr. Weaver tell you that Alan’s Boston burglars are hell-bent for Utah on the Interstate?”

Remly nodded.

The F.O. said, “And you don’t wish to chase after them?”

“Let them chase themselves,” Remly said. “It’s over with.”

The F.O. wasn’t pleased to hear that. “They appear to be traveling to God-knows-where with a load of nuclear materials and plastique Semtex explosives.”

“That’s their problem,” Remly said. “They’re moving it away from Vegas, no provable connection with Alan, let them go in peace.”

The F.O. said, “You seem to have damped down the fire in your belly.” He wasn’t amused by the idea.

“Fire in the belly?” Remly said. “What’s the synonym for that—*auto-da-fé*? Self-immolation?”

“Whatever became of the dedicated fellow who first brought this escapade to me?”

“My dedication was never to an escapade, if you want to call it that. My dedication was to staying alive and keeping my town from getting a fire in its belly. I happen to like Vegas, I don’t want to move.”

They stood silently for a moment, Remly looking across the estate’s croquet pitch and beyond the pitch across a golf fairway to the lake and its faux Pontevecchio bridge—as ever with the old man a heavy presence of money. Remly turned to see the F.O. peering at him like a battlefield medic.

There were fine lines around the F.O.’s eyes and he squinted at Remly’s face as though hoping to penetrate his protégé’s soul. When he spoke his voice was troubled. “In my time I’ve seen men who were working up to stress-related heart seizures and post-traumatic breakdowns. There is a certain look to them—a pallor and an intensity around the mouth. And at the moment, Charles, you are the perfect picture of someone who is about to go flying apart.”

Remly considered this, and in honesty he couldn’t disagree. Turning again to the view he said only, “I’ve lost a lot of sleep.”

“Yes, perfectly understandable,” the F.O. relented. “I imagine you’re fatigued, my boy. Do go home and catch up on your sleep. Come back tomorrow, we can decide how to deal with all this. Negotiating with Mr. Dmitrovsky. Alan’s burglars. Brother Kurskov.”

“You cut the deal with Dmitrovsky,” Remly said. “Send him back to Russia, get him chasing after Kurskov. Beyond that to hell with it.”

“I was rather hoping you would function as Mr. Dmitrovsky’s defac-to case officer while he puts together a plan to eliminate Aleksandr Kurskov.”

“My only function is to go home. Let Alan turn him and run him, it’s Alan’s specialty, black arts. If Dmitrovsky *can* be turned, Alan can turn him

as easily as anyone—easier, probably.”

“You seem doubtful regarding Dmitrovsky’s turnability. Do you see a problem?”

“I’m not sure where Didi’s center is,” Remly said, “or if he even has a center. If he’s like the rest of us in the trade—all surface and no center—Didi can be turned and turned again, a perpetual dervish, depending on who’s spinning him. Sic him on Kurskov, that’s a given. Just don’t imagine he won’t end up working for Kurskov once he gets home to Russia.”

The F.O. said, “You’re fatigued, it brings out your cynicism.”

“It’s a matter of centrifugal force,” Remly said. “Everything about us is on the surface, we’re hollow inside.”

“Go home,” the F.O. said. “Rest. You can work him over tomorrow.”

“We keep going back to this, don’t we? I’m short on sleep. I’m a couple weeks behind, restoring a bike. And I’ve got unread books stacked all over my house.”

“It means nothing to you then?”

“Sir,” Remly said, “This isn’t about justice and it’s not about settling scores. It’s about being let alone so I can catch up on my sleep and maybe on my life. Vegas is safe and Kurskov’s not coming after me, there’s no reason for him to. My thinking is, fuck it.”

“Then it *does* mean nothing to you.”

“I see we’re on the same page finally.”

“And the gentleman from Iraq—General dur-Shamshi? Valeri Voshch’s arms shipment traveled across Georgia without problem. If the arms weren’t interdicted elsewhere they should be in Iraq by now. Does the general get a free pass?”

“Leave him to his destiny,” Remly said. “He’s not my fight.”

He went down the broad steps to the rented Mustang, pressing a hand against the middle of his shirt and reminding himself to breathe regularly and calmly because something had begun thumping heavily and with a halting rhythm in his chest.

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## . . . L A S   V E G A S

Remly had stripped, dumping his clothes on the laundry pile between the bed and the bathroom door, and was pulling out two oversized towels from the bath’s linen closet when his cell rang, *Gymnopedie*, Pru’s voice, leaving a message.

“Charley? Are you there? I wanted ... Have you seen the news? It’s just ... are you there? I’d really really like to talk to you in person. It’s just ... I can’t see you tonight. It’s just all ... have you seen the news? Channel 4?

They're finding all these dead bodies around town and they're connected to Li'l Mikey's funeral. And Morris called Mimi and Mimi says Morris says his friend Ricky Butzek the cop says it looks like Li'l Mikey could have been murdered too. Some strange woman—I don't mean 'strange,' I mean she was a stranger to the hospital people—this gray-haired woman visiting Mikey just a few hours before they found him dead. Call me?"

'The news,' Remly thought. Naked and carrying his cell, he went to the hall closet where the phone books were stored.

As he was reaching for Clark County Yellow Pages, *Gymnopédie* ringing in his hand again, now Morris Berman, leaving a voice-mail: "So we're doing it again—I'm playing 'Where's Charley?' and you're doing your famous groundhog schtick. C'mon, poke your little head out, smell the sunshine. You don't speak up, buddy-bud, I'm coming over with a can of fish remover for your piranhas, okay? So what we got, we got Li'l Mikey McCoy's hearse driver is shot with a pistol round that smells suspiciously like a famous hard-to-find Russian 5.54mm of recent memory. And a guy gets whacked alongside the hearse driver, Ricky tells me this guy has got a lot in common with the Ruskies were whacked down near Laughlin. And there's a bunch of guys Metro is coming up with around Fremont Experience, guys in comas—including hizonner's chauff, who's zoned out in his lingerie in the back of Osgood's limo. So are you runnin' with me? Turn on the news, gimme a call. Me and you's got a lot to chew over."

On his way back through the bedroom, Remly picked up the TV remote from the night table and turned on the small set that rested on a chest of drawers across from the foot of his bed. He switched channels and Vegas-4-News came alive, Don without Barbara, the image of a hearse on the big screen behind him, to his left the Channel 4 weatherman in his signature green blazer. While Don read from a teleprompter about what he called The Li'l Mikey Murders, Remly rooted through his carryall. Guns, underwear, spare magazines for the Beretta, more underwear—used, which he threw onto the growing laundry pile on the floor—finally one of the throw-away cell phones.

Once more in the bathroom, the Yellow Pages laid out beside the sink, Remly slipped his glasses on and looked up Television Stations And Broadcasting Companies in the phone book. With his thumbnail Remly marked the Channel 4 listing—the Citizen Tipster Hotline—but first dialed 911 on the throwaway. "Please send an ambulance, I think I'm having a heart attack."

"Sir," the operator said, "where are you. Is anyone with you? Can you give me an exact address?"

In the dark, Ashor asked, "How long, usually?" He pressed at his stomach, seeking the source of the pain.

Fawzi also was calm. "Never more than three minutes, General Ashor." Ashor imagined him patiently counting his worry beads in the dark.

At first only the two computer screens glowed, powered by uninterruptible sources, then the security monitor came to life.

"This is not the mains coming alive," Fawzi said. "The security system is on battery backup." A dim, very round figure in the dark room, he raised one arm, hand outstretched to the security screen as though accusing it of something, and the screen's montage of images was replaced by an overview of the darkened countryside, the view panning up the road to the village of Afak in the distance.

Fawzi giggled. "No lights in town, either. It's just the usual blackout. Sabotage against our system here, there would still be a few windows lighted in the village, even at this time of night."

As a small diesel engine was heard kicking over, Darwish said, "I've had my battalion colonels on condition orange, in case you signed off on my plans. I'll get the word out tomorrow for them to stand down. Now, thinking on the fly, let me forward this idea, now that your Las Vegas program has failed ..."

"You'll make a fine Chief of Military Operations, Darwish," Ashor said. "Never approach me to be seconded to the diplomatic corps." With the room getting smaller still and the lump in his gut growing, Ashor found it hard to disguise the edge in his voice.

"Of course," Darwish said, oblivious to Ashor's underlying sarcasm. "I have an idea along the lines of your orphan buses—that I should select some of the senior commandos and sappers from my own battalion to form ambush squads."

The lights flickered, the television monitors came on.

"Against American security contractors, I'm assuming," Ashor said.

"Of course." Darwish came as close as his control would let him to an offended tone. "What else?" The lights were full on, and Darwish pulled his lined pad to the ready, poising his mechanical pencil over it. "This would be in densely populated areas, where the Yanks would be sure to lash out at Iraqi civilians."

"... world's premier financial center," Adrian Smith was saying in English on Al Jazeera. "The world-record *height* of the Burj is only a *side* issue. Space is already selling at four thousand dollars a square foot ..."

“Turn them down, Fawzi, if you will,” Ashor commanded.

And CNN’s newsreader: “... on the floor of the Board of Trade ...”

“It’s the default,” Fawzi explained as he worked his remote, clicking off the sound on the main news monitors. “They ignore mute when the lights come back on.”

“... Hal’s weathercast coming up following this special report on the Li’l Mikey McCoy murders ...”

Fawzi clicked the Las Vegas channel silent.

“How soon?” Ashor asked.

“The very second the Strongfort caravan shoots up the orphans buses,” Fawzi said. “The flags and the Uncle Sam effigies can be distributed within two hours at the latest.”

“No,” Ashor said. “General Darwish.” Lacing his fingers, he placed his hands contemplatively over his stomach, but pressing in tightly with his thumbs.

Darwish was busily scratching notes to himself on his yellow pad. “I could possibly have them good to go within twenty-four hours, but I would like an extra day to select the targets and do some recon. A full week, ideally, to develop diversion and redirection.”

“Let us say five days,” Ashor said.

On the Las Vegas television the man in the green jacket was gone, the woman again at the desk.

“And focus your ambushes exclusively on Baghdad,” Ashor said. “As close to the Green Zone as possible, to catch the attention of the American television journalists.”

“Stay here,” Ashor said, “both of you.” With that Ashor rose, there didn’t seem to be enough oxygen in the tight claustrophobic atmosphere of the room. “I need a bit of fresh air. Keep your eyes on that Las Vegas news channel. Let me know if anything significant comes up.”

Ashor glanced only briefly at the monitor—a helicopter view of a broad green expanse, a Las Vegas country club it looked like—then went to the door and out onto the broad back porch.

The moment he made the edge of the porch and saw the sky, Ashor’s frustration began slipping away. Though, yes, he’d experienced flashes of anger—momentary rage, even—over the failure of the Las Vegas plot, and especially toward Aleksandr Kurskov, the emotion now dissipated as he breathed the desert air, the smell of the river mingling with barnyard odors and a hint of the lamb which Fawzi’s women had roasted for them earlier. Whatever the situation in Las Vegas, the fallbacks were sound and sure to

be effective—simply not as quick in bringing the desired result. Now, rather than a month or two, it might take as much as half a year before the Yanks cracked and the battalions could move on Baghdad.

In every life, particularly in the years that bridge infancy and cynicism, there comes now and then an exquisite moment when it seems the entire universe has been made transparent—all knowledge, all truth, all understanding revealed—and a rush of transcendent clarity is experienced, thrilling and frightening. And at this moment as he looked deeply into the brilliant blinking heavens, despite that he was well into his cynical years, Ashor felt himself overwhelmed by a similar emotion, his frustration now completely gone.

Lifelong Ashor was accustomed to taking things as they came, the good with the bad, weaving it into the larger fabric of where he was and where he hoped to go, and nothing—not even this massive blunder of Kurskov’s—would sway him from his unblinking vision for Iraq, the many complex details of his planning and the long years of calmly waiting now clicking into place, the tipping point at hand. Perhaps clicking less neatly than if the meltdown in Las Vegas had succeeded, but there was still a sense of transcendence, of pure clarity, in his knowledge that the rest of his planning had come off so smoothly, from getting full control over the bank accounts, and bringing around Vanbastian’s master at Virginia as well as Gio Buccini and Peter Carpin. Darwish had whipped the colonels and their battalions into shape, there were large groups of Iraqis who wanted his blessing and large segments of the population who would welcome his gift of stability and prosperity.

Yet Ashor was still a military man and his military mind had accepted the transcendent rush for what it was and compartmentalized it. Nor did he allow himself to imagine any specific results of the attacks and protests that would begin tomorrow. He saw them only as squares in a flow-chart: Were the primary contingency plans successful? If yes, take this path—if no, the other. Would the fallback’s fallback succeed? Another set of choices. A matter of possibilities and contingencies to smooth his path to the presidential palace in Baghdad.

As for his curiosity about who had foiled the Las Vegas program—a curiosity now mild but certain to become more intense as the days wore on—as for that he had already compartmentalized it. He knew it was there, he knew he would eventually begin demanding explanations, but like his frustration and anger, curiosity had yielded to the immediate challenges. And even thoughts of Kurskov were submerged. There was no place in Russia where Kurskov could hide, and the man would eventually be dragged

forth to answer for his \$10-million failure.

After a last deep breath of the chill night air, Ashor turned and went back inside.

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. . . L A S   V E G A S

Remly stepped from the shower, grabbing two large white towels and dripping his way into the bedroom, wet footprints in the carpet, drying himself more or less with one of the towels, his glasses in his other hand. He tossed the first towel onto the knee-high pile of laundry on the floor. His glasses had gotten steamed, he wiped them with a tissue from the decorative box on the nightstand beside his bed.

Barbara had rejoined Don, looking grimly and dramatically brave, as though she was petitioning for a Purple Heart. Don and Barbara were trying to connect with one of Channel 4's mobile units. As Remly put on his glasses and finished drying his remaining damp parts, video from a Channel 4 helicopter came through. Remly settled himself between fresh sheets to watch the news.

There was a text crawl at the bottom of the screen: MORE MURDERS IN VEGAS VALLEY—AN EPIDEMIC?

Barbara was saying, "... just in from a concerned citizen on our Vegas-4-News Tipster Hotline." Behind her on the projection screen a birds-eye view of Overlook Country Club, zooming down into the back parking lot to show a Ford Escort, a Ford F-150, a white Dodge van, and a Clark County paramedic truck, and parked haphazardly another van, on its roof a satellite dish and in large black script, VEGAS-4-NEWS MOBILE. There was no sign of Metro, nor of any yellow crime-scene tape.

The image on the screen shifted suddenly to a ground level view, with Phil Green—"Green on the Scene" he called himself—standing at Overlook's service entrance. Remly recognized the reporter, an aggressive journalist who been in trouble more than once for breaking news on subjects that Metro wanted to bury. Green was large on the projection screen behind Don and Barbara, who had turned to look at him. As Remly understood it, the screen in reality was a blank panel, its virtual content merged into the final image by the show's technical staff. Real or not, Don and Barbara seemed fully engaged with Phil's supposed image, Phil dressed in khakis and a safari jacket.

"... am I live?" Phil looking off to the left side of the camera. "Harry, are you getting me on the monitor?" Then again into the camera, "Phil Green, on the scene, with Vegas-4-News Mobile. In what appears to be an epidemic of murders in the Vegas Valley today, two more victims have been



discovered. Metro Homicide hasn't responded yet; my director tells me the police are overtasked with the suspicious death of Li'l Mikey McCoy and the Li'l Mikey-related murders near Marnelli's funeral parlor. As you can see from the parking area around me, there aren't any black-and-whites, and there's none of the yellow tape of tragedy that acts like funeral bunting at a murder scene."

Barbara spoke to the big screen: "Phil, as you know, our Hotline Tipster reported a murder. But I understand that the first responders are paramedics, and they were called out for an apparent heart attack, not gunshot wounds."

Phil had pushed a thumb into his ear, then looked off again, questioningly. He must have gotten a signal to continue; he said, "That's right, Barbara, it was a cardiac seizure callout, and they went in through this unlocked back entrance with a defibrillator and oxygen." The camera panned left to show the service door behind him, then panned back. "What they found, up in the second-floor banquet hall, two men who'd been shot dead. Although the parameds have kept us from entering the building, I have with me Mr. Tyrone Williamson ..."

Barbara, looking up at Phil's oversized image, said, "I'm told you spoke to the first responders, the paramedics."

"Just one, and I've got him right here," Phil said, and the camera pulled back to show a young black paramedic standing beside Phil Green. The medic was buffed and cool, standing with squared shoulders but loose on his feet. He wore blue latex gloves. Phil turned to him. "Tyrone Williamson is a certified senior paramedic and emergency responder." Turning to Williamson, "Tyrone, can you tell us what you found?"

Williamson spoke in easy tones, as though he was interviewed regularly about murders. "Place like this, out in the country, s'posed to be a watchman. We go in—me and Ronald, he's upstairs—we call out for someone. No one's here. Three vehicles in the lot, no one home. All the doors closed along the hall. We go upstairs."

"Three vehicles," Phil said, pointing at them. "Who d'you think they belong to?"

Without answering, Williamson offered Phil Green a withering look. 'I'm psychic?' his expression said.

"So you go upstairs," Phil prompted.

"The first job of a professional emergency medical practitioner is to perform triage. First thing you do, you go into a crisis with multiples, you look for the patient who needs help most, see *can* he be helped. You with me?"

"I'm with you, Tye."

“Tyrone,” the medic said. “I check out the room, looks like two gentlemen have gunshot wounds. They’re bleeding out on the floor, cross the room from each other, one at the door, other over by a long table at the windows. I start reporting this to Metro, I’m checking the gentleman near the door, bad headshot wound, no vitals, pretty obvious I’m not needed. I go cross the room, look at the other gentleman, looks like he got shot in the back a few times, once in the head. Funny thing, now, his wallet’s on a table in front of him, big long window table, like he was going through it for a phone number. Phone on the table, ready to call someone.”

Phil brought the hand mike back to his own face and looked into the camera. “And here’s your Vegas-4-News exclusive, viewers.” Again facing Tyrone Williamson, Phil put the mike to him and asked, “And tell us what you discovered next, Tye.”

“Tyrone.” Now he was less charming, some people obviously had a hard time getting their heads around things. “What I found, little scraps of paper ... this camera of yours see my cell phone camera display?” He showed his cell phone.

“Fraid not,” Phil said, then moved the microphone back to Williamson. “Just tell us about it, your own words.”

“What I find, bunch of little pieces of paper, top one’s got foreign words on it. Numbers like some kind of code.”

Phil said, “Think I might look at that?”

Untroubled, Tyrone handed over his cell.

The phone and his mike in one hand, Phil brought a pair of glasses from one of the kangaroo pockets of his safari jacket and slipped them on. Squinting through his glasses, Phil said, “Looks like it could be a name, maybe not. ‘Ashor al-Tigris dur-Shamshi.’ Is that a name? Ring a bell with anyone?”

Don came alive, half-raising his hand like a schoolboy. “I remember the guy.” He turned aside, now urgent, to speak to the off-camera person. “James? What do we have in the library on this guy? Did you get the name—dur-Shamshi? I know I’ve seen him recently. Back east somewhere? Washington? Wasn’t there a national feed—something about dur-Shamshi pitching to open up more trade with Iraq? Does the library still have national feed from a couple weeks back?”

Speaking over Don, Phil went on, “... under ‘dur-Shamshi’ there’s ‘Hotel Lisboa Do Rei.’ Something else—‘Lisboa Occidental.’ And here’s a couple numbers ... phone numbers? Looks like they start with international area codes.” Phil looked into the camera. “Any of our Hispanic staff? Is this Spanish, ‘Lisboa Do Rei?’”

“James?” Don looking off to the side, his sense of urgency undisguised. Turning to the camera, “Viewers, I’m getting our producer, James Martinez, to track this down for you. A Vegas-4-News exclusive, and you’re seeing it live on Channel 4, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.”

*Gymnopedie* startled Remly. He threw the ringing phone onto the pile of laundry and tossed the remaining towel on it. He clicked off the TV and brought his pillow down to sleeping level and reached under the other pillow to assure himself the pistol was still there and went to sleep.

“Nach dem Spiel ist vor dem Spiel.”  
(After the game is before the game.)  
Josef “Sepp” Herberger

## PROCLAMATION

To the People of Baghdad Vilayet:

In the name of my King, and in the name of the peoples over whom he rules, I address you as follow:

Our military operations have as their object the defeat of the enemy, and the driving of him from these territories. In order to complete this task, I am charged with absolute and supreme control of all regions in which British troops operate; but our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators.

Since the days of Halaka your city and your lands have been subject to the tyranny of strangers, your palaces have fallen into ruins, your gardens have sunk in desolation, and your forefathers and yourselves have groaned in bondage. Your sons have been carried off to wars not of your seeking, your wealth has been stripped from you by unjust men and squandered in distant places.

Since the days of Midhat, the Turks have talked of reforms, yet do not the ruins and wastes of today testify the vanity of those promises?

It is the wish not only of my King and his peoples, but it is also the wish of the great nations with whom he is in alliance, that you should prosper even as in the past, when your lands were fertile, when your ancestors gave to the world literature, science, and art, and when Baghdad city was one of the wonders of the world.

Between your people and the dominions of my King there has been a close bond of interest. For 200 years have the merchants of Baghdad and Great Britain traded together in mutual profit and friendship. On the other hand, the Germans and the Turks, who have despoiled you and yours, have for 20 years made Baghdad a centre of power from which to assail the power of the British and the Allies of the British in Persia and Arabia. Therefore the British Government cannot remain indifferent as to what takes place in your country now or in the future, for in duty to the interests of the British people and their Allies, the British Government cannot risk that being done in Baghdad again which has been done by the Turks and Germans during the war.

But you people of Baghdad, whose commercial prosperity and

whose safety from oppression and invasion must ever be a matter of the closest concern to the British Government, are not to understand that it is the wish of the British Government to impose upon you alien institutions. It is the hope of the British Government that the aspirations of your philosophers and writers shall be realised and that once again the people of Baghdad shall flourish, enjoying their wealth and substance under institutions which are in consonance with their sacred laws and their racial ideals. In Hedjaz the Arabs have expelled the Turks and Germans who oppressed them and proclaimed the Sherif Hussein as their King, and his Lordship rules in independence and freedom, and is the ally of the nations who are fighting against the power of Turkey and Germany; so indeed are the noble Arabs, the Lords of Koweyt, Nejd, and Asir.

Many noble Arabs have perished in the cause of Arab freedom, at the hands of those alien rulers, the Turks, who oppressed them. It is the determination of the Government of Great Britain and the great Powers allied to Great Britain that these noble Arabs shall not have suffered in vain. It is the hope and desire of the British people and the nations in alliance with them that the Arab race may rise once more to greatness and renown among the peoples of the earth, and that it shall bind itself together to this end in unity and concord.

Oh people of Baghdad remember that for 26 generations you have suffered under strange tyrants who have ever endeavoured to set one Arab house against another in order that they might profit by your dissensions. This policy is abhorrent to Great Britain and her Allies, for there can be neither peace nor prosperity where there is enmity and misgovernment. Therefore I am commanded to invite you, through your nobles and elders and representatives, to participate in the management of your civil affairs in collaboration with the political representatives of Great Britain who accompany the British Army, so that you may be united with your kinsmen in North, East, South, and West in realising the aspirations of your race.

(signed) Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude

*The above proclamation was issued to the citizens of Baghdad on 19th March 1917, shortly after the occupation of the city by British forces.*

End thoughts and a further Dedication:

Discerning Readers will note a chasm of difference between the insensitivity toward Iraq expressed by certain characters in this fiction and the Author's obvious distress regarding the irreparable horrors his country has visited upon Iraq and its people.

John Donne originally voiced it, Ernest Hemingway reiterated it, and our attachment to the continent of mankind is no less valid today than it was 400 years ago or 70 years past: We are not islands, not any of us, and that somber bell still tolls not for others but for us—for all of us, individually and collectively—and the pain of the good people of Iraq must be our pain as well.

This story therefore is further dedicated to the fabled booksellers of Mutanabi Street—and to all the other courageous and visionary rebuilders of Baghdad's intellectual community. As the saying has it, "Cairo writes, Beirut publishes, Baghdad reads."

And a few words of thanks:

I turned to a cabal of friends to critique *The Last Days of Las Vegas* while it was still a helpless manuscript.

For their comments and (*ouch!*) brickbats, my pained gratitude to: Richard "Poke Chops" Butzek, Terrance "Numbers" Jackson, Lois "Moggie" Love, Richard "Shadow" Love, Bob "Plugger" Thomas, and Michael "Knuckles" Wetterauer. And extra thanks to Poke Chops for the gift of a laptop computer, which kept me writing when my trusty Underwood was out of reach.

A special thank-you to Ring Lardner for a classic one-liner ("Shut up," he explained.), and to Lawrence Durrell and James Joyce for some character names—along with a tip of the hat to Neil French for the "XO" beer (best taken lying down).

Finally, my gratitude to the legendary Paul Bacon for allowing his design and part of his illustration for the cover of *The Hungarian Game* to be used as a template for the cover of *The Last Days of Las Vegas*. Paul is a national treasure—his book covers and record jackets as riveting and delightful today as when they were first unveiled over 50 years ago.

Roy Hayes, 15 May 2009



A preview of Roy Hayes's next novel, *Big Gap*:

## Chapter 1

Pru was wondering should she get a boob job when the call came through that her cousin Jason had been murdered.

She said, "I'm thinking ... maybe getting a boob job."

"Something impressive?" Charley said, "Rent advertising space like the Goodyear blimp?"

"I wouldn't have to wear jiggles at work."

Charley said, "Trust me, wear the jiggles. Save the real stuff for home."

"My poor little boobies are all saggy." She cupped them with her hands. Pushed them up.

Charley said, "You're not twentysomething." Then, "Look at you, you're perfect." She was. Generous hips, sweet little breasts. Nice tight waist she kept trim with a million situps every morning, it wore him out watching. Even if he hadn't been crazy about her he would have been crazy about her.

Inspecting her cupped breasts Pru said, "I don't look sexy."

"You don't look sexy? Look what you're doing to me, just standing there."

Pru looked. "Oh, my!" Showing her teeth, all the way back to the wisdoms.

Charley asked, "Anyone ever tell you, you have a radiant smile?"

"All the time," she said, spreading her arms and flopping onto him.

The phone rang, he reached for it, rolling Pru with him on the bed, her nakedness getting him even more worked up.

"Mr. Littleton?" A man's voice.

Charley covered the mouthpiece and looked at Pru: "A man asking for Mr. Littleton." Pru looked blank. "Would you settle for *Miss* Littleton?" Charley said into the phone, his tone flat.

"Yessir. Thank you."

Charley put his hand over the mouthpiece, saying it sounded like a cop as he handed her the phone and rolled out from under her, reaching for the cordless handset on the other nightstand. Lifting it, turning it on to listen.

It was a cop. County Constable L. Raymond Butler from Big Gap, Wyoming. Was this the Prudence Littleton was originally from Casper, Wyoming? Had a nephew name of Jason Sanderson? No, a cousin Jason, Pru said. Her mother's brother's son. Something happened to Jason? "Could



you advise me of the whereabouts where Mr. Jason Sanderson's parents might be, Miss Littleton?" They were dead. A car accident—a pickup accident actually—seven years ago—near the bird refuge down at Pathfinder. "Any brothers or sisters you'd likely to know of, Miss Littleton?" None, Pru told him. Was Jason okay? "You would be Mr. Sanderson's closest living relative, then, correct?"

"One of five," Pru said. "Six. Two brothers, two sisters, Mom's related too. What's happened to Jason?"

"Any of them sibbelings up in Wyoming, Miss Littleton?"

Pru gave him Little Joe's name and phone number in Casper, her sisters were in San Francisco and Chicago, Sven probably on the road with his truck. Then asked, "Is Jason hurt? In trouble?"

"I have the sad duty to tell you that your—Mr. Sanderson was your cousin?"

"What's happened to Jason?"

"I have the sad duty to tell you that your cousin, Mister Jason Sanderson, was killed earlier today. I suspect it was a homicide, and am investigating." Right now County Constable Butler was only notifying next of kin. He would contact Mr. Joseph Littleton, the cousin in Casper, to come in and make a positive ID, the constable couldn't get it local. Could he phone her tomorrow and ask just a few questions?

"No way," Pru said.

"Ma'am?"

"I'm flying up. You're in Big Gap?"

"Nearest airport is Jackson Hole. You'll hafta charter from Las Vegas. Only direct flights to Jackson is from Salt Lake, Denver. Maybe rent a car in Jackson, drive up to Big Gap."

"Charley?" Pru said, handing him the phone. "Deal with it? Right now ... I don't know if I want to hear any more."

Charley dropped the cordless and dealt with it. Jason Sanderson had been beaten then dragged to his death behind a vehicle, probably a 4x4 pickup truck. There were boot marks on his face and neck, he'd been kicked in the head and ribs, his knees stomped. The constable suspected it was murder—Charley gripped his forehead and squeezed—the constable said, "His jenn-eye-tals was disfigured."

"What's that mean?" Charley asked.

"His penis was severed off and his testicles was sliced with a blade or other sharp object of some sort."

"*Christ!*"

"Oh ... Charley." Pru said. "*What?*"

Charley shook his head, said, “Your name is Butler?”

“Yes, sir. L. Raymond Butler, Constable, Municipality of Big Gap, Sheriff’s Department, County of Teton, State of Wyoming. And your name might be?”

“Charles Remly. Charley. You’re a homicide detective?”

“S’pose you might put it like that. I am what we have got up in this end of the county, keeping-the-peace wise.”

“You’re a one-man police department?”

Pru looked at the floor, shaking her head.

Constable Butler said, “You could say that, yes.”

Now Charley shaking his head, saying, “The Sheriff’s Department isn’t sending you any homicide detectives to help with the investigation?”

“Stay pretty busy, the load a crime they already got down in Jackson. But I surely am investigating. One a the reasons I called. From what I got, Mr. Jason Sanderson was a gay person, correct?”

“You’d have to ask Pru,” Charley said. “But ... when we get there, okay? We’ll drive up. What’s your town again? Give me the easiest way there from Las Vegas.”

“Big Gap,” Constable Butler said. “North of Jackson. There isn’t no easy way.”

Pru phoned Mimi while Charley was getting their suitcases out of the loft in the garage. Morris answered, Mimi was in the shower. When Pru told him that poor Jason had died badly Morris said, “*Shit!*” Behind him Pru could hear the water running and Mimi calling, “What is it, Morris? What is it?” Pru told him all she knew—which was almost nothing—and Morris asked to speak to Charley. While Mimi was asking “What is it?” Charley walked in and Pru gave him the phone and began pulling out warm clothing. It had been a long time, but she remembered Wyoming, north of Jackson. It wasn’t Vegas.

“It sounds sexual, Morris,” Charley said. “Homophobic hate crime, the kid got mutilated. They cut off his dick.”

“He’s not a kid,” Morris said. “Thirty-two, thirty-maybe-four.”

“Homosexual?”

“But not feggele, you hear me?”

Behind him Mimi was asking, “For God’s sake, Morris, what is it?” There was water splashing.

“I have to get packing,” Charley told Morris. He didn’t have anything else on the issue—would phone from this place, Big Gap, when he got more.

He didn't have a lot of faith in the county constable. "I wouldn't want him backing me, the shooting started."

"Bumpkin?"

"He doesn't come off as the brightest bulb," Charley said. A one-man police department, no homicide detectives on it. How important was this kid? This guy, Jason?

"Jason fell off the edge of the earth, you wouldn't hear any splash."

Charley said, "Low priority across the board, then, too much real crime going on down in Jackson. Which has Pru worried sick. She wants me to look into it." Morris was pretty close to him?

"Mimi's step-sister's son," Morris said. The step-sister and her husband died in a one-car accident a couple years ago. Maybe five. And beyond him Mimi, "*Morris, talk to me! Jason? Something's happened to Jason?*"

## Dear Reader

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Thank you.

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